

**Wielding the Sword:
John Wesley's Biblical Hermeneutics on Wealth**

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Introduction

The self-consciousness of a post-modern age has taught us to see ourselves as agents in our own readings of texts, and to recognize that we read inescapably as twenty-first century Africans or North Americans or what-have-you, caught up in our own questions and shaped by our own societies. But it is something of a jolt to see our theological ancestors, even the primary sources of our common tradition, every bit as constructively involved in making meaning out of the biblical text: to see John Wesley for the supremely *active* reader and expositor he is.

He reads the Bible as an Englishman in the 18th century, at the cusp of political and economic transformations whose future consequences are still below the horizon and unimaginable. He reads the canonical texts with, to and for other Englishmen and women (and their half-alienated offspring in the New World), moving with the ease of unselfconsciousness between first century Palestine and 18th century London. He reads pre-eminently as a pastor engaged in forming and sustaining a community, with an eye always to the needs and circumstances and sins of his own people. None of this is to fault him as a reader; it is merely to note that his reading is shaped by his situation and driven (as all readings are) by his purposes, which are always more than exegetical.

This is not, of course, an observation that would have troubled Wesley in the least. It was for him an orienting point of doctrine that Scripture itself was the most purposive of books, written to awaken in humanity a fear of God's judgment and a hope

of God's mercy. The preacher's task is to bring the two-edged sword of God's word to bear upon a particular community for the sake of their salvation. It is hard to know what he would have made of our idea of exegesis as a neutral, scientific and historical unpacking of an ancient text that has no specific aim either to edify your own soul or to guide and instruct the souls of your fellows. It seems likely he would have thought such "interpretation" no business of a minister of the gospel.

My aim in what follows is to review and reconsider the body of Wesley's material on the moral use of possessions, looking in particular for the strategies by which and the ends to which he turns biblical texts to the address of his people. In the space available, it will not be possible to deal exhaustively with this material. Nevertheless, this is not an area in which we see a great deal of shift and development in Wesley's thought, but only a gradual darkening of expectation that the preached word will fall on hearing ears. The portion that is dealt with here should be able accurately to reflect the whole.

As is well known, Wesley devotes a substantial amount of ink to the subject of money, returning to it several times, using a variety of biblical passages as his launching points. At the same time, it is important not to distort the place of this subject in the whole sweep of Wesley's preaching and writing: however striking and memorable this strand of his work may be, and however important it may be for us to attend to it, it represents the central focus of only a small percentage of texts. However, the chronology of those texts suggests an increasing focus on possessions as a moral and spiritual danger as Wesley observed the course of his Societies' development, and an increasing urgency to his concerns.

The standard list of pertinent works will be familiar even to casual students of Wesley. In chronological order: there is the most widely known (and equally widely misrepresented) sermon “The Use of Money” (1744); there is the sermon on “The Good Steward” (1758?: date disputed)), and that on the “Danger of Riches” (1780), and one called simply “On Riches” (1788). There is the deeply disappointed sermon “On the Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity” (1789), and the final, almost desperate “On the Danger of Increasing Riches” (1790). Also relevant is the pamphlet “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions” (1773), notable for its generality of address and its attention to the scalar, systematic effects of individual decisions and practices. In addition, brief remarks about the potency, usefulness and peril of wealth are laced through other sermons as occasion arises, for example in his multiple treatments of the Sermon on the Mount. However, none of these develop points not already represented in the works cited above. Thus it seems safe, at least as an initial appraisal, to focus on what exactly Wesley is busy interpreting in each of the standard sources, what central interpretive strategies govern his readings, and what is morally decisive in each case.

The Use of Money: Competition and Consumption

Wesley’s sermon on “The Use of Money” has been a victim of its popularity, or more precisely of its homiletical effectiveness. It takes up a text that has confused and embarrassed the church for centuries, the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Lk.16), and handily transforms it into three easily-remembered maxims. Moreover, on first glance they do not seem all that challenging. The first of his “three plain rules” is that we should “gain all we can.” In our own happily acquisitive society this seems a little like

admonishing fire to burn or water to be wet, but of course, Wesley has just begun. By the time he has finished unpacking all the means and terms of gain that are *ruled out* for Christians, he has excluded anything that harms us in body, mind or spirit, anything which saps health or perverts character or weakens faith and joy in God. He also excludes anything that harms our neighbor in any aspect, by damaging her body, by failing to exercise due diligence in her protection, or by exploiting weaknesses of mind or failings of character: anything which involves or even conduces to our own or another's sin is out of bounds.

This is already a stunning check to business as usual in Wesley's day, as it would be in our own. But these strictures, according to Wesley entailed by our duty to love our neighbors as ourselves, are not the most surprising or the most illuminating of his instructions. Included in Wesley's explication of what duty forbids are several things we would likely consider in the category of healthy competition, or the efficient operation of the market, and regard as inseparable from capitalism. Wesley says we may not harm our neighbor's substance, and under this heading he rules out not only predatory lending practices, price-gouging, and profiting from another's hardship, but also routine competitive practices.

He expressly forbids the sale of goods below market value for the purpose of driving others out of business, and lays it down as a principle that we may not "study to ruin our neighbor's trade in order to advance our own" (I-3). Nor can we compete with others for the capacity to do business: we cannot solicit our neighbor's workers, or even agree to hire them if she is in need of them. (He does not appear to have considered competition for labor as a potentially positive force in securing livable wages for

laborers.) To the extent that competition in trade is constructed as a zero-sum game in which my benefit depends upon your loss, Wesley regards it as contrary to Christian duty.

What is evident here is Wesley's resistance to economic changes which were part of the transition from a predominantly rural agrarian society toward an urban manufacturing economy, the prototype of early industrial capitalism. The subject of his interpretation is less the biblical text than his own society: its emerging patterns of commerce, and the ethos they are fostering. Wesley regards the kind of direct competition for a limited market which we take for granted as the fundamental mechanism of capitalism, and valorize as the engine of efficiency and progress, as a violation of human solidarity: a transgression of our basic duty not to harm. Thus he calls into question its whole mechanism for profit-seeking itself.

It is important to note the biblical text that governs Wesley's ethic of commerce is not his ostensible sermon text, the parable of the dishonest steward; this receives only scant attention confined to the introductory paragraphs. As the foregoing has already suggested, the governing text is the oft-repeated and much more central commandment to "love the neighbor as the self." Christians are to prosper in business by sheer diligence, by ingenuity and excellence in the use of their various skills, and by the superior quality of their work. Anything else violates the commandment "on which hang all the law and the prophets", and is thereby equated with "gaining the world at cost of your soul." It is this hermeneutical judgment that does the real moral work in this part of the sermon.

But there is more. Wesley's second rule about saving all one can is not just a plea for modesty or prudence in expenditures. It is an attack upon *all* the elective consumption

that fuels a capitalist society. Licit expenses include those needed to provide basic sustenance for oneself and one's dependents, but Wesley's exposition makes clear that the accent here falls upon "basic." One may in conscience spend enough to support health and strength, but not to provide such ancillary benefits as mere variety or pleasure or beauty in one's food, clothing or surroundings. All these in common are accounted luxuries. Not only do such unnecessary expenditures detract from what may be given away, but they are in themselves condemned as a species of worldliness. Resources devoted to such things are not merely wasted; they are devoted to "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life." This Johannine phrase is used by Wesley repeatedly, in this sermon and elsewhere, to sweep up whatever is desired without being strictly needed for life. The result is a standard for what may be innocently spent not much beyond bare necessity, with whatever is left over owed to the poor.

The weight of Wesley's biblical interpretation falls here, on this identification of unnecessary purchases with "loving the world and the things that are in the world," inherently at odds with loving God. The creation of new conveniences and the turning of a newly emerging productive capacity to consumer goods which marked the latter half of the 18th century (and which continues as the central economic engine of our own prosperity) becomes on this view one vast temptation. The basic premises of consumer capitalism, market competition and continuously rising consumption, are from Wesley's standpoint occasions of sin: sin which, while rejecting the Scholastic category, he nevertheless identifies as mortal. Despite its reputation as the most accommodating of Wesley's treatments of wealth, "The Use of Money" takes as its subject not the biblical text but the economics of the emerging Industrial Revolution, and it does not fare well.

The Good Steward: Ownership

It is notable that the sermon called “The Good Steward” uses for its underlying text a single phrase (Lk. 16:2b) from the same parable, that of the unjust steward. Now, however, Wesley’s interest is turned in a new direction, one that gives this the broadest scope of all his sermons dealing with money. In this address he aims to sum up in one phrase the whole situation of the human being, the whole tenor and shape of Christian duty, and with it the nature of human infidelity. Moreover, he says as much in his Introduction, going on to occupy the first third of the sermon with his exposition of the breadth of application of his central metaphor. We are stewards of our souls, bodies, minds, affections, lives, strength, powers, talents and goods (I: 2-8). Certainly the topic of money and possessions is embraced in this list and given attention here, but here as well is Wesley’s most comprehensive account of the dimensions of stewardship.

From this basic theological anthropology comes a picture of moral life both compelling and daunting: everything is owed, no act is morally indifferent, and there can be no works of supererogation since we can never do more than is our duty. Wesley’s concluding gloss on the mild-seeming verse, “every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor”, is as follows: “We cannot be wise stewards unless we labor to the uttermost of our power, not leaving anything undone which we can possibly do” (IV, 3) This is nothing less than an interpretation of moral existence.

In this overarching context, the treatment of possessions is wholly consistent, but also utterly radical in its implications. Wesley takes the term steward in its fullest and most literal sense: a steward is a servant, most often a slave, charged with the

administration of another's property. He has no stake and no right in what is dispensed, and when all has been administered according to the owner's and master's will, then only basic justice has been done.

At the root of Wesley's treatment of ownership is a theological counterpoint to John Locke's labor theory of property, which was highly influential at the time. Locke famously held that a person naturally owns himself and his labor, so that the labor expended to obtain, modify or make use of a natural resource, including land, gave one a natural right of property in it. Wesley, however, begins with the premise that raw nature is not, as Locke assumed, unowned; rather, God, as Creator of all that exists, maintains an essential and inalienable claim upon everything.

Thus, neither our bodies nor our labor may be thought of as our own, since we ourselves are God's, and our every capacity comes to us as a trust, an endowment for whose use we are directly accountable to our Maker. We may have used our strength and skills and energy to acquire property and make it profitable; nevertheless, the property along with the capacities that secured it and the profit that comes of it, together with ourselves, all belong in their entirety to God. God mercifully gives us the privilege of being the first to be served by the property we hold in trust, and the blessing of being givers rather than recipients of the fruit of our own labor. Still, nothing on earth belongs to us, and for the use of every resource of nature, time and talent we are wholly accountable before God.

This conviction is in part and obviously a result of the doctrine of creation. But Wesley's insistence that the goods of earth are neither gifts nor loans but merely temporary entrustments takes its force from a passage later in Luke, one to which he

repeatedly alludes but which he never quotes in its entirety: "If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust you with true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" (Lk. 16:11-12) On Wesley's reading, those things we are used to calling our possessions are by definition "what belongs to another", while those that genuinely belong to us can do so only proleptically; they are the spiritual goods waiting in the eternal country for which this present "land of our sojourning" is only test and preparation (I:1).

Thus Wesley's understanding of possessions and their use is grounded at least as much in eschatology as in creation. The rigor and consistency of his standards for legitimate expenses arise partly from the notion of entrustment and the here-and-now practicalities of human needs which material resources might meet. But to an even greater extent, they are determined by the eschatological horizon against which he interprets the most routine transactions. With every expenditure we are declaring what is the home toward which we look, and staking a claim to the country of our final dwelling place.

The Danger of Riches: Wealth and Its Seductions

The sermon on "The Danger of Riches" is notable in this company for the degree to which it actually focuses on the exposition of the sermon text, I Tim. 6:9. ["They that will be rich fall into a temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful desires which drown men in destruction and perdition."] Wesley allows the text to structure his sermon; he proceeds by identifying those who fall under the warning, and then details the

nature and operation of the threat, and ends with a plea that his hearers turn from destruction.

From the preceding verse, “having food and raiment, with these let us be content” (I Tim 6:8), Wesley moves summarily to the judgment that all who desire more than this, all who seek it, or even those who simply retain it when it comes to them without being sought, fall under the text’s working definition of ‘those who would be rich.’ This is true whether the wealth is stored as possessions, or as land, or as money laid by against adversity. All those who make such provisions, along with all who love money itself, fall into the temptations and disasters of “those who will be rich”. On this contention hang the force and persuasiveness of Wesley’s whole interpretation, and the cogency of the conclusions he draws from it.

Along with what he calls the “gross and unnatural sin of love of money” in itself (I, 6), he speaks of the more refined sin of “desiring more” (I, 7). Having worked so extensively with those in real want, Wesley observes that this desire kept within proper bounds can be innocent; yet “how difficult it is not to exceed them!” The danger of riches, plainly put, is sin, and he identifies the heart of that peril bluntly: at its root, the sin consists in the desiring of happiness in something other than God (I, 12). It is here that Wesley gives his most extensive explication of the Johannine triad comprising love of the world which wars with the love of God.

In fact, much of the sermon explores what a modern commentator might call the psychology of desire. It details the effects of gratifying desires, which is not to quiet but rather to increase them (I, 16). It is the experience of ensnarement that Wesley expounds, and the slide into spiritual paralysis and blindness that attends it. He does not merely

parse the movements of the passage; he provides a kind of phenomenology of the captivity of affluence. Those who have the means and gratify their desires risk becoming unable to forego them, chained to novelty and ease and convenience, and the blows to patience, humility, zeal, and ultimately to faith and charity that come of that attachment are deadly. This is Wesley as pathologist, describing the natural history of a fatal disease. Indeed, he closes with a long list of diagnostic questions, inviting his hearers to determine whether they are not infected with this toxic desire that distorts hope, dilutes faith and destroys zeal for the active work of charity, ending with the warning of Mt. 19:24 about how hardly the rich can enter the Kingdom.

And it is here that he picks up in the 1788 sermon “On Riches”, exploring another dimension of the perilous quality of wealth: the number of temptations to and occasions for sin that lie in the path of the rich. Beginning with the temptation to place one’s confidence in riches rather than God, Wesley describes the particular moral deformities of English social life which reinforce and exacerbate that tendency. He notes how the adjective “good” is applied to any man who is rich, and that a wealthy man is held in honor; he declares it impossible that such a one should escape pride to come to God as the merest sinner, trusting only in faith for salvation, unless by the powerful grace of God. Lacking that realization of a welcome altogether unmerited, the rich are hindered in their love for God itself. And should that obstacle be overcome, another waits, for “how is it possible for a man not to love the world who is surrounded by all its allurements?” ((I-2) Like the rich man of the passage, Wesley says, his great possessions will expel the love of God from his soul. Thus faith and love toward God are both wounded.

Moral virtues are likewise harder to acquire for the rich, for they are “cut off from that freedom of conversation whereby they might be made sensible of their defects, and come to a true knowledge of themselves.” (I-4) Surrounded by dependents and sycophants, by those who from fear or greed will offer only flattery, “his situation necessarily occasions praise to flow in upon him from every quarter.” (II-5) Wealth ensures that whims are gratified on every side, Wesley observes, as all strive to oblige the wealthy, increasing self-will and thwarting patience, till he be “ill able to submit to the will of either God or men”. (II-6) The rich are thus deprived of opportunities to learn meekness and gentleness, to learn to yield to other persons and to love with disinterested benevolence those who do not flatter and pamper their vanity. Not only the love of God but the love of neighbor will find little occasion to grow up in such a setting. More than an interpretation of the passage, this is an interpretation and critique of British society, of the moral distortions he saw imbedded in its class-conscious social order.

Speaking at last not to the rich in general but to the wealthy now among his own congregations, Wesley applies to them the words of James 5:1: “Woe to you rich, weep and howl for the miseries which are coming upon you....” Here Wesley is no longer principally interpreting scripture, whether in particular or in whole. He is no longer expounding the divine purpose of money, or the theological fitness of the metaphor of stewardship, or the wide parameters of the lusts of the flesh. Now he begins to deal with his own failure: the failure of his decades of preaching and teaching to counter the effects of the changing social location of Methodists on their conduct, and their souls. With the growth in property, status, respectability and wealth, he sees them falling prey to all that

his analysis of desire and the temptations of riches could predict, but has not been able to prevent.

Inefficacy and Increasing Wealth: The Captive State of the Church

In the sermon “On the Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity”, Wesley undertakes to interpret just that fact. In a long and [for us] awkward prelude, he declares the greater part of the world, including most of ostensible Christendom, to be ignorant heathens. But they are not Wesley’s chief concern, or the source of his grief. Instead, he grapples with the lack of evidence of spiritual progress among those who have the benefit of both Christian doctrine and Christian discipline: those of his own congregations. He sets out to interpret the internal dynamics of decay and corruption within the Methodist movement, and attributes it to the failure of the practices of self-denial among them. The Methodists’ behavior in the use of money is in a sense merely an example of that larger pattern. However, corruption related to wealth receives his most sustained attention, both beginning and ending the analysis of the disease and decay he finds within his churches.

He reports that many observe the first rule of gaining all they can, fewer observe that of saving all they can, but hardly any observe the rule of giving all they can for which the other two are promulgated, leaving them “twofold more the children of hell than they were before” (8). With a candor that is somehow terrifying, Wesley admits his perplexity, and his regrets: “I am distressed. I know not what to do... With regard to dress, I might have been as firm (and I now see it would have been far better) as the

people called Quakers, or the Moravian Bretheren. . . .But alas! The time is now past; and what I can do now I cannot tell” (12).

Wesley traces the terrible irony which makes even the gifts of grace (sobriety, diligence, self-restraint, and discipline) agents of self-destruction, for this is what they become when they are severed from the goal of holiness they were given to serve, and turned merely to the service of prosperity. For this the only remedy, he insists, is the rigorous restraint which rules out all unnecessary expense: “I can see only one way....if you have any desire to escape the damnation of hell, then give all you can” (18).

And that brings us to the last of these central texts, Wesley’s final cry against what he has come to see as the bitter end of all the revival he has worked for through a lifetime. All the themes of “The Danger of Increasing Riches” are familiar; indeed, much of its wording paraphrases portions of earlier sermons, including the one just preceding. What is different here is the tone. One year later, the rhetoric is even sharper, the intensity greater than ever before. If not quite despairing, the sermon may fairly be called desperate in its plea that those who have increased in wealth not use that as the occasion for richer living or idleness or any other form of self-indulgence, lest they abandon the faith and imperil their own souls.

Clear here is Wesley’s conviction that salvation itself rests upon faithfulness in the use of money. If there is anything new to note, it is the weight of eschatological expectation (both in hope and in fear) conveyed in this sermon. This is not inconsistent with Wesley’s earliest writing, but long observation has darkened his expectations of a positive response at the same time as it has increased the urgency of his preaching. One has here the sense that the near approach of his own death moves him to fear, not for

himself, but for the survival of his movement. Like Moses' final discourse at the edge of the Jordan in Deuteronomy, this is a last cry to those whom he fears will perish, snared by the very bounty God has provided: turn and live!

Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions: Toward Interpreting the World

For all his intense focus upon preaching and pastoral leadership, Wesley did not restrict his hermeneutical work to the interpretation of texts, or of the moral and spiritual state of his Societies. In the pamphlet on the roots of scarcity, he confronted the desperate and widespread poverty affecting England in his day and searched for causes. He was groping for the tools of the science of economics, then in its infancy. Without either the mathematical tools or the data that would enable later thinkers to trace large scale trends and delineate complex relationships, still Wesley looked for patterns that explained *why* problems existed and how they might effectively be attacked. The situation of the poor, he argued, was part of a larger shift in social arrangements and institutions. Common lands had been fenced off, and the control of agricultural land was concentrated in the hands of fewer and wealthier property owners. Small farmers were displaced, creating large scale unemployment. This left households in need of income at the same time that it drove down the price of labor by concentrating unskilled workers in the cities to which they flocked in search of jobs. On top of everything else, the widespread use of distilled alcohol and the keeping of numerous horses by the wealthy created a greater market for grain, driving up the price of that portion left for food and leaving the poor unable to buy bread.

Thus, Wesley denounced as "wickedly and devilishly false" the commonplace claim that the poor were poor only because they were lazy or profligate. Instead, he argued, they suffered the effects of large scale changes over which they had no control, and from the greed, self-indulgence, and hard-heartedness of the upper classes. Wesley made quite clear the moral and spiritual implications of this analysis, both in sermons and instruction for the members of his Societies, and for the wider public toward whom this polemic was directed. Luxury and the hoarding of resources were denounced as crimes against God and neighbor. Even the temperance movement, embraced by the Methodists because of the spread of alcoholism and related vices, had also for Wesley this economic aspect: that it attacked an industry he saw as taking bread from the mouths of the hungry.

Learning from our Forebears

There is of course more to say, but space is limited, and I do not want to end without at least framing some of the questions this study suggests for our consideration. If Wesley turns out to have been interpreting his texts vigorously and powerfully in light of the needs and circumstances and failings of his own churches in their particular context, if I am correct that the subject of his hermeneutics is as much 18th century England as first century texts, we cannot leave this topic without asking, "What would an analogous hermeneutic look like in our own world?" What are the comparable tasks that face us as expositors of Scripture who are also teachers of the church set within a particular time and place? Here are a handful of suggestions, each of them of sufficient scale to occupy any a number of researchers for multiple years. I offer them merely as a

beginning stimulus to our thinking about what it might involve for us to continue John Wesley's tradition of broad and unflinching economic and social critique.

- Building upon this model, we might undertake to interpret our own economic system: driven by short and medium term profit, locked in competition for global markets, moved by large scale forces that drive down labor costs, so that there is a loss of living wage jobs and a curtailment of benefits for even mid-range workers. Wesley's vigorous critique might bring us to ask again fundamental critical questions such as, "What are the aims of economic life?" and "What are the measures of a good economic system?"
- We might also consider our own theology of stewardship in relation to the larger framework of our situation in the world environment. Ours is a setting of unparalleled military and industrial power, historically unprecedented concentrations of private wealth, and racing technological development. What would constitute faithful stewardship of such power?
- The average American is estimated to be exposed to 10,000 commercial messages per day. We might devote serious research to the moral and theological analysis of the psychology of desire in a mass media advertising culture. Our whole system lives on the insatiability of desire, indeed on the deliberate and calculated creation of desire for products heretofore nonexistent. This is at once the engine of our affluence and the force hastening the degradation of our environment. What resources does the

thought and practice of our faith bring to the runaway train of rising consumption in the West?

- At a deeper level, we might examine the effect upon faith, indeed upon human existence, of a world of continuous distraction. Our modes of stimulation now follow us via earphone and podcast into every moment and every space of our frantic lives. We are constantly entertained, via music and images, video and electronic games, so that we need never have an idle moment -- or a reflective thought. Do we even recognize an inner life? Or have we rendered ourselves effectively deaf to what Wesley would have called the inward promptings of the Holy Spirit, and drowned out the voice of God?
- Finally: Wesley traced the failure of Christian faith to transform lives to his people's unwillingness to practice self-denial. We, meanwhile, have all but lost the language. Can we achieve even the flickers of self-forgetfulness that make it possible to attend to the needs of others? Ours is a culture that has rejected suffering, regarding it not so much as a mystery as an offense, an infringement upon our entitlement to happiness and ease. Are we prepared to read the Bible to and for our own society, prepared to reclaim its insistence that the one who loses his life will save it? Moreover, do we have the imagination to proclaim as good news the message that we were made to find our life in God, to share in God's work of blessing others, and find there a share in God's inexhaustible gladness?