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The New Creation: What's Law Got To Do With It? John Wesley, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Need for an Inclusive Interpretive Hermeneutic

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Introduction

In 1984, Tina Turner had an international hit with her song, "What's Love Got To Do With It?" The lyrics are those of a woman who is falling in love but trying desperately to deny that this is the case. The song comes to mind when I consider the role of biblical law in the new creation because I know that it has a role to play, but I'm trying desperately to deny that this is the case! By "biblical law," I am referring to the collections of biblical laws found in the Pentateuch. In this paper, however, I am referring even more specifically to the laws concerning women in Exodus and Deuteronomy. By today's more equitable standards, some of these laws are problematic because they presume subordinate and limited roles for women. Interpreting these laws for the life of the Church, then, creates a challenge. On the one hand, if the laws are interpreted as supposedly intended by the original authors, then female subordination is simply re-inscribed in a new context. If we only re-inscribe old relationships in the new creation, can that creation really be new? On the other hand, if allowances are made for contemporary relationships between men and women, and the laws are re-interpreted, then the resulting interpretations are said to be inconsistent with the biblical text and therefore not authoritative. This paper attempts to find a middle ground--a hermeneutic that enables these problematic laws to be interpreted in ways that honors the biblical and Methodist traditions but also incorporates and reflects the perspectives and social realities of women.

An example of such a problematic law includes one that considers rape to be an injury against the woman's father rather than against the woman herself and requires the woman to marry the man.¹ Another troubling law states that if a groom accuses his bride of not being a virgin and her parents cannot present evidence of her virginity (presumably, the "bloody bedsheets"), the bride must be stoned to death.² If the necessary evidence is presented, the woman must remain married to the man as long as he lives; and he is punished by having to pay a fine. However, according to Deut. 19:19, the person who testifies falsely against another is to receive the punishment the one whom he accused would have received. Here, the husband only pays a fine rather than being stoned to death as the woman would have been if the charges were true.

Still another example of the oppressive treatment of women comes from the Decalogue and its prohibition against adultery (Exodus 20:14). A crucial point that needs to be made is that, in the Hebrew Bible, adultery is defined by the marital status of the female and not that of the male. Deuteronomy 22:22 reads: "if a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman."³ This law means that as long as an Israelite married man does not have intercourse with the wife of another (privileged) Israelite man, he is not committing adultery. The married man's sexual involvement outside of his marriage just has to be limited to prostitutes, female slaves, or foreign women. In addition to having a double standard for men and women, the law on adultery fails to consider the circumstances under which the man and married woman are caught lying together. Consequently, there is no exemption for a married woman if she has been forced and did not consent to the sexual act. Taken literally, this law means that a married woman could be executed for adultery when her only crime as such was having been raped.

Laws that require a rape victim to marry her rapist and would consider a married woman who has been raped to be an adulteress force us to reconsider our notions of biblical authority.

¹ Deut. 22:28-29. Under an earlier version of this law, Exodus 22: 16-17, marriage with the assailant was optional.

² Deut. 22:13-21.

³ All Scriptural references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Are all parts of the Bible, including these laws, authoritative? Similarly, how do we re-interpret these laws so that they can be instructive in today's context; and if we re-interpret these laws to make them less patriarchal and more inclusive, are those interpretations authoritative? In general, Protestantism, with its *sola scriptura* emphasis, tends to restrict interpretive latitude. Traditionally, for example, interpretations may be based on comparing one passage that is unclear with other passages.⁴ Yet, without an established hermeneutic permitting greater inclusivity, such comparisons are embedded within the texts' underlying patriarchal assumptions and women's perspectives remain excluded. Moreover, Protestantism's democratic polity means that an official denominational body authorized to make more inclusive interpretive determinations does not exist.

When an official interpretive body at least exists, the determinations rendered are authoritative even if they are not found in the Bible or if they go beyond the literal letter of the law. For example, the Roman Catholic Church's official teaching body, the bishops of Rome speaking within the whole college of bishops, is able to promulgate doctrines, including that of the immaculate conception, which are not found in the Bible. In the same way, Judaism has the Talmud, interpretations by noted rabbis that are authoritative. Within Judaism, the Talmud is the oral tradition thought to be the other half of the revelation given at Sinai. It is in this oral half of the revelation that the meaning of a biblical text is worked out. With respect to the biblical laws on rape, the rabbis made two important adjustments in the Talmud to the biblical prescriptions. First, they provide that the fine paid by the rapist is to go to the raped female rather than to her father. This adjustment means that rape does become an assault against the female so that she is the one to receive the compensation. Second, marriage to the rapist is not mandatory as provided in the biblical law. The woman may marry him but only if she so chooses.⁵ Through the Talmud, an unfair law becomes fairer and that re-interpretation is considered to be within the biblical tradition.

⁴ For a more detailed treatment of Protestant interpretive traditions, see Ted A. Campbell, [Christian Confessions: A Historical Introduction](#) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 133-144.

⁵ See Judith Hauptman, "Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture," in [Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, and Strategies](#), ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 472-486.

Although the need for greater inclusivity with reference to gender and biblical laws is presented here as somewhat novel, the same need for inclusivity was identified some time ago with reference to race and the laws of the United States. The nation's founding fathers were privileged white males who did not have the poor, women, or people of color in mind when they agreed that "all men are created equal." Barbara Jordan, the former African-American congressional member from Texas, made the same observation succinctly and powerfully during the televised presidential impeachment hearings of 1974.

Earlier today we heard the beginning of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, "We the People." It is a very eloquent beginning. But when that document was completed on the 17th of September in 1787, I was not included in that "We, the People." I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton must have left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision, I have finally been included in "We, the People."⁶

In the impeachment speech, Jordan implies (probably for dramatic effect) that her exclusion as a woman and an African-American was accidental. However, in her book on Barbara Jordan, Barbara Holmes, an ethics professor at Memphis Theological Seminary, refers to a comment made in a later speech which indicates that Jordan was well aware that the exclusion of women was intentional.

One may ask whether the founders were mean-spirited and just didn't like women? The answer is no. They loved women but had a very limited 18th-century notion about their role in the world.⁷

Like all women, African-Americans (male and female) were excluded from constitutional rights and privileges, as Jordan noted in her speech, and this exclusion was made explicitly in the Dred Scott decision.⁸ In that decision of 1857, Justice Roger B. Taney affirmed the exclusionary intent of the founding fathers.⁹

We think that they are not included and were never intended to be included. . . .

⁶ Barbara Jordan, "Opening Statement to the House Judiciary Committee Proceedings on Impeachment of Richard Nixon, 93d Cong. 2d Sess. 111, Washington, D.C., July 25, 1974. Quoted in Barbara Holmes, *A Private Woman in Public Spaces: Barbara Jordan's Speeches on Ethics, Public, Religion, and Law* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 48.

⁷ Jordan, "Women and the Constitution: The Challenge." Remarks February 11, 1988, Atlanta, Georgia. Quoted in Barbara Holmes, *A Private Woman*, 48.

⁸ *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857).

⁹ Holmes, *A Private Woman*, 48.

They had for more than a century before been regarded as being of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race. . . and so far inferior they had not rights which the white man was bound to respectAccordingly, a Negro of the African race was regarded . . .as an article of property, and held and bought and sold as such. . . .No one seems to have doubted the correctness of the prevailing opinion of the time.¹⁰

Jordan's statement, made in 1974, is instructive for our discussion of gender inclusivity in biblical laws today. First, she noted that her inclusion as an African-American woman resulted from interpretations, amendments, and court decisions. In other words, documents cannot be modified literally, whether the document is the United States Constitution or biblical laws. However, the manner in which they are interpreted and applied in later settings can be modified. Second, she did not let the fact that such exclusion was intentional prevent her from seeing herself as part of "We, the People." For our purposes, setting aside that intentional exclusion means that authorial intent should not be the determinative interpretation of either the Constitution or biblical laws. Similarly, Jordan's remarks remind us that traditional customs and culturally-defined limitations on the roles of women are not determinative either. Finally, Jordan's statement shows that we challenge texts and traditions because we cherish them and want to be included. In the same impeachment speech, she said the following words: "My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total. I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution."¹¹ Holmes comments that "Jordan's feelings about the Constitution are as personal and passionate as her biblical faith" and Holmes then mentions an anecdote shared by law professor Philip Bobbitt at Jordan's funeral.¹²

Many of us learned for the first time in the press accounts following Barbara Jordan's death that she carried with her a small pocket copy of the U.S. Constitution. From some apparently early point . . . this small pamphlet was always with her.¹³

¹⁰ Dred Scott v. Sandford at 393, 405, 407-8. Quoted in Holmes, A Private Woman, 48.

¹¹ Jordan, "Testimony House Judiciary Committee, July 25, 1974, Washington, D.C. Quoted in Holmes, A Private Woman, 95.

¹² Holmes, A Private Woman, 94.

¹³ Philip C. Bobbitt, "Barbara Jordan: Constitutional Conscience," *5 Texas J. Women & L.* (1996): 171-73. Quoted in Holmes, A Private Woman, 94.

Jordan was simultaneously dedicated to a text as written and dedicated to broadening the text's scope to include those formerly excluded. These themes of commitment and challenge are adopted in this study and serve as the points of departure in developing the need for an inclusive interpretive hermeneutic. In the next section, the parallels between the issue of women and biblical laws and the issue of race and secular laws are drawn, based on the theological perspectives of Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Wesley. Specifically, the views of King on secular laws and both King and Wesley on biblical law will be compared and then their views on law will be related to their theologies.

Explorations in Secular and Biblical Law: John Wesley and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr., shaped by the black church tradition and influenced by the Social Gospel movement, was able to convince a nation that its practices of racial segregation and discrimination were morally wrong. In order to succeed, he had to be committed to constitutional and cultural traditions that had excluded him and yet challenge them to become more inclusive—much in the same way that Barbara Jordan would do in a later decade. As a Baptist minister, his critique of American social and political structures was based on his reading of the Bible and the theological principles derived from it. King's sermons reveal several theological understandings that were essential to his ability to go beyond the traditional and exclusionary interpretations of the past. It is significant, for this paper, that Wesley's sermons reveal many of the same theological understandings found in King's writings. The contention here is not that Wesley's thought foreshadows that of King or that King's work is somehow based on that of Wesley. Instead, the notion advanced is that, just as King used these theological perspectives to develop a more inclusive hermeneutic, those same perspectives identified in Wesley's sermons can be used today to construct an inclusive hermeneutic within the Methodist tradition.

For his part, Wesley supports the continued use of Old Testament law in the Christian

life. However, when he affirms the use of the “law,” he does not mean the entire corpus of biblical law.¹⁴ He concedes that certain portions of the laws in the Hebrew Bible, “the Jewish ceremonial law” and “the entire Mosaic dispensation” are abolished.¹⁵ Wesley considers only the “moral law” to still be in effect and that for him is essentially “contained in the Ten Commandments and enforced by the prophets.”¹⁶ Although “moral law” and the “Ten Commandments” are not synonymous terms in Wesley’s thought, he does place a great deal of importance on the commandments. Indeed, Wesley’s position is reflected in the Doctrinal Standard of the United Methodist Church. The section on the Old Testament reads, in part, as follows:

Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites doth not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.¹⁷

By implication, then, we might consider these problematic biblical laws concerning women to be less important for Christians, if not abolished, pursuant to Wesley’s understanding of moral law. Nevertheless, Wesley’s reference to even the Ten Commandments is regrettable because these laws not only reinforce the subordination of women, like the others mentioned earlier, but they also accept slavery and reinforce other social hierarchies.¹⁸ The subordination of women becomes readily apparent when the Ten Commandments are considered within the

¹⁴ For concise comparisons of Wesley’s concept of the three uses of the law and the views of Luther and Calvin, see John B. Cobb, Jr., Grace & Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 115-134; and D. Stephen Long, Living the Discipline: United Methodist Theological Reflections on War, Civilization, and Holiness (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 88-95.

¹⁵ Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” (1750), in The Works of John Wesley (WJW), Vol. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 264. More specifically, according to Wesley, the “Mosaic dispensation” contained three parts, “the political, moral, and ceremonial.” See Scott J. Jones, John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 56-57.

¹⁶ Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,” (1748), WJW, Vol. 1, 551. Wesley’s notion of moral law is more expansive than the commandments. Klaiber and Marquardt found that, for Wesley, “law preexisted and already before the foundation of the world it was made known to the angels,” but they admit that Wesley’s “concept of the law itself is not fully clear.” Walter Klaiber & Manfred Marquardt, Loving Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 158, 161.

¹⁷ The Articles of Religion of the United Methodist Church, Article VI, The Book of Discipline (2000).

¹⁸ See also Athalya Brenner, “An Afterword: The Decalogue—Am I an Addressee?,” in A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 255-258; and David J.A. Clines, “The Ten Commandments: Reading from Left to Right,” in Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible (JSOT Supp Series 205: Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26-45.

context of other biblical laws. There is a commandment against bearing false witness and yet a husband may, with limited consequences, make up charges against his wife (Deut. 19:19 and 22:13-21). Another commandment condemns killing and yet a married woman may be stoned to death for adultery (Deut. 22:22) or for not being a virgin at the time of her wedding (Deut. 22:13-21). Since Wesley praises the Ten Commandments but patriarchal and hierarchical biases can be identified in them, the need remains for an inclusive hermeneutic.¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, the Ten Commandments and the other laws concerning women that have been discussed are problematic because of their double standards for males and females and the exclusion of female perspectives and experiences. However, when King's arguments against secular laws that maintained racial segregation are used to evaluate these laws, it is clear that these biblical laws are also morally unjust. In his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," King sets forth the criteria for just and unjust laws.²⁰ Although King addressed the issue of racial inclusivity and secular laws specifically, his analysis works surprisingly well for the issue of gender and biblical laws. For the purposes of this paper, the following three features of King's argument are significant. First, King wrote that "any law that uplifts human personality is just; any law that degrades human personality is unjust."²¹

All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and degrades the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.²²

Appropriating King's definition of an unjust law and applying it to the biblical laws on women discussed here, these laws are unjust because, by implying that a rape is not a crime against the female involved, they degrade human (female) personality and encourage a false superiority of

¹⁹ It is worth noting that, even if the biblical laws on women are not part of Wesley's canon, they are still a part of the Old Testament canon and that canon is recognized by the denomination. According to the Doctrinal Standards of the United Methodist Church, "the Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation" and the list of canonical books includes Exodus and Deuteronomy. Articles of Religion, Article V- "Of the Sufficiency of Holy Scriptures for Salvation."

²⁰ King, "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964), 85-86.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

²² *Ibid.*

men over women.

Second, King asserts that a law is unjust if “a numerical or powerful majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself.”²³ Again, the biblical laws being discussed are unjust under this criterion because women are made to obey laws that are not binding in the same way on men. Two clear examples are the law on adultery, where a married man is not subject to the law in the same way as a woman, and the law on the “bloody bedsheets” where the female, but not the male, must be a virgin at the time of marriage. Third, King defines an unjust law as one that “is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law.”²⁴ Women had no apparent role in the development of these biblical laws but they are subject to them. In the biblical narrative itself, the men were told to avoid being with women before the laws were given (Exodus 19:15) and, in the development of ancient Israelite religion, heterodoxy came to be associated with the exclusion of women.²⁵ These laws, therefore, are unjust.

Initially, it seems that the attitudes of King and Wesley are diametrically opposed. Wesley feels that the Ten Commandments are the essence of the moral law; whereas if King’s analysis of secular laws is utilized, the Ten Commandments and related laws are morally unjust. Upon closer examination, though, their views may not be as far apart as they seem. After considering King’s objections to unjust laws, Wesley’s views on the law can be read in a different way. For example, Wesley equated justice with the “Golden Rule.”

The grand measure of justice, as well as mercy, is, Do unto others as thou wouldst they should do unto thee. Do you walk by this rule? Do you never do unto any what you would not they should do unto you?²⁶

By not subjecting themselves in the same way to the laws applied to women, men have treated

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 85-86.

²⁵ See Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from A Feminist Perspective (HarperSanFrancisco, 1990); and Phyllis Bird, “The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus,” in Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 81-102.

²⁶ Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,” (1748), WJW, Vol. 1, 565-566.

women differently and so have acted unjustly by Wesley's standards as well.

Moreover, certain aspects of Wesley's theology are found to parallel those of King. As a result, Wesley's writings on the law provide the grounds for an inclusive interpretive hermeneutic that is both biblical and Methodist. The two key features in Wesley's theology are that (1) the ultimate goal of fulfilling the law is Christ-like obedience to God's will and (2) Christians must fulfill the law through inner and outer obedience.

(1) The ultimate goal of fulfilling the law is Christ-like obedience to God's will

It is true that for Wesley, the moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments and enforced by the prophets, was not revoked by the Jesus event.²⁷ However, upon closer examination, it is clear that Wesley sees the law as more than the biblical commandments themselves.

What is the law but divine virtue and wisdom assuming a visible form? What is it but the original ideas of truth and good, which were lodged in the uncreated mind from eternity, now drawn forth and clothed with such a vehicle as to appear even to human understanding?²⁸

In this way, the law of God for Wesley is "a copy of the eternal mind," which is "the fairest offspring of the everlasting Father."²⁹ His notion of the law, then, is christological.³⁰ Wesley's emphasis on Christ is so unequivocal that, by the law, Wesley actually seems to mean the radical teachings of Jesus as contained in the Sermon on the Mount, rather than the Ten Commandments.³¹ As a result, Wesley finds a strong connection between the law and the gospel.

There is therefore the closest connection that can be conceived between the law and the gospel. On the one hand the law continually makes way for and points us to the gospel; on the other the gospel continually leads us to a more exact fulfilling of the law. The law, for instance, requires us to love God, to love our neighbour, to be meek, humble, or holy. We feel that we are not sufficient for these things, yea, that with man this is impossible. But we see a promise of God to give us that love, and to make us humble, meek, and holy. We lay hold of this gospel, of these glad tidings: it is done unto us according to our faith, and the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 551.

²⁸ Wesley, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," (1750), *WJW*, Vol. 2, 260.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Long, *Living the Discipline*, 93.

³¹ Cobb, *Grace & Responsibility*, 119.

righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us through faith which is in Christ Jesus.³²

To be meek, humble, holy, and to love our neighbor become, therefore, the ultimate goal of fulfilling the law. In this respect, the law is a means to an end. The law makes us aware that we need God's help to exhibit qualities such as humility and meekness and to love others as we should. For both Wesley and King, the ability to express love for others, the law of love, is the essence of the will of God and governs both heaven and earth. For example, King related the divine will and the law of love to the Lord's Prayer.

The Kingdom of God will be a society in which men and women live as children of God should live. It will be a kingdom controlled by the law of love. . . . Many have attempted to say that the ideal of a better world will be worked out in the next world. But Jesus taught men to say, "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." Although the world seems to be in bad shape today, we must never lose faith in the power of God to achieve his purpose.³³

Similarly, Wesley stated that "there is nothing arbitrary in the law of God," because it is based on the divine will, "so that 'Thy will be done' is the supreme universal law both in earth and heaven."³⁴

In the same way, both King and Wesley understand God's will, the moral law, to be expressed by acting out of love for others rather than out of hate. King preached that "there are moral laws of the universe just as abiding as the physical laws" and that the "law of love" was one of them.³⁵

. . . I'm here to say to you this morning that some things are right and some things are wrong. (*Yes*) Eternally so, absolutely so. It's wrong to hate. (*Yes, That's right*) It always has been wrong and it always will be wrong. (*Amen*) It's wrong in America, it's wrong in Germany, it's wrong in Russia, and it's wrong in China. (*Lord help him*) It was wrong in 2000 B.C. and it's wrong in 1954 A.D. It always has been wrong, (*That's right*) and it always will be wrong. (*That's right*) . . . Some things are right and some things are wrong, no matter if everybody is doing the contrary. Some things in this universe are absolute. The God of the

³² Wesley, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, V," (1748), *WJW*, Vol. 1, 554.

³³ King, "What a Christian Should Think About the Kingdom of God," King Papers, Special Collections, Boston University, 2. Quoted in Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 129; and Walter Fluker, *They Looked For A City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1989), 110-111.

³⁴ Wesley, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," (1750), *WJW*, Vol. 2, 261.

³⁵ King, "Rediscovering Lost Values," in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Time Warner Books, 1998), 10-11.

universe has made it so.³⁶

Likewise, Wesley preached that one who is “under grace” keeps the moral law, “not from the motive of slavish fear, but on a nobler principle, namely, the grace of God ruling in his heart, and causing all his works to be wrought in love.”³⁷ According to Wesley, faith “works inwardly by love” to purify the heart and cleanse “if from all vile affections” so that one may “daily increase in holy love, till faith is swallowed up in sight, and the law of love is established to all eternity.”³⁸

(2) Christians must fulfill the law through both inner and outer obedience.

Because the Pharisees “endeavoured to keep all the commandments,” Wesley found them to be “blameless.”³⁹ However, he thought that Christian righteousness should not only equal but exceed that of the Pharisees “by fulfilling the spirit as well as the letter of the law, by inward as well as outward obedience.”⁴⁰ Wesley distinguished between the inner and outer attributes in the following manner:

Thus to do no harm, to do good, to attend the ordinances of God (the righteousness of a Pharisee) are all external; whereas, on the contrary, poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger and thirst after righteousness, the love of our neighbour, and purity of heart (the righteousness of a Christian) are all internal.⁴¹

To Wesley, “the Pharisees laboured to present God with a good life; the Christian with a holy heart.” Wesley demonstrated the type of inner obedience required by using an example from the

Ten Commandments:

The law says, ‘You shall not kill,’ and hereby (as our Lord teaches) forbids not only outward acts but every unkind word or thought. Now the more I look into this perfect law, the more I feel how far I come short of it; and the more I feel this, the more I feel my need of his blood to atone for all my sin, and of his Spirit to purify my heart, and make me ‘perfect and entire, lacking nothing.’⁴²

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³⁷ Wesley, “The Law Established Through Faith, I,” (1750), *WJW*, Vol. 2, 274.

³⁸ Wesley, “Law Established Through Faith, II, (1750), *WJW*, Vol. 2, 284-285.

³⁹ Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,”(1748), *WJW*, Vol. 1, 567-568.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 568.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” (1750), *WJW*, Vol. 2, 265.

Wesley presented the ways in which a Christian's righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees: observances of the commandments, participation in the ordinances and extent of good works.⁴³ Wesley thought that the Pharisees dispensed with some of the commandments, making their righteousness "partial." To him, the righteousness of a "real Christian" is "universal."
He does not observe one, or some parts, of the law of God, and neglect the rest; but keeps all his commandments, loves them all, values them above gold or precious stones.

Furthermore, Wesley said that a Christian should "use all means of grace, in a constant and careful attendance on every ordinance of God," and surpass the Pharisees "in doing good."
Give alms of all thou dost possess. Is any hungry? Feed him. Is he athirst? Give him drink. Naked? Cover him with a garment. If thou hast this world's goods, do not limit thy beneficence to a scanty proportion. Be merciful to the uttermost of thy power.

Using different language, King made the same point about the extent to which a Christian's life must change in order to fulfill the law. When King preached on Matthew 9:17 and its observation that new wineskins are needed for new wine, he referred to the story of Nicodemus in John 3.⁴⁴ Specifically, King noted how Jesus had consistently related an inner attitude to an outward action, and that Jesus' response is that one's whole life (both inner and outer aspects), and not just isolated behavior, must be different.

Jesus always went back to the evil intent. You see, Jesus realized that if you think evil long enough, you will do evil. So Jesus didn't major on saying, "Thou shalt not kill." He said, "Thou shalt not get angry." Because he realized that if you get angry enough, you will kill. He didn't major on saying, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." He said, "Thou shalt not look upon a woman with lust in your eye. Because he knew that he who looketh upon a woman with lust in his eye long enough, will commit adultery. . . . Jesus realized that if a man will commit adultery, he will be dishonest. Jesus realized that if a man will be dishonest, he will lie. Jesus realized that if a man will lie, he will steal. Jesus realized that if a man will steal, he will kill. So he didn't say, "Now, Nicodemus, you stop gambling. . . drinking liquor. . . committing adultery. . . stealing". . . . He looked at Nicodemus and said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again. Your whole structure must change. Your whole life must be changed."⁴⁵

For both Wesley and King, then, the Christian life means that one is obedient to God's

⁴³Wesley, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, V,"(1748), *WJW*, Vol. 1, 567-571. All of the quotations in this paragraph are taken from these pages of the sermon.

⁴⁴ King, "New Wine in Old Bottles," unpublished sermon, January 2, 1966, Ebenezer Baptist Church, King Library and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

will, the law of love, in both the inner and outer aspects of his or her existence. King described the results of living out the law of love based on the following theological constructs: “man is a child of God, made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such,” “in Christ there is neither male nor female,” and that “when we truly believe in the sacredness of human personality, we won’t exploit people, we won’t trample over people with the iron feet of oppression, we won’t kill anybody.”⁴⁶ Given King’s statement, the troubling biblical laws concerning women can be rejected as they now read. Because they oppress women, they violate moral law, the law of love. Although King made that comprehensive statement, it expresses themes on the law of love that are consistent with Wesley’s thought. With such consistency, the negative evaluation of these laws that is possible using King’s analysis represents a negative evaluation based on Wesley’s thought. In that case, these laws are problematic according to Christian theological principles, generally, and Methodist theological principles, specifically.

The Need for an Inclusive Interpretive Hermeneutic: Commitment and Challenge

As mentioned earlier, Barbara Jordan’s famous statement provides the themes of commitment and challenge that underlie this study. Her observation was that, as an African-American woman, interpretations, amendments, and court decisions had to be used to include her in the United States Constitution. Her dedication to a document from which she had been intentionally excluded shows her commitment to democratic principles and that commitment challenges those who would continue to exclude her. In the same way, the argument for an inclusive biblical hermeneutic made here demonstrates a commitment to biblical and theological principles but challenges those who would continue to exclude the perspectives and social realities of women. Those who exclude others claim that the authorial intent is the determinative interpretation. Yet, such an approach means that those who were excluded in the past will be excluded also in the present. An inclusive hermeneutic, therefore, enables change to occur by listening to those voices that would be marginalized otherwise. With respect to women

⁴⁶ King, “A Christmas Sermon for Peace,” in The Trumpet of Conscience (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), 72.

specifically, change is necessary so that they can be respected as children of God and non-hierarchical relationships between men and women can be developed. The advantages, though, of an inclusive hermeneutic are not limited to those excluded and extend to those who have the power to exclude. Those excluded offer to those who have excluded them an opportunity to grow into the fullness of the Christian commitment.

As discussed in earlier sections, the moral law, the law of love sets an exacting standard. Because it is difficult to achieve the required inner and outer obedience to God, there is a human tendency to lower the standards of Christian commitment. By lowering the standards, they can then be attained more easily. King realized that this tendency existed. As a result, he was able to move the American public beyond exclusionary laws and customs in the nation and the Church by pointing out the discrepancies between the values proclaimed and those practiced. Basically, King uncovered the tactics used by some Christians to avoid being held accountable to the gospel. For example, King identified one avoidance tactic as that of defining narrowly those whom one must love. In a sermon, “On being a good neighbor,” based on Luke 10:29, King commended the Samaritan for his “universal altruism,” that allowed him to see beyond “the eternal accidents of race, religion, and nationality.”⁴⁷ Referring specifically to the Ten Commandments in that sermon, he mentions that in the early Old Testament days, ‘Thou shalt not kill’ meant ‘Thou shalt not kill a fellow Israelite, but for God’s sake, kill a Philistine.’⁴⁸

Likewise, another avoidance tactic he revealed was to focus on some sins, the more obvious ones, but ignore others that were just as damaging.

Oh how we turn up our noses at those who commit the obvious sins like stealing, excessive drunkenness, the crimes of the criminal court. How often do we fail to see that so many times we do things just as bad. We may not rob a bank. How many times have we robbed our brothers and sisters of their good names by malicious gossip? We may not get drunk, but how many times have we staggered before our children and our friends intoxicated by the wine of a bad temper? We may not murder anybody physically, but how many wives have spiritually murdered their husbands and how many husbands have spiritually murdered their wives through the bullet of mental cruelty?⁴⁹

⁴⁷ King, “On being a good neighbor,” in *Strength To Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁹ King, “Pharisee and Publican,” unpublished sermon, October 9, 1966, Atlanta, Georgia. King Library and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia, p. 3.

Finally, in his sermon, “Rediscovering Lost Values,” King noted how another tactic is to pretend to love when it is really concealed hate.

. . . We have adopted a sort of pragmatic test for right and wrong—whatever works is right. (*Yes*) If it works, it’s all right. Nothing is wrong but that which doesn’t work. If you don’t get caught, it’s right. [*Laughter*] That’s the attitude, isn’t it? It’s all right to disobey the Ten Commandments, but just don’t disobey the eleventh, “Thou shall not get caught.” [*Laughter*] That’s the attitude. That’s the prevailing attitude in our culture. (*Come on*) No matter what you do, just do it with a bit of finesse. (*All right*) . . . It’s even all right to hate, but just dress your hate up in the garments of love and make it appear that you are loving when you are actually hating. Just get by! That’s the thing that’s right according to this new ethic. (*Lord help him*)⁵⁰

These avoidance tactics that King highlights prove that Christians have difficulty fulfilling the requirements of the moral law. Yet Wesley wanted Christians to be exemplary in their fulfillment of the law in completeness, degree, and extent.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Wesley was aware that Christians might encounter such difficulties. In fact, he saw the law’s very purpose to be that of making us aware of the need for the gospel. As expressed in Wesley’s own words: “Now the more I look into this perfect law, the more I feel how far I come short of it; and the more I feel this, the more I feel my need of his blood to atone for all my sin, and of his Spirit to purify my heart, and make me perfect and entire, lacking nothing.”⁵²

In a patriarchal system, men are unable to treat women in ways that are consistent with the requirements of love and justice under the moral law. That failure, though, does not mean that the law should be abandoned or avoided in some way. Usually the avoidance tactic takes the form of women being excluded from the parameters of basic moral and theological guidelines. To the contrary, however, that inability to meet the requirements should draw those who benefit from patriarchal and hierarchical systems to the gospel and its promises so that, as Wesley suggests, their “hearts can be purified.” Confronting the problematic laws concerning women in

⁵⁰ King, “Rediscovering Lost Values,” in *A Knock at Midnight*, 12-13.

⁵¹ Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,” (1748), *WJW*, Vol. 1, 567-571.

⁵² Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” (1750), *WJW*, Vol. 2, 265.

Exodus and Deuteronomy, therefore, allow us to re-claim basic biblical and Methodist principles and include women's realities in interpretive approaches. The resulting inclusive interpretive hermeneutic can move us all closer to the new creation—a time when mutuality in relationships between men and women is affirmed and the relationship between law and gospel is established.⁵³ So, what's law got to do with it? Everything!

⁵³ In his book, Grace & Responsibility, Cobb concluded that “the dialectic of law and gospel, so crucial for Wesley, is broken,” and he advocated a preaching of the law so that excessive consumerism and patriarchy could be critiqued. He noted, too, that King had utilized the law in that way during the Civil Rights movement by showing that “racism was incompatible with the law of love.” Cobb, Grace & Responsibility, 122, 126.

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