

Douglas M. Strong
Seattle Pacific University

Methodist Hermeneutics Regarding Slavery

Though John Wesley was known to be a firm opponent of slavery, his heirs in America were less reliable on this pivotal ethical issue. Would a more consistent moral stance by American Methodism—especially as it became the largest and most influential denomination in the country—have helped to create an alternative culture in the United States, which thereby would have ended slavery without a devastating civil war and subsequent decades of racial segregation and oppression?ⁱ The answer to this counterfactual question may allude us, but it is still possible to ask a simpler historical question: how and to what degree did Wesley support his ethical position biblically and what sort of biblical hermeneutic did American Methodists employ when they were debating about slavery?

Wesley's evangelical colleagues, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, both owned slaves, believing that if slaves were treated kindly and were given the gospel, there was nothing immoral about the institution. But Wesley took an altogether different view. After he observed slavery firsthand in South Carolina, Wesley vigorously spoke out against the practices of slave trading and slaveholding. Slavery was prohibited for all Methodists in the General Rules of the societies (1743). The very last letter of Wesley's life (1791) deplored slavery, and especially American slavery, "the vilest that ever saw the sun."ⁱⁱ

Wesley's most coherent expression of views on the slavery issue was his "Thoughts upon Slavery" (1774),ⁱⁱⁱ a statement that he hoped would influence a broad audience of Englishmen. In order to appeal to the largest segment of the British public, the arguments that he used in this

treatise centered on the natural rights of all human beings, and minimized any specifically biblical arguments.

I would now inquire, whether these things [slave trading and slaveholding] can be defended, on the principles of even heathen honesty; whether they can be reconciled (**setting the Bible out of the question**) with any degree of justice or mercy.

Have you, has any man living, a right to use another as a slave? It cannot be, even **setting Revelation aside**.... Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature. If therefore, you have any regard to justice, (**to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God,**) render unto all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature.^{iv}

Though a “man of one book,” Wesley’s strong opposition to slavery in this essay was not articulated with a specifically biblical defense. On three occasions in the treatise, he “set Revelation aside”—not denying scriptural authority on the issue, but also not choosing to refer explicitly to the Bible. Indeed, the only biblical references in the entire treatise are at the very end of his essay, where Wesley alludes to the restoration of the Babylonian exiles (Psalm 126.4) and utters a prayer on behalf of the slaves: “O thou God of love, thou who art loving to every man, and whose mercy is over all thy works...thou who hast mingled of one blood all the nations upon the earth; have compassion upon these outcasts of men.” This reference is to Acts 17.26, which he uses to claim that the slaves are fully human and thus need salvation like everyone else. And since they need salvation, Wesley reasoned, they therefore require their freedom.

When writing for this general readership, Wesley used a natural law defense for his discourse against slavery rather than an explicit biblical defense. According to the natural law argument, natural rights are endowed to every person, of whatever background. Natural justice stems from natural law, Wesley surmised, and natural justice insists on human liberty. Slavery therefore impinges on the fundamental human rights inherent in every creature.

There is, of course, a strong theological basis for making such a case from natural law. Natural law is ultimately derived from a doctrine of creation, in which human existence reflects the design of the Creator. Through the creation, we can discern God's intention for humanity and the worth of every person. When all is said and done, then, it is not human nature that is decisive, but the nature of God. However, in "Thoughts upon Slavery," Wesley assumed this theological explanation and did not state it outright.

Revolutionary-Era American Methodist Opposition to Slavery

American Methodists conformed to their founder's vigorous opposition to slavery—at least at first. Wesley's appeal to natural justice and natural rights found fertile ground in the idealism of Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary (early National period) America. The earliest class meetings were integrated. The white Methodist preacher Freeborn Garrettson famously manumitted his slaves after his conversion. Many early American Methodists were renowned for their antislavery stance. The 1780 conference acknowledged that "slavery is contrary to the law of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society." The organization of the Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) Church in 1784 occurred nearly simultaneously with the founding of the American republic; and while the government capitulated on the slavery issue, the M.E. Church did not, initially. The 1784 *Discipline*, spurred by newly-arrived Thomas Coke's impassioned antislavery preaching, insisted that no Methodist could buy, sell, or own slaves, and any who did so would be expelled. As Christians and as Americans, the founding Methodist Conference asserted that slavery was "contrary to the golden law of God...and the inalienable Rights of Mankind, as well as every Principle of the Revolution."^v

Freeborn Garrettson spoke for many when he wrote in his book “A Dialogue between Do-Justice and Professing Christian” that slavery was contrary to the gospel and to natural law. A person must “do justice” according to both the biblical worldview and according to the Enlightenment worldview—which, Garrettson was convinced, were in harmony with one another. This compelling combination of republican thought and biblical teaching became persuasive for many Revolutionary-era Methodists. No person could have absolute power over another person, Garrettson argued, because only God could have that power. A “real Christian,” as opposed to a “professing” (or nominal) Christian, would free one’s slaves as the typical response to receiving the gospel.

Other early American Methodists agreed. James O’Kelley wrote an “Essay on Negro Slavery” in 1789, one of the earliest tracts against the peculiar institution written by a clergyman. In 1790 and 1791, Methodist itinerant Ezekiel Cooper wrote a series of newspaper articles denouncing slavery in Maryland and Virginia. Interestingly, like Wesley, Cooper’s reasoning was based on an appeal to natural law, since this principle “evidently allows every man his freedom.” In all of Cooper’s articles, no references are made to scripture or even to God, except for the claim that “any law [justifying slavery] is inhuman and unjust that counteracts the law of God in nature” and the assertion that the Bible is “the very book...that teaches us to let the oppressed go free.”^{vi} Most of the time, though, Cooper used the rhetoric of American liberty to frame his argument rather than the language of biblical discourse—perhaps because he, similar to Wesley, was writing to a broad, secular audience.

Both Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke were firmly committed antislavery advocates. In the 1798 *Discipline*, these two spiritual leaders of early American Methodism wrote a long annotation, which they appended to the disciplinary rule regarding slavery. In this extended

footnote, Asbury and Coke observed—from their experience traveling throughout the Connection—that slavery has a “tendency to fill the mind with pride and tyranny and is frequently productive of almost every act of lust and cruelty which can disgrace the human species.” The explanation that they gave for their antislavery position was based on both natural theology and the biblical witness. “Even the moral philosopher will candidly confess,” Asbury and Coke wrote, “that if there be a God, every perfection he possesses must be opposed to a practice contrary to every moral idea which can influence the human mind.” That is, even a Deist could come to the general conclusion that slavery was evil. But the practice of slavery was also “totally opposite to the whole spirit of the gospel.” In order to demonstrate that point, they listed seven biblical passages as proof texts indicating God’s hatred of slavery.^{vii} As with other Methodists, Asbury and Coke were arguing that slavery was self-evidently wrong both according to the generalized moral law of humanity and according to the specific moral law of the Christian scripture.

American Methodist Compromise and Accommodation

Despite the early commitment of American Methodists to speak out against slave holding, their witness over time was very mixed. As quickly as six months after the 1784 regulation that outlawed slavery among Methodist members, there was so much opposition to the rule that it was not enforced. In fact, after 1785, except for proclamations by African-American Methodists and a few small groups of breakaway abolitionists, American Methodists never again made an unequivocal statement against slavery. The rapid growth of the Methodist Episcopal Church—becoming the largest denomination in the United States by 1830—occurred as church members compromised principles in favor of numerical success, choosing popularity over purity.

Sometimes, this compromising was subtle. For example, in the same 1798 *Discipline* in which Asbury and Coke wrote passionately about the evils of slavery, they also stated that they needed to “give the credit due to multitudes [of slave owners] who do not thus enslave the minds of their servants, but allow them full liberty to attend to the preaching of the gospel.”^{viii} This kind of positive word to slave owners gave the wrong message that slavery—though evil—might be acceptable as long as the owners allowed their slaves to respond to the entreaties of Methodist evangelists.

Other types of Methodist accommodation to slavery were more blatant. Along with noble stories of white preachers and members who sacrificed money and social standing in order to manumit their slaves are other stories of white members and preachers who bought slaves for profit, in order to improve their wellbeing. Frederick Douglass’s autobiographical account of cruelty at the hand of his master, who was a Methodist class leader, is just one infamous example of this kind of hypocrisy.^{ix}

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, Methodist policy regarding slavery evolved to a place in which the Church nominally disapproved of the practice in its official documents, but regulations against slave owning were rarely enforced. As a result, it is estimated that, in the antebellum era, 25,000 Methodist members owned 208,000 slaves and 1200 Methodist ministers owned 1500 slaves.^x

By the 1830s, this compromised attitude within the Church was called into question by the rise of “immediate abolitionism,” a multi-denominational social movement that emphasized that slavery was a sin that must be ended at once—without any monetary compensation to the slave owners. According to Wesleyan theological reasoning, as soon as slavery was identified unequivocally as a sin, then—as Christians who were “going onto perfection”—Methodist

believers were required to cease and desist. By such reasoning, if they continued to practice that sin, then their disobedience placed their salvation in jeopardy. Not surprisingly, Methodist slave owners reacted vehemently against such argumentation, and tried to justify their actions with biblical explanations for the supposed legitimacy of their practice.

Methodist Hermeneutical Positions in the Pre-Civil War Period

More than in the Revolutionary and early National periods, during the antebellum era, Methodists self-consciously used biblical arguments to make their case for their respective points of view regarding slavery. Since all Methodists claimed the Bible as a primary authority for their ethical decision-making, they tried to use scriptural warrants to vindicate themselves. By 1840, three major hermeneutical positions had been staked out by Methodists on the slavery issue.

First, there was the biblical interpretation developed by the slaves themselves. Methodist slaves and free African Americans (along with African-American Christians of other denominations) used the Bible to argue against slavery. Popular verses that they drew upon were Acts 17.26 (“God hath made one blood of all nations”) and 1 Corinthians 12.13 (“By one Spirit are all baptized...whether bond or free”). The slaves also saw in their situation the story of God’s people in the Old Testament fleeing the subjugation of the Egyptians; and thereby they developed what we would call today a hermeneutic of the oppressed.^{xi}

As mentioned above, a second hermeneutical position developed among proslavery advocates during the antebellum era, in reaction to the abolitionists. Slave owners and their apologists invented a religious justification for their actions by which slavery was interpreted as a biblically sanctioned providential blessing for the good of society—and even for the slaves

themselves. They turned to the Bible as authoritative rule book in which—they hoped—they could prove empirically that slavery was ordained and approved by God, and thus could not be considered as a sin.^{xii} Such apologists for slavery determined that Old Testament patriarchs supported slaveholding by divine sanction and that the story of Noah and Ham supported the oppression of Africans by divine decree. John Bell Robinson, a Methodist minister, wrote that if Ham had not dishonored his father, there would have been no slavery or “negroes” in the world. By such an argument, the proslavery advocates found a way to link slavery with white superiority and racial oppression. Meanwhile, they asserted that the New Testament, while not so clear on the issue, at least permitted the continuing practice of slavery.^{xiii} By using a literalistic hermeneutic of selected biblical passages, applied within a society in which slavery was intricately interwoven with the culture, these defenders of slavery could seemingly demonstrate the propriety of their practice.

Another interpretative tool used by proslavery proponents was a concept known as the “spirituality of the church.” First articulated by Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell, this doctrine asserted that “God’s word recognizes the relation of master and servant as a relation that may lawfully subsist”; therefore, the Church may not go “beyond the Bible” by attempting to change what God has established.^{xiv} Proslavery Methodists agreed with their Presbyterian colleagues. In the late 1840s, Bishop Joshua Soule declared that it was “unscriptural” for Methodists to interfere with the divinely established relationship between master and servant or to try to alter “the civil institutions of our country” by working to legislate against slavery. Soule claimed that there was “no warrant from apostolical precept or example” to disturb the legal *status quo* in the nation regarding slavery. When any religious leaders

advocate for change in the “civil institutions of the country, we go beyond the [biblical] charter, and transcend the bounds of our commission.”^{xv}

Some abolitionists came to the conclusion that if such ideas were true, and the Bible in fact justified slavery, then biblical authority must be repudiated. The pre-eminent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison (who came from a Baptist background) rejected evangelical Christianity in all its forms because he was convinced that a literal reading of scripture supported slaveholding. Garrison wrote that “the Bible is a self-evident falsehood” and should be considered “an enemy of the progress of the human race.” A few Methodist abolitionists, such as George Storrs, abandoned Methodism for similar reasons.^{xvi}

Most Methodist abolitionists, however, did not accept such a literalistic interpretation of selected Bible verses. They held a third hermeneutical position related to the slavery controversy: a higher law hermeneutic. Abolitionists tended to use a more comprehensive and moralistic approach to interpreting the scriptures. Whenever a biblical text seemed to have different possible meanings, then the one should be preferred which was most consistent with natural liberty and justice. According to such a perspective, Jesus Christ gave precepts (recorded in the Bible) which, if followed, would ultimately lead to the abolition of slavery. The abolitionists condemned slavery according to the “spirit of the Bible” or the “higher law.” This was a doctrine of “universal humanity” derived from democratic values that were well-suited to the American political context. They especially pointed to the “law of love” (Matthew 22.36-39). How can one love their neighbors as themselves, they asked, and yet hold them as slaves? This was the so-called Golden Rule or Golden Law—a principle given by Christ that would end slavery if fully obeyed.^{xvii}

Methodists who wrote according to this higher law hermeneutic included Orange Scott, LaRoy Sunderland (*The Testimony of God Against Slavery*, 1839), and (especially) Luther Lee (published sermons entitled *The Supremacy of the Divine Law*, 1846, *Slavery: A Sin Against God*, 1853, and *Slavery Examined in Light of the Bible*, 1855). In *The Supremacy of the Divine Law*, Lee wrote—in direct contrast to the “spirituality of the church” idea—that “the law of Christ is to be obeyed whatever human laws may exist to the contrary and whatever consequences may attend obedience.” In *Slavery: A Sin Against God*, Lee made another common abolitionist argument (one that had been made years earlier by Wesley): that the institution of slavery cannot be allowed by God because it prevents the fulfilling of explicit scriptural commands regarding a person’s religious duties to God, one’s marriage relationship, and one’s responsibilities to children. Lee also attacked the so-called biblical defense of slavery by engaging in a text-by-text refutation of the proslavery arguments. Lee’s interpretative approach in this instance was to use texts that appeared to support the antislavery agenda to counter other texts that appeared to support the proslavery agenda.^{xviii}

Concluding Comments

Methodists clearly did not have a single interpretative framework for understanding the Bible on the subject of slavery—especially since African-American Methodists, slave-owning Methodists, and abolitionist Methodists had such different frames of reference from which they looked at the text. But can any generalizations be made, at least, about antislavery Methodists? Was there an overriding hermeneutical principle operating among abolitionists? For example, did the Wesleyan doctrines of universal grace or sanctification become determinative in any way regarding Methodist readings of the Bible on the slavery question?

As we have seen, when John Wesley wrote to a general audience on his opposition to slavery, he took his reasoning from the concept of natural law. It can be argued that such reasoning was derived from Wesley's emphasis on God's prevenient grace extended to all of humanity (universal grace). Though it is probably true that Wesley's moral judgment was made on the basis of such a theological rationale, nevertheless on this topic he did not express his reasoning with a straightforwardly theological argument—and certainly not a biblical argument.

Some American Methodist abolitionists in the antebellum era, such as Luther Lee, were more explicit about their dependence on Methodist theology, particularly concerning the doctrine of sanctification. They declared that slavery was a “sin against God,” and that sanctified Christians could not willingly participate in such a sinful practice.^{xix}

In general, however, there was no discernible difference between the biblical interpretation done by Methodist abolitionists and that of other antislavery Protestants. Antislavery Christians of all stripes tended to use the “higher law” hermeneutic when explicating the scriptures. But that raises another question: to what degree did any Methodists (antislavery or proslavery) allow the biblical text to stand over against themselves as interpreters, so that the interpreters' presuppositions and understandings were changed by their encounter with the text? Put simply, how authoritative really was the Bible on the question of slavery? Were Methodists actually a people “of one book” or did their understanding of the scriptures in regard to slavery merely reflect their respective cultural assumptions and preconceptions?

ⁱ This question is provocatively raised in C. C. Goen's, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War* (Mercer University Press, 1985).

ⁱⁱ See Warren Thomas Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery* (Abingdon, 1986), 117-20.

-
- ⁱⁱⁱ John Wesley, *Works*, XI: 70ff. Wesley's treatise was based loosely on Anthony Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (Philadelphia: Joseph Crukshank, 1771).
- ^{iv} *Works*, XI: 70, 79.
- ^v Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism, 1780-1845: A Chapter in American Morality* (Princeton, 1965); *Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., the Rev. Francis Asbury and others, at a Conference, Begun in Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on Monday, the 27th of December, in the Year 1784* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785).
- ^{vi} Cited in Mark Franklin Leep, "Freedom the Just Due of Every Man': Ezekiel Cooper and Slavery in Early National Virginia," *Virginia United Methodist Heritage* 31:1 (Spring 2005): 12, 13.
- ^{vii} *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798), 138-140. The passages were Nehemiah 5.8-9; Isaiah 63.6; Ezekiel 27.13; Acts 27.24-26; 1 Timothy 1.9-10; Revelation 13.10; and Revelation 15.2.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 138.
- ^{ix} Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written By Himself* (1845).
- ^x J.G. Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religion* (Farmington: Thomson Gale, 1991), 5. This statistic was for the year 1843.
- ^{xi} Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1980).
- ^{xii} The argument for an empirically verifiable biblical proof text demonstrates the dependence of American Christians on commonsense moral philosophy. They believed that a reasoned reading of the literal text, governed by common sense, should lead Christians to a common understanding. See Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ^{xiii} Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 181. See also John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (University of Kentucky Press, 2002).
- ^{xiv} Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (John Knox Press, 1961), 21-25. Despite Thompson's subtitle, the "spirituality of the church" concept was not unique among Presbyterians; Slave owning Methodists and other proslavery co-religionists in the U.S. also affirmed this teaching.
- ^{xv} Charles F. Deems, ed., *The Southern Methodist Pulpit, Vol. I—1848-9* (Richmond Christian Advocate, 1849), 218-20.
- ^{xvi} *Union Herald* 6 (23 Sept. 1841): 82; *ibid.* (30 Dec. 1841): 141; Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 230.
- ^{xvii} Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Herald Press, 1983), 44, 52.
- ^{xviii} Donald W. Dayton, ed., *Five Sermons and a Tract by Luther Lee* (Chicago: Holrad House, 1976).
- ^{xix} Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse University Press, 1999), 100-01.