

## CHAPTER 4

# “Good News to the Poor”: The Methodist Experience After Wesley

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“‘To the poor the gospel is preached’—Which is the greatest mercy, and the greatest miracle of all” (John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, commenting on the last phrase of Luke 7:22).

### *Introduction*

In this essay I am taking on the nearly impossible task of tracing the theme “Good News to the Poor” through the “post-Wesley” history of the “Methodist” experience, including the great variety of Methodist traditions that derive from Wesley and now cluster themselves together in the World Methodist Council. I will be able to do this in the space available only by severe restrictions. I have chosen a more “cosmic” and illustrative, rather than detailed and comprehensive, method that will result in a more “broad stroke” analysis and interpretation.

I propose to deal with the topic in several steps. First, I will summarize my own reading of the theme in Wesley. Second, I will suggest that the theme “Good News to the Poor” provides a window of access into the very soul of Methodism as it struggles with an ambiguous legacy from Wesley—one in which the Methodist traditions are caught in a profoundly contradictory dialectic of countervailing forces. Third, though it has not often been so used, I will argue that the theme (and its explication in this manner) provides a “hermeneutical key” for a re-reading (*relectura*) of the Methodist tradition—a reading that we must confront more directly than we have

generally done in our historical and theological work. Fourth, I will explore the manifestation of this theme in several key “flash-points” of the larger Methodist tradition. And, finally, I will attempt a few closing observations.

It is, of course, “liberation theology,” in its various manifestations but most particularly in its South American versions, that has taught the modern church to reflect on a dimension of “divine partiality,” that is, the claim that the biblical witness clearly reveals a sort of “preferential option for the poor” that must be taken as an essential and not accidental aspect of the Gospel. The expression is modern, deriving from the title of one of the most controversial documents from the 1979 Puebla (Mexico) meeting of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference (CELAM). This origin of the expression means that it often carries today a certain ideological and political freight that obscures the extent to which the basic question it raises has recurred again and again in the history of the church in a variety of ecclesiastical and cultural contexts. Indeed, Justo González has sought roots and antecedents of the idea in the early church and in the resistance to the “colonization” of South America in the wake of Columbus.<sup>1</sup> A forthcoming volume explores the parallels between liberation theology and a variety of nineteenth century radical protestant movements that had each articulated this theme in its own way.<sup>2</sup> In our own time the theme has found expression in such diverse locations as the “sectarian” ethics and theology of Mennonite John Howard Yoder (e. g., his *The Politics of Jesus*, which explores the biblical basis of this theme in the Gospel of Luke) and the “evangelical” social activism of Ronald J. Sider (e.g., *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical Study*). When I use the expression “preferential option for the poor,” I have a more general concept in mind than some; by it I mean little more than Karl Barth, who much earlier in this century said that

The church is witness of the fact that the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost. And this implies that—casting all false impartiality aside—the Church must concentrate first on the lower and lowest levels of human society. The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of its primary and particular concern. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Barth’s firm commitment to this theme is indicated in his willingness to draw as a correlate the conclusion: “We do not really know Jesus (the Jesus of the New Testament) if we do not know him as this

poor man, as this (if we may risk the dangerous word) partisan of the poor. . . ."<sup>4</sup> It is in this sense that we may explore the significance of a "preferential option for the poor" in Wesley and the Methodist traditions without the fear of anachronism or of forcing our own modern categories on history.

### *The Wesleyan "Preferential Option for the Poor"*

I have presented my interpretation of this theme in Wesley more fully in my November, 1990, presidential address to the Wesleyan Theological Society, the week of the publication of Theodore Jennings' book *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*,<sup>5</sup> with which I am generally in basic agreement. My fundamental reservation about that book is that, while we can probably agree with Jennings that "every aspect of Methodism was subjected to the criterion, how will this benefit the poor?" I am less convinced than Jennings that Wesley lifts this to the level of theological principle. His practice seems to make an option for the poor constitutive of the life of the church, but I am less clear how he would argue the theological grounding for this praxis.<sup>6</sup> It seems to me that one reason for the neglect of this theme in later generations is that Wesley did not ground his praxis sufficiently theologically to make the issue normative for those who would claim him as mentor in following centuries. No doubt we will be debating the various aspects of this question (Were the early Methodists really poor? Was this theme in Wesley an "accident" of the early years of Methodism? etc.) for some time to come. Meanwhile, however, let me summarize my own tentative and preliminary view of the matter.

First, anyone who has read at all in the *Journal* of Wesley will know that Wesley was systematic in his cultivation of the poor. He made it a regular practice from his Oxford student days to visit the sick, the poor, and those in prison, and he regularly insisted that his followers do likewise. He urged "a member of the society" in 1776 "frequently, nay, constantly to visit the poor, the widow, the sick, the fatherless, in their affliction."<sup>7</sup> Wesley's commitment to this practice is made clear in his sermon "On Visiting the Sick" based on the classic text of Matthew 25. In this sermon Wesley argued that the visiting of the poor is an absolute duty of the Christian without which one's "everlasting salvation" is endangered. Wesley built into the life of

Methodism collections for the poor and on occasion went publicly begging for the poor.

Second, Wesley's struggle with and final acceptance of field preaching must surely also be related to this theme. It is no accident that his first major experience with this practice was a sermon based on Luke 4:18-19, a key text for "liberationist" readings of Scripture or any advocacy of a "preferential option for the poor." After a brief experience preaching in Nicolas Street on April 1, 1739, Wesley initiated the practice on the next day (a Monday):

At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people. The scripture on which I spoke was this, (is it possible any one should be ignorant, that it is fulfilled in every true minister of Christ?) "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind: to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

Third, it is also possible to argue that Wesley's message was peculiarly adapted to the poor—that for some fundamental reasons "the poor heard him gladly." Robert D. Hughes III grounds this directly in Wesley's theology—in his "Arminian evangelicalism" with its "twin pillars of universalism and insistence on the role of man's free will in salvation."<sup>9</sup> These principles meant that *all* (even the poor and "disreputable") could come and find acceptance in the Gospel and in the societies of Methodism. In *The Methodist Revolution* Bernard Semmel makes the same point through the doctrines of Christian Perfection and Assurance, "an experience more accessible to the humble and unsophisticated than to their better situated or better educated fellows."<sup>10</sup> Wesley's brand of Methodism affirmed the magisterial Reformation "pessimism of nature" but went on to profess an "optimism of grace" that offered the hope of change—both personally and socially. This is the revolutionary side of Methodism that offered hope to the poor.

Fourth, however we make the case, I think that it is clear that Wesley's theology and preaching tended toward a profound "gospel egalitarianism" that the poor found attractive. Wesley used the gospel radically to relativize a variety of factors that often sustain class structures and thus oppress the poor in various subtle and not so

subtle ways: education, birth, social class, etc. As the Duchess of Buckingham wrote to the Countess of Huntingdon, significantly the patron of George Whitefield and the "Calvinistic" wing of the Methodist movement:

I thank your ladyship for the information concerning the Methodist preachers. Their doctrines are most repulsive, and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks, and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting, and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiment so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.<sup>11</sup>

Fifth, no doubt the poor were also attracted to Wesley because he did not blame them for their poverty. "So wickedly, devilishly false is that common objection, 'They are poor, only because they are idle.'"<sup>12</sup> Wesley's favoritism for the poor was also revealed negatively by his hostility toward the rich, as evidenced in many of his sermons that we tend to neglect because they fall outside the "standard sermons" that we more usually consult: "The Danger of Riches" (#87); "On Riches" (#108); "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (#112); "On the Danger of Increasing Riches" (#126). If anything, Wesley became more cranky on this issue as he grew older and more worried about the departure of Methodism from his principles. In this sense Wesley did not shirk, as do many modern advocates of a soft version of a "preferential option for the poor," from the "woes" against the rich that parallel the "beatitudes" that bless the poor (especially in Luke's version).

We could explore other aspects of Wesley's commitment to the poor: the role of his extensive publishing program in the education of the poor; his concern for health; Methodist structures for the relief of the poor; and so forth. But I must move on to the question of how Wesley grounded and defended his concern for the poor. I have hinted above that Wesley seems to have made visiting the sick and the poor a dimension of discipleship without which one's salvation is endangered. Very occasionally he appealed to the precedent of the life of Jesus and the Apostles.<sup>13</sup> Other times Wesley implies an egalitarianism based in the death of Jesus for all without distinction.<sup>14</sup> He also hints that the character of grace may be at stake: "Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to

be of men.”<sup>15</sup> But as I have explored these passages, I do not think that I find a self-consciously theological articulation of the grounds for this “preferential option for the poor.” In this lack of such a grounding, I believe that we see a major flaw in the Wesleyan articulation of this principle that contributed, along with other factors, to a profound ambiguity in the Wesleyan legacy on this question.

### *A Fundamental Ambiguity in the Wesleyan Legacy*

Wesley himself was aware of the difficulty of sustaining the Methodist “preferential option for the poor” over time. Viewed from the perspective of this essay, his often-quoted words of warning to the Methodists gain a new poignancy:

Does it not seem (and yet this cannot be) that Christianity, true Scriptural Christianity, has a tendency, in process of time, to undermine and destroy itself? For wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches! and riches naturally beget pride, love of this world and every temper that is destructive of Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Wesley pointed in this and other similar comments to the dynamic that “church growth” specialists call the “social uplift” effect of Christian movements that find new vitality in a turn toward the poor but are soon drawn away from the life of the poor by new disciplines and other factors that pull them toward the middle classes, a tendency that we may celebrate or regret depending on other commitments.

I often wonder how to interpret the epigraph from Wesley with which I began this paper. Why is it that the “greatest miracle of all” is that the “poor have the Gospel preached to them”? Could it be that sociological and cultural forces are so pitted against such a result that when it occurs it can only be a “miracle of grace”? And if a “preferential option for the poor” is a central theme of the Gospel and the biblical witness, should we move to think of those powers that pull us away from this task as the epitome of sin—as a form of “original sin” in which our desire for respectability and acceptance puts us in fundamental opposition to this basic theme?

Full analysis of this dynamic, this war within the soul of Methodism in which the movement is drawn both toward the poor and away from the poor, is beyond the purposes of this essay, but it would

seem to have several layers. There is an obvious sociological dynamic to which Wesley seems to be pointing in the quotation above. Such movements, especially those with a rigorous and highly disciplined ethical standard and the expectation of a radically transformed life under grace, bring a new discipline and focus to life that provides a form of upward social mobility that draws the movement more and more into the bourgeois middle classes and forms of church life, a process that I have frequently called *embourgeoisement*.<sup>17</sup> But there is also a profound psychological dimension—a powerful urge to overcome the alienation from the culture caused by the marginalization of poverty and belonging to religious movements that are not carriers of central cultural values. This urge expresses itself most powerfully in the second and third generations among those who are reared from childhood within the life of such new movements. There is the powerful urge to “belong,” to find a role at the center of the culture, and especially to move beyond the disreputable aspects of a “deprived background.” The “liberationist” analysis has helped us to understand the extent to which oppression trains the oppressed to envy their oppressors and pattern their own lives after patterns of their own oppression.

As in most similar movements, there was in Wesley’s legacy a profound ambiguity of countervailing forces. On the one hand, there was the model of Wesley in turning toward the poor—in field preaching; in planting churches among the lower middle classes, the working classes, and the poor; and so on. And, on the other hand, there were the profound sociological and psychological forces that pulled Methodism away from the poor—and back toward the more “respectable” established church and toward the center of the culture. These countervailing forces created a highly unstable Methodist mix that would shape the successive history of the Methodist traditions—and indeed the wider Christian world, since it is probably impossible to understand the life of Protestantism apart from Methodism. At times certain wings of Methodism would reassert, and on occasion even radicalize, the Wesleyan “preferential option for the poor.” At other times certain other wings of Methodism, or the same wings in other times, would play out the other trajectory and move away from the poor. This fundamental ambiguity lies at the very heart of those currents that claim Wesley as a founder; Methodist history since Wesley must be interpreted in terms of this struggle in the very soul of our movements.

But to this constitutional instability of Methodism with regard to its relationship to the poor we must add a further dimension of theological and ecclesiastical instability in the life of Methodism. We see this conflict most sharply in the ongoing conflict between what I will somewhat reluctantly call the “high church” and the “low church” interpretations of Wesley and the Methodist experience. Perhaps the clearest illustration of what I mean here is to be found in the book *The Believers’ Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* by Donald F. Durnbaugh.<sup>18</sup> Though quite conscious of the difficulty of putting Methodism squarely in the category indicated in the title of his book, Durnbaugh does treat Methodism and provides an interesting analysis focused in the diagram on the following page.

This diagram is an effort to place the major Christian traditions in relationship to each other in a more sophisticated version of Troeltsch’s sect/church typology. What is important for our purposes is that Durnbaugh puts the Methodists right in the center with arrows indicating that they may move in either a more radical or a more traditional direction depending on the historical circumstances and other factors in the life of Methodism in a given time. In Durnbaugh’s words, “the middle ground is occupied by movements which are inherently unstable.”<sup>19</sup> In this sense Methodism is constitutionally unstable, perhaps the most constitutionally unstable of all Christian movements, at least according to Durnbaugh.

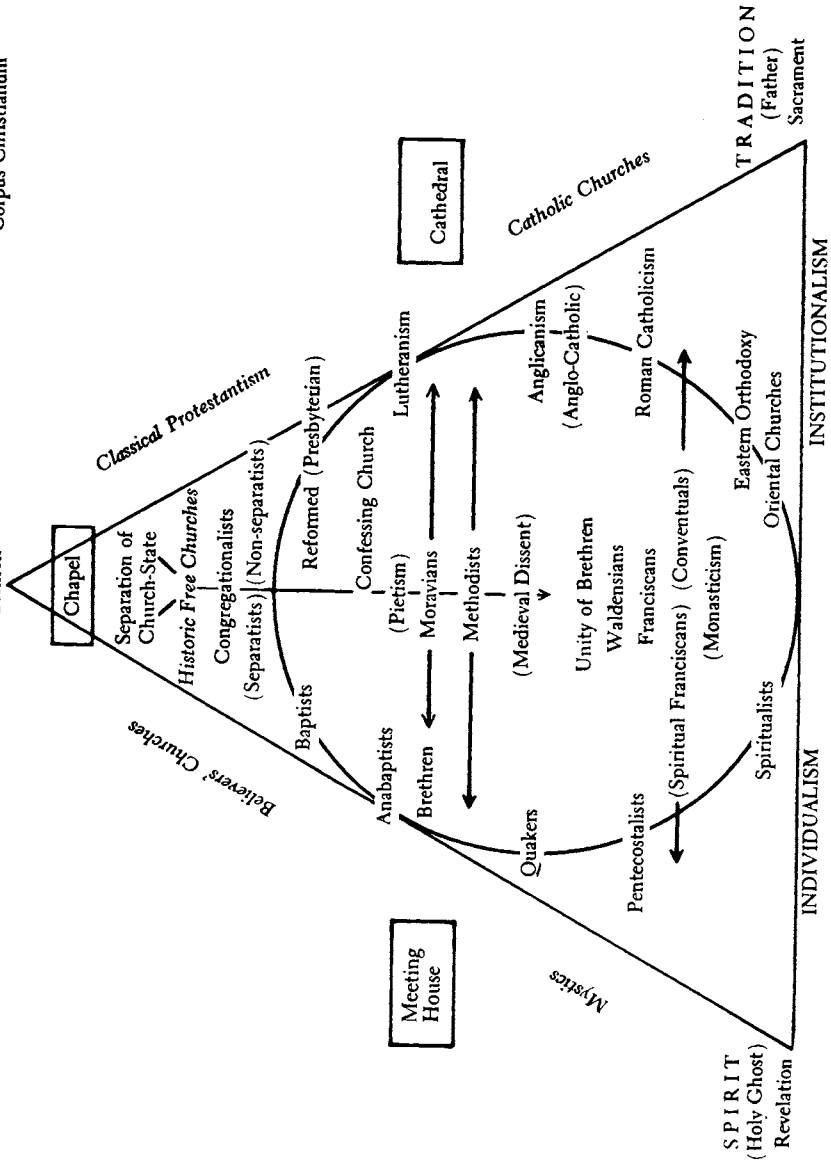
I have analyzed further this theological “constitutional instability” of Wesleyanism in my book *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*.<sup>20</sup> In one sense, I am suggesting little more than Albert Outler when he described Methodism as an “ecumenical bridge” tradition with points of contact with the whole range of Christian traditions, or when Colin Williams suggests that Wesley kept in balance Catholic, Magisterial Protestant, and Radical Protestant elements in a sort of “catholic” synthesis.<sup>21</sup> But the fundamental question is whether these diverse tendencies are held together in a principled matter in Methodism or whether in Wesley’s time they were held together merely in the particularity of his own mind and personality, only to fragment in the age after Wesley. There is evidence on both sides of this question, and there is reason to celebrate the genius of Wesley and the Methodist tradition in attempting to hold these diverse elements together. But the point for us here is that Methodism is a highly complex and unstable synthesis in which the constituent parts are



SECT-TYPE  
Corpus Christi

WORD (Son)  
Sermon

CHURCH-TYPE  
Corpus Christianum



likely to fly apart into fragments, each of which has a genuine rootage in Wesley but yet has difficulty recognizing the Wesleyan dimension in the other. Thus the campmeeting tradition rooted in a sense in Wesley's field preaching has difficulty recognizing Wesley in the more traditional forms of church life rooted more in Wesley's high-churchmanship, and vice versa.

Our present interests here are also more in the correlation of these two "instabilities," the theological and the sociological. Without trying to enforce a rigorous conformity to our paradigm and recognizing some counter evidence, I think it is nonetheless clear that there is a correlation between the countervailing movement toward the poor and away from them with the theological fragmentation of Methodism. It is the revivalist and campmeeting side of the Methodism that has most faithfully preserved the Wesleyan "preferential option for the poor," cultivated the Wesleyan use of the laity, extended the Wesleyan openness to the ministry of women, and in general preserved a "low-church" reading of Wesley. It is the more classical and traditional side of Methodism that has brought Methodism more into the cultural center, has pushed toward the professionalism of the ministry, has more faithfully preserved the complexity of Wesleyan thought with its classical and traditional tendencies, and in general been the carrier of a more "high-church" reading of Methodism.

### *An Alternative Historiography?*

In a modest sense we might find here a new "historiography" of the Methodist experience, one that would place this "war" of countervailing forces at the center of our focus to find a perspective that would revise many of our ways of reading that tradition. Such a reading might provide insight not only into the fate of our theme, the "preferential option for the poor," among Methodists, but also to wider dynamics in the life of Methodism.

I have come to many of these insights pursuing the history of the emergence of the ministry of women in the church in general, but especially in the Methodist traditions. This study has forced me radically to revise many inherited patterns of thought, especially those that insist on dividing the world, especially the church world, into the categories of "liberal" and "conservative," a lens for viewing the world that seems almost unavoidable in the twentieth century

and, perhaps especially in North America, in the wake of the conflicts of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy. If we spread the Methodist traditions along such a spectrum, it is surprisingly the so-called "conservative" traditions that have been more open to the ministry of women while the "progressive" traditions have more often suppressed such a disreputable practice in their efforts to show that they "belong" in the center, at least until that point in the twentieth century when the basic tenets of feminism became generally accepted culturally and thus one of the elements that one needed to affirm to be accepted in the broader culture.

To understand such dynamics we need to use more subtle and complex paradigms of thinking to overcome the superficiality of the conservative/liberal spectrum. We should find other patterns of thought, perhaps in the diagram of Durnbaugh above, or in a dynamic of (perhaps alternating) centrifugal/centripetal movements away from and back toward the cultural center. Such ways of speaking would allow us more accurately to describe some of those movements within Methodism that we often label "conservative" as actually "radicalizations" of the Methodist impulse, sometimes in ways that go far beyond Wesley. The "campmeeting" traditions of Methodism, for example, are only in a few very specialized ways "conservative;" they more often are "radicalizations" of one side of Wesley that pull the Methodist tradition even further away from bourgeois church life, traditional views of the sacraments, classical theologies, "conservative" or "traditional" views of the ministry, and so on.

Such reorientations in my thinking have aided me in my attempts to offer more adequate interpretations of what constitutes the "evangelical" experience, the analysis of which consumes so much energy in our own time. "Liberal" is not a good antonym for "evangelical." This use of the words implies that "evangelicals" occupy the "center" of the Christian tradition now deserted by "liberals" who have left this space under the pressure of "modernity." This rather static analysis cannot explain the change in such movements over time, nor the rapid oscillation back and forth by such movements. Because the "conservative/liberal" paradigm helps us to analyze hardly anything historically, we should move beyond it in the analysis of Methodism itself.

With this preliminary call for new paradigms of analysis and perhaps even of a new "historiography" of Methodism, let us turn

then to some historical illustrations of the playing out in history of this “constitutional” instability of the Wesleyan legacy.

*The Challenge of Race Posed by the African American Methodists*

Our first historical illustration is North American not only because of chronology but because it was in that context that Methodism most profoundly struggled with the question of race in the last decades of the eighteenth century. It may be part of the “epistemological advantage of the oppressed” that it was the African Americans who perhaps most clearly discerned this ambivalence of the Methodist tradition in its movement toward and away from the poor, and in many ways anticipated the historiographical perspective that I have suggested above.

It was no accident in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that African Americans moved toward the Methodist and Baptist traditions—or that the African American churches tend still today to be largely Methodist and Baptist, with the addition of the more recently formed Pentecostal tradition. Richard Allen, for example, was faithful to the Methodist tradition and thankful for its mediation of the gospel:

The Methodists were the first people that brought glad tidings to the colored people. I feel thankful that I ever heard a Methodist preach. We are beholden to the Methodists, under God, for the light of the Gospel we enjoy; for all other denominations preached so high-flown that we were not able to comprehend their doctrine. Sure I am that reading sermons will never prove so beneficial to the colored people as spiritual or extempore preaching. I am well convinced that the Methodist has proved beneficial to thousands and ten times thousands. It is to be awfully feared that the simplicity of the Gospel that was among them fifty years ago, and that they conform more to the world and the fashions thereof, they would fare very little better than the people of the world. The discipline is altered considerably from what it was. We would ask for the good old way, and desire to walk therein.<sup>22</sup>

By the “semi-centenary” of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1866) Bishop Daniel A. Payne, who became the first formal historian of the movement, had worked out an historiographical framework for the understanding of the impact of Methodism that almost exactly fits what we have developed above. At this point,

however, we are less interested in his accuracy than his perspective, his experience of Methodism from the underside, so to speak. His jubilee interpretation struggled with the notion articulated by a Black clergyman at a recent General Assembly of the New School Presbyterians that "Methodism degrades the Negro." Payne's great concern in his book is to trace the "ennobling" and "uplifting" impact of Methodism on all that it touches. He takes it as a fundamental principle of history

that some men are apparently modest and good, while they are poor, but as soon as they become rich, their consequent influence begets pride and contempt, which lead them to acts of oppression against the weak, the poor and the defenseless.<sup>23</sup>

In Payne's view the Wesleys were raised up in response to the Church of England having fallen prey to such forces. The task for the Wesleys was "to convert the most vicious of the English peasantry," and to do so, "this apostolic band entered the public grounds, the alms-houses, the mines and the jails—expounding in simple speech the profound truths of Christianity. . . ." Interestingly, in Payne's view, they also "entered the mansions of the rich gentry and cultivated nobility, subjecting many of them to the *Rule of Jesus*." For Payne, Methodism is a double-edged sword, "a power exalting the lowly, humbling the powerful."<sup>24</sup> As successive African American interpreters have noticed, Payne's book at points reveals what seems at times to be an excessive reverence for education and something that might be called a naive doctrine of inevitable "progress." The ennobling impact of Methodism upon the "Anglo-Saxon" race is found in the production of literature, in the founding of schools and colleges, in the founding of Sunday-Schools, and finally in the support of Christian missions—in ways in each case that were particularly adapted to the poor.

Payne goes on to develop similarly the impact of Methodism on the "Anglo-American" race in a second section of the book before turning to the impact of Methodism on the Negroes. Here he repeats the observation of Allen that Blacks were attracted to Methodism: "Among the early *converts to Christ*, by the agency of Methodist preachers, were many Negroes" who "naturally joined the Methodist Episcopal Church."

As long as this Church were in *number few*, and in *condition poor*, its colored members were gladly received and kindly treated, but as soon as

it began to increase in numbers and wealth, so it became elevated in social position—with this increasing prosperity, the enslaved and proscribed free Negro became contemptible in its eyes—this contempt culminated in such treatment of the colored members, as none but *men robbed of true manhood* could endure.<sup>25</sup>

This passage is followed by an extended quotation from the book of James about the honoring of the rich, a text that has always been a favorite of those advocating a “preferential option for the poor.” In Payne’s book the quotation ends with:

hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the Kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do they not blaspheme that worthy name by which you are called? If ye fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, *thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*, ye do well. But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.<sup>26</sup>

I find it difficult to follow the logic of Payne in this section. He introduces it with a summary of the biblical argument for the equality of races, that God “hath made of *one blood* all nations of men.” Payne then proceeds to argue that because of this unity of the race “Methodism” cannot “degrade the Negro”—or else “Methodism would cease to be Methodism.”<sup>27</sup> Apparently it is certain “Methodists” rather than “Methodism” in general that have oppressed the African because Payne goes on to show how the African Methodist Episcopal Church itself has moved on to support the “education” and other forms of “social uplift” for the African American that he has celebrated among the “Anglo-Saxons” and the “Anglo-Americans.” We must assume then, at least in the view of Payne, that the line of “true Methodism” moves from the first generation of the Wesleys through the first generation of the American Methodism to the emergence of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. We are left to wonder about the fate of Methodism in the next generation.

African American interpreters of Payne have not been too kind to him. No doubt Payne’s reading of history is on one level naive and over-simplified, especially in its apparent commitment to education as a panacea for the evils and sins of the human race. Some of Payne’s Black critics suggest that his own classism was revealed when he later felt impelled to resist the influx of the ex-slave preachers who were not quite up to his own standards of “respectability.” Even the

African American tradition in one sense experienced the limits of toleration to challenges to its own self-interest that qualified its own commitment to a "preferential option for the poor" that would reach beyond its own boundaries! But in this, it is no different than any of the traditions we will examine. We are not left with the freedom to dismiss entirely his historiography, for Payne clearly discerned this fundamental conflict at the heart of Methodism. And it is clear that race constituted one of the most fundamental challenges to Methodism, especially in North America, and that by and large Methodism failed the test. If the Wesleyan "preferential option for the poor" is an essential ingredient of Methodism or of the biblical gospel then, then Daniel Payne may be correct in his tracing of a line of "true Methodism" that finds it difficult to sustain itself over generations.

### *The Growing Fragmentation of Methodism: The Primitive Methodists*

Race was not the only factor that led to the fragmentation of Methodism and the formation of various traditions of Methodism. The theological and ecclesiastical instability of Methodism also manifested itself on both sides of the Atlantic in the decades after Wesley's death. Some branches of Methodism played out the trajectory of the more radical side of Wesley while others drew back toward the more classical tradition and toward a more "respectable" style of church life. Methodism got caught up in the tensions produced by the spread of a democratic egalitarianism, which only exacerbated the inner struggle of Methodism between its radical push toward a "gospel egalitarianism" and the drawing back toward more traditional styles of church life and organization. On both sides of the Atlantic profound struggles emerged that led to splits over a variety of divisive issues: the extent to which democratic structures of government ought to prevail within the life of Methodism, the role of the laity in church governance, the even more radical question of the role of women in ministry, the nature of ministry and ordination in general, the value and necessity of an educated ministry, the nature of Methodist worship, the use of the prayer book and formal liturgy, the status of the sacraments in Methodist worship, congregational singing versus the use of musical instruments and the propriety of professional musicians, the structuring of the church in general,

modes of financing church life, whether the "pew rental" system was an appropriate way of financing church life, the appropriateness of "field preaching," the accountability of independent evangelists to larger church structures, campmeetings and their role in the life of the church, revivalism in general as a reading of Wesley and the heart of the Methodist impulse, and so forth.

We could take any of a number of examples of the splits over such issues. I have chosen to look at the emergence of Primitive Methodism and its conflicts with the more dominant Wesleyan Methodism to illustrate the dynamics in this period. Any selection of a case study during this period has its pros and cons. Primitive Methodism was in part (though only in part) a product of the American influence of Lorenzo Dow and his importation of the "campmeeting" tradition from North America. This fact may confuse the matter, and divert our discussion into a debate about "revivalism," but it also illustrates the transatlantic character of most of the conflicts of this era. I have chosen this illustration primarily to move us back across the Atlantic again to the nation of Wesley, and to pick up the largest and most powerful of the divisions within British Methodism. We could approach the analysis of this division in a number of ways. Let me briefly suggest some dimensions.

On a superficial level we might be inclined to interpret the rise of Primitive Methodism primarily in terms of the conflicts between powerful personalities. There is something to be said for this perspective. Much ink has already been spilt in the analysis of the role of Jabez Bunting in the period after Wesley. Bunting dominated the development of the Wesleyan branch of Methodism so much that he became known as the "Methodist Pope." Though earlier in his life more committed to at least some forms of "revivalism" and an advocate of the nondenominational "Sunday Schools," Bunting moved eventually to resist the influence of revivalism and the camp meetings traditions, to bring the Sunday Schools and other educational efforts under denominational control, to push strongly for the value of theological education and an educated ministry, to defend a form of clerical authority against the claims of the laity, and in general to centralize authority against those like Hugh Bourne and William Clowes who in many ways represented a free spirit that resisted such moves and found themselves expelled by the Wesleyans. Bourne and Clowes moved to found the Primitive Methodists and in the polarization to emphasize the opposite side of these



tensions, commitment to the ministry of the laity and their role in church governance, freedom to employ women in ministry, dedication to the structures of the camp meeting and the spirit of "revivalism" in general, and so forth.

John Kent, Reginald Ward, and others have analyzed these conflicts as a struggle between a "high church" and a "low church" Methodism.<sup>28</sup> At the time the polemics were often cast between "primitive" and "modern" Methodism. David Hempton summarizes the position of Ward, himself a product of "Primitive Methodism," as follows:

Professor Ward's analysis of Methodism and revivalism has stood up well. . . . The crude informality of the of provincial revivalists challenged the respectable ecclesiastical ambitions of a Wesleyan elite based on wealth, connexions and education. This elite responded to revivalistic enthusiasm with the attitude that "what was needed was less revival and more denominational drill"; less expansion and more consolidation. Thus, Ranterism, which challenged Wesleyanism hard where it "teetered between form and formalism," encouraged the very thing it was reacting against—a more rigid denominationalism.<sup>29</sup>

This fundamental conflict was then played out in terms not only of style but also in more theological terms of visions of the church, the nature of ministry, forms of worship, and so forth.

But it is also clear that such issues, as is hinted at in the above quotation from Ward, had their roots in social class conflict. Again, one cannot absolutize such claims in the face of some contrary evidence, but most interpreters agree that the Primitives tended to find success in a level of society lower than that of the Wesleyans. This is the regular conclusion of observers both at the time and in the more recent scholarship, for example, Julia Stewart Werner, who comments:

Where Wesleyan Methodism was deeply rooted and the Wesleyan itinerants both encouraged revivalism and permitted a greater than usual degree of lay involvement, Primitive Methodism prospered least. In circuits like Manchester and Bolton, however, whose Wesleyan and New Connexion preachers aligned themselves with the middle class and stifled lay initiative, disenchanted Methodists were eager to embrace the sectarian alternative of Ranterism.<sup>30</sup>

In summary, she says:

... the conversion tactics of the new sect, its fostering of lay enterprise, and the sense of community that characterized its societies fulfilled needs increasingly felt among the lower classes as they moved from a dependent and traditional pattern of life into the new ways of a rapidly evolving urban industrial nation. Primitive Methodism preempted a significant role that Wesleyan Methodism failed to play, and it undertook this mission precisely at the time when opportunities were greatest. In consequence, the Primitive Methodist Connexion ultimately became the preferred affiliation for many working class Methodists.<sup>31</sup>

In the Primitive Methodist literature that I have examined I have not found a full, self-conscious articulation of a "preferential option for the poor," but the kernel of the idea is clearly in the literature. John Petty's history describes the significance of the name as a call to "cultivate the simplicity and zeal, the faith and piety, by which the first Methodists were distinguished"—in part by "regular open-air preaching"—and to "preserve the life and fervour of apostolic Christianity; to maintain plain, pointed, and energetic preaching; to 'condescend to men of low estate.' . . ." <sup>32</sup> Or again, and more fully:

It has been mindful of the apostolical admonition, 'Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.' It has usually left the wealthy and the polished classes of society to the care of the older denominations, while it has sought the enlightenment and elevation of the poor.<sup>33</sup>

Similar themes and perspectives are projected back on the early Christian church, where the apostles were "'unlearned and ignorant,' or home-bred, possessing no extraordinary talents, and retaining much of their rough Galilean dialect and rusticity of manners."<sup>34</sup>

However one understands all of this, it is important to notice that Primitive Methodism played an important role in the emergence of the labor movement in Britain. A movement toward the poor often reshapes one's politics, even if, in some cases, it becomes a simple case of self-interest. This more radical branch of Methodism was a carrier of a more radical social tradition than the Wesleyan wing. As John Munsey Turner put it,

Primitive Methodism brought into the union of Methodists in 1932 men and women who combined a simple, almost Quakerly style, a deep concern for social justice brought out of the struggles for workers' rights in mining and in the agricultural struggles. Certainly a deep fissure had developed between religion and labour

politics which has widened since. Primitive Methodism, even if seen as an interim faith, played a role in the painful birth of modern English socialism out of all proportion to its numerical size.<sup>35</sup>

### *The Free Methodists in North America*

One of the sharpest and most profound articulations of the "preferential option for the poor" emerged in North America, in upstate New York, under the ministry of B. T. Roberts, the primary founder of the Free Methodist Church. For Roberts, the equivalent of Jabez Bunting was probably Bishop Matthew Simpson, who was a symbol of the new *embourgeoisement* of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Simpson was the editor of *The Cyclopaedia of Methodism*, which surely must be understood, at least in part, as an effort to put Methodism more clearly on the ecclesiastical map. Simpson was a leader in advocating theological education and other efforts to lead American Methodism toward more traditional church life. Some of this was rooted in his travels in Europe and his respect for European culture and more traditional church buildings and music. He was in many ways a symbol of the *embourgeoisement* of Methodism in the generation before the Civil War in the United States. One can almost hear the collective sigh of relief of American Methodists at having finally arrived culturally when Bishop Simpson was asked to participate in the various funeral services of assassinated President Abraham Lincoln.

This new denomination of "Free Methodists" focused many of the issues that troubled Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. The emerging church rejected the episcopacy and affirmed the equal representation of the laity in church governance. Roberts himself was deeply committed to the ministry of women, and was profoundly disturbed when his denomination failed to support him on this point toward the end of the century. The "free" in "Free Methodism" carried a great deal of freight. It signaled the new denomination's commitment to abolitionism, a concern to "free" the slaves (the one Free Methodist change in the "general rules" was to forbid the holding of slaves). It expressed a concern to articulate a version of the Wesleyan doctrine of "Christian Perfection" that enabled the Christian to live "free" from sin. It identified a style of worship that was congregational in style and "free" in spirit, as well as being "free" from musical instruments, paid

professionals, and other innovations that turned worshippers into an audience of observers. It referred to the reaffirmation of a pattern of dress that would be "free from the outward ornaments of pride." There were other connotations to the word "free," including freedom from secret societies (a response to controversies over Free Masonry), but the primary meaning of "free" was a polemic against "pew rentals" and an assertion of commitment to a system of "free pews." This commitment to "free pews" was symbolic of a larger commitment to a church that would serve the poor and structure church life on their behalf.

This "free pews" theme permeates the writings of Roberts but his thinking on the question is epitomized in the lead article in the first issue of *The Earnest Christian* (January 1860), the heart of which was reprinted as the introduction to early *Disciplines of the Church*. This article is preceded by a description of the "object and scope" of the magazine, including that

*The claims of the neglected poor, the class to which Christ and the Apostles belonged, the class for whose special benefit the Gospel was designed, to all the ordinances of Christianity, will be advocated with all the candor and ability we can command.*

The key article is entitled "free churches." B. T. Roberts argues that "*Free Churches are essential to reach the masses.*" In making this case Roberts carefully balances both the universality of the gospel and its particular commitment to the poor. "The provisions of the gospel are for all...to civilized and savage, black and white, the ignorant and the learned, is freely offered the great salvation." But Roberts goes on to ask, "*for whose benefit are special efforts to be put forth?*" In answering this question Roberts makes an interesting appeal to Luke 7, where he links his answer directly to the messianic office of Jesus:

Jesus settles this question. . . . When John sent to know who he was, Christ charged the messengers to return and show John the things which they had seen and heard. "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up," and if all this would be insufficient to satisfy John of the validity of his claims, he adds, "AND THE POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM." This was the crowning proof that He was the One that should come. It does not appear that after this John ever had any doubts of the Messiahship of Christ. He that cared for the poor must be from God.

Roberts goes on to make this theme decisive for the church and the disciples of Jesus: "In this respect the Church must follow in the footsteps of Jesus. She must see to it, that the gospel is preached to the poor." This fact is grounded in the plan of God, who "hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise." But Roberts takes another step and moves on to make this theme defining of the nature of the church:

There are hot controversies about the true Church. What constitutes it, what is essential to it, what vitiates it? These may be important questions, but there are more important ones. It may be that there cannot be a Church without a bishop, or that there can. There can be none without a gospel, and a gospel for the poor. Does a church preach the gospel to the poor—preach it effectively? Does it convert and sanctify the people? Are its preaching, its forms, its doctrines, adapted *specialy* to these results? If not, we need not take the trouble of asking any more questions about it. It has missed the main matter. It does not do what Jesus did, what the Apostles did.<sup>36</sup>

This strikes me as a very remarkable theology and a very radical position. B. T. Roberts seems to be arguing that a "preferential option for the poor" is *defining* of the true church, that it belongs to its *esse* rather than to its *bene esse*. As such Roberts has more than any other in the Wesleyan tradition (at least that I have read) clearly articulated the Wesleyan "preferential option for the poor," grounding it theologically in the messianic office of Jesus and making it defining of the church, thus raising it to the level of the *status confessionis* of more confessional traditions.

It is worth noting also the way in which the "pew rental" theme and its correlate "preferential option for the poor" was the organizing principle of Roberts' theology and church practice. The early Free Methodist commitment to "plain dress" was *not* just a form of legalism, but was firmly grounded in a larger missional vision that said that all should dress to make the poor feel comfortable in their midst. Consistent Free Methodists "dress down" to go to church! Similarly, their commitment to "prohibition" and the Prohibition Party (for many years the Prohibition Party candidate for President in the United States was a Free Methodist) was not so much a campaign against alcohol as an issue of *personal* vice as such but rose out of a conviction of Free Methodists that alcohol oppressed the poor. Prohibition was a "social vision" that worked for a new society through the political process—and occasionally outside it, as in the

ax wielding of Carrie Nation who was also associated with the Free Methodists. This commitment to the poor led to a range of political activity that one might not expect: a radical critique of capitalism, including an occasional tendency to favor a sort of “Christian socialism”; critiques of monopolies and emerging economic structures like the stock market; advocacy of the poor farmers, including forms of political activism on their behalf, and so on. And, at least in theory, there was a push to move beyond a patronizing view of the poor to a real vision of solidarity. As Roberts put it,

A Christian goes among the poor—not with the condescending air of a patron—but with the feeling of a brother. . . . In the Christian congregation the rich and poor meet together on terms of equality, and no preference is given to a man on account of his riches, or his gay and costly apparel.<sup>37</sup>

It is not clear that Free Methodism has sustained this commitment any better than mainstream Methodism, but it has managed to produce some important advocates of a “preferential option for the poor.” Free Methodism may also demonstrate that even a profound theological grounding of the principle may not serve to sustain the theme in the face of the forces that would erode it. Nonetheless it remains true that B. T. Roberts of the Free Methodist tradition was, at least historically, one of the clearest of the Methodist articulators of a “preferential option for the poor.”

### *The Salvation Army as a Radicalization of Methodism*

Many of us generally do not naturally consider the Salvation Army a branch of the Methodist tradition, but I think that it is clear that we should. Both William Booth and his wife Catherine had roots in the Reform traditions of Methodism, and William served New Connexion churches before his break. One famous picture in the Salvation Army literature shows William Booth waving to his Catherine in the gallery of a Methodist church. Booth was calling his wife to meet him at the door in a symbolic departure in impatience with church bureaucracy in meeting the needs of the poor. This symbolic shaking of Methodist dust off his feet led William Booth out of the Methodist tradition in a formal sense, but the movement continued to reveal the influence of especially the Holiness tradition of theology, perpetuated still today in the “holiness meetings” and doctrines of the Army, particularly perhaps in the United States.

This is no accident; the Army reflects again the transatlantic character of many of these movements in that William Booth was converted under the preaching of James Caughey, the American Methodist evangelist with revivalist and holiness leanings, and in that Catherine felt called to ministry and preaching during the "four years in the old world" of Phoebe Palmer, often considered the founder of the holiness movement. This influence of Phoebe Palmer probably led Catherine Booth to push William on the question of the ministry of women, a pressure that made the Army one of the most consistently feminist religious organizations in the nineteenth century.

The Army was more the praxeological incarnation of the Wesleyan "preferential option for the poor" than a theological articulation of the principle. By such measures as the adoption of the military style of dress and organization it managed to freeze its commitment to the poor into a "permanent sect" that gives us some continuing reflection of what many Holiness churches were in earlier years. Early Army literature is filled with polemic against the "respectable churches" and the claim to be the true followers of Christ, "who though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we, through his poverty, might become rich, and who had left us an example that we should follow in his steps."<sup>38</sup> Similar rhetoric appears throughout the Army literature, though not, so far as I have seen, with the same regular and systematic development of a "preferential option for the poor" as I have suggested appears, for example, among the Free Methodists.

There exist many parallels in the Army to the radical side of Methodist preaching. Booth remarks in his book *In Darkest England and the Way Out* that

The Scheme of Social Salvation is not worth discussing which is not as wide as the Scheme of Eternal Salvation set forth in the Gospel. The Glad Tidings must be to every creature, not merely to an elect few who are to be saved. . . . It is now time to fling down the false idol, and proclaim a Temporal Salvation as full, free and universal, and with no other limitations than the "Whosoever will," of the Gospel.<sup>39</sup>

Here one finds many of the Wesleyan themes of a personal "gospel egalitarianism" overflowing into a social vision for the poor, though

perhaps not with the same theological sophistication but with the same anti-Calvinistic polemic.

One also finds many of the same issues as the Salvation Army struggled with its status over against the churches. Was it to be like Wesley's Methodist movement before the separation, a movement of renewal and revitalization that met outside the "church hours" and so declined to become a church? Is this how, for example, we are to understand the Army tendency to avoid the use of the sacraments? Or was there a theological issue at stake, as David Rightmire argues, that the Army was a radicalization of the holiness movement away from traditional church life and a parallel radicalization of the holiness theological tendency to subordinate ecclesiology to pneumatology and thus reconceive the whole logic of Christian Faith?<sup>40</sup> Such is but a recasting of the issues that Methodism struggled with after Wesley's death.

From a modern view point we often see the Army as a traditional and sentimental view of charity, typified by the food-basket at Christmas. We forget what a threat the Army posed to the dominant culture by its "turn to the poor." In one twelve-month period around 1880, 669 Salvationists were reported "knocked down, kicked, or brutally assaulted," 56 Army buildings were stormed, and 86 Salvationists imprisoned. We forget what a threat it was to conventional morality to have William Booth argue that prostitution was not caused by lack of virtue but was the product of such social forces as low wages that could not support young women flocking to London or to reject the double standard of sexual morality on profoundly feminist grounds. We forget that the mere movement toward the poor to identify with the poor is often so profound a move that it threatens the whole culture and appears to be "subversive." W. T. Stead in a biography described Catherine Booth as a "socialist and something more" because she was "in complete revolt against the existing order."<sup>41</sup> And many of our modern day forms of social ministry have not advanced far beyond the scheme of "social salvation" of Booth with its credit unions, day care centers, shelters for the homeless and abused, legal assistance, and so forth, not to mention the various campaigns of political advocacy in which the Army engaged.



*The Church of the Nazarene:  
A "Preferential Option for the Poor"*

The Church of the Nazarene was the major denominational product of the "holiness revival" in the United States. This revival had many sources, from the Finneyite revivalism that emerged in the increasing "Arminianizing" of New England Theology after Jonathan Edwards, through the cultural optimism of the age that was ready to receive Methodist perfectionist egalitarianism as a support for the emerging "democratic" vision in the new nation, to the Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness in which Methodist laywoman Phoebe Palmer led many Methodists and others into a form of the Methodist experience of "entire sanctification." The American Holiness Movement emerged out of the amalgamation of such currents, gathered force during the century, found expression in the National Campmeeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness (which has evolved into the present-day Christian Holiness Association), went through a period of fragmentation at the end of the century into local holiness associations and eventually into an agglutinative process that began to produce at the turn of the century a variety of new holiness denominations claiming fidelity to a sort of "campmeeting" version of the Wesleyan tradition.

There is a strong tendency to describe this movement (both within and without its boundaries) as a "conservative" or "evangelical" version of the Methodist tradition. I am more and more convinced that this is a superficial reading of the situation along the lines described above in our historiographical discussion. This movement is better described as a reaction to the nineteenth-century *embourgeoisement* of Methodism in North America. It is more a radicalization of the Wesleyan tradition than a "conservative" version of it, though it often identifies itself as a reaction to a perceived "liberalization" of the Methodist tradition. There is no doubt some element of truth to that perception, but I find issues of class conflict more explanatory of many phenomena than the conservative/liberal paradigm.

However one sorts out such questions, it is clear that most wings of the Holiness Movement continued some commitment to a "preferential option for the poor" with varying degrees of clarity and radicality. Charles G. Finney, the Presbyterian/Congregationalist evangelist who was so influenced by Methodism that his theology

was called "Oberlin Perfectionism" and became a major source of Holiness thinking, was so committed to "free pews" that his followers founded a separate Presbytery committed to the principle. Even Phoebe Palmer, whose "parlor holiness" so shunned controversy over political issues like slavery that Free Methodist B. T. Roberts disassociated himself from her in spite of having felt her influence spiritually, was known for her involvement in the "Old Brewery," an early antecedent of the "rescue mission" and "settlement house" movements. It was explicitly acknowledged in the emerging National Campmeeting Association that a major motive was to cultivate the masses. The campmeeting was the vehicle designed for this purpose. The close affinity of the Holiness Movement with the Salvation Army (today a member of the Christian Holiness Association) is to be explained not only in terms of the shared commitment to the "holiness" version of Wesleyan theology but also in a shared polemic against high steeple churches that neglected the poor and the masses. Similar dynamics were present in the founding of the Pilgrim Holiness Church and Holiness movements that emerged from other denominations (especially the Christian and Missionary Alliance under the influence of Presbyterian turned Holiness preacher A. B. Simpson); both churches boasted of their commitment to the poor and neglected, especially of the cities. In a sermon based on Luke 4:18-19, A. B. Simpson announced his departure from his east side Manhattan church to work among poor immigrants. But let us turn to the Church of the Nazarene to indicate a particular focusing of this theme within the Holiness Movement.<sup>42</sup>

Phineas Bresee was a successful Methodist pastor who precipitated a crisis in California Methodism when he requested "location" to work with a rescue mission in the face of the concern of Methodist Episcopal Church leadership who wished him to continue founding and leading successful and substantial churches that contributed more to the advance of Methodism and its financial success. It was this issue more than "theology" or "conservatism" as such that precipitated the crisis that led to the founding of a major new denomination in the Wesleyan tradition. The very name of the Church of the Nazarene was chosen to signal a "preferential option for the poor"; it was meant to express the commitment of the church to the mission of the "lowly Jesus of Nazareth." The first stationery of the Church quoted Jesus, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." And the preface

to the first Articles of Faith and General Rules of the new church in 1895 clearly alluded to work among the poor.<sup>43</sup> Bresee was quite explicit about these commitments:

The first miracle after the baptism of the Holy Ghost was wrought upon a beggar. It means that the first service of a Holy Ghost baptized church is to the poor; that its ministry is to those that are lowest down; that its gifts are for those that need them the most. As the Spirit was upon Jesus to preach the gospel to the poor, so His Spirit is upon his servants for the same purpose.<sup>44</sup>

Bresee developed from this position a polemic against elaborate and expensive church buildings and other features of the Holiness "preferential option for the poor." But such sentiments were not Bresee's alone. They pervaded the life of the early church of the Nazarene. One paper started in Texas in 1906 was called *Highways and Hedges* and boldly proclaimed that "the respectable have had this call and rushed madly on after the things of this world" and claimed that "steeple-house church people are busy chasing dollars." This paper vowed to "open up a chain of missions in all of our large cities where real mission and slum work is pushed; and the poor and destitute looked after."<sup>45</sup>

Again, of course, it was very difficult to sustain these early commitments. Like the Free Methodists, the Nazarenes, again with some significant exceptions, have found ways to avoid and suppress this theme in their lives and churches. Certain wings of the church, like the organization of philanthropic agencies and some forms of urban ministry, still appeal to this history and rhetoric, but it is difficult to avoid the impression that this theme is no longer vitally alive in the church.

### *Latin American Pentecostalism Viewed in the Same Line*

Where in the twentieth century is this centrifugal motion of a "Wesleyan preferential option for the poor" being played out? There might be several answers to this question. The *embourgeoisement* of the various holiness churches is producing its own powerful but little noticed reaction in a variety of places. One might also point to various social movements over the last century or so that have revitalized in new modes the Wesleyan "preferential option for the poor," but I am convinced that the place where the original dynamic of Methodism is being played out most clearly is in the rise of

Pentecostalism in our century. We are not accustomed to thinking in these categories, but I am again convinced that we must. We do not understand the full range of Methodist experience, or Methodism itself, in a sense, without attending to this phenomenon. In many ways Pentecostalism is the radicalization of the holiness impulse within the Methodist traditions, or perhaps more recently a reaction to the *embourgeoisement* of the holiness churches. The historical linkages between Methodism and Pentecostalism have been traced by H. Vinson Synan<sup>46</sup> and I have extended this argument on the theological level in my *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*.<sup>47</sup>

The way in which this Methodist dynamic is being played out in our time is perhaps best seen in the South American country of Chile, where Pentecostalism is most firmly rooted in the Methodist tradition and is threatening to become the dominant religious force in the country to the point of challenging the Roman Catholic Church. Chilean Methodism has its roots in the early visits of William Taylor, the maverick missionary Bishop of American Methodism, who planted a fiercely independent form of Methodism around the world (Africa, Asia, South America, especially—after years of street preaching in the California “gold rush” at mid-century). The Methodism that Taylor planted was very close to the Holiness Movement that gave him much support and named Taylor University after him, and the “self-supporting” missions that Taylor founded were also unique and largely outside the control of “official” Methodist mission boards. Taylor’s plan raised the laity to new roles, placed the missionaries and nationals on a more equal footing financially, encouraged structures of “self-support” that provided for a dimension of independence, and was so demanding that it appealed only to the “less cultured revivalist fringe of the Methodist church in the United States.”<sup>48</sup> This naturally gave the Methodism of Chile a “holiness” tinge and laid the foundation for the emergence of Pentecostalism in this context.

The early twentieth century brought new Methodist missionaries to Chile more in the tradition of the modern rejection of revivalism. According to John Kessler this precipitated a conflict between North American missionaries bringing a more middle class and modern orientation into a context in which the more traditional revivalism was more effective where Methodism was still located primarily among the working classes. The first decade of this century led to a number of conflicts that included the emergence of Pente-

costalism under the ministry of a North American, Willis C. Hoover, pastor of a large Methodist Church in Valparaiso. Hoover was, however, so indigenized and acculturated that he was accepted as a "national," and to this day it is difficult to get Chilean Pentecostals to admit that the movement is in any way dependent on the North American scene and not totally an indigenous movement. At any rate, Chilean Pentecostalism arose rather spontaneously among Methodists at the end of the first decade of this century and from those beginnings has grown to about fifteen percent of the population, enough to compete with the number of "practicing Catholics," to use that unhappy term. Missionaries from classical Pentecostal denominations did not begin to have major impact until mid-century.

The Methodist influence is still predominant in the names of denominations, in the preservation of infant baptism, episcopal church government, doctrine, and hymns. Chilean Pentecostals often see their most characteristic practice to be "street preaching" which they understand to be in the "apostolic" line of the "field preaching" practiced by John Wesley (generally ignorant of William Taylor as a significant carrier of the practice). My examination of the rather limited literature that I have available to me on Chilean Pentecostalism does not reveal any self-conscious articulation of a "Wesleyan preferential option for the poor," but there can be little doubt that in practice there was the equivalent. Studies of Chilean Pentecostalism tend to see the growth of the movement as a result of its turn to the flood of poor workers from the country to the city. And in this and other features, John Kessler judges that "Hoover maintained the essence of the Wesleyan tradition more faithfully than the Methodist missionaries who opposed him, and this has come to be recognized increasingly by the Methodists themselves."<sup>49</sup> In this context we need also to think of the recent book by David Martin, now an Anglican but with Methodist roots. In *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*, Martin argues that we must see the rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America as the third great wave of the Methodist impulse that flowered in Great Britain in the eighteenth century, in North America in the nineteenth century, and now in Latin America in the twentieth century. Martin uses the categories of his Methodist background to provide one of the most powerful and useful interpretations of Pentecostalism to date.<sup>50</sup>

Such suggestions bring pause to our usual interpretations of

Pentecostalism, but they suggest that to predict the future of Latin American Pentecostalism in the next century, we need to look at North American Methodism in this century. What now appears as a somewhat otherworldly movement of the disenfranchised may prove to have a powerful social impact. There are already some signs of unexpected developments.<sup>51</sup> It is from the Chilean Pentecostals that the majority of Pentecostal members of the Work Council of Churches have come, and the indigenous character of the Chilean Pentecostal churches may give them freedom to move in new directions apart from the influence of North America. On a recent visit to Chile I was privileged to visit a congregation of the "Mision Wesleyana Nacional" whose founder had served on the *junta* of the Socialist Party of Chile in part out of his formation in the southern mining district of Chile.<sup>52</sup> Shades of early Methodism, the Primitive Methodists, and other brands of the Methodist tradition that have often broken into a form of social radicalism rooted in a "Wesleyan preferential option for the poor"!

### *Some Concluding Observations*

I am aware of the limitations and modest results of this study, which has in many ways been narrowly focused on one strand of a Methodist "preferential option for the poor." I have not dealt with a more modern form of such a concern as would be expressed in the nineteenth-century move toward a more holistic social analysis as expressed in the social gospel, the "social principles" of the modern ecumenical movement, or more recently the questions raised by the theologies of liberation. This is not to deny their significance nor to suggest that there is not much to learn from them. Such currents have often had significant roots in the Methodist traditions. I would welcome such study but have felt that such was beyond the limits of my own essay. But, in this concluding section, I would like to suggest something of what I have intended here.

(1) I have suggested that there is buried in the Methodist tradition a very significant and profound history of a "Wesleyan preferential option for the poor" that deserves study and pondering. It does not answer all the questions that we have about this theme in the Methodist experience, but I believe that it speaks more profoundly to them than we might suppose. While not primarily political in the first sense, it has often given impulse to political currents and raised

significant political questions, both within the movements that it has generated and in the social radicalization that has come as persons have responded to a "preferential option for the poor" and shifted social location enough to gain a real sympathy for the poor.

(2) I have intended to unsettle our thinking by celebrating the "underside" of the Methodist experience, the side that most of us find somewhat disreputable and from which many of us are in various ways fleeing, and I have on occasion deliberately used provocative language to drive this point home. For a variety of reasons we scholars are all trained to read the Methodist tradition through the lens of the dominant and "higher" Methodist traditions, but we also need to reverse this lens and read the Methodist experience from the bottom up as well. Only by doing so will we ever really understand the internal dynamic of Methodism and the profound social influence that it has had.

(3) I have also tried to suggest that our readings of Methodist history might be informed by a "new historiography" more rooted in this "underside" of Methodist history, and that we may find here many clues not only about the social impact of Methodism but about the soul and fundamental intention of Methodism, issues that I am convinced remain unresolved in the life of our traditions.

(4) It should be clear that I have had an ecumenical intention in this essay. I have tried to put the "disreputable" traditions of Methodism at the table with the more traditional forms of Methodism in a way to open up a new dialogue about the nature of Methodism. I am convinced that we will understand Methodism fully only when such a dialogue takes place at a table of equals.

(5) It should also be clear that I have had a theological agenda as well. I have tried to suggest that Wesley bequeathed us a subtle synthesis, too subtle and complex (and perhaps idiosyncratic) to be kept together in one piece by the minds and cultural experiences that followed him. I am convinced that most of our traditions serve as carriers of only certain fragments of the tradition that disenfranchise and excommunicate each other as reflections of themes that cannot be genuinely "Wesleyan." We have hope of recovering the "historical Wesley" (and perhaps the spiritual inner dynamic of the Wesleyan tradition) only as we bring those pieces back together in the dynamic interaction that they had in Wesley.

(6) I have also sought to extend our view of what constitutes the broader Wesleyan tradition. For this reason I have included the

Salvation Army and Chilean Pentecostalism as illustrations of the Wesleyan tradition, and particularly of the power of its "preferential option for the poor." I am convinced that we will not fully understand the full range of the Methodist experience and power until we find a way to do this.



## Notes to Chapter 4

1. See 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), and his contribution to *Poverty and Ecclesiology: Nineteenth Century Evangelicals in the Light of Liberation*, ed. Anthony Dunnavant (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier Books, 1992).

2. See my Epilogue to Dunnavant, ed., *Poverty and Ecclesiology*.

3. Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946–52* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 36. This passage is in paragraph 17 of Barth's famous essay on "The Christian Community and the Civil Community."

4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 180. The German original was published in 1955.

5. I worked in advance with only Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "Wesley's Preferential Option for the Poor," *Quarterly Review* 9 (1989), 16. This argument was then expanded in *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990). My address, entitled "The Wesleyan Option for the Poor," has now been published in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 26/1 (Spring 1991), 7–22.

6. Perhaps I am influenced by the thorough-going and profoundly theological grounding of this principle in Barth (in the fundamental motifs of his Christology that lie at the heart of his trinitarian doctrine of God—especially that we know no other God than that revealed in Jesus Christ by the nature of the incarnation as a form of "divine condescension" that provides the "direction" for our own life in the church) to expect something more of that sort. But this is perhaps a significant point for the successive history of Methodism.

7. *Works (J)* 12:302 ("Letter to a Member of the Society," February 26, 1776).

8. *Works (J)* 1:185 (April 1, 1739).

9. Robert D. Hughes III, "Wesleyan Roots of Christian Socialism," *The Ecumenist* 13 (May–June, 1975), 50.

10. Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 17.

11. See Aaron C. H. Seymour, *The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 2 vols. (1844), 1:27, as cited by Oscar Sherwin, *John Wesley: Friend of the People* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961), 40–1.

12. *Works (J)* 2:280 (February 9–10, 1753).

13. *Works (J)* 12:301 ("Letter to a Member of the Society," February 7, 1776).

14. *Works (J)* 12:302 ("Letter to a Member of the Society," February 26, 1776).

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

16. "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," *Works (J)* 7:290.

17. I have become increasingly convinced that we need to give more attention to this issue in the life of Methodism than we have—and was pleased to hear from a friend that Albert Outler concurred in this judgment, citing my work, in a letter shortly before his death. I have developed this concept in a preliminary way in my essay, "Yet Another Layer of the Onion; Or, Opening the Ecumenical Door to Let the Riffraff In," *The Ecumenical Review* 40 (January, 1988), 87–110.

18. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985). This has become the classic interpretation of this strand of Christianity. The diagram is taken from p. 31.

19. Durnbaugh, 31.

20. Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots on Pentecostalism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987; paperback editions by Francis and Asbury Press and more recently by Hendrickson Publishers), chapter two.

21. Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), chapter nine and appendix.

22. Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 30.

23. Daniel A. Payne, *The Semi-Centenary and the Retrospection of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Baltimore: Sherwood and Co., 1866; reprinted 1972 by "Books for Libraries"), 6.

24. *Ibid.*, 8.

25. *Ibid.*, 20.

26. *Ibid.*, 21.

27. *Ibid.*, 20.

28. See W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England 1790–1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), and various writings of John Kent, especially *Jabez Bunting: The Last Wesleyan* (London: Epworth Press, 1955), and chapter four in *The Age of Disunity* (London: Epworth Press, 1966).

29. David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750–1850* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 92.

30. Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 133.

31. *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

32. John Petty, *The History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion*. I have used the new edition of James Macpherson (London: John Dickinson, 1880), 51.

33. *Ibid.*, 575.

34. *Ibid.*, 2.

35. John Munsey Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation: Studies in Methodism and Ecumenism in England, 1740–1982* (London: Epworth Press, 1985), 88.

36. B. T. Roberts, "Free Churches," *The Earnest Christian* 1 (January,

1860), 6–10.

37. *The Earnest Christian* (March, 1871), 160, as cited by William Kostlevy, "A Preference for the Poor: Benjamin Titus Roberts and the Preferential Option for the Poor in the Early Free Methodist Church," in Dunnivant, ed., *Poverty and Ecclesiology*. See also my unpublished essay that circulates among Free Methodists under the title, "Reclaiming our Roots: The Social Vision of B. T. Roberts." On Roberts in general, see Clarence Howard Zahniser, *Earnest Christian: Life and Works of Benjamin Titus Roberts* (privately published, 1957).

38. I trace some of these themes in *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976; reprinted with a new preface, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988) chapter nine, 116–19.

39. This quotation is found on page 44 of the "Social Services Centenary Edition" of William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (Atlanta: Salvation Army, 1984).

40. *Sacraments and the Salvation Army: Pneumatological Foundations*, Studies in Evangelicalism No. 10 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1990).

41. See *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 118.

42. I have traced some of these currents in *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, especially chapter nine.

43. These developments are described in Timothy Lee Smith, *Called Unto Holiness* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1962), 110–15, and in Donald P. Brickley, *Man of the Morning: The Life and Work of Phineas F. Bresee* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1960), 135–164.

44. This is taken from the *Messenger* (September 12, 1901), as quoted in Harold Ivan Smith, *The Quotable Bresee* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1983), 167.

45. I trace more of this theme in *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, chapter nine, especially 113–14.

46. H. Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971).

47. Various editions as cited above in note 20.

48. See the analysis of Jean B. A. Kessler, Jr., *A Study of the Older Protestant Missions and Churches in Peru and Chile* (Goes, Holland: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1967), 103–5 and *passim*.

49. *Ibid.*, 308.

50. David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

51. For an illustration of the growing minority of ecumenically minded and socially engaged Pentecostals, see the recent publication edited by Carmelo Alvarez, *Pentecostalismo y Liberación: Una Experiencia Latinoamericana* (San José: DEI, 1992). This volume, which came out of several conferences, including one that I attended in Chile, is part of the DEI "relectura" project of the various Latin American Protestant traditions that produced the volume that so many of us have found help on

the Methodist tradition.

52. See on this tradition, see Manuel Ossa, *Espiritualidad Popular y Acción Política: El Pastor Victor Mora y la Misión Nacional* (Santiago: Ediciones Rehue, 1990).

### Notes to Chapter 5

1. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–X*, Anchor Bible 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981).

2. Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

3. Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, tr. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984); and Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

4. Theodore Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981); M. Douglas Meeks, ed., *The Future of Methodist Theological Traditions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985); and Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

5. Albert C. Outler, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 135.

6. See, for instance, John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3rd edition (New York: Vintage, 1969); Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 2nd edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983); and Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

7. Susie Stanley, "Empowered Foremothers: Wesleyan/Holiness Women Speak to Today's Christian Feminists," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 24 (1989), 103–16.

8. For an examination of ecclesiologies in various liberation theologies see Peter C. Hodgson, *Revisioning the Church: Ecclesial Freedom in the New Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

9. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

10. Theodore Runyon, "Introduction: Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation," in Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation*, 48.

11. José Míguez Bonino, "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification From a Liberationist Perspective," in Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation*, 58–59.

12. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

13. In pragmatism abduction is hypothetical, introducing new ideas,