

CHAPTER 1

Wesley and the Poor: An Agenda for Wesleyans

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Introduction

The main burden of this essay takes for granted the case I have made in my book *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*. On that basis I will argue for an agenda for Methodist theologians and scholars that may make effective for World Methodism a recuperation of this essentially Wesleyan theme: *Wesley's option for the poor*.

Wesley and the Poor

In order that we may become more clear about our Wesleyan heritage in this respect let us first recount Wesley's own appraisal of the character of the Methodist movement that he launched and directed for so many years.¹ Toward the end of his life Wesley attempted a number of assessments of his movement. In the sermon "The Signs of the Times," Wesley sought to place Methodism within his own growing appreciation of history as the arena of God's saving work. In order to show that God was indeed at work in history he pointed to the Methodist movement and declared: "And surely never in any age or nation, since the Apostles, have those words been so eminently fulfilled, 'the poor have the gospel preached unto them,' as it is at this day."²

Here we should notice two related things. The first is that the mission of the people called Methodists can be accurately summarized, according to Wesley, as the preaching of good news to the poor. The second is that this is regarded by Wesley as the fulfillment of the

gospel mandate itself and thus as making of the people called Methodists a true sign of the purpose and work of God in the world.

Now we cannot understand the significance of Wesley's remark here unless we bear in mind that this carrying of good news to the poor was not, for Wesley, something that just happened. It was the result of a conscious and deliberate choice; Wesley turned away from the prosperous in order to turn toward the poor. Thus Wesley can say to his critics in the established church: "The honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcasts of men."³ And Wesley is as good as his word. He regularly reports in his *Journal* that he was alarmed by the presence of the prosperous among his audience. When he discovered them there he would change his message to suit the occasion: "In the evening I was surprised to see, instead of some poor plain people, a room full of men daubed with gold and silver. That I might not go out of their depth, I began expounding the story of Dives and Lazarus."⁴ And when a sermon on the rich man in hell appealing in vain for the mercy of the poor in God's reign does not suffice to drive the prosperous away, Wesley himself is disposed to leave: "Many of the rich and honourable were there; so that I found that it was time for me to fly away. . . ."⁵ It would be possible to illustrate this point many times from Wesley's *Journal*. He seeks out the poor, he turns away from the prosperous. There are still many who regard such a policy as perverse, but Wesley understood that it was absolutely necessary if the gospel of Christ were to be served. When he was questioned about this policy Wesley responded: "Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men."⁶

Here is what we may call the theological basis of Wesley's preferential option for the poor in the work of evangelization. Religion, if it is not to be the pious form of worldliness, if it is instead to be the response to the action of God, must begin where God begins, among the poor, the despised, the oppressed, and the marginalized. Otherwise it is not a divine but a merely human project, in which case, whatever success such worldly evangelism has need not be explained as the operation of God but as the result of good public relations, market research, and customer satisfaction. Wesley understood that the means must correspond with the end, that evangelization which corresponds to the gospel must begin with the poor. Wesley was far from ignorant of the plight of the poor; indeed he

made it a regular practice to acquaint himself directly with their situation. He was not content to preach to them, even though his favorite venues for preaching (open fields, market places, public hangings, etc.) made certain that he would reach them in ways closed to those who stayed within the bounds of churches and meeting halls. Instead Wesley made a point of visiting the poor and even of lodging with them, as we are so vividly reminded in the work of John Walsh.⁷

The practice of visiting the poor on a regular and constant basis goes back to Wesley's Oxford days. He regarded it then simply as an essential aspect of that holiness without which none can see God. He could no more imagine a week without visiting the hovels of the poor than he could a week without participation in the Eucharist. Moreover, he insisted to all who placed themselves under his direction that the visiting of the poor was an essential means of grace and an indispensable form of obedience to the command of Christ: "The walking herein is essentially necessary, as to the continuance of that faith whereby we are saved by grace, so to the attainment of everlasting salvation."⁸

Wesley understood that the deep class divisions of his own society were largely based upon a studied ignorance of the life of the poor on the part of the prosperous. "One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them."⁹ Thus the practice of the visitation of the poor which he regarded as essential to Methodist discipline was a practice that broke down the barriers between the classes so as to produce a conversion of the prosperous to the cause of the poor. An immediate consequence of this intimate awareness of the conditions of poverty was the determination to develop programs of aid for the poor: "On the following days, I visited many of our poor, to see with my own eyes what their wants were, and how they might be effectually relieved."¹⁰ One level of response was the practice of "begging for the poor." Here is one illustration of this practice which comes from Wesley's 82nd (!) year:

At this season [Christmas] we usually distribute coals and bread among the poor of the society [of London]. But I now considered, they wanted clothes as well as food. So on this and the four following days, I walked through the town, and begged two hundred pounds in order to clothe them that needed it most. But it was hard work, as most of the streets were filled with melting snow,

which often lay ankle deep; so that my feet were steeped in snow-water nearly from morning till evening.¹¹

Wesley also made a point of the fact that the collections taken at his public meetings were not for Church buildings nor for pastors' salaries but for the poor. Even at this level, Wesley's practice far exceeded what is normally thought of as alms giving and charity.

But he went much further than this; he sought to help the poor help themselves. Thus he organized clinics, cooperatives, and credit unions. He understood the evangelization of the poor to entail far more than simply preaching to people. The gospel concerns not a disembodied word but the word made flesh. And the announcement of good news to the poor must at the same time be the enactment of good news to the poor, the healing of broken bodies, and the feeding of the hungry, and the mobilizing of the paralyzed. If this does not occur there can be no talk of an evangelism that has anything to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Wesley sought to make the welfare of the poor the criterion of every aspect of the Methodist movement. This is already obvious in his choice of venue for preaching. It is also the motivation for his work of extensive publishing of small tracts and abridgements and indeed whole libraries. It is the criterion for the building of meeting places which were to be cheap so as not to make the Methodists beholden to the rich:

Let all preaching-houses be built plain and decent; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable: Otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent upon them, yea and governed by them. And then farewell all Methodist discipline, if not doctrine too.¹²

Thus every aspect of Methodism was subjected to the criterion, How will this benefit the poor? Solidarity with the poor was not to be a side issue, but the test of every dimension of activity.

One other aspect of Wesley's preaching and practice that is critical to the evangelization of the poor is the style of life that corresponds to a commitment to the poor. From the days at Oxford, Wesley had sought to develop a lifestyle that would permit him to engage in solidarity with the poor. This included not only visitation but also the disciplines of frugality. When Methodism became a lay ecumenical movement following 1738, Wesley developed his views on this question under such headings as stewardship and in special-

ized reflections on such matters as dress, the drinking of tea, and so on. Wesley maintains that we are to be stewards "of God and the poor."¹³ Stewardship for the poor means that everything beyond what is necessary for life belongs to the poor. God gives me what I have in order that I may give it to the poor. Wesley writes:

. . . who lodged [this money] for a time in your hands as his stewards; informing you at the same time for what purposes he entrusted you with it? Do not you know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessaries for your family) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind.¹⁴

Given that our economic life is to be governed by the welfare of the poor, the attempt to acquire more than is necessary, and especially the consumption of surplus, is to be understood as robbery. Thus consumption or needless expense is simply the robbery of the poor. Wesley's view of what we would call consumerism is as strict as a commandment: "Everything about thee which cost more than Christian duty required thee to lay out is the blood of the poor."¹⁵

When Wesley speaks of stewardship, he is not talking about fund raising for a middle-class institution. He is talking about the redistribution of wealth from the prosperous to the poor. Now much of this concerns what we would call personal ethics, but Wesley's own reflections on these matters do not stay at the level of the personal and individual. His concern for the poor leads him into direct conflict with powerful sectors of his own society: the medical and legal professions. It leads him to denounce ordinary business practices as sheer robbery. His identification with the poor and despised of society makes it possible for him to read history and society from the underside. It is this which enables him to see the ghastly character of the slave trade and vigorously to oppose the policies of colonialism.

I am aware that Wesley's views on what I have called his evangelical economics have certain limitations from the point of view of our own more sophisticated understanding of global economic reality. It is the case that Wesley was a man of the eighteenth century rather than our own. I do not suppose that it is possible to transplant the early modern reflections of Wesley into the post modern context in which we must live, reflect, and work. As José Míguez Bonino and others have reminded us, not only have the concrete realities of our

world altered and the sociological, psychological, and philosophical categories within which that reality is reflected and criticized, but even the theological categories and hermeneutical principles that guide our work have also dramatically changed.¹⁶

Yet still, I believe Wesley may speak challengingly to us in our own time. When, after years of avoiding the study of Wesley, I found it necessary to teach Wesley in Spanish to seminary students in Mexico, I discovered that they found in Wesley a point of entry to the concerns of liberation theology which a traditional reading of scripture and a pious suspicion of Marxist theory had conspired to close off to them. That is, Wesley's concrete concern for the poor, his critique of wealth and privilege, his protest against colonialism and exploitation made a far greater impact upon them than the more sophisticated and undoubtedly more conceptually adequate formulations of contemporary Latin American theologians. I think it was precisely Wesley's own pietism, his own evangelical fervor, and his own moralizing scrupulosity that gave his social ethic an immediate plausibility that provoked a rethinking of the gospel and a re-reading of their own situation. I have found this experience repeated in a variety of other contexts as well. Indeed, I regularly find that Wesley, despite his limitations, is still quite radical for those who are committed either to a nineteenth-century tradition of piety or to the institutional maintenance of an established church.

The resistance on the part of the institutional church to Wesley's commitment to the poor and the apoplexy engendered by a discounting of the priority of Aldersgate are negative indications of the power of a rereading of Wesley just as the conscientization and mobilization of the poor and of those who work with the poor facilitated by this re-reading suggests to me that this project is not simply a waste of time. Who can doubt that this challenge is an urgent one today? For it is becoming increasingly clear that the anti-evangelical economics of institutionalized greed and violence is destroying the earth and its inhabitants. During the Nazi horror twelve million victims, half of them Jews, were sacrificed to national pride and institutionalized insanity. But in the decade of the 1980s one hundred million children died of poverty. One hundred million! Each year more children die of poverty (of starvation, malnutrition, and the diseases that feed on the starving) than the Nazi horror machine could exterminate in all the years of its feverish and fiendish activity. Each year there is a new holocaust, a new sacrifice to the

Moloch of greed and indifference. This slaughter of the innocents is no fortuitous calamity but the direct result of economic arrangements which blind us to reality by making us complicitous in calamity.

Mortal poverty is not due, as some blasphemously maintain, to an act of God. It is the work of our economic idolatry.¹⁷ The earth, reeling as it is, produces more than enough food to feed plentifully every man, woman, and child on the planet. Yet our economic system produces murderous scarcity. A few have more than they can consume, so much that garbage disposal is a critical problem, while millions perish in sight of plenty. One nation, containing a tiny fraction of the earth's population (the majority of whom think of themselves as Christians), consumes half the earth's resources yet still manages not to feed its own hungry. If proposals are made to remedy this iniquitous hoarding and waste by the few at the expense of the many we are told that this would destroy the economy. The economy of death. That is an economy worthy of destruction; it is open contempt of God.

This same economy of death imposes upon poor nations the crushing burden of debt, extorting interest payments by which poorer nations subsidize the excesses of richer nations. Thus the countries of Latin America, for example, so far from receiving aid from their immensely wealthy neighbor, actually export capital. Meanwhile the banks and international lending agencies propose that in order to solve the "debt crisis" the poorer countries accept "loans," the effect of which is to increase their debt and their payments of interest to these same banks. The International Monetary Fund has the audacity to extract as the price of this "aid" that the poor countries actually reduce their assistance to the poor of their own nation, cutting back food assistance to the hungry, medical care to the dying, education for the illiterate in order to have the honor of continuing to subsidize the wealthiest nation on earth. Neither Latin bureaucrats nor international bankers, nor the technocrats who negotiate these "final solutions" pay a penny. On the contrary, they grow wealthy creating and solving the "debt" crisis. It is only the poor who pay.

The solvency of the international financial market is the blood of the poor. The peoples of eastern Europe, so recently delivered from political tyranny, find themselves now remorselessly delivered up into the hands of this same economy of death that has been leeching the life blood of Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. The same

economy of death diverts human resources and those of the planet to the creation of weapons of death to ensure the security of the greedy and the complacent. Vast sums are squandered on unproductive arms industries even by the poorest nations, or rather by the elites of those nations, in imitation of their wealthier cousins of the North. Thus the instability generated by the greed of the few and the impoverishment of the many induces the greedy to protect themselves from the many, thereby reducing the resources available to redress the grievances of the many, thereby further destabilizing the societies they pretend to protect.

The vicious cycle of impoverishment and violence feeds upon itself. This same economy of death meanwhile is rapidly destroying the earth itself. More than half the arable land of the globe has already been turned into desert by the agriculture of avarice, arrogance, and ignorance. The waters of the earth are becoming cesspools, the air poisonous. Where once forests stood to cleanse the air and make it healthful for all creatures, there is now drifting sand; where grassy plains stretched to the horizons to feed the creatures of the earth there is now only desert. The prophets promise that the deserts can be made to bloom like gardens, but the economy of death turns the garden that remains into a desert. Already the majority of the earth's plant and animal species have been exterminated.

Is there no remedy? Certainly no minor adjustments to this mechanism of death will transform it into something that nourishes life. Without a radical transformation of our ways of dealing with one another and the earth, God's teeming creation may become a lifeless rock hurtling through the void of space. But from whence can such a radical transformation come?

A Future for a Wesleyan Perspective

In my judgment the outline of an answer is to be discerned in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those of us in the Wesleyan traditions may be helped to discern aspects of this gospel through a reflection on Wesley. Recently our world has been shaken by the great earthquake to the East and the collapse of the Soviet empire. Indeed some believe that a similar seismic event is in store for the post-Maoist regime that still governs more than a quarter of the earth's population. What is to be made of all this? Are we to imagine as Francis Fukuyama has maintained, that we live at the end of history? Does the collapse of

Communism in the East portend the hegemony of capitalism with or without a trickle down effect? What shape the New World Order? Are we condemned to the economic reign of avarice limited only by a formal democracy vitiated by the marketing of political double talk? These are not only rhetorical questions.

For about a century the opposition to the dominion of avarice has been largely carried by Marxism. Marxism has been the carrier first of a radical critique of those arrangements that make the world safe for the oligarchs and a buffering middle class at the expense of the impoverished masses of human kind. The Marxist critique has served as a powerful instrument in the demystification of the ideological disguises by which the interest of the powerful has wrapped itself in the stolen robes of the common good. Moreover, Marxism has also been the bearer of the aspiration of those classes which have been exploited, impoverished, and chained by the rule of unbridled mammon. Marx himself concentrated on the proletariat and Mao considered the peasant class. To be sure neither gave much attention to the truly destitute, the fully marginalized. And each perspective gave way to the domination of elites scarcely less malignant than their capitalist counterparts. Even though Marxism as a legitimating system for state and empire has been discredited, the historical project of which it has been the bearer is scarcely less urgent: that of unmasking the arrangements of greed and of carrying the hopes of the marginalized.

Indeed this is a project as old as the liberation of Egyptian slaves and the denunciations of the prophets. Historically this project has been carried by Israel, Christianity, Islam, and Marxism. Each in its own way has betrayed this project by becoming a legitimating system for the arrogation of power and privilege by the few at the expense of the many. In my view this is the true dynamic of history, a dynamic whose end is not the hegemony of avarice but the dominion of justice and generosity heralded by the prophets and made flesh in the mission and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In the current situation there is a renewed opportunity for the reassertion of an evangelical economics that measures political and economic systems by the criterion of the welfare of the discarded masses of humanity.

I do not suppose that we will find all the resources necessary for the continuation of this project under the conditions of post-modernity in the early modern reflections of Wesley. But there are several points of departure that I believe may be of use to us. When Wesley

provided an analysis of economic conditions in England he took as his point of departure the situation of the poor.¹⁸ The specific economic policies, including trade and tax measures, that he proposed all had in view a response to the misery of the poor. Certainly any economic proposals that have a Wesleyan character today must likewise begin with the situation of the destitute and the dying. It is this rather than notions of development or free trade or gross national product that must be the beginning and end of economic policy if the economy of death is to be countered and overcome. Further we may recall that when Wesley came to oppose the slave trade and to assign responsibility for the moral outrage which that system perpetrated his analysis followed the money trail by asking: Who benefits, that is, Who is responsible?

Similarly, in an analysis of the economy of death today, it is important also to ask, Who benefits from the arrangements that consign the bulk of the earth's population to misery and dehumanization and death? When Wesley thought about social sin he thought about the globe and not simply the nation, thus his denunciation of the policies of colonialism not only by the Spanish in Latin America but also by the British in India. He knew the motive was profit and the price was the blood of the poor. One of the ways in which Christian social ethics in the first world is short-circuited is through a focus on a national situation in which those who suffer most are a minority of the population. We seldom see how our prosperity is purchased at the price of the misery of millions in places many of us cannot find on a map. The days of national economy have long passed away. We cannot afford to be more provincial than Wesley in seeing the connection between our prosperity and others' misery.

One of the things for which Wesley is often criticized is his failure to endorse the American revolution. Yet here, too, I think we may have a point of departure for fruitful reflection on the new world order. For Wesley saw that democracy in the case of the colonies was a mask for the interest of merchant princes and slave owners. He was not taken in by talk of human rights that only served the interests of the wealthy few, or talk of democracy that excluded the poor and women. We have forgotten the way in which democracy can all too readily be manipulated by the powerful for their own ends. It is important therefore as we reflect on the new world in which we live that we not be uncritical of the ways in which formal democracy serves as a cover for the perpetuation of the privilege of unscrupu-

lous elites who have become adept at the manipulation of public opinion in a society of addictive consumption.

Finally I think we would do well not to dismiss Wesley's undoubted emphasis on the transformation of the person as an essential dimension of social transformation. Persons become willing tools of the economy of death when they have not been enabled to practice the disciplines of an evangelical economics in their own lives. The point of an emphasis on the personal is not to distract from the social but rather to capacitate persons for transformation at all levels of life. Only as we are freed from the ethos of consumption and as the barriers between prosperous and poor are broken down will we find both the courage and the capacity to challenge the economy of death. Thus I believe that the development of a personal and communal ethic of frugality and simplicity of life and of generosity to and solidarity with the poor is indispensable if we are to break the hold of the economy of death upon the hearts of the prosperous and the bodies of the destitute. For this revolution in consciousness and practice, the reflections of Wesley provide an indispensable resource.¹⁹

The transformation of our world entails, I think, a theory of transformation, a theology of transformation. Hence I want to turn our attention to the theological work that is necessary if we are to realize anew the promise of a Wesleyan reformation of church and society.

If theology is to respond to the Wesleyan and evangelical criterion of good news to the poor then it will be necessary to address certain themes adumbrated by Wesley but often obscured in subsequent theology. All too often the gospel we proclaim and upon which we reflect is one that interprets the world but does not alter it. This is especially true when we speak of grace and particularly, justifying grace. For here we too often speak of a grace that saves us without changing us. The emphasis on grace alone or faith alone then serves perfectly well as a palliative to the consciences of the prosperous. For God in this view really does not require justice but rather calls us just, treats us as if we were just, on condition merely that we in some way pay God the tribute of a willing suspension of disbelief, which we are pleased to call faith.

One of the most important contributions of Wesley is to utterly reject this interpretation of grace and faith. Wesley will have nothing to do with the sort of grace that saves us without changing us. Hence

Wesley's criticism of so-called Gospel Preachers: "But of all preaching, what is usually called Gospel preaching is the most useless, if not the most mischievous: a dull, yea, or lively, harangue on the sufferings of Christ, or salvation by faith, without strongly inculcating holiness. I see, more and more, that this naturally tends to drive holiness out of the world."²⁰ Whenever we speak of a genuine transformation we are likely to be warned not to minimize the seriousness of sin. The pervasiveness and profundity of sin in the human heart and condition is invoked to tell us why it is that all our talk of the transformation of life and society is simply wishful thinking, is uninformed concerning the depth of human depravity and original sin.

In spite of Wesley's "optimism of grace" he was by no means ignorant of the power of sin in human life. Indeed Wesley's longest theological treatise was precisely a defense of the doctrine of original sin. But here Wesley was on far sounder ground than many theologians of today. For he knew that the doctrine of original sin and even of total depravity cannot be deployed as an alibi for continuance in sin. The function of these doctrines is to show the necessity of grace, not to show the impotence of grace. One of the important fruits of late twentieth century theological labor is that we are learning to differentiate the kinds of sin from which human beings need deliverance. For many in the middle classes sin is a bondage to addictive behavior and compulsive denial of the truth about ourselves and our world. Theologies of liberation in Africa and Latin America have recovered a biblical view of the sin of oppression and injustice among the ruling classes. Korean Minjung theology opens a way for understanding how the sins of injustice poison the hearts of the oppressed with the bitterness, suppressed rage, and self-contempt that is called "han."²¹

The discrimination of the ways in which sin dominates our lives serves also to make clear the dimensions of liberation from sin's dominion that is promised us in Christ Jesus. An important aspect of a theology responsive to the cry of the impoverished and oppressed is to recover a clear view of the power of grace through faith to change lives, societies, and the world itself. This will mean unmasking incompetent theological tributes to the power of sin that mask a fatalism with respect to the world which only serves the interests of the current rulers of the world. One of the ways in which theology has often stopped itself short from becoming a liberating word is

through puzzlement about the relationship of faith and works. This has especially characterized Protestant theology. Wesley had the good sense to be clear that faith and works are intimately related, indeed that faith is instrumental to the accomplishment of the divine will for a life of love:

I would just add, that I regard even faith itself, not as an end, but as a means only. The end of the commandment is love, of every command, of the whole Christian dispensation. Let this love be attained, by whatever means, and I am content; I desire no more. All is well, if we love the Lord our God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves.²²

Faith separated or even opposed to works serves the interest of the maintenance of the world as it is.

What Wesley lacked was a way of developing the relationship between faith and works in a truly satisfactory way. The result has been a certain instability in Wesleyan theology which hobbles between a Protestant proclamation of faith without works on the one hand and a fall into the petty works righteousness of degenerate holiness traditions on the other. What is needed in a Wesleyan theology is an understanding of faith that produces a real correspondence to the divine will without becoming trivial. I believe that this can be best achieved if we return to faith the connotation of faithfulness or fidelity.²³ Understood in this way faith in Christ will be expressed as faithfulness to his mission and ministry, loyalty to him and to the project of announcing and actualizing the reign of God as the reign of justice and generosity and joy. In this way we may succeed in making clear how it is that the sheer unmerited favor of God in Christ that befriends the outcasts of religious, economic, and political society awakens the astonished and glad response of joy and gratitude among these so as to engender a glad and joyful loyalty to the love that has befriended us. It is this loyalty of joyful and responsive love that seeks to imitate the love of the loving God and so becomes an imitation of the divine love made manifest in Christ.

On this basis it is possible to make clear how it is that faithfulness is by no means to be confused with the grim attempt to curry the favor of a tyrannical judge, or with the attempt to make something of oneself. In this sense the faithfulness that proceeds from the divine initiative has nothing to do with the old works righteousness even though it far more clearly does produce and necessarily produces

that holiness without which none shall see God. To be sure this entails a fundamental re-reading of Romans from the standpoint not of the perpetuation of the system of sin but from the perspective of those who yearn for the transformation.

The aim or goal of justification is the production of justice: just persons, just societies, a just earth. We must liberate theology from the Alice in Wonderland logic by which justification does not produce justice. Wesley, whatever the limits of his hermeneutics or his theological categories, would not accept this trifling with God that spoke of justification while leaving us in our sins, any more than it would make sense to speak of a resurrection of the dead that left us in our graves. While a reformulation of themes like sin and grace, justification and faith is crucial to meeting the challenge of a turn to the poor and dispossessed, it seems to me that the heart of Wesleyan theology is the notion of scriptural holiness. It is this which seems to provide the *cantus firmus* of Wesley's theology from the days in Oxford to the theological maturity of his later years. For it is the realization of holiness which is the project for which faith itself can be regarded as a means. We are all aware that there are dangers here. There is the danger of a holiness that collapses into petty moralizing, of an individualizing and legalizing of the Christian life that is surely unacceptable.

Wesley, despite his best efforts, did not always escape these difficulties. Yet in spite of his limitations Wesley did know that the aim of the divine grace was the restoration of the image of God whereby we become faithful images and reflections of the divine nature. He knew that the rules of the societies were to be regarded as only prudential helps along the way to the realization of this goal. Moreover, he was aware that holiness was not something that pertained to the individual in isolation but rather to the person in relationship and in community, and he was aware that the actualization of this holiness had in view the transformation of society as a whole. Further he knew that the key to the actualization of this holiness was an imitation of the divine orientation to the poor and the excluded. All of these things Wesley at his best knew. Yet he often lacked the hermeneutical tools or the theological categories to prevent the collapse of these insights into the moralistic legalisms that came to be the hallmark of Wesleyan and holiness movements generally. It is this degradation of the notion of holiness that has made it seem an unlikely candidate for serious theological reflection.

It is an urgent task for a Wesleyan theology to re-construct the idea of holiness as the practice of persons empowered by God to be imitators of God and so to be participants in the divine mission. This entails an imitation of the one who though he was rich, for our sakes became poor. It is then an embodiment of the practice of love that lives in sacrificial solidarity and unconditional generosity among those who are excluded by the religious and secular systems of deceit, destruction, and death. Holiness that is genuinely scriptural and even evangelical has nothing to do with the childish game of inventing arcane moralistic rules but is instead the imitation of the divine love under the concrete forms of social, political, economic and religious history. One cannot become more like God by withdrawing oneself from the world that God created, from the poor and despised whom God in Christ befriended, from the concrete forms of suffering and the dominion of death exposed by Christ's cross and invaded by his resurrection.

A further area of theological work in the Wesleyan spirit that may enable us to respond more adequately to the global economy of death has to do with reflection on the sphere of nature as the site of divine care and activity. It is in Wesley's late sermons on creation and new creation that his long-standing interest in the natural world is integrated into his theological reflection. Here it becomes clear that the aim of salvation entails a future not only for a few pious souls, but for forests and rivers, for mountains and meadows, for lions and tigers and house pets as well.²⁴ Indeed when a friend requested a kind of funeral service for his canine companion of many years, I was able to read for him at the gravesite the wonderful passage from "The General Deliverance."²⁵ This strong insistence upon the world of nature as the sphere not only of divine providential care but also as the sphere of redemption goes back to Wesley's beloved "Fathers" of the Church who insisted on the resurrection of the earth as ingredient to the consummation of the divine salvific aim.

This extension of the horizon of redemption (already anticipated, for example, in Romans) is an important counter to the tendency to regard nature as a mere stage for human achievement or as a treasure house of resources for our exploitation. Writing on the eve of the industrial revolution, Wesley did not perceive the full implication of this view of creation as the sphere of redemption, nor its connection to his evangelical economics including the option for the poor. But today we live in a world in which the connection between the

impoverishment of the masses of humanity and the violation of the earth has become all too clear. The scars of sin's cruel reign are manifest in the bodies of the poor and the devastation of the earth and air and water. A Wesleyan theology will see in the earth not only the violated body of sin but also the scene of redemption. A Wesleyan theology of transformation which takes seriously the importance of future redemption becoming evident in present deliverance from the yoke of sin and death will issue not only in protest against the violation of the earth but also in the practice of transformation of the earth as evidence of the truth of the gospel.

I have suggested that the driving dynamic of history is the call for justice for the wretched of the earth. I believe that the people called Methodists may make a contribution to this historical project through a recuperation of Wesleyan themes of commitment to the poor and to the grace that transforms life and society. But it is not only theological and ethical work that is called for here but also historical work.

Obviously it is important for us as for all Christians to generate our theological and ethical proposals out of a conversation with the Bible. This after all was also Wesley's own principle. We are all well aware that Wesley's hermeneutics are not yet fully liberated from the habits of pre-modernity. He is an inveterate proof-texter, and even after he is forced to consider the whole of scripture in the preparation of his *Explanatory Notes* on the Old and the New Testament, he does not have available to him the tools for accomplishing what he clearly wished to accomplish: to see any point from the standpoint of the whole.

In my judgment the development of a new hermeneutics within the ambit of liberation theology makes possible a re-reading of the biblical texts that will strengthen a commitment to an evangelical economics. But contemporary hermeneutics not only provides us with a far greater range of data in the re-reading of the Bible from the standpoint of the poor; it also enables us to apply a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion to the reading of the biblical texts. For we are becoming aware of the ways in which the biblical texts already betray the effects of a de-radicalizing tendency, of an attempt to come to terms with the world rather than confront the world with the un-watered-down claims of the God of Exodus and of the Crucified.²⁶

This willingness to criticize particular passages of scripture on the basis of the fundamental meaning of the gospel is not alien to the

Wesley who could dismiss the exegetical arguments for double predestination by asserting that it would be better to forget the Bible than believe that God was a monster. Wesley himself sought to re-read the Bible whole from the standpoint of his own mission and ministry among the poor and outcast of England. Today persons on several continents and with different constituencies among the marginalized of the earth are attempting the same. A Wesleyan re-reading of scripture today will join hands with these projects around the globe. In this re-reading of scripture we may be assisted, as Wesley was, by acquaintance with the exegesis of the earlier church theologians. Indeed many of the most radical passages that I quote from Wesley in *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* are echoes of passages from theologians like Basil and the Gregories and Chrysostom. The splendid work by Justo González, *Faith and Wealth*, provides ready access to the teaching of the early church on what I have called evangelical economics.²⁷ A comparison of these texts with those that I have cited from Wesley will show a profound indebtedness on the part of Wesley to the exegesis of the early church.

Yet this tradition is not an unmixed blessing. Thus, for example, Wesley's reading of the pericope of the rich young ruler owes more to Clement of Alexandria than it does to an unbiased approach to the New Testament texts themselves. For it was Clement who invented the dodge that the distribution of all possessions to the poor was not a prerequisite for the following of Christ but rather a sort of interior distance from these possessions.²⁸ In this way Christianity was accommodated to the common sense of the prosperous classes of Alexandria. Thus both at the level of biblical exegesis and at that of a study of the church's reflection on scripture we are confronted with the embodiment of the divine project of justice for the wretched of the earth and with the ways in which that project has been compromised and evaded.

The same will be true of an investigation of the thought of Wesley himself. In my book I indicated some of the ways in which, especially in the middle years of his ministry, Wesley seems to have muted his own convictions concerning economics in the attempt to reduce the scandal of the Methodist project. That is, there are ways in which Wesley himself may have laid the foundation for the failure of the Methodist project to liberate itself from the suffocating restrictions of worldly prudence.²⁹ But whatever may be alleged concerning this

period of Wesley's work it is clear that Methodism after Wesley has been characterized by the headlong rush to abandon Wesley's option for the marginalized. Indeed the study of Wesley has often done more to obscure than to clarify the radicalism of Wesley's views on economic justice. For example, Sugden's notes in *Wesley's Standard Sermons* simply dismiss references by Wesley to the communalism of the primitive church.³⁰

The result of this sort of "interpretation" of Wesley has been that Wesley is often portrayed by friends as well as enemies as one who gave religious sanction to the middle-class accommodation to capitalism. If we are to attempt to actualize a Wesleyan and evangelical turn to the poor we must also be historically informed concerning the variety of ways in which such a project can go wrong, can sabotage itself and so render itself ineffective. This holds true not only for the study of Wesley and his interpreters but also for the history of the Methodist movement itself. It is of course important to ransack our collective history for models and examples of a clear and courageous commitment to the poor and oppressed. Fortunately there are illustrations of this in all periods and places of our mission. But it would be disingenuous to suppose that these illustrations of commitment represent a history of noble achievement for the Methodist movement as such. In the first place such movements whether in the abolition of slavery or the organization of workers, or the capacitation of untouchables, or the identification with the aspirations of oppressed peoples in Africa or Asia or Latin America, have regularly been opposed both by the main body of people called Methodist and by those who have held positions of influence or power within the movement.

This is all too easily forgotten in the aftermath of a concrete struggle. We imagine that Methodists have generally opposed slavery or apartheid or imperialism, that Methodists have been on the side of women's rights or civil rights for minorities or excluded majorities. But this is manifestly not the case. We also know that the people called Methodist have collaborated with Apartheid in South Africa, supported slavery in North America, and been tools of Western economic hegemony in the mission movement. Historical inquiry should enable us to identify those strategies by which we have again and again persuaded ourselves to collaborate with the principalities and powers of domination and division.³¹

If we are to produce a usable history of the people called Meth-

odists, we must not engage in illusion, for it is the truth alone that can make us free from the patterns of the past. Put another way, it is only through the clear confession of sin that we approach that grace that is capable of saving us not only from the guilt but also the power of sin, that can liberate us from the compulsion to repeat the errors of the past. This is but an outline of the agenda that faces us. It is a formidable task that awaits us, and only by the energizing and transforming power of God's grace will we be able to address it. But nothing less would be worthy of the people called Methodists.

As the bearers of Methodist tradition and the representatives of Methodist institutions we may find ourselves falling under the curse of Wesley. This is what he wrote two and a half centuries ago:

Lay this deeply to heart, ye who are now a poor, despised, afflicted people. Hitherto ye are not able to relieve your own poor. But if ever your substance increase, see that ye be not straightened in your bowels, that ye fall not into the same snare of the devil. Before any of you either lay up treasures on earth, or indulge needless expenses of any kind, I pray the Lord God to scatter you to the corners of the earth, and blot out your name from under heaven!³²

It is my earnest hope that we will find a way to rescue the people called Methodists from the curse of Wesley and enable this people to be again the embodiment of the promise of Methodism, so that it may be true also for us that:

Never in any age or nation, since the age of the Apostles, have these words been so eminently fulfilled, "The poor have the gospel preached to them," as it is at this day.³³

Notes

Notes to Chapter 1

1. More detailed information of Wesley's views on this matter presented in my *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990). Some of this material has also appeared in "Wesley's Preferential Option for the Poor," *Quarterly Review* 9/3 (Fall, 1989), 10–29.

2. "The Signs of the Times," *Works (J)* 8:308.

3. *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Part III, *Works (J)* 8:239.

4. *Works (J)* 2:178 (March 29, 1750).

5. *Works (J)* 1:490 (April 15, 1745).

6. *Works (J)* 3:178 (May 21, 1764).

7. John Walsh, "John Wesley and the Community of Goods," Keith Robbins, ed., *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany, America, c.1750–c.1950: Essays in Honor of W. Reginald Ward*, *Studies in Church History* 7 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 25–50.

8. "On Visiting the Sick," *Works (J)* 7:117. See also: "On Zeal," *Works (J)* 2:60.

9. *Works (J)* 7:119.

10. *Works (J)* 4:296 (Feb. 13, 1785); cf. *Works (J)* 4:358 (Feb. 8, 1787).

11. *Works (J)* 4:295 (Jan. 4, 1785).

12. "Large Minutes," *Works (J)* 8:332.

13. "Sermon on the Mount," *Works (J)* 8:377.

14. "Danger of Increasing Riches," *Works (J)* 7:362. See also "The Most Excellent Way," *Works (J)* 7:36.

15. "On Dress," *Works (J)* 7:21.

16. José Míguez Bonino, "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification From a Liberationist Perspective," in Theodore Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 49–63.

17. This theme is pursued in Pablo Richard, et al., *The Idols of Power and the God of Life: A Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).

Franz Hinkelammert, *The Ideological Weapons of Death*, tr. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986).

18. "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions," *Works (J)* 11:53–59.

19. See Dow Kirkpatrick, "A Liberating Pastoral for the Rich," in Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation*, 209–23.

20. *Works (J)* 12:140 (Letter to Charles Wesley, Nov. 4, 1772).

21. See Andrew Sung Park, "Theology of Han," *Quarterly Review* (Spring, 1989), 48–62. See also Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

22. *Works (J)* 12:78–9 (Letter to Mr. John Smith, June 25, 1746).

23. I have attempted to argue for this in *Loyalty to God: The Apostles Creed in Life and Liturgy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

24. "The New Creation," *Works (J)* 6:288–296.

25. *Works (J)* 6:241–52.

26. In Africa, Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), and Canaan Banana have been among those who have opened new vistas for the reading of the texts in this way; as have Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), and Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), in the United States, and José Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974), in Latin America.

27. Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

28. Clement of Alexandria, "Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved?" in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, American Edition, 10 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1908–11), 2:589–604.

29. See "Why Did Wesley Fail" in my *Good News to the Poor*, 157–179.

30. See *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, ed. E. H. Sugden, 2 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 1:97–98, 493–494, where Sugden fails to indicate to the reader the significance of this for Wesley and proposes interpretations that flatly contradict Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (q.v.).

31. Here I have in mind studies such as that of James Cochrane of the mainline churches in South Africa aptly titled *Servants of Power* (Ravan Press, 1987), or the reflections of David Kwang-sun Suh on the way in which the radical protestantism of turn-of-the-century Korea was deflected by an evangelistic campaign seeking to turn attention away from the concrete historical problems of the minjung to "spiritual" issues. See "Minjung and Theology in Korea: A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation" in Kim Yong Bok, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Christian Conference of Asia, 1981), 17–39.

32. *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Part II, *Works* (J) 8:187.
33. "The Signs of the Times," *Works* (J) 6:308.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. John D. Levenson, "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," *Midstream* (October, 1989), 30–36.
2. Renita Weems, "The Hebrew Women are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1," unpublished paper, 11.
3. John van Seters, "Reconstructing the Past: The Yahwist's Historiographic Method in Exodus," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* (1992).
4. In Theodore Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 60.
5. *Ibid.*
6. "The Bible: Is Interclass Reading Legitimate?" in Norman K. Gottwald, ed., *The Bible and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 62.
7. *Tribute* (February/March, 1986), 176.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. For Wesley's own account of the Methodists' assistance in "temporal things," see "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists" in *Works* 9:272–80. Several modern commentaries will be mentioned below.
2. Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992). This is a translation by John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter of the original German edition, entitled *Praxis und Prinzipien der Sozialethik John Wesleys* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977).
3. *Works* 2:162–63.
4. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).
5. *Ibid.*, 57, quoting a letter of June 9, 1775, in *Letters* 6:153.
6. Jennings artificially supports this wrong assumption by occasionally putting words in Wesley's mouth; e.g., "the poor of the society [of London]," implying the broader society rather than the Methodist society. See *ibid.*, 59.
7. Henry Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
8. See the chapter on "Daily Conduct" in Abelove, 96–109.