

## JOHN WESLEY'S UNDERSTANDING OF 'SPIRITUAL POVERTY'

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If we are truly and fairly to comprehend Wesley's understanding of "Good News to the Poor" we must comprehend Wesley's understanding of "spiritual poverty." Many people today might blush at using such a phrase, especially with theologians of liberation justly deriding any attempt to completely "spiritualize" realities that have concrete and physical components. But this distrust of "spirituality" has to be tempered if we are to grasp Wesley's views of both economic and religious reality.

In the call to papers for this gathering at Oxford, there is no mention of "spiritual poverty" in either the general introduction or in the section describing the Wesley Studies Working Group. To understand how odd and noteworthy this lapse is, we need to look at the scripture that is posted at the very top of this same call for papers, the scripture which apparently informs and authorizes our task. The passage is Luke 4:18-19 which reads

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (NRSV)

Yet in John Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* he comments on verse 18 in this way: "*To preach the Gospel to the poor--Literally and spiritually.*"<sup>1</sup>

To underscore his interpretation of this passage as not being exclusively or even primarily about literal poverty, blindness and oppression, Wesley goes on to comment:

*To proclaim deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised--Here is a beautiful gradation, in comparing the spiritual state of men to the miserable state of those captives who were not only cast into prison, but, like Zedekiah, had their eyes put out, and were laden and bruised with chains of iron.*<sup>2</sup>

If the understanding of "the poor" or "poverty" found in the Call for Papers is representative of contemporary thinking, then most people today do not naturally understand those concepts the way that John Wesley did. This interpretive mindset is a major problem for our working group to address, for we are charged with understanding Wesley's views of "the poor" and "poverty." Accordingly, we must expand our own 1990s "common sense" understanding of "the poor" and "poverty" in order to see how Wesley used the terms.

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<sup>1</sup>(London: Epworth Press, 1976) p. 216.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

### "The Poor in Spirit"

In his thirteen part series of sermons "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount," Wesley makes some very basic, clear and bold statements about the essence of Christianity. In the first of this series he gives the overall organizing scheme of the series. He states that 3 chapters of Matthew (5,6,7) each contain a principal branch of the Sermon on the Mount. In the first part, contained in the fifth chapter, Wesley says "the sum of all true religion is laid down in eight particulars, which are explained and guarded against the false glosses of man in the following parts of the fifth chapter."<sup>3</sup> The "eight particulars" are, of course, the "beatitudes" and the first of these is "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

In commenting on this first beatitude, Wesley says that "...real Christianity always begins in poverty of spirit..." [475] and, again, "The foundation of all is 'poverty of spirit.'" [475] So what does this phrase mean? Wesley says that Jesus was not here referring to

they that are poor as to *outward circumstances* (it being not impossible that some of these may be as far from happiness as a monarch upon his throne) but 'the poor in spirit'; they who, whatever their outward circumstances are, have that disposition of heart which is the first step to all real, substantial happiness, either in this world or that which is to come. [475-476]

After this Wesley goes on to show that some misunderstand this phrase to mean "those who love poverty; those who are free from covetousness, from the love of money; who fear rather than desire riches." [476] Wesley says that perhaps some have taken this perverted understanding by not truly interpreting 1 Tim 6:10 ("the love of money is the root of all evil"). Drawing on both reason and experience, Wesley shows that the passage from 1 Timothy is making an important, but less basic, point about the life of the believer. "Poverty of spirit" is perverted if it is reduced to the economic sphere. Love of money, Wesley says, is only "one particular vice" [475], freedom from "desire of riches" is "only a branch of purity of heart." [476]

Accordingly, we ask with Wesley "Who then are the 'poor in spirit'? Without question, the humble; they who know themselves, who are convinced of sin; those to whom God hath given that first repentance which is previous to faith in Christ." [477] One who is truly poor in the spirit "can no longer say, 'I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing;' as now knowing that he is 'wretched, and poor, and miserable, and blind, and

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<sup>3</sup>*The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984) Volume I, *Sermons I*, p. 474. All future references will be to this edition of Wesley's works.

naked'. He is convinced that he is spiritually poor indeed; having no spiritual good abiding in him." [477] How is the sinner aware of his or her state? The sinner

sees more and more of the evil tempers which spring from that evil root: the pride and haughtiness of spirit, the constant bias to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; the vanity...the hatred or envy, the jealousy or revenge, the anger, malice, or bitterness; the inbred enmity both against God and man which appears in ten thousand shapes; the love of the world, self-will, the foolish and hurtful desires which cleave to his inmost soul....His guilt is now also before his face... [477-478]

Poverty of spirit, then, "as it implies the first step we take in running the race which is set before us, is a just sense of our inward and outward sins, and of our guilt and helplessness." [479] If it is true that "Happy are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" then the next obvious question is : what is the "kingdom of heaven"? Wesley tells us

this is that kingdom of heaven or of God which is 'within' us, even 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost'. And what is righteousness but the life of God in the soul, the mind which was in Christ Jesus, the image of God stamped upon the heart, now renewed after the likeness of him that created it? What is it but the love of God because he first loved us, and the love of all mankind for his sake? And what is this peace, the peace of God, but that calm serenity of soul, that sweet repose in the blood of Jesus...This inward kingdom implies also 'joy in the Holy Ghost', who seals upon our hearts 'the redemption which is in Jesus', the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us for 'the remission of the sins that are past'...[481]

In this striking sermon, then, which stands first in a thirteen part series and is included in part of the material that was used to give basic theological guidance to the Methodist Societies (the "Standard Sermons"), Wesley defines both what we are saved *from* (pride, hatred, revenge anger, malice, etc.) and what we are saved *to* (love, joy, peace, etc.) in terms of the life of the heart, its "tempers" and "affections." That this was a consistent emphasis of his can be seen in many places. For instance, at the end of his series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley asks the reader to examine on what foundation he or she builds (with reference to Matthew 7:21-27).

Wesley asks the reader: Do you expect to enter the kingdom of heaven by orthodoxy (having right opinions)? Or perhaps based on the fact that you do no harm (innocence)? Or perhaps because you are zealous of good works? He scoffs at all of this saying

Learn to hang naked upon the cross of Christ, counting all thou hast done but dung and dross. Apply to him just in the spirit of the dying thief, of the harlot with her seven devils; else thou art still on the sand, and after saving others thou wilt lose thy own soul. ["Sermon on the Mount XIII," p. 695]

And how are we to accomplish this? "Now, therefore, build thou upon a rock. By the grace of God, know thyself." [696] Once again, we see that the self-knowledge of repentance which is synonymous with "poverty of spirit" is the foundation of the Christian life. To reinforce his central focus of the life of the spirit within us, he summarizes the rest of the beatitudes and concludes by saying

"In a word: let thy religion be a religion of the heart." [698]

Let us now consider how this "religion of the heart," with its "foundation" of "poverty of spirit," relates to financial poverty in our quest to get the most comprehensive picture of what "Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition" means.

### Spiritual Poverty and Financial Poverty

As we have seen above, love of money is clearly one of the temptations to Wesley's religion of the heart, but it is only one of many. Anger, hatred, bitterness and envy are just as destructive as greed to the life of Christianity. On the other hand, financial poverty has distinctive characteristics which affect the spiritual life, and Wesley notes several of them. But for Wesley, financial poverty is not the ultimate concern of Christianity nor is it finally the key to understanding the Gospel.

Spiritual poverty can be thwarted by either wealth or financial poverty. Financial poverty does not guarantee true spiritual poverty, nor does it of itself lead to damnation. Financial poverty is not a matter of indifference to Wesley, but, in the end, it pales in significance to the larger issue of spiritual poverty.

In sermon number 1, Wesley says that the poor "have a peculiar right to have the gospel preached unto them." ["Salvation by Faith" I, 128] While the editor of the *Sermons*, Albert Outler, has inserted a footnote referring to Matt. 11:5 and Luke 7:22, Wesley himself does not choose to expand on this "peculiar right."<sup>4</sup> He does not try to make a metaphysical

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<sup>4</sup>It is useful for our enquiries to see Wesley's comments on the two scriptures to which Outler points the reader. On Matt. 11:5 *The poor have the gospel preached to them* Wesley comments "The greatest mercy of all." [Notes p.58] Similarly, on Luke 7:22 *To the poor the gospel is preached* Wesley comments "Which is the greatest mercy, and the greatest miracle of all. " [Notes, p. 227]

scheme or an epistemological system with "the poor" at the center, but he merely reports the dictates of his Lord.

More importantly, in this same passage Wesley goes on to relativize this claim by saying that not only do the poor need the gospel preached to them, but so do the unlearned, the young, the sinners, the rich, the learned, the reputable, and the moral. "For thus the tenor of our commission runs: 'Go and preach the gospel to every creature.'" {Mark 16:15} [I, 128] Here as elsewhere, in the good company of the Protestant reformers, Wesley uses one scripture passage to interpret another. The general commission of Mark 16 is clearly Wesley's interpretive orientation and not a single minded concern for the poor as some would like to interpret Wesley.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, the whole issue of money and how it is used is important for Wesley, but it is important because of its effects on the "heart religion" which is always his central proclamation. His sermon "On Riches" is spent warning how riches interfere with various aspects of heart religion, especially those which are synonyms for, or aspects of, spiritual poverty (e.g., meekness, humility, yieldedness) [III, 521ff] The second half of the sermon is spent showing that riches are temptations to "unholy tempers" and here Wesley points out that the rich are more assaulted by atheism, idolatry, pride, self-will, anger, fretfulness and peevishness than the poor. [523-526]

If we need to be reminded of it, Wesley tells us that the person in dirt and rags is "an immortal spirit" ["On Pleasing All Men," III p. 425], but we also need to see that this condition is no necessary indicator of one's spiritual state. In his sermon on "Spiritual Idolatry" Wesley says that the "desire of the flesh" as an idol "is not confined to the rich and great...thousands in low as well as in high life sacrifice to this idol; seeking their happiness (though in a more humble manner) in gratifying their outward senses." [III, 106] Similarly, in "The Trouble and Rest of Good Men" Wesley asks where "faith working by love" has gone.

Where then art thou now? Among the wealthy? No. The 'deceitfulness of riches' there 'chokes the word, and it becometh unfruitful'. Among the poor? No. 'The cares of the world' are there, 'so that it bringeth forth no fruit to perfection.' However, there is nothing to prevent its growth among those who have neither poverty nor riches.--Yes, the desire of other things. And experience shows, by a thousand melancholy examples, that the allowed desire

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<sup>5</sup>See my critique of Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. below.

of anything, great or small, otherwise than as a means to the one thing needful, will by degrees banish the care of that out of the soul, and unfit it for every good word or work. [III, 536-7]

This is consistent with what Wesley says in his sermon "Dives and Lazarus" that "it is no more sinful to be rich than to be poor. But it is dangerous beyond expression." [IV, 11] Similarly, Wesley tells the rich that they are peculiarly called of God to the blessed work of visiting the sick, but can the poor

give them nothing? Nay, in administering to them the grace of God you give them more than all this world is worth! Go on! Go on! Thou poor disciple of a poor master! Do as he did in the days of his flesh! Whenever thou hast an opportunity, go about doing good, and healing all that are oppressed of the devil...Above all, give them your prayers. Pray with them; pray for them! And who knows but you may save their souls alive?" ["On Visiting the Sick," III, 394]

Here we should recall the passage quoted at the opening of the paper where Wesley emphasizes that in the first beatitude Jesus did not say

they that are poor as to *outward circumstances* (it being not impossible that some of these may be as far from happiness as a monarch upon his throne) but 'the poor in spirit'; they who, whatever their outward circumstances are, have that disposition of heart which is the first step to all real, substantial happiness, either in this world or that which is to come. ["Sermon on the Mount, I," I, 475-6, emphasis his]

The theological priority that spiritual poverty has over financial poverty for Wesley is spelled out in several places. For instance, in his "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity" he blasts his fellow Methodists for gaining and saving all they can without giving all they can (and thereby becoming "twofold more the children of hell than ever they were before)" [IV, 91], and blames this on their ignoring the basic Christian call to self-denial. Because they are rich, they can indulge more of their passions and hence have forgotten the basic call to spiritual poverty, the call to the humility which seeks to please only God. [cf. 93-96] This is also seen in "On Visiting the Sick" where the lack of true humility is seen as the root reason why many do not perform this Christian calling. [III, 387-89]

In "Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations" financial poverty is again addressed in the context of the spiritual life when Wesley notes that poverty often occasions sorrow and heaviness which can tempt us out of spiritual poverty and therefore out of the sanctified life [II, 227-8]. This would entail, of course, working to alleviate poverty, and Wesley urges this in many places. But even when we engage in doing these "works of mercy," the spiritual

intention in the actions are crucial for Wesley.

For instance, in "On Repentance in Believers" Wesley asks "And while they are endeavoring to do good to their neighbor, do they not feel wrong tempers of various kinds? Hence their good actions, so called, are far from being strictly such, being polluted with such a mixture of evil! Such are the works of *mercy*! And is it not the same mixture in their works of *piety*." [I, 343] In "Sermon on the Mount, VI" he explains the outline of chapter 6 of Matthew by saying

In the preceding chapter our Lord has described inward religion in its various branches. He has laid before us those dispositions of soul which constitute real Christianity: the inward tempers contained in that holiness 'without which no man shall see the Lord'--the affections which, when flowing from their proper fountain, from a living faith in God through Christ Jesus, are intrinsically and essentially good, and acceptable to God. He proceeds to show in this chapter how all our actions likewise, even those that are indifferent in their own nature, may be made holy and good and acceptable to God, by a pure and holy intention. Whatever is done without this, he largely declares, is of no value before God. Whereas whatever outward works are thus consecrated to God, they are, in his sight, of great price. [I, 573]

Again in "On Charity," Wesley says 'although I give all my goods to feed the poor'...yet if I am proud, passionate, or discontented; if I give way to any of these tempers; whatever good I may do to others, I do none to my own soul. O how pitiable a case is this!" [III, 304] Indeed, earlier in this same sermon Wesley points out that "thousands have been misled" by the translating of "agape" as "charity" instead of "the plain English word 'love'" because "charity" leads them to imagine that "the charity treated in this chapter refers chiefly, if not wholly, to outward actions, and to mean little more than almsgiving....But had the old and proper word 'love' been retained, there would have been no room for misinterpretation." [III, 294] Later he puts this in the plainest possible way: "That all those who are zealous of good works would put them in their proper place! Would not imagine they can supply the want of holy tempers, but take care that they may spring from them!" [III, 305]

In his 1745 letter to "John Smith" Wesley made a similar point when he tried to ensure that "faith working by love" did not degenerate into a works righteousness:

I would rather say that faith is 'productive of all Christian *holiness*' than 'of all Christian *practice*'; because men are so exceeding apt to rest in 'practice', so called, I mean in *outside religion*; whereas *true religion* is eminently seated in the heart, renewed in the image of him that created us. [emphasis his] [letter of 12/30/1745, XXVI, 179]

In "On Zeal" he exhorts his readers to be more zealous for holy tempers than even for works of mercy or works of piety, for it is the holy tempers which make the works possible. [III, 313ff.] In a sermon written in the last year of his life, ("On the Wedding Garment") Wesley describes holiness by reminding us that the only thing that avails is 'faith working through love.' Such a text might occasion a moralistic emphasis on action, but Wesley takes this as an occasion to emphasize the centrality of the heart in Christianity, for the first 'work' that this faith is to engage in is to produce "... love to God and all mankind; and by this love every holy and heavenly temper. In particular, lowliness, meekness, gentleness, temperance, and long-suffering." [IV, 146] Here even Christian "works" are most basically described as that which produces "lowliness," or spiritual poverty.

### A Late Twentieth Century Blindness

Recently a new edition of the papers of Marcel Proust was published. Included in this new edition were all of the references to his sex life that the edition published earlier in the century had left out. It was noted by a recent reviewer, however, that while the new edition had included all of the sex, it left out a lot of Proust's political musings. This should remind us that every era, in both literary criticism and theology, has its own peculiar trends, fascinations and fixations which characterize its interpretive mindset.

In contemporary theological circles, the interpretive mindset, the intellectual filters, are often characterized by economic concerns. Because of this, there are some who seem to have a peculiar late twentieth century bias against - almost a blindness towards - anything that smacks of traditional spirituality or "heart religion" as exemplified in the theology of John Wesley. In a misguided effort to make Wesley appear more "relevant" they would pervert his fundamental emphasis on heart religion. Addressing such misinterpretations embarks us on what Wesley called the "sad business of controversy." But when misunderstandings receive a wide reading, as Wesley found, there is no choice but to correct them. In two recent publications, Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. has exemplified this blindness toward Wesley's heart religion.

In a recent article in *Quarterly Review*<sup>6</sup>, Jennings attacked the notion that Aldersgate was Wesley's "conversion" (which is clearly debatable), but he also ridiculed "conversionism" and "Aldersgatism" as movements which take their inspiration from a wrong reading of what happened at Aldersgate street in 1738. Among other things, Jennings there asserts that "neither before nor after [Aldersgate] did Wesley find it possible to 'love' the God he so vigorously served." [19] His target is "pious individualism" which "thinks of interior consciousness instead of doing the will 'of the Father.'" [21]

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<sup>6</sup>"John Wesley *Against* Aldersgate" (Volume 8, Number 3, Fall 1988), 3-22.

Throughout this article, Jennings betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of Wesley's view of the religious affections or tempers and, more generally, the role that experience played in Wesley's theology. I have addressed these issues, and tried to show Wesley's true positions on these matters, elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Suffice it to say that Jennings had identified *having* an emotion with *feeling* an emotion, something of which the mature Wesley was not guilty.<sup>8</sup>

Jennings' distortion of the true character of Wesley's heart religion is also seen in his book *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*<sup>9</sup>. In this work, Jennings does the Methodist community an important service by reminding us of Wesley's comprehensive and integrated view of the Christian life, especially how the economic realm is part and parcel of the arena of our witness. In showing how Wesley de-mystified wealth, protested against injustice and urged a radical stewardship, Jennings has reminded us of aspects of the gospel that are too-often neglected. But from his "Preface" to the very last words in the book, Jennings makes clear that his over-riding commitment is to "liberation theology." Without making any judgments about this whole school of thought, it is clearly fair to say that Jennings's commitment to liberation theology has colored his interpretation of Wesley with unfortunate results.

While Jennings acknowledges a place for personal transformation in Wesley's theology, he quickly shifts his focus to the implications of this for the economic realm. So committed is he to the liberationist agenda that he almost never speaks of the heart and even speaks of "real" transformation as identical with "social" transformation. [196] Furthermore, Jennings ignores the fact that Wesley held that dealing with greed is but "one branch of holiness," and he says that for Wesley "economic considerations are the principal threat to the Christian life." [48] Similarly, he says that Wesley takes "the plight of the poor as the criterion of all action..." [25] and "concrete service to the poor becomes the test of Christian action." [48, cf. 66, 170 also] Jennings has Wesley "see" that "worldliness was precisely where the Bible located it, in the sphere of unregenerate economics." [154] Holiness "must, then, be the practice of an evangelical economics." [154]

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<sup>7</sup>*John Wesley on Religious Affections* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1989); and "Orthokardia: The Practical Theology of John Wesley's Heart Religion" (*Quarterly Review* Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 1990, 49-66).

<sup>8</sup>See *John Wesley on Religious Affections*, pp. 60-64; 118-120; 162-164.

<sup>9</sup>(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990)

Jennings has been blinded by his commitments to liberation theology so that he can no longer see or acknowledge what Wesley ceaselessly proclaimed: that true religion is a matter of the heart. Granted, this book is meant to be only a study in Wesley's *economics*, but the very one-issue nature of his focus has led him to completely mischaracterize the entire tenor of Wesley's theology in an attempt to portray the agenda of liberation theology as Wesley's own agenda. To think that the economic realm is the only realm where important impoverishment takes place, to ignore Wesley's larger diagnosis of the world's problems as a lack of true *spiritual* poverty, is just as indefensible on Wesley's terms as allowing self-indulgent luxury to go uncriticized.

John Wesley may or may not be finally enlisted in support of a theology of liberation, but if he is, the rationale will have to take a different approach from that which Jennings has taken.

### Conclusion

If we return to the original scripture passage which is the motto for our gathering and look once again at Wesley's comment on it, we will see that Wesley saw two distinct but related problems concerning "poverty." First, we humans have a tendency to imagine that we are self-sufficient gods, which shows the need for "spiritual poverty." Secondly, the needs of the financially poor are not being met, which calls for concrete action in the real world. Wesley saw both of these realities clearly, and linked the one with the other, seeing that the former had logical and theological priority over the latter.

"Good news to the poor in the Wesleyan tradition" cannot be reduced to a question of money, capital or charitable works. The good news that Wesley proclaimed was that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that through this act of forgiveness God's grace creates in us a new heart. This heart is the home of true religion, not in a mere moralistic program of doing and giving. Wesley knew that people are always itching for an easy religion, but he was not content to let people rest content with an "outward religion" and continued to urge all to go on to the true religion, the religion of the heart, the true holiness that begins in spiritual poverty. How we relate to the financially poor is important but finally is subordinate to the question of whether or not we ourselves are truly "poor in spirit."

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