

God's Sovereignty and Governance Demand Societal and Ecclesiastical Change: John Wesley and the Methodist Student Movement

This Conference seemed committed to a critical evaluation of the effect of the world on the Church, the significance of the Church in the world, and the prospects for moving the Church into the world with a revolutionary impact commensurate with the needs of an epoch of revolutionary change.¹

These words close the Report of Eighth Quadrennial Conference of the Methodist Student Movement in 1964. They obviously reflect the rhetoric of the mid-sixties student generation and their talk of revolution sounds dated to us. Nevertheless, while stated in terms of the "church," they express a conviction which characterized the MSM starting with its very first conference in 1937--if the gospel revealed in Jesus is believed *and* expressed in daily life it will revolutionize the university and its world. When one examines the theological justifications offered for this vision they resonate with those used by John Wesley in his explanations for the social and ecclesiastical changes he found useful in his ministry. Both the MSM and Wesley ground their call for change in concepts of God's sovereign power and governing love. This paper seeks to compare Wesley's insights into God's sovereignty and governance and how they should be appropriated in daily living with those used by a distinctive student (and faculty) company of his heirs.

The Methodist Student Movement in Its Historical Setting

American Methodism led the nation in establishing local colleges in the post Civil War period yet it also found many of its students studying at state and independent colleges and universities. These institutions had often been established to provide not only a general liberal arts education but to respond to the growing demand for scientific and technological education. To meet the spiritual needs of these new educational communities, churches located close to college campuses found themselves taking on specialized student ministries. Methodist campus ministry is usually dated from the establishment in 1913 of the first Wesley Foundation at the University of Illinois. By the 1920's similar ministries were being organized across the nation in all three major branches of Methodism (The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South and The Methodist Protestant Church). The 1930's found staff personnel serving the needs of this expanding ministry through Departments of Student Work within the Boards of Education.

Cooperatively these Student Work Departments arranged in 1937 at St. Louis the "First National Quadrennial Methodist Student Conference." That conference officially organized a "Methodist Student Movement" joining students from all three branches of the church into one

¹The Conference Report of the Eighth Quadrennial Conference of the Methodist Student Movement (Records of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Methodist Archives), 9.

united body and anticipating by some two years the union of the three Methodist churches into The Methodist Church. Under the banners of this MSM an aggressive, dynamic program of leadership training, state and national student conferences, student missions, social service projects, and a variety of publications allowed Methodist campus ministry to establish itself as a significant pattern of evangelical ministry throughout the next three decades. Always sympathetic to the European and American ecumenical movements which had experienced energetic new life in the post World War II period MSM leaders in the turbulent 1960's chose to dissolve the Movement as they joined with other student Christian groups to create the University Christian Movement (1966).

Unfortunately, the UCM only survived for three years but by that time the MSM's national, regional and state infrastructures had been dissolved. Campus ministries of the church continued but largely in local forms until the reorganization of the MSM in 1996. For purposes of this paper we will limit our discussion the MSM's ministry to its first incarnation at mid-century (1937-66).

Born with the dark clouds of war gathering on the horizon, holding its second national conference less than thirty days after Pearl Harbor, and living with the nuclear threat of the Cold war stretching from Korea to Vietnam the MSM never escaped the specter of war as a backdrop for its ministries. The angst of that reality is clearly evident in its numerous publications and conferences.²

At the same time, the MSM's life spanned one of America's most dynamic periods of change where new intellectual, economic, and social opportunities became available wherever one turned. America's emergence in the post WWII period as a key international, economic and political power coupled with an extraordinary rise in the purchasing power of ordinary Americans meant new patterns of living (and materialism) were easily accessible to most people in the society. Phenomenal expansion in the scientific and technological fields joined to a new availability of higher education among the masses turned traditional universities into vast multiversities and intensified the major philosophical and practical changes in higher education that had begun in the previous century.³ In the boom nature of this period Methodism like other Christian churches experienced its greatest expansion not only in membership but in number of churches, programs, new and renewed buildings, and the addition of trained staff at conference, jurisdictional, and national levels. As a part of that growth the MSM also enjoyed the phenomenal benefits of the educational and religious expansion by creating many new units while adding staff and buildings in traditionally strong campus ministries.

While the period enjoyed vast opportunities set within real threats it also typified periods of social change; periods which almost inevitably produce new tensions and aggravate old social

²Everett Tilson, *The Conscience of Culture* (Nashville, The Board of Education of The Methodist Church, 1953), 30-1; *motive*, 11:4 (January, 1951), 2-3; 10-12; 24:8 (May, 1966), 4-5. The themes of quadrennial conferences also reflect issues of the period; e.g. "The Christian Use of Power in the Secular World"-- the theme of the 1949-50 conference.

³Robert Hamill, *Gods of the Campus* (Nashville, The Abingdon Press, 1949), 11-35

problems. The new wealth of the nation was seldom equitably distributed; historic racial tensions magnified themselves when the new opportunities of the period were not extended to all; nuclear war raised unanticipated questions of the human capacity for good and evil; and a fresh confidence in the ability of science and technology to solve humanity's problems all joined together to threaten the viability of traditional religious dependence on spiritual powers beyond the physical and material universe. It is within this complicated, dynamic context, with its real similarities to the vast social, economic and political changes of Wesley's eighteenth century setting, that the MSM sought to make the gospel of Jesus Christ relevant to America's campuses.

In the following material I have chosen a few characteristic elements of the Movement's thought and life which will hopefully help us understand how their conceptions of God and of themselves as God's servants provided a lively critique of the university, the church and society. Grounded in the confidence that God's sovereignty and governance must be relevant to their daily lives they reembody significant Wesleyan concepts and patterns.

A word of explanation before we proceed. Speaking of a movement which counted among its members thousands of students, campus ministers, departmental staff, and others who participated in conferences, publications and activities through several decades leads one into difficulties. I have found it necessary to repeatedly refer to the MSM as "it" or "they" when in fact I am referring to representative persons, events, and publications. This could be seen as ignoring the diversity of thought and action actually present in the group. Certainly such diversity was always present as a casual perusal of the "letter to the editor" section of *motive*, the magazine of the movement, will clearly show⁴. Nevertheless, in my opinion, there was enough consistency displayed in thought and program to refer to "its general characteristics" without negating or ignoring real differences among individual members in their understanding and handling of certain issues. As with any movement that spans decades, we will also find significant modifications in theology, and patterns of involvement with the church and society, occurring over the life of the MSM. Recognizing the ambiguities such change creates in "general characteristics" is an important part of the story.

Selection of which characteristics of the MSM and Wesley to discuss proved difficult and certainly subjective, but I have allowed the MSM's first list of "objectives" to guide us. The "First National Methodist Student Leadership Training Conference" of the MSM meeting at Berea College, Kentucky, (June, 1939) formulated the MSM's guiding objectives. They allow us to see how the fledgling movement understood itself and they outline several of its defining characteristics. We will only be able to discuss its three central affirmations.

⁴*motive* began publication in February, 1941 and ceased Methodist sponsorship with the last issue of 1971. Always a unique and innovative entry among Church publications its odyssey through the period chronicles the MSM's transformations and provides a treasure chest of resources for one seeking to understand the movement.

The Objectives of the Methodist Student Movement

Adopted unanimously by the Conference

The Methodist Student Movement is the Methodist Church at work in the college community seeking, through organized fellowships in Methodist Colleges and through Wesley Foundations in state and independent colleges, to provide for the spiritual, moral, and social needs of students. Among its objectives are the following:

1. To lead students into becoming followers of Jesus Christ and into a vital personal relationship with God. . . .
2. To develop a supporting group in which individuals will mutually strengthen one another in Christian living
4. To help create a new order (the kingdom of God) embodying Christian ideals and conserving the highest human values:
 - a. By practicing racial understanding, fellowship and cooperation. . . .⁵

Concepts of God as an Interactive Being

Our Institute's theme statement reminds us of John Wesley's assumption that God's sovereign will always be joined to his governing love. In "Thoughts on God's Sovereignty" Wesley comments:

Wherever, therefore, God acts as a Governor, as a rewarder, or punisher, he no longer acts as a mere Sovereign, by his own sole will and pleasure; but as an impartial Judge, guided in all things by invariable justice.

Yet it is true, that in some cases, mercy rejoices over justice; although severity never does. God may reward more, but he will never punish more, than strict justice requires.⁶

Similarly in "Predestination Calmly Considered": "But in disposing the eternal states of men . . . , it is clear that not sovereignty alone, but justice, mercy and truth hold the reigns."⁷ Formulated as a

⁵Report of the First National Methodist Student Leadership Training Conference, Berea College, June, 1939, ed. Nenien C. McPherson, Jr. (Nashville: General Board of Education, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1939. I am indebted to the Reverend Tom Pendell and his wife Carol Embree Pendell, participants in that conference, for sharing these and other early MSM publications.

⁶*The Works of John Wesley*, ed., Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958-59), 10:362-63. Hereafter referred to as Jackson, *Works*.

⁷*John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 453.

part of Wesley's arguments with the Calvinists over issues relating to the divine and human roles in salvation, these statements express Wesley's conviction that the very nature of God's being requires interaction between power, justice, mercy (which we might translate as love), and truth. One is never present without the balance of the others.

In like manner, Wesley's doctrine of grace urges humans to recognize their *dependence* on God's sovereign power in creation, God's redemptive grace offered in Jesus and the attracting and sustaining work of the Holy Spirit . In all of these God acts on humanity's behalf. Wesley further asserts that humans must be able to *respond* (interact) to these gracious actions of God; "so every individual may, after all that God has done, either improve his grace [by cooperating with it] or make it of none effect."⁸ Wesley's question to those who insisted on irresistible grace consistently was "If humans can not respond to God's grace but only receive it how can they be responsible for their actions?" For Wesley, human responsibility in daily life was derived from a continual interaction between humans and God. Consequently, all true Christians were expected to have a personal relationship with God that empowered their own "godly" love in daily personal and social living.⁹ His critique of ineffectual Christianity whether expressed in personal life, church or society rested on these assumptions and his innovative patterns of ministry grew out of them.¹⁰

The first objective of the MSM quoted above suggests that the movement presumed an interactive relationship between God and humans that was similar to Wesley's concepts. All action of the movement was to emerge out of each Christian's "vital personal relationship" (or interaction) with God. Personal relationship included responsibility beyond oneself consequently each Christian student was responsible before God for him or herself *and* for their campus and social setting. The principle pattern for personal and communal daily living was the example of Jesus. At the Berea Conference emphasis on an active participatory Christian life was expressed by W. J. Faulkner, Dean of the Chapel at Fisk University:

The Religion of Christ is a source of creative self-expression on the highest possible level, not merely a set of ancient creeds and affirmations to which one is called to give lip-service. . . .It is daily re-commitment to do God's will. . . .But it

⁸Jackson, *Works*, X, 363.

⁹ For extended discussion of Wesley's understanding of God's nature and human responsibility as response to God's sovereignty see Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), Ch. 2.

¹⁰Wesley in answer to questioning about his faithfully fulfilling the canons of the church appeals to higher (God's) authority as his touchstone: "But the 'testifying the gospel of the grace of God' is not a point of an indifferent nature. 'The ministry which we have received from the Lord Jesus' we are at all hazards to fulfil [Cf. Acts 20:24.] It is the burden of the Lord' [Jeremiah 23:33] which is laid upon us here: and we are 'to obey God rather than man'. [Cf. Acts 5:29]. . . . We did not, could not promise to obey 'such' injunctions as we know 'are contrary to the word of God'." Jackson, *Works*, VIII, 34-5.

is more concerned with ideal relations, with moral values, with what man might become -- with the possibilities of man becoming a saint -- of the Kingdoms of this world becoming the Kingdom of God.¹¹

This wording reflects the “liberal social gospel” theology embraced by most Methodists in the late 1930's. Wesley, loyal son of the Anglican church, generally accepted without detailed comment traditional Christian beliefs, explicating doctrine only when he found his beliefs expanding or being questioned. Similarly, while Faulkner's statement notes a suspicion of “creed and affirmations” that did not lead to action, it still assumes that everyone understood without explanation “faith”, “the Christian point of view”, and what it meant to be “Christ like”. Consequently, the emphasis fell not on doctrine but on human ability to change and modify the world and in so doing to help establish God's kingdom on earth. God's help in this task was presumed but not elaborated nor particularly emphasized. Paul Engle, speaking at the Second Quadrennial Conference (1942), could rather poetically express the idea, “Here between your hands the limp earth lies--so it will till you give your living up to be a life for it.”¹²

The consummate optimism present in these liberal visions of the world and its naivete concerning the nature of humanity were shattered by WWII. In the midst of the war other theological perspectives began to appear in *motive*. The magazine published in 1943 an article by H. Richard Niebuhr entitled “The Nature and Existence of God.” The article explored the radical nature of faith (trust) in the God beyond all irrelevant and false gods -- the one true God revealed in Jesus. Here, rather than understanding Jesus to be the example by which humans might mold their lives, Jesus is the active transformer of life. “So faith in God [which is a gift from God] involves us in a permanent revolution of the mind and of the heart, a continuous life which opens out infinitely into ever new possibilities.”¹³ Clearly in this article attention has shifted from what humans “should” do to help inaugurate the Kingdom of God to stress on God's initiative and gift which transforms humans.

By 1949 one of the study books commissioned by the Department of Student work for the Fourth Quadrennial Conference drew extensively on the European “crisis” or neo-orthodox theology. Robert Hamill's *Gods of the Campus* began by graphically depicting the plight of Christian student and his/her false gods.¹⁴ Drawing on the insights Martin Buber and Emil Brunner, Hamill moved on to explain the nature of human encounter with a personal God and

¹¹Report of the First National Methodist Student Leadership Training Conference, 16.

¹²*motive*, 2:6 (February, 1942), 10. The conference theme similarly voices the image: “God's Will and Your Hands.”

¹³*motive*, 26:3 (February, 1966). I have quoted the article from this anniversary volume but it was originally printed in the December 1943 issue and later incorporated by Niebuhr in *Radical Monotheism and Western Civilization*.

¹⁴Hamill, *Gods of the Campus*, Part I.

suggested that only dependence (faith) on the God revealed in Jesus will create true life.¹⁵ The emphasis, as in Niebuhr's article, falls on *faith* from which arises new life. In these and similar MSM publications at mid-century the significance of Christian dependence on God offered a needed balance to the traditional liberal (and MSM) expectation that humans, by simply being given a vision, could transform the society.¹⁶

Albert Outler's article "Beyond Pietism: Aldersgate in Context" presented "the Wesleyan conjunction that bears most directly on the vocation and the motives of a Christian scholar: "faith and reason, piety and learning, the surrendered heart and the enfranchised intelligence" as a model for the campus and student ministry.¹⁷ In this material, Outler offered to the MSM the Wesleyan balance that held together God's sovereign power and governing love.

When, in the sixties the MSM was sometimes seen by its critics as "radical" because of its support of revolutionary social change it most often justified its action as called for by their faithfulness to God's justice and mercy. They understood these "works" to arise from their "faith". In doing so they claimed as their justification, as Wesley had done in his day, that God worked in their actions to assure justice and mercy in their world--they embraced God as interacting with them daily.

A Supporting Group: An Essential Component of God's Call

The second MSM objective noted above called for the development of "a supporting group" where individual students might "mutually strengthen one another in Christian living." This objective recognized the human need for community with and nurturing by others. In the case of Wesley's Methodism and the MSM, however, this basic human need for support became a foundation on which these groups built a vibrant character going far beyond simple strengthening of each other. From their beginnings their *raison d'être* was rooted in an extraordinary sense of "call" or "mission" that gave the groups depth of commitment, creative drive and enhanced their high sense of camaraderie.

Many credit Methodism's ability to sustain itself beyond its immediate historical context within the eighteenth century English Evangelical Revival to Wesley's early incorporation into its societies of small "classes" and "bands" where one's Christian commitment, understanding, and life was sustained and expanded. Albert Outler referred to such classes as "*schola animarium*--a

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Parts II, IV.

¹⁶Richard Bender, an executive of the Department of Campus Ministry, criticizes both liberalism for its naivete regarding "the state of the human soul and the integrity of cultural institutions" and neo-orthodoxy for its "Calvinistic emphasis on original sin" and its propensity to see all human possibilities and institutions through the eyes of disillusionment. *Campus Evangelism: In Theory and Practice* (Nashville, The Board of Education, 1957), 10-11.

¹⁷*motive*, 23:8, 12-16.

“school for growing souls.”¹⁸ It was in these groups that Methodists studied scripture, examined each other’s grasp of the gospel, offered another instruction and encouragement. Consequently they gained a sense of community and fellowship that not only sustained them in their Christian living but turned them into evangelists for Christ in their neighborhoods. Depending on these primary groups to provide his lay helpers Wesley built much of his elaborate Methodist system--turning it into a “movement” influential far beyond its numbers.

For our purposes it is not necessary to examine in detail these groups and the Methodism that developed from them since that has been excellently done by others.¹⁹ However, we should remember Wesley was convinced that God’s hand was uniquely upon them. The Preface to an early Journal volume expresses it clearly:

What I design in the following extract is openly to declare to all mankind what it is that the Methodists (so called) have done and are doing now--or rather, what it is that God hath done and is still doing in our land. For it is not the work of man which hath lately appeared. All who calmly observe it must say, ‘This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.’²⁰

He was even more sure of God’s mission for the movement when in his later years he writes “Thoughts upon a late Phenomenon [Methodism]” where he notes that Luther marveled that any revival of religion lasted “more than a generation, that is, thirty years” and Methodism had already exceeded a generation.²¹ Wesley was obviously convinced that in Methodism God was creating a new revival of “true Christians” who in their personal and social lives embraced and exemplified God’s love.

Turning to the statements of the MSM’s early leaders the vision held out for the movement was strikingly similar. The sense of being called together for a purpose, of having a special character based on Christ’s example, and of mission to the campus and the world is clear in the following comments.

The four regional conferences, the twenty-two state conferences and the national conference are the *organizational medium through which Methodist students give*

¹⁸Preface to David Lowes Watson’s *The Early Methodist Class Meetings* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987) ix.

¹⁹Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meetings; The Methodist Societies*, ed., Rupert E. Davies, *The Works of John Wesley*, General Editor, Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), Volume 9 (Hereafter referred to as *Works*); Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995).

²⁰*Works*, 19:3.

²¹*Arminian Magazine*, 1789: 46. Noted in Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1970), 310.

intercollegiate expression to a fast-developing consciousness of group. This great host of student Christian leaders, with its own organization, designed to give maximum individual expression to Christian experience in campus and community, is developing a constructive consciousness of group in the building of the Kingdom of God.

(The Methodist Student Movement: Report to the Board of Education, May, 1941)

If Christianity is to meet the paganism of this world and all the devises of a pagan civilization, it must have a positive witness in terms of lives that are devoted to the new way. This must be God's way, and for the Christian this must be the way enunciated by Jesus as the person who sought and understood most fully God's way. . . . This is what the mass of students at the Conference committed themselves to on New Year's Eve. But only a small but mighty number realized that for them it meant the beginning of a new way that might have to set itself apart from the accepted ways of living, a new pioneering movement which might bring Christian living again into powerful demonstration as "the way." Cells and small groups will be the beginning of this movement. It will always be a minority movement. . . . Man must find God's will and purpose--he must then call his companions and set about the living of this will and purpose in life.

Report on the Second Quadrennial Conference, *motive*, February, 1942²²

Both a sense of mission and a consciousness that communal effort was necessary are present in these early comments. In the disillusionment of the 1960's the imagery and language had changed but the sense of mission was unclouded.

In a world which seems meaningless, in which tensions and the threat of destruction have become commonplace, in which we of the academic community find lack of purpose for our lives because we know neither who we are nor what we are for, we call our contemporaries to examine with us the Gospel--the Good News from God in Jesus Christ -- to seek: some word of meaning for ourselves, our campus and our world; (to seek) a Covenant in which we can give our lives through which power, strength, and community may come; (to seek) some reawakening to the mission of the Church in our world.

Call to Conference, Seventh Quadrennial Conference of the MSM, 1964²³

The Movement's original idealism and sense of "call" or "mission" naturally experienced periods of "ebb and flow" through the years as student generations and their life situations changed, but

²²*motive*, 2:6 (February, 1942), 12.

²³As quoted in an undated report entitled "Historical Material of the Methodist Student Movement" (Records of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Methodist Archives) 18.

generally the concept of being chosen for a special mission in the world continued to permeate its life.²⁴

The sustaining fellowship which characterized Wesley's small groups similarly found expression among the various units of the MSM. The Movement's early leadership conferences urged each campus unit to consider establishing "Cooperatives" where Christian students might share resources and develop Christian lives. "Cooperatives are worthwhile on college campuses because they make it possible for students to learn to live together on a cheaper economic basis, cooperate in building the characters of others, and in developing their own characters in a spirit in keeping with the ideals of Christian brotherhood."²⁵ While such cooperatives were popular through much of the 1940's, more consistent small groups developed around Bible Study, Wesley Players (local campus organizations seeking to express the gospel through drama), study groups, worship experiences, mission projects and recreational fellowship. Closer in character to Wesley's classes was the development in local MSM units of "Fellowship (Cell) Groups" mentioned in the quote above. Usually consisting of eight to twelve students meeting weekly these groups often fulfilled the roles of study, examination of personal life and companionship so crucial for Wesley's earlier groups.²⁶ The combinations of such small group experiences became an integral part of local MSM units.

A major contributor to the unique character of the MSM, which often generated its *esprit de corps* and furnished its perception of being a community with a mission, was the series of student conferences held by the MSM. Born in a National Youth Conference the national organization held eight quadrennial conferences (1937-64) while supplementing these with semi-annual regional leadership conferences and annual state conferences. From their beginning these conferences offered students the opportunity to hear and converse with national and international religious and social leaders, participate in small group discussions of Christian living, experience contemporary religious art and drama, have their parochial understandings challenged and, of special significance, encounter the camaraderie of Christian students from other campuses and

²⁴By the mid-1960's the nature of the Movement fell under critical inquiries questioning whether the group was truly a "movement" or the creation of the Department of Campus Ministry staff, see "The Methodist Student Movement," an undated report without notice of authorship (Records of the GBHEM, United Methodist Archives.). The report raises excellent questions for surely the MSM was greatly dependent on the leadership of the Department Staff but it does not adequately take into account the very evident *esprit de corps* and acceptance of mission among those students and campus ministers who participated in the MSM.

²⁵Report of the Regional Methodist Student Leadership Training Conferences, 1940.

²⁶Some sense of the nature of their study patterns may be obtained by reviewing books recommended for these cell groups, *motive*, 10:3 (December, 1949) 47. The usual designation of a "cell" group was generally dropped during the "Red scare" years of the mid fifties.

nations.²⁷ As the Board of Education report quoted above suggests, these conferences combined with the state meetings provided a “sense of group” so essential among students and necessary for a “movement” seeking to exemplify Christian ideals and practices. Comments of a student participant of the Second Quadrennial Conference express such a consciousness.

Urbana has meant to me a broadening of perspective and purpose. . . .I have found others whose convictions and attitudes I have felt the hardest to stand for alone. In such fellowship I shall go back strengthened and more determined that what I believe is not pointless and in vain but that it points to a force within Christianity-- a power that shall not be denied but shall grow because isolated individuals shall work together, . . .Urbana gave me the sense that the individual is not alone but a part of a vital movement.²⁸

With a conviction of God given mission, small groups to sustain fellowship and support personal and social life, and state and national conferences to challenge and encourage faith, would Wesley have recognized the members of the MSM as colleagues who through their fellowships sought to make Christianity relevant to life? I think we can answer in the affirmative recognizing that the limited life of the MSM and its general confinement to the academic community (and perhaps other difficulties not discussed here!) did not promote the sustaining and broader influence that Wesley’s movement enjoyed.

Creating a “New World Order”

John Wesley’s was often, as we have seen, amazed at God’s creative work among Methodists but would perhaps have been hesitant to express it in terms of creating “a new world order.” He would, however, have understood the intent of the third objective of the MSM--to help embody Christian ideals in the culture round about them. Manfred Marquardt and Theodore Jennings, Jr. have recently helped us understand more fully the extent of Wesley’s concern for social justice and his attempts to influence the society that surrounded his Methodism.²⁹ One of the MSM’s principle characteristics throughout its history lay in its consciousness of social injustice in its society. Creative programs designed to help alleviate such injustice continually arose out of this concern. To show how both Wesley and the MSM related these to God’s sovereignty it is necessary to examine only one example--racial inequality and injustice.

²⁷Harold Ehrensperger was so bold as to compare the 1937 organizing conference with the Church councils and conferences of old seeing it as being in “the category of important, history-making gatherings.” Frank Dent, *Motive Magazine*, 24

²⁸*motive*, 2:6 (February, 1942), 14-15.

²⁹Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992); Theodore Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

Given Wesley's conviction that all humanity stands before God as equals and his lack of patience with the privileged social stratification that characterized much of his English society, we are not surprised that the doors of Wesley's societies stood open to all people whatever their social or economic status, religious tradition or race. It is, however, his ministry to those of African heritage and his active support for efforts to eliminate the slave trade that provide direct knowledge of his attitude toward racial equality. Wesley first encountered African Americans in his Georgia ministry where he preached to and taught them whenever he had the opportunity.³⁰ Returning to England he baptized Africans and worked to provide them with education.³¹ It was several decades later when Wesley became an active participant in the early stages of the struggle to eliminate the British slave trade. His publication in 1774 of *Thoughts Upon Slavery* was an appeal to those participating in the slave trade to carefully look at what they were doing and to desist.³² Influenced by the writings of the Quaker Anthony Benezet and depending on the reports of travelers to Africa and America, Wesley's publication enjoyed wide circulation. Perhaps because of his intent to appeal to a wider eighteenth century audience, Wesley carefully placed his arguments against the slave trade within the natural law of justice and mercy rather than arguing from scripture.³³ Wesley understood such natural law to be grounded in God's prevenient grace so ultimately he traced it to God's sovereignty even if the scriptural evidence is not cited. While appealing to the proprietors of the slave trade in his *Thoughts*, by the end of his life we find him supporting those who would enter the political halls of Parliament to right this injustice.³⁴ For Wesley, if God's very nature incorporates justice and mercy into sovereignty, none of God's human creation should suffer the unjust, often malicious, plague of slavery.

From its beginning the MSM contained no racial barriers in its organization and program. A number of actions at the Berea Conference(1939) spoke to their convictions on racial issues: the inclusion of W.J. Faulkner, Dean of the Chapel of Fisk University, a prominent black university, as a leader of the conference; the decision at that conference to include student representatives from the Central Jurisdiction (the racial jurisdiction) in the MSM's National Student Council; and a stated desire that all students leaders should be "eager to establish understanding, cooperation and fellowship on local, state and jurisdictional levels, working for the day when we can be truly unified [by the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction]."³⁵ From the

³⁰*Works*, 18: 501-3.

³¹*Works*, 21:21, 172.

³²Jackson, *Works*, XI: 59-79.

³³*Ibid.*, 70.

³⁴John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 8:265. For a full discussion of Wesley and the slave trade see Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics*, Chapter V.

³⁵Report of the First National Methodist Student Leadership Training Conference, 99-100.

presentations of President Mordecai Johnson of Howard University, another prominent Black school, at its Second Quadrennial Conference (1942) to those of Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Eighth Conference (1964) the MSM continually presented speakers who challenged the church to recognize that, in Dr. King's oft repeated words, "The Church is still the most shamefully segregated institution in America."³⁶ By early 1960's race relations had become the predominant social focus of the Movement.

Articles discussing the issue, as one might expect, received salient attention throughout the history of *motive* magazine. Frank Dent has suggested that under the editorship of Jamison Jones they became *the* central social concern of *motive*. "For Jones *motive*, art and the quest for social justice were clearly two sides of the same coin. . . . Thus Jones's *motive* perpetuated a tradition of images as uncompromising and relentless as its repeated examination of the racial justice issue."³⁷ Jones's justification for resistance to injustice was two fold:

The central drive in the [sit-in] demonstrations is toward justice. Justice in the literal sense of what is right. Negroes of the South know quite well that God, in his creation, and the Constitution of the United States, in its founding of a nation, have granted them full citizenship, freedom and dignity. . . . The problem now is how to achieve the justice to which the laws of God and of their nation entitle them.³⁸

In appealing to God's created order Jones, as Wesley before him, incorporated the sovereignty and justice of God as the bases for civil and racial justice adding to this basis the rights of citizens under the constitution.

Examination of the MSM's quest through various programs and publications to raise the consciousness of students and others to the injustices of race could be extended to other issues -- peace, the arms race, poverty, Christian unity and world unity. In each we would find students and their leaders attempting to understand the nature of God's sovereignty, justice and mercy and, relying on God's guidance, to become, sometimes haltingly and sometimes with vigor, its emissaries in a broken world. As such they were certainly heirs, even if unconscious heirs, to the central core of John Wesley's message and practice.

Postscript

My comment that the members of the MSM were often unconscious heirs to the Wesleyan tradition perhaps needs some explanation. Research revealed what many of us might

³⁶The Conference Report of the Eighth Quadrennial Conference of the Methodist Student Movement, 5 (Records of GBHEM, United Methodist Archives).

³⁷Frank Dent, *motive Magazine*, 371

³⁸*motive*, 20:8 (May, 1960), 10.

have expected. John Wesley's demarcation of a vital, dynamic practical theology that underlay the Methodist community was essentially unknown among American Methodist church members (and the MSM) until the late 1960's. Mention of Wesley in the early publications related to the MSM usually referred to him as a "hero of the faith" with no reference to his message and practice. In Methodist academe Charles Wesley's joining of "knowledge and vital piety" provided a convenient slogan but seldom rated much investigation. In an 1950 issue of *motive* authored by British Methodist educators and students Eric Baker comments "I felt that in some of our Methodist colleges there was a tendency to soft pedal the Methodist emphasis."³⁹ Baker's critique could easily be extended to all of the MSM. Little effort was expended to help students know their Wesleyan heritage. Perhaps *motive* broke the pattern when it dedicated the majority of its May, 1957 to articles examining the Methodist tradition. By that time Wesley and the Methodism heritage were being given much greater attention among Wesleyan scholars and that new consciousness (however feebly) began to make its way into the MSM and the wider church. Nevertheless, Albert Outler's article on Aldersgate quoted above was the only one examining Wesley's ideas I was able to locate through the last years of *motive*. Clearly, among members of the MSM, there was minimal direct dependence on Wesley and his insights although their beliefs, thought and action, as we have hopefully seen, incorporated much that corresponded to his distinctive teaching and practice.

Robert C. Monk
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³⁹*motive*, 11:1(April, 1951), 5.