

INTRODUCTION

On Reading Wesley with the Poor

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The essays comprising this book were originally given as papers at the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies at Somerville College, Oxford, England in the summer of 1992. The theme of the Institute was "Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition." The premise of the Institute was threefold: (1) that in some sense God's relation to the poor is constitutive of the gospel as conveyed by John Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition; (2) that honestly facing the deformation of the Wesleyan tradition away from the poor would be a hard but necessary task requisite to its more faithful practice; and (3) that regaining an evangelical relationship to the poor would be decisive for the transformation and renewal of Methodist/Wesleyan churches across the world. As can be readily seen, the essays presented here do not flinch in pursuing all aspects of the premise with verve. These fresh readings of the Wesleyan tradition from the perspective of the poor result in penetrating questions and incisive suggestions as to work that must be done in service of the generations of the people called Methodists.

Wesley and the Poor

While there is some controversy as to whether "the poor" meant for Wesley those poor among his own movement or the poor at large in society, none of the essayists doubts Wesley's unequivocal insistence that the poor are at the heart of the evangel and that life with the poor is constitutive of Christian discipleship. There is widespread agreement that, according to the practice of Wesley, "the poor in Jesus Christ" has to do with the nature of the church and with salvation. Wesley's ministry with the poor included feeding, cloth-

ing, housing the poor; preparing the unemployed for work and finding them employment; visiting the poor sick and prisoners; devising new forms of health care education and delivery for the indigent; distributing books to the needy; and raising structural questions about an economy that produced poverty.

Wesley's turn to the poor, however, was not simply *service of* the poor, but more importantly *life with* the poor. Whether Wesley would have "naturally" preferred to be among the prosperous or the poor can be debated, but that he actually shared the life of the poor in significant ways, even to the point of contracting diseases from their beds, is undeniable. Nor was Wesley's life with the poor merely an accident of his peculiar gifts. Rather Wesley understood visiting the poor as an essential means of grace necessary to the continuance of faith. To be in Christ meant to take the form of Christ's own life for and with the poor. To be a disciple of Christ meant to be obedient to Christ's command to feed his sheep and to serve the least of his sisters and brothers. This meant that the *evangel* took Wesley where the poor were, in the fields and hamlets, mines and city streets, where enclosures and a mercantilist economy had made them congregate.

The Poor in an Economy of Death

If to be a Methodist in Wesley's view is to practice life with the poor as the heart of Christian discipline, what does it mean to look into the face of today's poor? Victorio Araya-Guillén writes from the perspective of Latin America's observance of the 500th anniversary of the European conquest of Latin America and its consequences in the holocaust of millions of indigenous peoples, the enslavement of African peoples brought to the "new world," and the destruction of the environment. Araya-Guillén confronts the Wesleyan churches with the threatened holocaust of the poor in our time: "How are we to be a community of faith in a world of injustice and death for the poor? How do we announce, by deed or word, the good news of life that comes from God (John 10:10) in the midst of this bad news of the daily death of the poor who are victims of the economic rationale imposed by the West?"

Poverty is not the will of God or the incorrigible result of fate. Mortal poverty is not due to the sins of the poor. Poverty as we know it today, this "new sacrifice to the Moloch of greed," as Araya-Guillén says, is an historic, social, and economic act that has a beginning and

objective causes with economic mechanisms and social subjects. It responds objectively to a process that is determined by "reason" and the will of human beings. It is a complex process that was developed from the Renaissance mercantile expansion (during the sixteenth century) to today's international neoliberal capitalism (the new free market economy). Within this process, thanks to unequal exchange, some countries "specialize in gaining and others in losing" until today there are clearly "the losers," throw-away nations.

In the new situation of market capitalism spreading throughout the world the poor are increasingly subjected to the laws and necessities of the market and free trade. In the economic "logic" of capitalism, capital and the laws of the market come first. Human beings and the satisfaction of their basic needs and the right to life for all come second. This is true also in First World countries as capital flight causes a restructuring that means many are dropping out of the middle-class while the plight of the poor becomes more desperate.

No one may assume that Wesley or the Wesleyan tradition can solve the economic quandaries that entail the terribly complicated conditions of poverty's death-dealing in our time. And yet if the Wesleyan legacy has nothing to contribute to the life and future of the poor, it forfeits its right to re-present Jesus Christ in the *oikoumene*.

Contradictions in the Wesleyan Legacy

How then can the Methodist memory be brought to bear on the life and death situation of the poor today? Wesley seems to have made life with the poor a dimension of discipleship without which one's salvation is endangered. But has the Wesleyan heritage been so compromised that it is useless today in confronting the threatened holocaust of the poor?

Itemelung Mosala writes out of the South African situation in which the leading forces on almost all sides do not allow the poor to speak for themselves. Methodism, he argues, is of necessity a people's movement which at its best has nurtured poor people's spirituality for liberation. But the way the Wesleyan tradition has actually played itself out has been a "part of the history of domination and exploitation" of the poor. His question is whether the Wesleyan tradition can be retrieved and practiced in such a way that it can actually represent the voice and action of the poor. The answer is not so facilely given.

One unmistakable learning of the Ninth Oxford Institute is that there are profound ambiguities, contradictions, and instabilities in the Wesleyan tradition regarding the gospel and the poor. In an highly nuanced essay, Donald Dayton searches for a new historiography by which the fundamental intention buried in the history of Methodism can be critically retrieved. Dayton believes that Wesley held together elements that have been fragmented over the last two centuries into various branches of Methodism. Once the "subtle synthesis" is fractured, the resulting Methodist strands convey "only certain fragments of the tradition that disenfranchise and excommunicate each other as reflections of themes that cannot be genuinely 'Wesleyan.'" Profound sociological and psychological forces of *embourgeoisement* have pulled various branches of Methodism away from the poor and toward the "respectable" center of the culture.

Our best chance for finding the integrity of Wesley's own emphasis on "good news to the poor," according to Dayton, is to regard the "underside" of Methodist history in those branches that have not succumbed to the dominant culture and political economy. Thus Dayton surveys such traditions as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Primitive Methodism, Free Methodists in North America, and even the Salvation Army and Latin American Pentecostalism. These traditions generally express a gospel egalitarianism, full ministry of women and lay, and a lifestyle that enabled evangelization to the masses. For Dayton there is a clear "correlation between the countervailing movement toward the poor and away from them with the theological fragmentation of Methodism." One way to begin dealing with this theological fragmentation is learning to reread the Bible.

Toward a Wesleyan Biblical Hermeneutic

There are many problems in developing a Wesleyan hermeneutic of the scriptures today. For one thing Wesley was not liberated from the practices of pre-modernity. As he works at a hermeneutic from the perspective of the black South African poor, Mosala suggests that a much more serious problem is reading the poor within the biblical texts. His question is "how to interpret the eloquence with which the poor are silent and the absence through which they are present in the pages of the Bible." Focusing on the Exodus story of Moses and the midwives, he asks whether the text itself is open to the misuse to

which colonizers and oppressors have put the exodus narrative. He argues that the most difficult aspect of Exodus is the absence of the slaves's own voices. A non-oppressed person, Moses, becomes the hero of the oppressed. If, as some scholars claim, this Exodus material was compiled during the Solomonic reign, then is the story not simply an ideology condoning the dispossession of peasants and slave labor practiced by the regime of Solomon?

Such a story can be liberated only through the praxis of the poor against their present enslavement; and only in this way can the stories themselves be liberating. It is the everyday praxis of the poor who gain their spirituality from the Bible which Mosala would like to retrieve from the best of the Wesleyan tradition: "For without this new presence of the poor in the business of reading the Bible, there is no recovering the erstwhile presence of the poor in the stories of the Bible."

Overcoming Wesleyan Theological Fragmentation

In view of the massive dimensions of world poverty today, the internal ambiguities of the Methodist tradition, and the difficulties of reading the poor in the Bible and the Bible with the poor, how can we critically practice the Wesleyan tradition today?

These essays raise penetrating questions about the theology that must be done afresh today in service of a critical practice of the Wesleyan tradition. Did Wesley adequately establish "good news to the poor" in the being of God so that the evangelical emphasis on the poor has sufficient theological grounding? Two authors, Theodore Jennings and Donald Dayton, argue that while Wesley intended such a theological claim, he did not consistently succeed. The failure to provide this theological grounding in a normative way, it is argued, led to the pervasive "constitutional instability" concerning the poor in the Methodist tradition. And thus the case is made for the urgency of christological, pneumatological, and trinitarian work that must be done today, work that will more clearly demonstrate the biblical grounding of the gospel to the poor in the life and being of the Triune God.

The essays of David Lowes Watson and Richard P. Heitzenrater make significant contributions to this task on the christological level. Watson criticizes the prevailing mode of evangelism for its failure to proclaim the fullness of Christ's work in all his offices. The priestly

and prophetic offices tend to get divided up by conservative and liberal evangelistic approaches to the near exclusion of the sovereign office. Watson argues that to hold together the Wesleyan proclamation of the gospel to the poor requires holding together all aspects of the work of Christ. To emphasize only the forgiveness and reconciliation of the priestly office is to fall into the well-known antinomianism which simply reinforces the individualism of persons and the isolation of communities. To emphasize only the prophetic office leads to an activism that is soon devoured by despair. According to Watson, the true power by which we can live good news to the poor comes from the power of God's own love of God's children. This is not a love without judgment but is "above all the royal summons to prepare for audience with a wrathful parental potentate whose children have been neglected and starved and beaten and slaughtered for millennia. On that day of God's anger, we shall all tremble for a long, long time."

Heitzenrater asks the questions, Why was Wesley so interested in helping and going among the poor? What was Wesley's motivation for working with the poor? The answers, Heitzenrater believes, can be found in a christologically-grounded virtue ethics. Wesley held a virtue ethic that emphasized *being* in Jesus Christ rather than *doing* as response to a command. Sanctification was basically a form of meditative piety through which the virtues in Jesus Christ were implanted in the disciple. To imitate Jesus Christ meant not only to see Jesus as the model of life but also in him to find the power to live with the poor. Heitzenrater makes clear the connection between life in Christ and acts of love toward the poor. "The simple answer, then, to the question, Why did Wesley work with the poor? is, first and foremost, because Jesus did so, but also because Jesus told him to do so and would help him to do so."

Personal Piety and Social Transformation

Several of the essays, especially those of Rebecca Chopp and Theodore Jennings, concentrate on the relationship between personal and social transformation in the Wesleyan emphasis on *scriptural holiness*. The grammar of sanctification is not simply reconciliation, but "emancipatory transformation." While criticizing the privatistic and moralistic tendencies of the Wesleyan tradition,

Chopp and Jennings reformulate both the discourses of grace and sin in historical and structural terms.

In the dialectic between denouncing sin and announcing grace the work of the Holy Spirit is interdependently personal and social. According to Jennings, "it was precisely Wesley's pietism, his own evangelical fervor, his own moralizing scrupulosity that gave his social ethic an immediate plausibility." If persons are to make a genuine difference in the conditions of an economy that oppresses the poor, they must be freed from their own idolatrous captivities and practice the disciplines of "evangelical economics" in their own lives. Without the development of a personal and communal ethic of frugality, simplicity, generosity, and solidity with the poor no persons or communities will have the courage to challenge the "economy of death."

The Discourse of Sin

A Wesleyan theology that genuinely speaks of God's presence with the poor as grounded in God's own character and that demonstrates the personal and social dimensions of overcoming poverty will have to develop what Chopp calls a "very large doctrine of sin." Chopp calls on pragmatic future-oriented thinking and rhetoric tied to praxis to develop such a doctrine of sin.

The first task in such a doctrine of sin is simply to name suffering and lament it. The impoverishment of the church often has to do with its inability to see and be persuaded by the brokenness, deprivation, and death of human beings and of creation. Without lament, without suffering from suffering, there can be no doctrine of sin or of grace.

The next task of a doctrine of sin is to unmask and criticize the idolatries that get expressed in the ideologies and unjust systems of a society, that is to show the relationship between systems of injustice and the depth structure of sin. Such an analysis of the depth structure of idolatry is itself a resistance to sin and evil. As Chopp argues, "sin as idolatry is structural in the sense that it is embedded in the political practices, the everyday habits, the linguistic structures, the ways we are raised as whites, or blacks, or women or men." Such hidden structures determine the way politics and language exclude the poor from what they need to survive and flourish in the expression of their humanity.

A doctrine of sin should relate such structures to the depth of human depravity and original sin—otherwise Christian approaches to the poor become mere wishful thinking. But it is a distinctive mark of a Wesleyan doctrine of sin that whatever is known and said about sin is based on grace. This is particularly important in resisting the widespread tendency in market society to employ sin as an alibi for the continuance of sin. Thus it is argued that because the human being is inevitably greedy, we should accept the fated consequence of that greed in economics. Such a fatalism, of course, serves the interests of those who most benefit from existing arrangements and seems theologically to justify the subjection of the poor to death. A doctrine of sin, then, should lead to a focus on God's work in overcoming sin and to the possibilities of human life as defined by grace against sin. How are we not only justified but also sanctified by grace? How through the power of the Holy Spirit can we construct sanctified ways of living in the face of God and the poor? God's grace does not save us without changing us.

The Poor and the Future of the Methodist Project

The title of this volume is taken from a hymn of Charles Wesley. S T Kimbrough, Jr. reminds us that the worship and spiritual life of the Wesleyan movement gave expression to the life and saving work of God with the poor. Does the tradition of Wesleyan piety and theology suggest some different modalities in which the church might genuinely manifest good news to the poor? The deconstruction of traditions conveying ideologies that oppress the poor and the criticism of the idolatries expressed in the hegemonic culture can lead to nihilism if they are not accompanied by the constructive work of sanctification. What does God really hope for the poor? What do the poor hope for? In the lament of suffering from poverty is already the seed of hope for a life sufficient to express one's humanity on behalf of life.

Several of the essays presented here converge on the claim that the future of Methodism lies in recovering a concrete practice of "scriptural holiness." Scriptural holiness, set in the presence of the poor, means transformed habits, relationships, and ways of being in the world. Holy living in the presence of the poor means that our practices of property, work, and consumption would be radically changed. It means new ways of praying with the poor and reading

scripture with the poor. It also means practicing *diakonia* with the poor so that they are not made objects of ministry and thus robbed of their ministry.

The sanctifying grace of God in Jesus Christ is meant not just for the sinner but also for a society beset by structural sin. An ancient and persisting problem, of course, is that sanctifying grace can be mediated to the larger structures of society only through the life and work of communities. And yet the spread of the market society makes community ever more threatened. What in the Wesleyan tradition can contribute to the imagining and constructing of new forms of community? Can there be communities which are not defined by the ancient principle of "birds of a feather flock together?" Can sanctifying grace create community in which the boundaries move according to the presence of Jesus Christ in the stranger, the radically other? Could such a community actually be an adumbration of the reign of God in which the poor actually and concretely hear good news? The following essays invite the Wesleyan communion to answer these questions in the presence of the poor and of a groaning creation and under the power of God's grace that creates the joy of a home for the homeless.