

“Intersections of Reform: Prisons, Poverty, and Slavery”

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Q. 3. What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?

A. Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.<sup>1</sup>

A Reflection on the Conference and Its Theme

The 1763 Annual Conference identified the work of “reforming the nation, and particularly the Church” as Methodism’s providential *raison d’être* and scriptural holiness would be the means by which this would take place. Let us take seriously the claims of this statement for a moment and try to find its relevance even for today. This mission looms in the very least as a historical backdrop to the theme of “revival, reform, and revolution,” for the 14<sup>th</sup> Oxford Institute Methodist Theological Studies (OIMTS). As the call for papers indicated, one segment of global Methodism is experiencing “genuine spiritual and social revival and renewal” while other Methodists are in dire need of renewal and reform.<sup>2</sup> This disparity itself is worthy of full exploration and even if we definitively discovered the root of its causation we are still left with the missional questions. Should those who are experiencing renewal be expected to leaven the remaining Methodist lump?

United Methodists in particular have two inherent tensions that might help or hinder renewal efforts. One tension arises from being historically a renewal movement in origins with its fossils being embedded in the sediment of what has been for many years an ecclesial institution. Some want to engage in ecclesial geology to excavate and recover the remains of the movement for the mission of reform. Secondly, United Methodists perpetually struggle to hold together the tension between contextual theologies that are placed in our connectional polity, and every four years we gather at General Conference and anxiously watch context stretch connection to the snapping point. Contextualized theology tends to lend itself toward a more congregational style of polity, which helps to account for what many see as the alarming drift toward congregationalism since at least 1996. As United Methodism stands on the edge of the precipice of schism is division the most viable means of reform? Or, as is the case facing the United Methodist Church in particular, is schism the best way to renew the church? Are those on each side of the long existing divide over homosexuality in the United Methodist Church so desperately disparate that the only way for either to thrive is through yet another nasty ecclesial

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<sup>1</sup> Wesleyan Methodist Church, Conference. *Minutes of several conversations between the Rev. Mr. John and Charles Wesley, and others* (London, 1763), 3.

<sup>2</sup> <https://oxford-institute.org/next-meeting/>. Accessed 7/20/2108.

divorce?<sup>3</sup> Or, is it an indication of abdication of the reason God raised up the preachers called Methodists was not to form a new sect?

If one is in step with the marching orders of the mission statement of 1763, schism as a preferential means of reform is questionable. In spite of calling bishops “mitred infidels” and other colleagues “orthodox devils” for whatever reason Wesley remained Anglican to his last breath, albeit while making provisions for the option of separation for those who survived him. On the other hand, Anglicans put up with Wesley’s antics of frequent and flagrant disregard of Anglican traditions and Canon law, from field preaching to the ordinations.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the 19<sup>th</sup> century history of American Methodism is replete with examples of disregard of Wesley’s admonition against schism. Between 1784 and 1895 the Methodist Episcopal Church split no fewer than 10 times, mostly over the race and the episcopacy. Schism is the American way.

In any case, as David Lowes Watson has been frequently known to say, United Methodism is now the church Wesley sought to reform. There is no shortage of ways and means, or “methods,” regarding how the United Methodist Church might be reformed and there is a significant bibliography to go along with that claim.<sup>5</sup> The critical need for reforming Methodists, particularly United Methodists, is what makes the theme of the Oxford Institute so timely. So long as Wesley’s *Sermons*, *Explanatory Notes*, or the *Minutes* are engaged as even a modicum of a doctrinal standard for Methodism, Wesley scholars will frequently turn to his works to see if he can reform us not just from the other side of the Atlantic, but from the grave.

As difficult as that challenge is, the greater challenge of being a “reforming movement” must surely be the aspirations that also include “reforming the nation.” But, before turning to Wesley for guidance as to how that might take place, two words of warning must be invoked. Maddox is entirely correct when he warns that we must avoid “hagiographical exaggeration” based on Wesley’s “own rhetorical exaggerations at face value” that result in a caricature at best.<sup>6</sup> A splendid example of this is David D. Thompson’s, *John Wesley as Social Reformer* (1808), where he declares that Wesley was not just the greatest social reformer of his day, but possibly the greatest in the history of England.<sup>7</sup> Then there is the infamous “Halévy thesis,” which proposed that Methodism significantly contributed to the stability of English society in the

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<sup>3</sup> This matter has been explored in, *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness, Study Guide* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See journal entry for June 6, 1755, John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 21, *Journals and Diaries, IV*, 16-17, where Wesley’s responds to a theory of Canon law in Thomas Sharp, *The rubric in the Book of common prayer and the Canons of the Church of England, so far as they relate to the parochial clergy, considered. In a course of visitation charges* (London, 1753). *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale. Northwestern University - CIC. July 15, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> There are a variety of proposals for renewal that seek to utilize everything from leadership to class meetings. See, Scott J. Jones, Bruce R. Ough, *The future of the United Methodist Church: seven vision pathways* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010); Gilbert R. Rendle, *Back to zero: the search to rediscover the Methodist movement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011); Lovett H. Weems, *Focus: the real challenges that face the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011); Molly D. Scott, *Restoring Methodism: 10 decisions for United Methodist Churches in America* (Dallas: Provident Publishing, 2006). Rex Matthews, ed. *The Renewal of United Methodism: Mission, Ministry, and Connectionalism* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Randy Maddox, “‘Visit the poor’ John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers” in, *The Wesleys and the Poor: The Legacy and Development of Methodist Attitudes to Poverty, 1729-1999* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 60.

<sup>7</sup> David D. Thompson, *John Wesley as Social Reformer* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1808), 5.

late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the embourgeoisement of the working classes, thus saving England from the same fate that met the French during their revolution.<sup>8</sup> But, what is often forgotten is that William Lecky made the same claim in his work before Halévy, showing how hagiographical biographies can make their way into mainline scholarship as twice told tales.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Gibson resisted the temptation in his recent history on the Church of England, even when Wesley gave clear indication of his opinion of England's "manners of the present times" and characterized the English as people of sloth, luxury, and ungodliness with a total ignorance and contempt of God, while the vast majority of the English neglect the worship of God.<sup>10</sup> Gibson worked on the assumption that Methodists often engaged in caricature to make the Church of England look bad so that Methodists could look better.<sup>11</sup>

The second warning is, what do we do with the definite article of that phrase, "the nation"? Within the context of the 1763 conference "the nation" was taken to mean "England" as an idea wrapped up in the "divine rights" robes of king and empire. Even the 1784 Christmas Conference changed it from the political idea of "nation" to the geographical concept of "continent." Geography has indeed been a significant shaper of North American doctrine and polity. With the international expansion of world Methodism to global proportions, the modern idea of "the nation" has become a scrutinized, criticized, and contextualized term that now carries with it implications of coloniality, empire, as well as hegemonic, and oligarchical powers. How is "the nation" to be understood as a modern concept in its particularity and then fit within the context of an international connectionalism? With the increased popularity of white nationalism in Europe and the United States it underlines the claim that nations have been nothing more than racialized states all along. These issues are a clear indication that the social and political settings of Wesley's England have decidedly changed but much has remained the same.

Once the idea of "nation" is set aside the next issue is, can a denomination, such as the United Methodist Church, which is in such desperate need of reform itself, be capable of reforming any nation, whether the nation under consideration is Liberia or the United States itself? What would make Wesley or us think that "Scriptural holiness" is up to the task of nation reform and social transformation, especially given Wesley's blind spot in his social ethics, his conservative views of the state, his rejection of structural changes in society, and his defective knowledge of causal connections, making his suggestions for reform seem "naïve and superficial."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Élie Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: P. Smith, 1962), 433-485. In addition to having a questionable thesis there are several inaccuracies along the way, e.g. he maintains that Wesley was 'driven from the Church' (433) and that Wilberforce lived on Battersea Rise (435). Having once lived in London I regularly passed the plaque noting Wilberforce's London residence (111 Broomwood Road, Battersea, London SW11 6JT) during his collaboration with the 'Clapham Sect' and their anti-slavery campaign.

<sup>9</sup> William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1878, 1917). 8 Vols. Vol. I.

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley, "An estimate of the manners of the present times," *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979), 11:156-164, hence *Works* (Jackson).

<sup>11</sup> William Gibson, *The Church of England 1688-1832: Unity and Accord* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Manfred Marquardt, *The Principal of Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, John E. Steely, W. Stephen Gunter, trans. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 133-135.

Wesley is also noted for the primary directive given to his preachers, “you have nothing to do but to save souls” and admonished his preachers not to preach politics.<sup>13</sup> Is evangelism alone enough to bring about social transformation without getting involved in the politics necessary to bring “reform of nation” about? For much of his life Wesley seemed to think the problem of slavery could be addressed through the conversion of one slave trader and one slave owner at a time. But, as we shall see below his association with two institutional and political reformers, John Howard and William Wilberforce, Wesley came to realize that national reform could not take place without political engagement and provided encouragement and support for those who were involved in it.

The argument to be made here is that Wesley’s theology of Scriptural holiness is capable of transforming individuals as well as engaging in ecclesial and national reform as well. Having said that, the eschatological telos of Wesley’s theology in general is not mere reform. It is the “new creation.” Jennings once argued that Wesley’s was a “beta version” of liberation theology, which is a reforming theology of its own kind. I would want to argue instead that Wesley’s scripture way of salvation engages a liberating faith that results in an eschatological vision of human thriving that extends beyond a concern for either reform or humanity’s salvation alone.<sup>14</sup> “Scriptural holiness” is cosmological with its vision of a “new creation” liberated from human selfishness, sinfulness, and dysfunctional relationships.<sup>15</sup>

All of this cannot be dealt with in a single paper, so the scope must be narrowed considerably. So, to what extent did Wesley actually engage in reforming his nation? What lessons might be learned from his reform efforts? Did Wesley engage in any efforts of reform social issues that are relevant to our own age? How might the challenges of reforming both nation and church be explored in a way that is neither anachronistic to Wesley’s age nor irrelevant to ours? Wesley was indeed involved with efforts to reform in three specific areas: prisons, poverty, and slavery. These are all issues that are sadly still relevant for us today. At the core of these was the issue of poverty and the driving force was economics. In spite of his privileging evangelism and his admonition to avoid politics Wesley was more deeply involved with national reform than what is usually attributed to him.

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<sup>13</sup> *Works*, (Jackson), 8:309; John Wesley, “How far is it the duty of a Christian minister to preach politics?” Also, *The Arminian Magazine*, March (1782), 151-152. Hence *Arminian*.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore W. Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998).

## Wesley on Prisons

Secondly: By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men: To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison. (*The General Rules*, 1743)<sup>16</sup>

Wesley's exposure to prisons can be tracked throughout his life, sadly starting in Epworth. Samuel Wesley, Sr. was accomplished at many things but not in managing money. Before John turned three his father had been arrested and taken to Lincoln prison for debt, where he would eventually serve two sentences, leaving Susanna and the children to experience hunger and poverty. In answer to the Archbishop of York's questioning her about whether the family had "ever really wanted bread," she replied:

My lord . . . I will freely own to your grace, that strictly speaking, I never did want bread. But then I have had so much care to get it before 'twas eat, and to pay for it after, as has often made it very unpleasant to me. And I think to have bread on such terms is the next degree of wretchedness to having none at all.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between debt, prison, and poverty was a real experience for the Wesley family, which surely left its mark on John as much as the rectory fire from which he was snatched as a "brand from the burning." Samuel was eventually released through the efforts of the Archbishop and others who paid Wesley's debt, otherwise he would have spent a much longer prison term.<sup>18</sup>

Prisons were indeed used for debtors as well as for criminals during this period.<sup>19</sup> While most prisoners were not generally incarcerated for long, debtors were typically detained for months while negotiations with creditors took place, leaving many to even die imprisoned.<sup>20</sup> Samuel Johnson estimated in 1759 that the jails held over 20,000 debtors alone who were constantly being harassed and exploited by their prison guards and keepers.<sup>21</sup> It was a semi-privatized system fraught with fraud, abuse, and exploitation with overcrowded, dilapidated, and squalid conditions; where prisoners were expected to pay rent for their cell; with families

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<sup>16</sup> United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2106), Kindle Locations 2123-2126).

<sup>17</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, Charles Wallace, Jr., ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Bungay, Suffolk: Richard Clay Ltd, 1989), 49.

<sup>19</sup> John Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies* (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 66.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Woodfine, "Debtors, Prisons, and Petitions in Eighteenth-Century England," *Eighteenth Century Life*. 30(2006)2:4; cf. Richard Heitzenrater, "Prison Ministry in the Wesleyan Heritage," *I was in Prison*, eds, James Shopshire, Sr. et al. (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2008), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750: The Movement for Reform 1750-1833* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 339 n. See of particular note, Philip Woodfine, 'Debtors, Prisons, and Petitions in Eighteenth-Century England,' *Eighteenth Century Life*. 30:2(2006), 2.

expected to provide the food to be eaten and any care to be given in times of illness.<sup>22</sup> Being an imprisoned debtor was certainly a problematic situation for which the only solution was denied by a being in prison, a circumstance inherent in the problem of being in prison.<sup>23</sup> How might a debtor pay off his debt while serving in prison and being denied income? This was the penal system the Oxford Methodists would encounter.

*Prisons and the “first rise of Methodism”* - In the summer of 1730, during the “first rise of Methodism,” Richard Morgan stopped to visit Castle prison to see a man who had been convicted of murdering his wife. Afterward, he convinced the Wesleys that the Oxford Methodists should make regular visits to the Castle and Bocardo prisons.<sup>24</sup> Only after writing his father to inform him of this practice did Wesley learn of Samuel’s experience of prison ministry while a student at Exeter College.<sup>25</sup> The spiritual practices of these early Methodists consisted of both “acts of piety” (such as Bible study, fasting, regular, if not daily, Eucharist), and “acts of mercy” (such as care of the poor and prison visitation) and develop as central to their spiritual method and rule. Among other things the rule specifically attempted,

to do good to those that are in prison...[to] release such well-disposed persons as remain in prison for small sums...[to] lend smaller sums to those that are of any trade, that they may procure themselves tools and materials to work with...give to them who appear to want it most a little money, or clothes, or physic.<sup>26</sup>

Admittedly the primary aim of prison ministry was the repentance and conversion of prisoners, with particular attention being given to “condemned malefactors.”<sup>27</sup> The immediate pastoral demand was the material needs of the prisoners and procuring release for debtors. The work was also intended to reduce recidivism by helping prisoners to find gainful employment upon their release. Their work went beyond the prisoners themselves and extended to the needs of their families. Even at this point, Methodist prison ministry was premised by the assumption that prisoners are created in the image of God and by God’s grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, redeemable and capable of change and improvement. Additionally, those being visited were Christ to those who were the visitors. The effect of the experience would inspire Charles to frequently use prison metaphors for the experience of salvation as liberation and eventually compose several hymns and even prayers for “Condemned Malefactors.”<sup>28</sup>

While much of the early Methodist practice of prison visitation went unnoticed and unappreciated, it came at an important juncture in British history when an increased public

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<sup>22</sup> For a list of fees see, John Howard, *The State of Prisons in England and Wales...* (Warrington: William Eyres, 1778), 477-78; for a list of fees charged at Ludgate prison, Wayne Sheehan, *The London Prison System, 1666-1795*. (Dissertation, The University of Maryland, 1975), 409-12.

<sup>23</sup> This type of scenario was precisely what Joseph Heller described as “catch 22.”

<sup>24</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 18, *Journals and Diaries*, I, W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 124, hence *Journals and Diaries*.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries*, I, 126.

<sup>26</sup> John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries*, I, 128; cf. *Arminian* (1781), 319, and *Works* (Jackson), 10:521-23.

<sup>27</sup> See, Tim Macquiban, “Imprisonment and Release in the Writings of John Wesley,” in *Retribution, Repentance, and Reconciliation*, eds. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2004), 240-52.

<sup>28</sup> While examples of these hymns have survived the actual hymnal (*Hymns for Condemned Prisoners*, London: Strahan, 1742) has not; see, Charles Wesley, *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (London: J. Paramore, 1785).

awareness of the inhumane conditions of prisons would eventually result in calls for reform.<sup>29</sup> What will be seen below is how Wesley's insistence that Methodists be engaged in prison visitation contributed greatly to this increased awareness.

*The "second rise" of Methodism and James Oglethorpe (1696-1785)*- The "second rise of Methodism" took place in Savannah after James Oglethorpe extended an invitation to John and Charles to join him in the work of the Georgia colony. But, before that invitation was given Oglethorpe was involved in working on an experiment for prison reform, even chaired a Parliamentary committee on that task. It started with the 1728 death of Robert Castell, a noted architect and friend of Oglethorpe, who was sent to Fleet Prison as a debtor as the result of several bad business decisions. His imprisonment and death motivated Oglethorpe to engage in prison reform by working to change the laws to make Savannah a safe haven for the permanent relief of the deserving poor by freeing as many as possible from prison, thus reducing the overcrowded prison population.<sup>30</sup> All of this was the result of Oglethorpe's association with Dr. Thomas Bray, an abolitionist instrumental in establishing the Church of England in Maryland, as well as the work of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Propagation in Foreign Parts.<sup>31</sup> While Savannah was not established as a slave colony, it was intended to be a debtor colony, but due to political motivations severe limits on the funding of a program was set. No Parliamentary politician wanted to be seen to support a program aimed at setting prisoners free. So, when applications were made debtors were joined by the poor, severely reducing the number of prisoners who were actually accepted for the colony.<sup>32</sup> It would be brother Samuel, not Charles, who would hear of this work and compose a poem in support of Oglethorpe's efforts at prison reform.<sup>33</sup> All three Wesley brothers were aware of Oglethorpe's work, but his would not be the most significant influence on John where prison reform was concerned.

*The "third rise" of Methodism the expansion of Methodist prison ministry*- Upon returning to England Methodism entered into its "third rise" and Wesley quickly resumed the Oxford habit and spiritual discipline of prison visitation. Even then public opinion of the day vacillated between the "reformers and advocates of severity."<sup>34</sup> Of Ludgate and Newgate he said,

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<sup>29</sup> Heitzenrater, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Rodney M. Baine, "The Prison Death of Robert Castell and Its Effect on the Founding of Georgia." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1989): 67-78. Before getting involved with prison reform Oglethorpe tried his hand at reforming the navy and opposing impressment. See, Richard C. Boys. "General Oglethorpe and the Muses." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1947): 19-29. Also, see the support of Samuel Wesley, Jr., 'An Ode to James Oglethorpe, Esq.; In the Country. A.D. 1728,' in, *Poems on Several Occasions. By Samuel Wesley, A.M. Master of Blundell's School at Tiverton, Devon. Sometime Student of Christ-Church, Oxford; and near Twenty Years Usher in Westminster-School* (London: 1736).

<sup>31</sup> Edgar Legare Pennington, "John Wesley's Georgia Ministry," *Church History* 8, no. 3 (1939): 231. Also of note, Verner W. Crane, "Dr. Thomas Bray and the Charitable Colony Project, 1730." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1962): 49-63. Bray wanted to provide libraries in Georgia.

<sup>32</sup> Albert Berry Saye, "Was Georgia a debtor colony?" *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1940): 323-41.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Wesley, *The Prisons Open'd. A Poem Occasion'd by the Late Glorious Proceedings of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the State of the Goals of This Kingdom* (London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1729). Also of considerable note, because of its inclusion of several poems by Samuel with Oglethorpe as its subject, and because of its implied endorsement of Oglethorpe, see, John Wesley, *A collection of moral and sacred poems from the most celebrated English authors* (London: 1744).

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm Ramsay, "John Howard and the discovery of the prison." *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 16, no. 1 (1977): 2.

“The very places strike horror into your soul. How dark and dreary! How unhealthy and unclean!”<sup>35</sup> It is well remembered and often cited that Wesley’s inauguration into field preaching started with Luke 4:18-19,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set a liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.<sup>36</sup>

What is often forgotten is that Whitefield had opened the pulpit to Wesley at Newgate prison so the next day Wesley went to preach at the chapel there, read the daily Morning Service, and continued the already well-established habit of prison visitation.<sup>37</sup>

Over the coming years Wesley regularly pressed upon all Methodists, and especially his preachers, the importance of prison visitation. Silas Told was extolled by Wesley and wrote a brief introduction to his autobiography, *The Life of Mr. Silas Told*, and then extracted it in the *Arminian Magazine*.<sup>38</sup> Told’s story was a remarkable one that involved becoming an apprentice on The Prince of Wales at age 14. He set sail for Jamaica and experienced beatings, abuse, malnutrition, sea sickness, and witnessed the horrors of slavery and the slave trade. “I can never sufficiently praise the Almighty for my happy deliverance from the slave trade, seeing it is one of the basest practices under the sun.”<sup>39</sup> In July 1740 Charles Greaves, a bricklayer, introduced him to “the people called Methodists” and heard Wesley preach the next day.<sup>40</sup> While working at the Foundry-school, in a 5 a.m. service he heard Wesley preach from Matthew 25:41, “I was...in prison, and ye visited me not.” Upon hearing this sermon Told embarked upon a prison ministry among debtors of approximately 25 years.<sup>41</sup>

Methodist women were often engaged in several facets of ministry: preaching, visitors of the sick, even class leaders, but not enough attention has been given to the women who advocated and engaged in prison ministry, often putting their health at risk. Two exemplars of women engaged in prison visitation were Sarah Peters and Damaris Perronet. A heroic account of Sarah Peters’ sacrificial devotion to prison ministry was given by Wesley in both the journal and the *Arminian Magazine*.<sup>42</sup> Perronet wrote a letter to Wesley saying,

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<sup>35</sup> John Wesley, *The works of John Wesley, The Appeals to men of reason and religion and certain related open letters*, vol. 11, Gerald R. Cragg ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 241. (Hence, *Appeals*).

<sup>36</sup> *Journals and Diaries*, I, 46.

<sup>37</sup> *Journals and Diaries*, I, 46-47.

<sup>38</sup> See, Silas Told, *An Account of the Life, and Dealings of God with Silas Told, Late Preacher of the Gospel; Wherein Is Set Forth The Wonderful Display of Divine Providence towards Him When at Sea; His Various Sufferings Abroad; Together with Many Instances of the Sovereign Grace of God, in the Conversion of Several Malefactors under Sentence of Death, Who Were Greatly Blessed under His Ministry* (London: 1785); in, *Arminian*, 10(1787) 72-75; 125-150; 183-86; 240-43; 296-300; 346-51; 406-10; 459-62; 515-18; 572-76; 626-28; 11(1788) 12-14; 66-69; 120-22; 178-81; 232-34; 290-95; 348-51; 403-06.

<sup>39</sup> Told, *Account*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Told, *Account*, 72-73.

<sup>41</sup> See, Told, *Account*, 89, and *Arminian*, April (1788), 178-81.

<sup>42</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 20, *Journals and Diaries*, III, W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 252-56; *Arminian*, March (1782), 128-136.

Dear Sir, let me beseech you, for the sake of our Redeemer, to press it on our Preachers to visit every prison they can. If there was more willingness to take up this cross, the Lord would be well pleased; his providence would work with his people; and many of the outcasts would escape to glory.

One man died in peace out of Maidstone Gaol the last assizes, and two more are powerfully wrought upon the word of God: one of whom has chose [sic] to go on board a man of war rather than work on the Thames, and the other we suppose will be pardoned.<sup>43</sup>

During all of this it was Wesley's role as a "public theologian" with strong opinions about the 18<sup>th</sup> century version of the "prison-industrial" complex that eventually resulted in him being restrained from visiting prisoners in the same way abolitionist Methodists would one day be prohibited from visiting slaves.<sup>44</sup> His opinions frequently found their way into the London newspapers. Eventually, his ministerial activism is what brought Wesley into contact with John Howard, the most important advocate of prison reform at the time.

*John Howard (1726-1790)*- Howard's father was a merchant in London and was born into an affluent family.<sup>45</sup> His father died in 1742 leaving him a sizable inheritance that would be spent on gathering experiences and information that would aid in prison reform. His early life was marked by poor health and being held in a French prison himself. In 1748 Howard left for a tour of Europe, only to fall seriously ill upon his return. By 1756 Howard was heading for Portugal after the Lisbon earthquakes of 1755, but before arriving there he was taken captive by a French privateer, imprisoned and experienced inhumane conditions. After negotiating his own release with his captors Howard returned to England with concern for prisons, prisoners, and jailers. He was eventually appointed high sheriff of Bedfordshire (1773), which was extraordinary giving his status as a Dissenter. Over the next few years Howard started visiting prisons in France, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, Switzerland, Malta, Asia Minor, Turkey, and across the British Isles. After collecting his information regarding the conditions of prison and prisoners Howard presented it to the House of Commons and the administration of prime minister Robert Peel, March 4, 1774. As a result of his testimony and Peels' actions Parliament passed the Gaol Act of 1774. It covered 4 main points:

1. Sanitary accommodations for all prisoners;
2. The elimination of private jails and a requirement that the management of jails be the exclusive jurisdiction of the government;
3. The implementation of a reformation program in regard to all prisoners; and
4. A regular inspection program.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Arminian*, September (1788), 498. Damaris was the daughter of Vincent Perronet. There is the account of Mrs. Kitley, who 'redeemed a poor, friendless youth out of prison, took the jail-distemper and died' (*Journal and Diaries V*, January 30, 1770; Sarah Peters, who visited 'condemned malefactors in Newgate' and died of a 'malignant fever' caught from the prisoners (*Journal and Diaries III*, Sunday, November 13, 1748)

<sup>44</sup> Marquardt, 82. *Appeals*, 405

<sup>45</sup> For a biography on Howard see, William H. Dixon, *John Howard and the prison world of Europe* (Webster, MA: Frederick Charlton, 1852), 261.

<sup>46</sup> Lloyd Duhaime, "Howard, John 1746 - 1790." Thirteenth (13th) Amendment Definition. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 July 2018.

In 1777 Howard's research resulted in his book, *The state of the prisons in England and Wales, with preliminary observations, and an account of some foreign prisons*. In addition to serious concerns regarding the ecology of prisons, Howard had a pronounced hesitancy regarding the use of the death penalty. In London, between 1749-1771, there were 678 executions with only 72 for murder, suggesting that capital punishment was being used regularly for much lesser crimes.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, he had a great deal of enthusiasm regarding the rarity of executions in Holland.<sup>48</sup>

In short, John Howard was to prison reform what William Wilberforce was to the abolition of the slave trade and both men were known to Wesley. Howard, a pious Dissenter, and Wesley shared a mutual appreciation and respect for one another, both of whom would be seen as major influences on prison reform.<sup>49</sup> Wesley's knowledge of the state of prisoners and their conditions came from his first-hand knowledge along with the testimonies from Methodists (including several women) who engaged in prison visitation themselves and was acquired through a committed and sustained ministry over several decades. It could well be argued that Wesley's prison ministry and his sharing of those experiences and observations through London's newspapers is as much a case study in public theology as his work against slavery was. It was this public work for prison reform that had a significant influence on Howard himself.

Wesley and Howard finally met in Dublin, July 28, 1787 (Wesley's birthday), to which Wesley remarked, that he

had the pleasure of a conversation with Mr. Howard, I think one of the greatest men in Europe. Nothing but the might power of God can enable him to go through his difficult and dangerous employments. But what can hurt us, if God is on our side?<sup>50</sup>

Howard told Alexander Knox that Wesley had encouraged him to,

go on vigorously with my own designs. I saw in him [Wesley] how much a single man might achieve by zeal and perseverance; and I thought why may not I do as much in my way, as Mr. Wesley has done in his, if I am only as assiduous in persevering? And I determined I would pursue my work with more alacrity than ever.<sup>51</sup>

In March 1789 Howard stopped by City Road to present Wesley with a copy of his book, *An Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe*, but missed Wesley, who had departed for a preaching tour in Ireland.<sup>52</sup> This book indicates that Howard's attention was turning to include

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<sup>47</sup> William H. Dixon, *John Howard and the prison world of Europe* (Webster, MA: Frederick Charlton, 1852), 261.

<sup>48</sup> John Howard, *The State of Prisons in England and Wales* (Warrington: William Eyres, 1777), 120.

<sup>49</sup> Sean McConville, *A History of English Prison Administration*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1981), 79; also, G.M. Macaulay, *English social History: A Survey of six centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1942), 329.

<sup>50</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, 8 vols. Nehemiah Curnock, ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 7:295 and note.

<sup>51</sup> Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists*, 3 vols. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), 3:495

<sup>52</sup> Tyerman, 3:495. The book was, John Howard. *An account of the principal lazarettos in Europe; with various papers relative to the plague: Together with Further Observations on Some Foreign Prisons and*

hospitals and their reform. Nonetheless, Howard took the opportunity share with the preachers there the time he heard Wesley preach a sermon in Bedfordshire on Ecclesiastes 9:10, “Whosoever thy hand find it to do, do it with thy might.”<sup>53</sup> Wesley’s last mention of Howard was in a letter to Walter Churchey on June 20, 1789 declaring, “Mr. Howard is really an extraordinary man. God has raised him up to be a blessing to many nations. I do not doubt that there has been something more than natural in his preservation hitherto, and should not wonder if the providence of God should hereafter be still more conspicuous in his favor.”<sup>54</sup>

Howard’s focus was on prisons and eventually included hospital reform Wesley’s approach to health care assumed the poor could not afford to visit the doctor or pay the apothecary for the cure and respond with free health clinics and published, *The Primitive Physick* (1747/1760). His critique of prisons was expanded to include lawyers and the legal system itself resulted in a “Wesley rant” in a section of the *Earnest Appeals*. In Wesley’s opinion, injustice was indeed caused by poverty of the accused and dishonest attorneys who charge the poor excessively for their services. In short, “Without money, you can have no more law; poverty alone utterly shuts out justice.”<sup>55</sup> Prisons regularly created and sustained poverty, denying the poor of justice, punishing them for their debt, and featured a troubling disregard for human life.

In an effort to keep the plight of prisoners before his Methodist readers, Wesley frequently related accounts of prison ministry, prison conditions, testimonies of jail conversions, and even how prisons were utilized for religious persecution in the *Arminian Magazine*.<sup>56</sup> There was clearly an expectation that Methodist preachers should be familiar with the inside of a prison and have personal knowledge of its population.

So how might Wesley’s concerns be summarized? Marquardt summarizes well Wesley’s complaints against the prisons and the legal system that put the poor there.<sup>57</sup>

1. The conditions of most prisons are the worst “this side of hell.”<sup>58</sup>
2. Prisons are a school in crime.<sup>59</sup>
3. Capital cases are often decided in a single day, while others are dragged out.<sup>60</sup>
4. There was unequal treatment of the poor and rich.<sup>61</sup>
5. The inhumane treatment of prisoners of war.<sup>62</sup>

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*Hospitals; and Additional Remarks on the Present State of Those in Great Britain and Ireland* (Warrington: William Eyres, 1789. Eighteenth Century Collections Online (accessed July 14, 2018). Howard’s legacy still lives in Canada and Chicago through the John Howard Association, with a mission of prison reform and accountability. See, <http://johnhoward.ca/> and <http://www.thejha.org/>.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel J. Rogal, *A biographical dictionary of 18<sup>th</sup> century Methodism*, vol. 2 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 2:481.

<sup>54</sup> See, John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* ed. John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 8:145. Hence, *Letters*.

<sup>55</sup> *Appeals*, 233. This section is a scathing attack on lawyers and the legal system in general.

<sup>56</sup> E.g., *Arminian*, March (1782), 128-136; July (1783), 358-360; November (1785), 572-573; August (1786), 428-431.

<sup>57</sup> Marquardt, 84.

<sup>58</sup> *Letters*, 4:127, *Works* (Jackson), 8:173.

<sup>59</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 8:173.

<sup>60</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 8:166f.

<sup>61</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 8:165.

<sup>62</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 8:166f.

There are obvious similarities between the concerns of Wesley and Howard that came from similar experiences, comparable values, and mutual concerns. It can be argued that while working independently it was an ideological collaboration devoted to alleviating the sufferings and injustices of penal system.

### Wesley on Poverty and the Poor

O England, England! will this reproach never be rolled away from thee? Is there anything like this to be found, either among Papists, Turks, or Heathens? In the name of truth, justice, mercy, and common sense, I ask, [...] Where is the mercy of thus grinding the face of the poor? thus sucking the blood of a poor, beggared prisoner? Would not this be execrable villany[...]?<sup>63</sup>

A great deal has been written about Wesley and the poor and these narratives are well known and often repeated.<sup>64</sup> Once again, the admonition of Maddox against hagiographical and rhetorical exaggeration should be heeded. The stories of Wesley's work of feeding and clothing the poor and of free medical care are often the result of twice-told tales, which does not make them fundamentally untrue, just prone to exaggeration. Heitzenrater reflects this concern when he warned that these descriptions are rarely accurate because the concept of poverty in eighteenth century England is unknown to Methodists today and poverty's depictions incomplete.<sup>65</sup>

In the seventeenth century the poor laws were revised in an attempt to change the "social contract" of the day and redefine the social responsibilities toward the poor. The Law of Settlement and Removal of 1662 determined that the responsibility of relieving poverty belonged to the parish church and aid was to be channeled through it. If someone needed assistance they had to first establish that they "belonged" to the parish, and if it was determined that they were not they would be "removed" to their parish of origin. The intent was not really to identify the poor but to identify and immobilize beggars and vagrants.<sup>66</sup> Heitzenrater says that the laws were rewritten with three aims in mind: Christian charity, moral reform, and changes in public policy because of economic concerns.<sup>67</sup> The poor laws tried to put every able-bodied adult and even children to work while attempting to relieve the elderly and infirmed. The biggest problems were twofold: 1. underemployment and the laboring poor; and, 2. internal migration, usually from rural and agrarian communities to urban population centers. Moving from the parish of one's birth disqualified individuals from parish support. Pregnant women were often forcibly and brutally carted back to their parishes, or at least to another parish as these quotes indicate: "Gave a travelling woman big with child to depart the place'...'Itt heaven to a poore woman

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<sup>63</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 21, *Journals and Diaries*, IV, W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 333.

<sup>64</sup> E.g., M. Douglas Meeks, *The Portion of the poor: Good news to the poor in the Wesleyan tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995); Richard P. Heitzenrater. *The poor and the people called Methodists, 1729-1799* Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002); Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. *Good news to the poor: John Wesley's evangelical economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

<sup>65</sup> Heitzenrater, *The Poor*, 9-10.

<sup>66</sup> ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to social Social Sciences, *Language surrounding poverty in early modern England: constructing seventeenth-century beggars and vagrants* (Lancaster University: Lancaster, England, 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Heitzenrater, *The Poor*, 18.

that was in labor carrying of her away' ...' "For getting a breat belly'd woman with Child out of the parish."<sup>68</sup> Jonas Hanway, who became of "governor and director of the poor of a parish," came to see the office of parish officer in a "contemptuous light."<sup>69</sup> He concluded that the general mistreatment of pregnant women and children created a, "...current of the bad opinion prevailing among the common people, namely, *that parish officers never intend that parish infants should live.*"<sup>70</sup>

The internal migration to the cities created conditions and needs that Methodist societies could meet by recreating the sense of extended family for support and by replacing the social safety net once provided by the parish church. It should not be surprising that the reforming of poor laws was driven by the desires and decisions of the wealthy and resulted in the "conceptualization, classification, criminalization, and perpetuation of poverty" and not the needs of alleviating the suffering of the poor. Yet, this provided Methodism with opportunity for ministry.<sup>71</sup>

Neither should it be a surprise that with the strongest language possible Wesley referred the attitudes of the wealthy toward the poor as an "execrable villainy," a phrase that he would also use to describe slavery. The result of this "execrable villainy" were people who suffered want and "lacked the necessities of life."<sup>72</sup> In other words, they lacked the capability to thrive as a result of economic deprivation. They were not "poor because they are idle."<sup>73</sup>

There was certainly hunger but not due to famine. In his treatise, *Thoughts on the present scarcity of provisions*, Wesley argued that hunger was due largely from so much grain going to distillers, too many coaches with an excess of horses who had to be fed, the land that was once used to raise cattle was being used to breed horses, and taxes are too high due to national debt. In short, the poor were hungry to satisfy the luxurious desires of the rich.<sup>74</sup>

Eventually Methodism became a victim of its own success and the tendency of upward mobility. *The Use of Money* is perhaps the most quoted of all his sermons because it can be remembered three pithy points: earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. The problem was that Methodists were attentive to the points of "earn" and "save" but conveniently developed amnesia regarding the "give" part, resulting in the embourgeoisement of Methodism. As Maddox has pointed out in the economy of Adam Smith the surplus of capital was the

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<sup>68</sup> In, Dorothy Marshall, *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century: A Study in Social and Administrative History* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 212.

<sup>69</sup> Jonas Hanway, *Letters to the guardians of the infant poor to be appointed by act of last session of parliament...* (London: A. Millar, 1767), 1-2.

<sup>70</sup> Jonas Hanway, *Letters on the importance of the rising generation of the laboring part of our fellow-subjects; being an account of the miserable state of the infant parish poor; ... With political, moral, and religious observations on the education and instruction of the poor, marriage, and population* (London: A. Millar, 1767) 1:106, italics in the original. Curiously enough he also published, *An earnest appeal for mercy to the children of the poor manufacturing towns, and rendering the children of the poor in general pious, useful, and good subjects* (London: J. Dodsley, 1766); also, *Defects of the police. The cause of immorality and the continual robberies committed, particularly in the about the metropolis...with various proposals for preventing hanging and transportation* (London: J. Dodsley, 1775).

<sup>71</sup> Heitzenrater, *The Poor*, 25.

<sup>72</sup> Heitzenrater, *The Poor*, 27.

<sup>73</sup> *Journals and Diaries III*, 3:445

<sup>74</sup> John Wesley, *Thoughts on the present scarcity of provisions* (London: R. Hawes, 1773).

“foundation of economic well-being, but to Wesley it was a mortal sin.”<sup>75</sup> If it can be said that Wesley was a capitalist, but must argue more forcefully that he was a “sanctified capitalist” who believed that money was to be earned and saved only so it can be given away and this was a spiritual discipline of the sanctified. The church cannot wait for the “nation” to do this through economic redistribution and taxes. The hands that handled “mammon” should wear the gloves of sanctifying grace.

The accumulation of Methodist wealth caused Wesley to lament,

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out... It nearly concerns us to understand how the case stands with us at present. I fear, wherever riches have increased, (exceeding few are the exceptions,) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. (*Thoughts upon Methodism*, 1786)<sup>76</sup>

James Lackington is often used as a case study exemplifying the fears Wesley expressed here and became an example of the threat that wealth posed to Methodism.<sup>77</sup> Lackington was self-educated, an ex-cobbler and Methodist who, with a loan of £5 from his Methodist Society lending-stock, set up business in Finsbury Circus as a second-hand bookseller and modernized the book trade by standardizing prices, issuing catalogues and pioneering cut-price remainder-selling. It was the marketing strategy of “pile them high and sell them cheap” where “small profits do great things.”<sup>78</sup> By 1791 he was selling 100,000 volumes a year with an annual profit of £5,000 a year. He eventually became disillusioned and critical of Methodism and its preachers

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<sup>75</sup> Randy Maddox, “‘Visit the poor’ John Wesley, the poor, and the sanctification of believers” in, *The Wesleys and the Poor: The Legacy and Development of Methodist Attitudes to Poverty, 1729-1999* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 62.

<sup>76</sup> *Arminian*, (February 1787), 315-317; *Works* (Jackson), 7:315-17.

<sup>77</sup> See, James Lackington, *Memoirs of James Lackington: Who from the humble station of a journeyman shoemaker, by great industry, amassed a large fortune, and now lives in a splendid style, in London. : Containing, among other curious and facetious anecdotes, a succinct account of the watch-nights, classes, bands, love-feasts, &c. of the Methodists; with specimens of Mr. Wesley's and Mr. Whitfield's [i.e., Whitefield's] mode of preaching, and the means made use of by them in propagating their tenets.* (Newburgh [N.Y.]: Printed by D. Denniston, for J. Fellows, New-York, 1796). He attributes much of his success to the discipline of Methodism, but sadly becomes an example of earning and saving, but not giving all you can. On the other hand, this provides an insider's view of a class-meeting, James Lackington, *Memoirs of the forty-five first years of the life of J. Lackington*, (London: J.D. Dewick, 1803), 60-76, (and an account of his Wesley's death and what followed) 196-198.

<sup>78</sup> See, James Lackington, *Second part of Lackington's catalogue for 1787; consisting of about thirty thousand volumes...The whole selling...* (London: At his shop, Moorfields, 1787). He lists 3 of Wesley's books in this inventory.

and left the society. Lackington's upward mobility was the result of an individual effort rather than the result of the collective effort of the society.

Samuel Johnson had men like Lackington in mind when he commented "...men are every day starting up from obscurity to wealth."<sup>79</sup> This is not to suggest that social climbers would have been welcome on the social ladder since the rungs of the ladder were carefully graded and closely guarded.

There were certainly attitudes toward the poor counter to Wesley's. Frederic Morton Eden concluded, "The miseries of the labouring poor arise less from scantiness of their income (however much the philanthropist might wish it to be increased) than from their own improvidence and unthriftiness."<sup>80</sup> The agriculturalist Arthur Young would insist, "Everyone but an idiot...knows that the lower class must be kept poor or they will never be industrious."<sup>81</sup> Wesley would respond to such opinions,

Has poverty nothing worse in it than this, that it *makes men liable to be laughed at?*...God pronounced it as a curse upon man, that he should earn [food] 'by the sweat of his brow...Is it not worse for one, after a hard day's labour, to come back to a poor, cold, dirty, uncomfortable lodging, and to find there not even the food which is needful to repair his wasted strength?'<sup>82</sup>

For Methodists, care of the poor went well beyond any idea of an option, preferential or otherwise. It was obligatory. The stewards of the societies would have had the greatest personal involvement with the poor. Gareth Lloyd writes,

John Wesley expected a great deal from his followers in terms of commitment, not just spiritual but also material. He had a strict definition of wealth, namely, the possession of many beyond what was needed for food and clothes with a little left over. He also declared that retention of such surplus sums for personal use amounted to theft from God. Wesley, therefore, saw nothing wrong in expecting his followers to give unsparingly, even when most people would have regarded them as poor themselves.<sup>83</sup>

There were five target groups Wesley sought to assist: 1. Widows and orphans who made up the helpless; 2. The able poor, who were underemployed by providing job training to give them more marketable skills, and by micro-lending for struggling merchants; 3. The children, by providing them with schools for education; 4. Uneducated adults by providing cheap books; 5. The sick and infirmed by providing health clinics in London, Bristol, and Newcastle.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*...2 vols. (New York: Harper Brothers), 1:219.

<sup>80</sup> Frederic Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor: or an history of the laboring classes in England...together with parochial reports relative to the administration of work-houses*...3 vols. (London: J. Davis, 1797), 1:

<sup>81</sup> In, Pavla Miller, *Transformations of patriarchy in the west : 1500-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 174.

<sup>82</sup> "Heaviness through manifold temptations," *Sermons*, 2:227-228.

<sup>83</sup> Gareth Lloyd, "Eighteenth-Century Methodism and the London Poor," in *The Poor and the People Called Methodist, 1729-1999*, Richard Heitzenrater, ed. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 126.

<sup>84</sup> Lloyd, 34.

Wesley's activism where poverty was concerned was expressed as a deep involvement with the poor and their conditions by seeking to alleviate the suffering of poverty. He got the "prepositions" of ministry correct: his was ministry *with* the poor and not just *to* the poor. His shortcoming was not attempting to address the issue of poverty either politically or economically.

### Wesley on Slavery

Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a "law" in our colonies that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this? (Letter to William Wilberforce, February 24, 1791)<sup>85</sup>

Wesley's first encounter with slavery in Charleston was well documented in his journal through a carefully constructed narrative and interviews. He went as a missionary to the indigenous peoples of Georgia and through his interviews of them the doctrine of original sin was reaffirmed, dispelling any "myth of the noble savage" that could be argued from Locke's epistemology of the "tabula rasa." He later recounts this experience as an argument in the *Doctrine of Original Sin, According to the Scripture, Reason, and Experience* (1757). Although at this stage in its history the colony in Georgia was not successful in exploiting the labor of either the poor or pardoned prisoners which would soon become the motivation for turning Georgia a slave colony, so Wesley journeyed to Charleston to encounter slavery.

His interviews of enslaved Africans were also well documented.<sup>86</sup> Through their conversations Wesley seemed to be exploring their humanity and is convinced that they are human beings. But why would he have reason to doubt this? Obviously, there were people who wanted to argue otherwise. The implications of the confirmation of their humanity should be evident. If human, they were created in the image of God. He preached his first university sermon in St. Mary's in November of 1730 and deals with the "prime issue of Christian anthropology."<sup>87</sup> His Georgia experiences were the first hard cases to really test his theological anthropology and he left Georgia with his doctrine of original sin reinforced and realized there were ethical implications for the image of God, eventually concluding that slavery was an execrable "sum of all villainy."

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<sup>85</sup> *Letters*, Telford, 8:265.

<sup>86</sup> *Journal and Diaries I*,

<sup>87</sup> *Sermons IV*, Sermon 114, "Introductory comment," "The Image of God."

*Anthony Benezet (1713-1784)*- The second development of note was Wesley's reading of the Quaker, Anthony Benezet's work on slavery, February 12, 1772. After finishing the book Wesley wrote,

...I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the 'slave trade.' I read of nothing like it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern. And it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries.<sup>88</sup>

Almost immediately Wesley wrote Benezet thanking him for his work and offered to help Granville Sharp in the work of abolitionism.<sup>89</sup> Two years later Wesley extracted Benezet's work, added his own thought, and publish it as, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774). Benezet's influence went well beyond Wesley and extended to included Absolom Jones (whom Benezet had taught) and Richard Allen (whom he had influenced), representing three emerging denominations, Methodism, the Episcopal Church, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>90</sup> It would be Jones and Allen who would walk out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, an event that led to Allen working to start the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Before publication of *Thoughts upon Slavery* Wesley sent a draft to Granville Sharp, who replied December 20, 1773 and complimented Wesley on the concise and accurate nature of the work with a powerful argument.<sup>91</sup> Unfortunately, not much more can be said here about the nature of their relationship apart from Wesley's support of Sharp's work in the abolitionist movement. One way to find out how wide spread Wesley's influence may have been is to track the phrase, "sum of all villainies." After reading Anthony Benezet's anti-slavery work Wesley succinctly summarized his views on the issue with a single phrase and denounced slavery as "that execrable sum of all villainies," which appeared in his Journal, February 12, 1772. The "sum of all villainies" became a catchphrase for abolitionists in America and England and was widely used by clergy, academics, and politicians to describe and denounce slavery, and can be found in the work of figures such as Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and James Sloane.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 22, *Journals and Diaries*, V, W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 307.

<sup>89</sup> Frank Baker, "The origins, character, and influence of John Wesley's 'Thoughts upon Slavery,'" *Methodist History* January 1(1984), 78-79.

<sup>90</sup> Maurice Jackson, "Benezet, Anthony" *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1619-1895: From the Colonial Period to the Age of Frederick Douglass*, edited by Ed. Paul Finkelman. *Oxford African American Studies Center*, <http://www.oxfordaasc.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/article/opr/t0004/e0053> (accessed Wed 11 July 2018 11:55:21 EDT 2018).

<sup>91</sup> Baker, 82.

<sup>92</sup> For examples of how the phrase were used see, Frederick Douglass, *The anti-slavery movement: a lecture by Frederick Douglass, before the Rochester ladies' anti-slavery society* (Rochester [N.Y.], 1855), 23; William W. Patton, *An attempt to prove that pro-slavery interpretations of the Bible are productive of infidelity / by Rev. WM. W. Patton, pastor of the Fourth Cong. Church Hartford, CT* (Hartford, 1846), 8, 17; John P. Betker, *The M.E. church and slavery, as described by Revs. H. Mattison, W. Hosmer, E. Bowen, D. D., D. De Vinne, and J.D. Long, with a Bible view of the whole subject* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1859), 10-11, 13, 15, 16-17, 30-31; Stephen S. Foster, *The brotherhood of thieves, or, A true picture of the American church and clergy* (New-London [Conn.], 1843), 8, 41; Orange Scott, *The grounds of secession from the M. E. Church, or, Book for the times : being an examination of her connection with slavery, and also of her* (New York, 1851), 60.

*William Wilberforce (1759-1833)* There are several things notable about the Wilberforce letter. First, it is recognized as being the last letter that Wesley wrote and was probably triggered by the last book Wesley read, Olaudah Equiano's self-published book, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or Gustavus Vass* (1789). Equiano's book credited by many in altering public opinion regarding slavery and becomes a paradigm for many subsequent slave narratives.<sup>93</sup> Secondly, the Slave Trade Act and the abolition of the slave trade did not happen March 25, 1807 and the abolition of slavery in British Empire would not happen until 1833. It is notable that Wesley was engaging in a battle whose victory would not be realized until after his death. Thirdly, while Wilberforce figures prominently in the letter the story involves more than that.

Wilberforce was elected a member of Parliament at the age of 21. In 1784 he experienced an evangelical conversion while under a Methodist influence and his pastor, John Newton. In 1787 Wilberforce came into contact with Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, Hannah More, and Charles Middleton and was convinced by the group and others to take the cause to Parliament, which he did by giving notice of putting forth a bill in February 1788.

While Wilberforce was not listed a member of the group, by May of that year Thomas Clarkson organized the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed, consisting of 9 Quakers and 3 Anglicans. The purpose of the group was to collect evidence against slavery and the slavery trade and use it in lobbying members of parliament to change the laws. They met in 1789 and sent out 500 letters asking for testimonies. The Quakers were the first to respond and on August 22 Clarkson notes that two letters were received from "celebrated persons" and one of those persons was Wesley. Wesley's letter was read, informing the committee of the

great satisfaction which he also had experienced, when he heard of their formation. He conceived that their design, while it would destroy the Slave-trade, would also strike at the root of the shocking abomination of slavery also. He desired to forewarn them that they must expect difficulties and great opposition from those who were interested in the system; that these were a powerful body; and that they would raise all their forces, when they perceived their craft to be in danger.<sup>94</sup>

Later, Clarkson writes of a second letter from Wesley.

He said that he had now read the publications, which the committee had sent him, and that he took, if possible, a still deeper interest in their cause. He exhorted them to more than ordinary diligence and perseverance; to be prepared for opposition; to be cautious about the manner of procuring information and evidence, that no stain might fall upon their character; and to take care that the question should be argued as well upon the consideration of interest as of

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<sup>93</sup> See n. 85 in "Introduction, 5. Wesley and His Sources" in, *The Works of John Wesley: The Bicentennial Edition, Sermons I* (Nashville: Abingdon, CD ROM version). I find it rather astonishing that Wesley was reading and learning up to the last moments of his life.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-trade by the British Parliament*, 3 vols. (New Yorks: J.S. Taylor, 1836), 2:62-63.

humanity and justice, the former of which he feared would have more weight than the latter; and he recommended them and their glorious concern, as before, to the protection of Him who was able to support them.<sup>95</sup>

Hochschild has argued, “If there had been no Clarkson, there would still have been a movement in Britain, but perhaps not for some time to come.”<sup>96</sup> Clarkson had read Wesley on slavery and one cannot but wonder to what extent that became part of his motivation for accelerating the work.<sup>97</sup>

Obviously, like his support of prison reform, while not taking direct action himself, Wesley was very much aware of those who were and offered both his encouragement and advice to the reformers. The most significant contribution to the abolitionist movement was without question his publication of *Thoughts on Slavery*. Field has pointed out that, “his 1774 booklet *Thoughts upon Slavery* was not only influential but provides a thought-provoking example of his nascent public theology. Its significance for the contemporary contexts is intensified in that it addresses an early manifestation of globalization which continues to impact upon contemporary societies.”<sup>98</sup> Wesley’s, *Thoughts on Slavery* was indeed an example of Wesley engaging in public theology and it has already been pointed out his work on prison reform is another example.<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps now is a good time to visit Maddox’s admonish against hagiographical and rhetorical exaggeration and caricature, this time in respect to Wesley’s regarding slavery. Jagessar has pointedly raised two issues. First, “How do we resolve that Wesley, on the one hand gave mileage to the view of Black folks’ (Africans’) “peculiar place among the savage peoples”, and on the other hand in *Thoughts Upon Slavery* “advanced the cause of emancipation” by arguing about the equal worth and humanity of the enslaved?”<sup>100</sup> Secondly, “Why, if Methodists still continue to revere Wesley and his theology with its high regard for human dignity and equal worth before God, is racism still prevalent among Methodists? And why, in spite of the work of Black British theologians, is Methodist theology so frighteningly monochrome?”<sup>101</sup> Both of these questions deserve a longer response than what can be given here, and the issues raised by the suggests that perhaps the OIMTS should consider “race” as its next theme.

They are sober reminders that while Wesley’s views regarding slavery were indeed progressive in terms of his context and the mission to reform the nation and church there was still much room for improvement. Having said that in the Wilberforce letter it should be noted that the terms “black” and “white” are not to be construed as racialized language or a reference

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<sup>95</sup> Clarkson, 2:66.

<sup>96</sup> Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), 79, Kindle Edition.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-trade by the British Parliament*. Vol. 1, Published by J.S. Taylor, 1836. *The Making of the Modern World*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6pXtN4>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2018.

<sup>98</sup> David N. Field, “John Wesley as a Public Theologian: The Case of *Thoughts upon Slavery*.” *Scriptura: International journal of Bible, religion and theology in Southern Africa* 114 (2015):2.

<sup>99</sup> Field, 1. While I don’t have the space to unpack it here his 7 point summary description of Wesley’s public theology was well said.

<sup>100</sup> Michael N. Jagessar, “Review Article: Critical Reflections on John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*” *Black Theology* 5(2007)2:252.

<sup>101</sup> Jagessar, 251.

to racial categories. This language is best understood phenomenologically. He his observing the phenomenon of melanin content. These terms are not racialized until the late nineteenth century as a means of targeting groups for economic discrimination. “Savages” is a theological term reflecting the supreme and exclusive nature of Christ and Christianity. I do not think was an anthropological term intended to deprive Black folks of either their humanity or their souls. At the same time let us be clear. Asbury sacrificed slavery (and with it, black bodies and lives) on the altar of church growth and was more willing to kick lay preachers out of the connection for administering the Eucharist than for owning slaves.<sup>102</sup> I think American Methodism would have been much better off if it had been the other way around. What if slave-holding Southerners had been forced out by an uncompromising rule on slavery rather than accommodating slavery and the slavery defending hermeneutic that defended it?

In addition to *Thoughts upon Slavery* being significant to the history of abolitionism and an example of Wesley engaging in public theology. Leon Hynson has also argued that what one finds in the document as well is the beginnings of human rights.<sup>103</sup> Most of the theological ground laid by Wesley in *Thoughts* derived from a robust understanding of natural law.

### Conclusion

Prisons, poverty, and slavery were certainly issues confronted by Wesley. So what strategies can be observed from his activity? First, his primary engagement with each of these issues was through his and local Methodist ministry. Alleviating suffering was their primary concern. Secondly, the alliance he formed with Howard regarding the issue of prisons and the alliance he had with Wilberforce regarding the issue slavery he lacked in the issue of poverty. Alliances with activists and social reformers is essential to the Methodist mission of reform itself. Thirdly, it is essential to be aware of the laws that create social inequity and have the willingness to dismantle them. It seems odd that Wesley did not demonstrate any awareness of the “poor laws” and their critical shortcomings in the eighteenth century, especially when they were ignored or abused by the local parish church. The closest he came to a summary critique of the creation of hunger was in his publication of *Thoughts on the present scarcity of provisions* (1773). Finally, the mission to “reform” is constitutive to a Wesleyan model of discipleship.

To be a Wesleyan theologian is to be committed to an outrageous hope in the optimism of God’s renewing, reforming, and transforming grace of both church and nation. Being both hopeful and optimistic is indeed hard and exhausting work. If reform of the church and nation is to be more than a sloganized mission statement, scriptural holiness must be engaged with the spiritual, political, and social transformation. It has been regularly and relentlessly argued by a variety of scholars that the reforming mission cannot occur without seeing both the spiritual and political relevance of the “Scripture way of salvation.” Acts of piety should not be sacrificed for acts of mercy; acts of mercy should not be sacrificed for acts of piety. One must not be sacrificed for the sake of the other. It is one thing to engage in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the imprisoned, but it is another thing to ask why people are hungry, or naked, or imprisoned to begin with. These questions raised deeply social and political issues that emanate

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<sup>102</sup> Barry E. Bryant, “The Methodist Chimera: The Quadrilateral and ‘Execrable Villainies,’” *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness, Study Guide* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church, 2017), 79.

<sup>103</sup> Leon Hynson, “Human Liberty as Divine Right: A Study in the Political Maturation of John Wesley” *Journal of Church and State* 25(1983)1:57-85.

from the justice issues. Wesley deeply embedded the practice of ministry around concerns for the poor resulting in an amalgam of theology and ethics. Soteriology results in reforming the church and nation because being concerned with social justice issues is as much a part of discipleship as reading the Bible.

Salvation entails the renewal of the image of God and Wesley's scripture way of Salvation was a way of describing how the Holy Spirit works the transforming grace of God in and through human lives. The goal is love, love for God and love for one's neighbor as one's self. To engage in the social and political work of the scripture way of salvation to engage in cultivating spiritual, social, and even economic conditions for human thriving. Humans thrive best when human lives are filled to the fullest of God's grace and the Holy Spirit.

Wesley framed the justice issues in a way that was not in an inherently adversarial relationship in which people get what they deserve, or when they get what is fair, or even when the guilty are punished for their wrongs. In one sense, for Wesley justice is when we get what God wants us to have. Righteousness is about right relationships. To this end right relationships constitute the liberating power of faith and the right use of power in relationships.

To frame justice, right relationships, and the power in such a way is to proclaim,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set a liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.<sup>104</sup>

This becomes the hermeneutical vanguard for addressing the issues of prison reform, the end of poverty, and the abolition of slavery.

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<sup>104</sup> *Journals and Diaries*, I, 46.