THE ONGOING DECLINE OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN METHODISM: A MODERNISTIC SAGA

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I. THE PROBLEM: THE LOSS OF MISSION AND IDENTITY

When the Duke and Duchess of York attended the inauguration of the Methodist Church at the Albert Hall with the signing of the Deed of Union in 1932, not only were the three great branches of British Methodism united (The Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Primitive Methodist Church and the United Methodist Church), but their numbers were also at the time relatively considerable. Today, however, decline is most everywhere apparent: About 40 percent of Methodist churches in 1995 had fewer than 28 members, and as John Munsey Turner has pointed out, “In Great Britain [today] there are almost 400,000 members...not much more than half the number when Methodist Union took place in 1932.”¹

Such decline, however, is not merely a British problem. It is an American one as well. But since the United States is not only a more overtly religious country than Britain, where on any given Sunday an average of 43 percent of Americans will be in church, compared to 14 percent for Britain,² and also because American Methodism is simply so much larger than its British counterpart, we have not yet experienced the urgency, the near despair, of the current British Jeremiad which cries out, “The Future of Methodism has become a problem for us.”³ And yet we too have sensed the deepening malaise that has descended upon us all. During the early 1960s, for example, when American Methodist membership was at its highest, no fewer than 11 million people participated in the local church. Today, however, our membership is just under eight and a half million and it is steadily declining. To illustrate, from 1985 to 2000, the United Methodist Church in America lost about 609,000 members;⁴ that’s an average of 40,600 a year, 780 a week, 111 a day. It is as if we closed down a small-sized church of just over a hundred members each day of the week, day in and day out, since 1985. American Methodists may not yet be

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in despair, but they clearly know that something is terribly wrong. The problem, however, is that when American Methodism catches a cold; British Methodism gets pneumonia. Not surprisingly, there have been a number of articles and books of late, in both British and American Methodism, that have grappled with this problem, all of which seek some plausible, if not cogent, explanation for the current downward trends. For example, Martin Wellings, a prison chaplain and Secretary of the Oxford and Leicester District Synod, has underscored the loss of spirituality that results when the fires are quenched and the heart grows cold. Moreover, this Methodist minister has ably described the ongoing secularization that often renders religious faith and practice "more difficult in modern societies." Across the Atlantic, William Abraham, a professor at Southern Methodist University, has likewise explored the consequences when Methodist churches lose their way spiritually due to cultural trends:

The church...is not centered on God; it is not rooted and anchored in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; it does not live by the power of the Holy Spirit. Over and against these great articles of the faith, the church is driven by cultural concerns.

In fact, according to Abraham, the Methodist church has been so compromised by the forces of secularism that "it no longer has any shared public discourse of its own, other than that borrowed from the secular world." As a consequence, "pastoral care is reduced to therapy, mission to sociopolitical action, evangelism to church growth, academic theology to amateur philosophical inquiry, and church administration to total quality management." And John Cobb, for his part, professor emeritus at Claremont Seminary, has argued that "The church has ceased to think about its own life in terms of its faith, a faith that has itself become vague and unconvincing." Indeed, whether one reads Abraham's book Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia, Cobb's Reclaiming the Church or Craske and Marsh's Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge, there seems to be a general agreement among contemporary scholars that Methodism, both British and American, has somehow or other lost its historic mission, and in losing its mission it has also unfortunately lost its identity. That is, the patient is not only sick, but she has also forgotten her name.

II. HOW WAS THE MISSION LOST?

The current crisis in Methodism has roots that reach far back into modern Western civilization and it is, therefore, not likely to be readily or easily resolved. In a real sense, our problem has to do with the origins of modernity, with patterns of thought, with intellectual habits and sensibilities, that slowly developed over the centuries. Indeed, it is attention to this larger story, important in many respects, that should provide key insights into our present dilemma.

During the 16th century, for instance, a new paradigm for understanding the nature of reality emerged through the work of Galileo. Developing the rudiments of an empirical method, this Italian genius fostered an approach that focused on the reality of matter in motion and its exact quantification. Moreover, in 1610 Galileo published his astronomical findings in The Starry Messenger and thereby helped to develop a scientific, empirical
method by championing the use of experimentation to test physical theories. Later, in 1687, Isaac Newton furthered this approach, taking it to new heights, in his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, a work that contained his three laws of motion and the theory of gravitation. The sheer predictive power as well as the mathematical precision of much of Newton's offerings was simply astounding to an age that had grown increasingly weary of religious superstition and dogmatic appeals to authority.

As the philosopher John Locke, and later Immanuel Kant, reflected on these intellectual developments entailed in the rise of science, they both recognized the importance of empiricism, as well as its philosophical implications as a world view, even though Kant stressed certain formal elements as well, in particular the categories of understanding. Indeed, so successful was this burgeoning scientific empiricism, especially in terms of measurement and prediction, that some Western intellectuals soon began to take the next step, philosophically speaking, and championed new epistemological limits; that is, they declared from the laboratories as well as from the halls of the academy: "what science cannot know, we cannot know." Here the horizon of human interest was limited not by science, but by the philosophical position known as scientism. The reality of God, spirit, the good, and even beauty all became suspect because not one of them was a phenomenon, to use the Kantian terminology, that could be empirically discerned.

In the 19th century, Karl Marx, reflecting his unswerving commitment to philosophical materialism, thereby turning Hegel on his head, developed what he thought to be the science of history in his dialectical materialism. Having read Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, which maintained that all theology can be reduced to anthropology, Marx rejected the religious sentiment as opium that could only prevent the oppressed from fully understanding their abject condition, their ongoing alienation. In the eyes of Marx what really counted was not God or the soul, or any sort of idealism, but the means of production such as factories, shipyards and utilities as well as the mode of production; that is, how these means of wealth were configured in any given society.

So then, the scientific method, which called for great objectivity and personal distance, originally emerged in the context of physics and astronomy where the study of matter or objects informed the basic paradigm. This approach, this avenue to discovery, was so successful, however, that it was soon applied to a number of other disciplines: chemistry, biology, sociology, psychology and politics as well. Indeed, around the turn of the twentieth century, the works of Darwin and Freud were well known for putting forth naturalistic explanations for realities that heretofore had been understood as evidencing the operations of the soul or the gentle leading of God. These same methods in the hands of B.F. Skinner in the 20th century led not only to a thoroughgoing reductionism, where a human being was considered to be simply a repertoire of behaviors, but they also led to the abolition of the distinctively human in Skinner's repudiation of both the freedom and dignity of men and women. Continuing these reductionist trends, some biologists today are attempting to explain the moral dimension, not by an appeal to anything transcendent, as even Kant had done, but by a critical examination of the behavior of genes. The "selfish" gene, so we are told, is the source of all. Not surprisingly, many modern men and women are asking, in the face of this methodological predominance, "Why do I need religion any longer?" a query that rightly emerges in Jane Craske's perceptive observation:
"Contemporary Christianity’s mission must face the apparent loss of confidence within and beyond Christianity about what religion is for."

Moreover, during the 19th century when scientific procedures were applied to the Bible itself what emerged was higher criticism, a largely empirically oriented way of viewing Scripture that was developed early on especially by German scholars, though it quickly spread elsewhere. One of the consequences of higher criticism was that it helped to split the Protestant churches in the early 20th century, a split whose effects are still with us even today. But this disruption of the unity of Protestantism into liberal and conservative wings is actually a red herring and does not adequately explain our current predicament. To be sure, both wings, interestingly enough, continue to be part of the ongoing problem for they both remain decidedly modernistic in their orientations as postmodern critics are quick to point out. To illustrate, theological liberals, throughout the century, have tended to focus almost exclusively on mundane existence, the realm of objects and of power, the “stuff” that “really” mattered, especially in terms of the maintenance needs of the poor, where Marx was the patron saint and mammon, or the lack thereof, was the altar. For their part, theological conservatives, chaffing under the charge of obscurantism, sought to justify their beliefs through the rigors of scientific objectivity and empiricism, especially in their near obsession with propositional language as an expression of the truth and integrity of the Bible. That is, conservatives, like their liberal counterparts, assented to a virtual scientific hegemony, methodologically speaking, though for quite different reasons. But if this earlier disruption of the unity of the churches was all that really mattered in any viable analysis, as some contend even today, then why didn’t the crisis that we are now facing occur sooner, let’s say in the 1940s or ’50s?

The answer lies in the number of cultural revolutions (sexual, racial, political, and economic) that occurred in the 1960s whereby a church already badly shaken, split and culturally defensive began to lose its own distinctive voice, in a crisis of mission and identity, and thereby increasingly substituted a secular political idiom for a theological one. Indeed, to the earlier orientation towards (though not quite acceptance of) philosophical materialism, itself a consequence of the quest for scientific objectivity, were added a number of secularizing elements. Thus, in his perceptive analysis of Western culture, Robert Bork, one time nominee to the Supreme Court, makes the case for radical individualism and egalitarianism as descriptive of this crucial period, though I think a better case can be made for radical liberty rather than individualism. For one thing, the political liberals of the 1960s, both in America and Europe, were often very tribal, focusing on the power configurations of groups, and what individualism remained in their assessments, as men and women came increasingly under the economic powers of the state (and all of this in the name of “justice”), was the liberty to pursue well touted hedonistic pleasures, often addictive by the way, and to do so unfettered by the otherwise intrusive state. This Western focus on liberty, of course, had its antecedents in the works of Montesquieu, Locke and Mill, but it was radicalized in the 1960s to displace most other notions of freedom, especially the freedom entailed in being in Christ. So conceived, liberty now meant, for the most part, freedom from all that restricted the pursuit of pleasure for consenting adults, a maxim that was amply displayed in the cultural heroes of the day, especially in the antics of Timothy Leary, Alan Ginsburg, and in the tragedy of Jim Morrison.
But Bork’s analysis is even more astute when he explores the ramifications of radical egalitarianism. During the 1960s and 1970s the commitment to this ideal, especially when it was joined with the politically correct polarities of rich/poor, white/black, male/female, where the latter pole was ever to be preferred, all of this newfangled political thinking was offered as nothing less than the gospel to which the energies and mission of the church should be directed. In this setting, the repeated preference for some groups to the exclusion of others, what some might actually call prejudice, was justified in the name of egalitarianism, that is, in the name of correcting past abuses and injustice. And though radical egalitarianism in the form of contemporary political correctness embraced a number of social groups and causes, each group within the broader movement often defined the essence of evil in terms of its own limited social perspective. For example, James Cone, a black theologian, responding to centuries of racial prejudice, maintained during the 1970s that the black/white distinction is nearly equivalent to the distinction good/evil. “Black theology,” he writes, “will accept only a love of God which participates in the destruction of the white enemy.” And he adds clarifying his point: “The goal of Black Theology is the destruction of everything white so that black people can be alienated from alien gods.” Similarly, Albert Cleage in his work Black Christian Nationalism states: “The white man is a beast … [and] white Christianity is a bastard religion without a Messiah and without a God.”

It was not long before members of the black community themselves responded to such strident rhetoric, and several writers called for an approach which would eliminate racist thinking, whether white or black, and that would enhance the prospects for the integration of all peoples. Julius Lester, a black poet, astutely realized that if the black/white distinction epitomizes good and evil, then blacks will fail to recognize clearly their own shortcomings, for evil, by definition, is always a characteristic of the other. Lester observes: “Black theology is shameful because its spokesmen want us to believe that blacks are without sin.”

In some respects, the radical feminist theology of the 1970s was similar in approach to black theology except that the female/male distinction replaced the black/white one as the most useful window on human evil. Mary Daly, a former Roman Catholic who currently teaches at Boston College, has criticized many liberation movements precisely because, in her estimation at least, they have not been radical enough. In other words, these movements have failed to realize that patriarchy, a social system in which the father is the supreme authority, lies at the very heart of all human oppression. In her early book, Beyond God the Father, for example, Daly elaborates:

There are movements which have liberation as their stated goal but which fix all their attention upon some deformity within patriarchy — for example, racism, war, poverty — rather than patriarchy itself, without recognizing sexism as root and paradigm of the various forms of oppression they seek to eradicate.

Not surprisingly, Daly sees “sexual caste” as the “original sin” upon which “other manifestations of oppression are modeled.” However, the kind of criticism which Julius Lester leveled against radical black theologians can be translated and then applied with equal
force to Daly’s thought. That is, if the essence of evil is deemed to be patriarchy, then feminists will undoubtedly fail to appreciate their own evil, their own lust for power, and their own capacity for self-absorption, since evil by definition, once again, is considered to lie outside this preferred social circle.

III. CONTEMPORARY SOLUTIONS: THE POLITICALIZATION OF THE GOSPEL

This polarizing mode of thinking that hails from the Sixties and Seventies has been picked up by contemporary Methodists, both British and American, though the greatest attention is now paid not so much to race and gender, though they too are important, but to economics. Indeed, informed by the latent philosophical materialism hailing from Enlightenment empiricism, equipped with the polarity of rich/poor championed by earlier political radicals, many Methodist scholars now focus almost exclusively on issues of poverty and wealth as those that supposedly epitomize the gospel. To illustrate, Christopher Shannahan, who teaches contextual theology at The Queen’s College, employs the reductionist language of “only” as he describes the contemporary scope of the good news. “The only Gospel-centered future for a twenty-first century lies in an action-oriented theology of liberation,” he writes, where liberation is defined almost exclusively in Marxist terms. Again, for Shannahan and others “the only struggle that matters is the struggle for justice.” Here, in other words, the gospel has, for the most part, been limited to modern political thought and action, to which the Church is supposed to succumb almost immediately in the name of seeking “justice.” However, many in the church are now coming to realize, especially after the collapse of communism in Europe, that the power and freedom that the Holy Spirit brings has always been far greater than many Marxists have ever imagined due to their materialistic orientation. Beyond the configurations of temporal power and agendas, is the holy, transcendent love of God and neighbor, the very substance of the kingdom, for which Christ died.

Or take the work of the American Methodist theologian Theodore Jennings. This contemporary scholar sets up a means/ends relationship and maintains that the love of God reigning in the human heart is a suitable means to works of charity and to the yet-higher end of reform of the political order. “Wesley emphasizes inward transformation,” Jennings contends, “because he is so earnestly interested in outward behavior.” Elsewhere in his writings, Jennings specifically links holiness to his own preferred political goals, that is, to the elimination of private property and to the establishment of communism. “Wesley supposes that the Methodist movement will produce not only a spread of the gospel throughout the earth,” he writes, “but also, and therefore, bring in the communist society.” Moreover, like his British counterparts, Jennings believes that “Marx chose a different path to reach a goal something like that envisioned by Wesley.” But once again Wesley’s thought is badly construed, even reduced, in this rendering for the eighteenth-century leader had actually envisioned far more than Jennings has apparently allowed. In fact, Wesley wrote on one occasion: “That the regulation of social life is the one end of religion is a strange position indeed. I never imagined any but a Deist would affirm this.”

Oddly enough, sometimes the pull of contemporary political thought is so great that it leads current Methodist commentators into historiographical error by reading 21st century viewpoints and judgments back into the 18th century where they simply do not
belong. Bishop Kenneth Carder, for example, declares that “Methodism began as a movement of the poor, for the poor, by the poor, and with the poor.” However, Henry Rack, the gifted British historian, cautions contemporary interpreters of Wesley’s economic ethics to remember that “the category of ‘the poor’ in the 18th century was itself an imprecise term... The poor that Wesley begged for in times of distress were often tradesmen down on their luck.” Indeed, it was often the artisans, merchants and petty shopkeepers that the early Methodists had so readily attracted. John Munsey Turner, ever careful in his scholarship, has noted this fact as well. He observes:

But though Wesley had great sympathy with those at the bottom of the heap, his helpers never recruited large numbers of what Karl Marx was to call the ‘lumpen proletariat.’ Wesley’s message, in fact, fuelled the aspirations of the artisan class, the skilled workers who were later to be called the ‘labour aristocracy’ and formed the bureaucracies which followed in the wake of urbanization. And again, Turner rightly cautions: “There is now no unified Methodist political stance, though some Methodist activists occasionally speak and act as though there were.”

Unfortunately, in America today Turner’s wise counsel largely goes unheeded and the poor are often romanticized in Methodist pulpits using the vocabulary of the political left. Put another way, the mission and identity of the church are often limited by ideology and polarized thinking. Indeed, the experience of poverty has become the soteriologically defining value in much pulpit fare on Sunday mornings such that parishioners are repeatedly taught that they do not bring the gospel to the poor but should only seek to be transformed by being in the presence of the penniless. But when John Wesley was among the poor, precisely because he loved them he refused to romanticize their condition, and he, therefore, often called them sinners, an offensive term to the politically correct among us today, but one no less accurate for its offensiveness. But in calling the poor sinners, Wesley actually paid these men and women considerable tribute, a high honor indeed. For in this term he understood that the most important thing about the poor was not their economic status, not their lack of material goods, but that they were beings made for a relationship with a God of holy love, a relationship oddly enough affirmed in the very title of sinner.

And so it is important that the broader Methodist community, re-appropriate its own rich heritage, reconsider the careful, well-nuanced thought and practice of John Wesley as he ministered to the downtrodden. His judgments, as will be apparent shortly, were markedly different from the politicized and often divisive ways that are championed today, and that have left the church gasping for the breath of life. Wesley’s ways, in contrast, allowed for a genuine inclusiveness where the poor and those who ministered to them were united in sin and in grace, in their common humanity, but above all, they were united in Christ and in love.

IV. JOHN WESLEY’S VARIEGATED MINISTRY TO THE POOR

Though seldom noticed, Wesley in his writings, especially in his sermon corpus, employs the term “the poor” in two key ways. First of all, commenting on Matthew 5:1-4, he specifically rejects a mere economic reading of the term “the poor” as found in “Happy are
the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Indeed, by means of this judgment, Wesley sought to reaffirm, once again and in a critical way, the radical nature of human evil which can not be utterly identified with the particular sin of greed or with the acquisition of wealth. But Wesley also employs this term, secondly, in a largely economic way. To illustrate, in his sermon, "Dives and Lazarus," produced in 1788, Wesley exclaims:

Hear this, all ye that are poor in this world. Ye that many times have not food to eat or raiment to put on; ye that have not a place where to lay your head, unless it be a cold garret, or a foul and damp cellar! Ye are now reduced to ‘solicit the cold hand of charity.’ Yet lift up your load; it shall not always be thus.

Ever energetic in ministry, Wesley sought out those who lacked the necessities of life: he visited them in their homes and preached to them in the fields. As a result, he knew by firsthand experience how “devilishly false is that common objection, ‘They are poor, only because they are idle.'” To be sure, so concerned was Wesley with the plight of the poor that he sought to improve their temporal condition through numerous ministries. Thus, in November 1740, for instance, Wesley undertook a humble experiment which involved about a dozen unemployed people, drawn from the Methodist societies, in the carding and spinning of cotton. The next year, in 1741, greatly offended by the poverty within the United Society itself, Wesley developed a systematic program to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, employ the poor, and visit the sick. In fact, according to Ward and Heitzenrater, for over 40 years “all the class-money in London, amounting to several hundred pounds a year, was distributed to the poor by the stewards.” Moreover, these attempts to ameliorate the temporal condition of the needy, some more successful than others, were augmented in 1746 by the opening of a free dispensary to provide medical services and by the institution of a lending-stock to offer cash to the impoverished. And though at its inception the stock did not amount to more than fifty pounds, it eventually served more than 250 people.

It should be evident by now that a significant portion of Wesley’s benevolent activity actually took place not indiscriminately but within the context of the Methodist societies themselves. That is, lending stocks, dispensaries, collections and the like most often serviced those poor who were already participating in some way in the institutional life of Methodism. More to the point, Wesley’s sermons demonstrate a hierarchical order in meeting the temporal needs of the poor which clearly privileges those in the church over those beyond its walls. Thus, as noted earlier, in assessing the proper distribution of goods beyond the real needs of one’s family Wesley counsels: “If when this is done there be an overplus left, then ‘do good to them that are of the household of faith. If there be an overplus still, ‘as you have opportunity, do good unto all men.” Not surprisingly, then, there are relatively few instances in either Wesley’s Journal or his letters which chronicle acts of charity which are not somehow purposely related to a larger ecclesiastical and soteriological context.

Though the descendants of the social gospel movement as well as some of the modern progenitors of liberation theology have, at times, looked askance at the language of “saving souls” as an instance of theological obscurantism, as a pious indulgence, such lan-
guage reverberates in the writings of John Wesley. At an early Methodist conference, for instance, Wesley asked those assembled to consider what is the office of a Christian minister? To which he and others replied: “To watch over souls, as he that must give an account.” And when he detailed the responsibilities of a “Helper” shortly thereafter Wesley exclaimed, revealing much of his mission and purpose: “You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spent and be spent in this work.”

To be sure, this particular emphasis of the redemption of souls, far from being an unusual or occasional one, continued throughout Wesley’s life. Thus, in 1763, as he considered the purpose or end towards which the church should be directed, he wrote the following in his sermon “The Reformation of Manners”:

This is the original design of the church of Christ. It is a body of men compacted together in order, first, to save each his own soul, then to assist each other in working out their salvation, and afterwards, as far as in them lies, to save all men from present and future misery, to overturn the kingdom of Satan, and set up the kingdom of Christ.

Moreover, when John wrote to his brother Charles in 1772, ostensibly to consider an aspect of the doctrine of Christian perfection, he reminded him, among other things, that his business as well as his own was “to save souls.”

V. Wesley’s Valuation of Different Kinds of Ministry

So then the crucial question must now be asked: was the satisfaction of the temporal, material, needs of the poor, though important, the very highest goal, the telos, at which Wesley aimed? Was political transformation really the end, the major purpose of the 18th-century revival? Or is this modern reading of Wesley, in its attempt to be up-to-date and relevant, actually reductionistic in that it entails the substitution of the penultimate for what is truly ultimate?

One way of reading Wesley, of construing the relationship between the love of God reigning in the heart and all manner of good works (individual, political, social) is to contend that the one endlessly leads to the other in a cyclical fashion. In other words, in this interpretation, the love of God and neighbor issues in works of mercy which in turn enhance the love of God and neighbor, that is, inward religion informs outward religion and vice versa. Here each element is a means to the other and the question of valuation, of an ultimate telos, is avoided. Indeed, when the historian focuses on particular kinds of evidence, Wesley can in fact be read in this way. Nevertheless, this interpretation must, in the end, be judged as inadequate simply because it cannot incorporate the kinds of value judgments which Wesley did, after all, make in this area. For example, in his sermon, “On Visiting the Sick,” produced in 1786, Wesley advises his visitors in the following fashion:

But it may not be amiss usually to begin with inquiring into their outward condition. You may ask whether they have the necessaries of life. Whether they have sufficient food and raiment. If the weather be cold, whether they have fuel. But after this, Wesley asserts, the visitor is to proceed to things of greater value. “These lit-
tle labours of love,” he writes, “will pave your way to things of greater importance. Having shown that you a regard for their bodies you may proceed to inquire concerning their souls.” Furthermore, Wesley repeats this judgment, no doubt for emphasis, but this time he clearly displays what is the telos of all ministry:

While you are eyes to the blind and feet to the lame, a husband to the widow and a father to the fatherless, see that you still keep a higher end in view, even the saving of souls from death, and that you labour to make all you say and do subservient to that great end.

Though these value judgments have seldom surfaced in the secondary literature, they are by no means idiosyncratic but represent Wesley’s own thinking throughout his career. For example, much earlier, in 1748, Wesley had written concerning those engaged in ministry that “He doth good, to the uttermost of his power, even to the bodies of men.... How much more does he rejoice if he can do any good to the soul of any man!” And two years later Wesley continued this theme in his sermon “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Thirteenth” and wrote:

Over and above all this, are you zealous of good works? Do you, as you have time, do good to all men? Do you feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction? Do you visit those that are sick? Relieve them that are in prison? Is any a stranger and you take him in? Friend, come up higher.... Does he enable you to bring sinners from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God?

Two points are noteworthy in light of the preceding evidence: first, for Wesley at least, a part of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself always involves the exercise of both material gifts and spiritual talents; it entails the employment of all those gifts and graces which will enhance the physical well being of the poor and their spiritual character. Second, and perhaps more importantly, though the material needs of the neighbor have chronological priority; they clearly do not have valuational priority in Wesley’s thought, for their fulfillment prepares the way, to use Wesley’s own terminology, for things of greater importance. Once again in his sermon, “On Visiting the Sick” the Methodist leader instructs his visitors and writes:

And if your delicacy will not permit you to imitate those truly honourable ladies, by abasing yourselves in the manner which they do, by performing the lowest offices for the sick, you may, however, without humbling yourselves so far, supply them with whatever they want. And you may administer help of a more excellent kind, by supplying their spiritual wants; instructing them (if they need such instruction) in the first principles of religion; endeavouring to show them the dangerous state they are in, under the wrath and curse of God through sin, and point them to the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world. But perhaps the most lucid expression of the value and necessity of personal, inward
transformation (spirituality) for social reform is found in the following selection from the sermon *On Zeal*, a sermon which epitomizes Wesley’s thought in this area and which provides insight into his ethical motivation and concern. Notice, for instance, what is at the heart of this ethic and the consequences which flow from it. Wesley declares:

In a Christian believer love sits upon the throne, which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers: long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance — and if any other is comprised in ‘the mind which was in Christ Jesus.’ In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed works of piety: reading and hearing the Word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord’s Supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one — the church, dispersed all over the earth; a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation.

In this sermon, then, it is as if Wesley has allowed us to peek into the throne room of his entire theological and moral enterprise. And on the throne sits not any political ideology nor works of mercy, however noble or valuable they may be. No, love itself sits on the throne, and next to it are all those holy tempers (holiness) described earlier. And it is precisely only when these elements are in place, as motivating factors, at the very heart of things, that Wesley is then willing to consider works of mercy, piety and the like. “No outward works are acceptable to him [God] unless they spring from holy tempers,” he cautions. And again, “That all those who are zealous of good works would put them in their proper place! Would not imagine they can supply the want of holy tempers, but take care that they may spring from them!” Therefore all those “dispositions of mind” like meekness, gentleness and long-suffering etc., are not beside the point, a pious extravagance or indulgence, but are “absolutely necessary...for the enjoyment of present or future holiness.” Indeed, they are nothing less than the lodestars of the moral and spiritual life, the key to Wesley’s ethic. Therefore, a bitter zeal for justice, that deprecates spirituality and the necessity of conversion, and that views matters of the soul as of little consequence is no substitute for the justice that grows out of a holy, loving, Christlike concern. Some contemporary theologians may have begun and ended on the political level; clearly Wesley did not. There are after all things of greater importance.

And so it was precisely on this basis of a universal need for redemption, of a radical transformation of the human heart for all people, black and white, male and female, rich and poor that Wesley was able to break out of the latent materialism, as well as the political strife and the animosity so typical of his day, to bring together those who hungered for redemption and those who ministered to them in a larger, more inclusive circle of ministry, to foster mutual concern and affection among them as joint members of the body of
Christ, and ultimately to unite them in the broadest circle of love. This was excellent counsel in the eighteenth century; it remains excellent counsel today. We must, therefore, go and do likewise.

NOTES
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 105.
9. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 118.
18. Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 56. Bracketed material is mine.
19. Ibid., p. 59.
21. Theodore W. Jennings Jr., Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics
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22. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "Wesley’s Preferential Option for the Poor," Quarterly Review Vol. 9, No. 3 (Fall, 1989): 22. Ignoring the political and social context of 18th-century England, Jennings contends that Wesley repudiated the right of private property. However, there is sufficient evidence in the Wesley’s own writings to demonstrate that he upheld both religious and civil liberty. More to the point, in his “Thoughts upon Liberty” Wesley observes that civil liberty entails “a liberty to enjoy our lives and fortunes in our own way; to use our property, whatever is legally our own, according to our own choice.” And in his “Observations on Liberty” he adds: “Civil liberty is a liberty to dispose of our lives, persons, and fortunes, according to our own choice, and the laws of our country.” Cf. Thomas Jackson, ed., The Works of Rev. John Wesley, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1829-1831), Reprinted Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1978, 11:41, 11:92.

23. Jennings, Good News, p. 188.


25. Kenneth L. Carder, “What Difference Does Knowing Wesley Make?,” in Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), p. 28. See also the essay of Douglas Meeks in this same volume (pp. 83-98). In it he contends that the current malaise of the Methodist church is due to its acceding to the logic of a market economy.


28. Ibid., p. 31.


30. Albert C. Outler, ed., The Works of John Wesley, Vols. 1-4. The Sermons (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 4:13. Some of the descriptions of the poor, found in Wesley’s sermons, are no doubt problematic for the modern reader. For example, in his “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Eleventh,” Wesley states: “Nor does this [the way to perdition] only concern the vulgar herd, the poor, base, stupid part of mankind.” However, see Outler’s comment (number 20) found on page 667, volume one of the sermons.


32. Ibid., 19:173.


34. Ibid., 20:176, note number 45.


36. Ward and Heitzenrater, Journal, 20:125. One of the reasons for the efficiency of this stock was that Wesley laid down a number of ground rules: first, only 20 shillings was to be lent at a
time; second, this sum was to be repaid weekly within a three-month period. Cf. Ward and Heitzenrater, 
journal, 20:204.

37. It should be noticed that the leading motif which informs Wesley’s concept of justice is not 
equality but “the rendering to each his or her due,” as found, for instance, in the writings of Plato,
Cicero, and other classical authors. Holland and Howell who, quite perceptively, note this difference 
write: “Wesley’s definition of the ‘just’ is Ciceronian, connoting rendering to all ‘their due’ and pre
scribing exactly what is right, precisely what ought to be done, said, or thought, both with regard to 
The Author of our being, with regard to ourselves, and with regard to every creature which he has made.” Cf. Lynwood M. Holland and Ronald F. Howell, “John Wesley’s Concept of Religious and 
Political Authority,” Journal of Church and State 6 (Autumn 1964): 301.


39. Jackson, Works, 8:309. For works which explore the importance of spirituality for 
Methodism, Cf. Gordon Wakefield, ed., The Fire of Love: The Spirituality of John Wesley (London: 
Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976); J. A. Newton, “Perfection and Spirituality in the Methodist 
Tradition,” Church Quarterly Review 3 (October 1970): 95-103; Albert C. Outler, “A Focus of the 
Holy Spirit: Spirit and Spirituality in John Wesley,” in The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of 
Albert C. Outler, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 
1991), pp. 159-74; and David Lowes Watson, “Methodist Spirituality,” in Exploring Christian 
Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader, ed. Kenneth J. Collins (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 
2000), 172-213.

40. Ibid., 8:310.

41. Outler, Sermons, 2:302. (The Reformation of Manners) In addition, in his “Letter to a 
Clergyman” Wesley writes: “I think he is a true, evangelical Minister, diakonos, “servant” of Christ 
and his church, who...‘so ministers,” as to save souls from death, to reclaim sinners from their 
sins;...” Cf. Jackson, Works, 8:498.

42. Telford, Letters, 5:316. More than a decade later, in 1784 to be exact, John reminisced 
about the founding of Methodism and the employment of lay preachers and exclaimed: “He chose 
a few young, poor, ignorant men, without experience, learning, or art;...seeking no honour, no 
profit, no pleasure, no ease, but merely to save souls.” Cf. Outler, Sermons, 2:558-559.

43. Wesley maintained that works of piety as well as works of mercy are in some sense neces
sary to sanctification. In other words, if there be time and opportunity, these works are the normal 
means to an improvement of the rich grace of God. Wesley, however, did not contend that doing 
good works necessarily results in an increase in holiness. The emphasis here, as elsewhere, is on the 
grace of God and works of mercy as a means of that grace. Cf. Outler, Sermons, 2:164.

44. Outler, Sermons, 3:390.

45. Ibid., p. 391. These hortatory comments found in the sermons reveal that in his ministry to 
the poor Wesley was never simply preoccupied with their temporal needs, important though they 
were, but he also was ever concerned with the transcendent, with the issues of God and eternity, a 
trait which gave his economic ethic, at least at times, a decidedly “otherworldly” emphasis. “Every 
pound you put into the earthly bank is sunk,” Wesley writes in his “The More Excellent Way,” “it brings no interest above. But every pound you give to the poor is put into the bank of heaven.” Cf. 
Outler, Sermons, 3:276.

46. Ibid., 3:393. Emphasis is mine.

47. Ibid., 1:519. With respect to the roles of ministry, the task of visiting the sick (and the poor) 
demonstrates not separation as in some praxis models, not ministry which occurs in one direction 
only, from the poor to those who minister to them, but it reveals, once again, a mutuality of need 
and of love in an ever larger circle of ministry. Moreover, this mutuality of need and love is amply 
displayed in Wesley’s sermon, “On Visiting the Sick,” in which he counsels his readers to visit the 
afflicted in person for two principal reasons: first, unlike a physician, the visitor can do great good to
the souls of men and women. Second, sending relief by another likewise does not improve one's own graces; there is no advance, in other words, in the love of God and neighbor. "You could not gain that increase in lowliness, in patience, in tenderness of spirit, in sympathy with the afflicted," Wesley notes, "which you might have gained if you had assisted them in person." Cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 3:389, 393.

48. Ibid., 1:695. Emphasis is mine.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 3:389. Emphasis is mine. Though the ministry of visiting the sick was one open to the poor, women, the young, as well as the old, Wesley contended that "the rich" have a special calling to this labor. He reasons: "You have likewise a peculiar advantage over many, by your station in life. Being superior in rank to them, you have the more influence on that very account. Your inferiors of course look up to you with a kind of reverence. And the condescension which you show in visiting them gives them a prejudice in your favour which inclines them to hear you with attention, and willingly receive what you say. Improve this prejudice to the uttermost for the benefit of their souls, as well as their bodies." Cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 3:393. (On Visiting the Sick)

51. Ibid., 3:313-14.

52. Though there is no evidence that Wesley ever read St. Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, the central images which both spiritual leaders use to describe the Christian life are remarkably similar. Both, for instance, employ paradigmatic metaphors which not only contain implicit value judgments, but they also highlight the crucial nature of love. For example, Teresa's seventh mansion and its "geographical" location in the center of the castle is analogous to Wesley's placing of love on the throne from which all else in the Christian life flows. Compare Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 206ff. with Outler, *Sermons*, 3:313-14. (On Zeal).

53. Ibid., 3:320. Bracketed material is mine.

54. Ibid., 3:305.

55. Ibid., 4:223. The danger of beginning not with love and holy tempers but with political and economic concerns is that "justice" so conceived will most likely be unreformed, speckled with anger, class animosity, and perhaps even outright hatred of the middle-class or the rich. In other words, its concern for the poor will be expressed in all those unholy tempers against which Wesley inveighed. Once again, love and holiness are the proper starting point. Only then will the poor be properly ministered to and receive the justice they deserve.