This brief paper is an attempt to critique the understanding of the concept of the downtrodden, the poverty-stricken, the sinned against and the sinful people who are depicted as 'masses' in the theology of mission of the founders of Methodism and its preachers, particularly its early thinkers. One must be aware of the historical context of their times of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and America. One should also not overlook the fact that it was a period when a historic mission enterprise was thrust upon by the churches in West on the rest of the world, notably on Asia. This occurred ironically in the wake of the colonial expansionism. The vantage point of this critique is the current sociological, political and spiritual upsurge which is now known as the emergence of a new consciousness and identity of the oppressed people in India who renamed themselves as Dalits.

In the past they were referred to as "Untouchables", outcasts, Harijans or Children of God, a compassionate name to gloss over caste prejudice invented by Gandhi and scheduled caste because they were listed by government to receive benefits. The occupations of Dalits generally centred around work considered menial and polluting by their oppressors of higher castes. It was usually skinning the hides of the dead cattle, leather-working and the removal of human waste. These and some other such occupations in India came to be associated with untouchability. Only recently after some of the Christian dalit theologians trained in the Western styled seminaries in India articulated a cry of protest and anguish on behalf of their brothers and sisters. Lately the word "dalit" has acquired a paradoxical connotation of pride and militance. The term is no longer associated with
the idea of rejection, pollution, impurity and untouchability but has a fresh meaning and a different sense of renewed identity.

Recent theological trends in India have affirmed that Christian dalits need not renounce their painful past in order to lead an authentic and fuller life. A majority of the Christian community in North, Central and South India are from dalit origin of untouchable classes. Thanks to the new theological consciousness brought about by the articulation of Christian Dalit theologians like Bishop M. Azariah, Rev. Arvind Nirmal and the American historian John Webster, the Christian dalits have decided to affirm their broken identity as well as their ancient roots.

There is an emerging new field of reflection and research called "Dalit Theology". Had there not been evangelising by the Christian missionaries in remote parts of India, there would not have been the so-called mass movements and the emergence of Christian dalits. The Church in India would have been much poorer than it is today.

Even though the development of the 'Dalit' consciousness may seem as a singular phenomenon of recent time in India, it was preceded by a subdued and unobtrusive ferment for several years in the modern period. It seemingly burst open as a startling and abrupt phenomenon of the suppressed people suddenly. It is plausible to guess that some of the inspiration behind its genesis might have come from the influence of recent trends of black theologies, Asian theologies, African theologies, Latin American theologies and other theologies of the third world. While there may have been some inspiration from these extraneous factors, the phenomenon of Dalit consciousness in India on the cultural and spiritual scenes is undeniably a unique one. All these influences have added some amount of assertiveness and an aggressive tone to the muffled voice of the Christian Dalits in India.
The term itself is of North Indian origin. It may have roots in the classical languages of India. The root form 'dal' as come across in its current vogue is of Sanskrit origin. It has acquired a richer connotation in course of usage in local dialects and common parlance. The verb form means to split, to crush, to trample and to grind between the two mill-stones. The adjectival form of 'dal' is 'dalit' meaning the one who has been trampled on and who has been oppressed and crushed. This usage has been popularised in the last two decades by an angry protest group known as Dalit Panthers. They are the militant youth wing of the neo-Buddhist movement which itself is a significant religious and social revival of the low castes in India. The Dalit protest expressed itself through the non-conformist voice of protest through poetry, song, drama and other forms of literature among the youth. The new name epitomized not only the centuries of humiliation, submissiveness and plight of the Dalits but also symbolised the anger and the intense rebellious spirit of condemnation of the accumulated shame and oppression inflicted upon them by the high-caste oppressors. This use of the word has also been adopted by other kindred oppressed and marginalised political as well as religious groups. A segment of Christian Church in India is one of such groups. They call themselves Christian Dalit which is a contradictory phrase. Large churches of Christian population in North India comprising former outcasts, and low castes of humble origins who suffered from social degradation and economic discrimination in spite of the announcement of the 'Evangel' by the fellow-church people to them, regrouped themselves under the banner of Christian Dalits. They are found among recent converts in North India, Central India and even among the ancient and traditional churches of South India. Their plight is a sad exposure of the Indian churches' hypocrisy. These Christians find
themselves much better off with their new identity. The 'dalit' label no longer has the stigma of abhorrence, uncleanliness and shame of the past. It expresses a newly acquired spirit of a rebirth and pride in one's ancient roots. In Punjab, the northwestern Indian province touching Pakistan border, Christian Dalits from Churhrs, Chamars, Mehtar or Bhangi, Lalbegi, Dhedh and Sansi and from other low-castes and no-castes, who existed as the unclean, polluted carrion-ester fringe of sub-humanity in the twilight zone of crime and depravity rallied in under Christian Dalit identity. The church historians and mission strategists sensed the presence of this invisible sub-humanity simply as a nameless and faceless 'masses'. In reality, the term Dalit is now the new symbol of transformation of no-people to a people. After millennia of submissiveness as the under-dogs, the Dalit taste liberation, self-expression and self-assertion never experienced before. There is now a spirit and yearning to get loose from bondage imposed through religion, culture, economic, through the complexion of body, language and so on.

To re-consider the biblical and theological understanding and insights in relation to Dalit phenomenon, of the early Methodist preachers and writers, the sermons and writings of John Wesley are of prime importance particularly where he sought to relate the Gospel to the downtrodden humanity. In his time, the waifs, the destitute, prostitutes and women of questionable means of living and repute, the drunkards, the sick, the alcoholics, persons under debt, prisoners, slaves and bonded labour were the starkest examples of the poor and the needy. The early Wesleyan Methodist theology of these people, of their power and their powerlessness was the centre of the teaching and preaching of leaders such as John Wesley, Charles Wesley, John Clayton,
James Hervey, Benjamin Ingham, Thomas Broughton and George Whitefield who were the founding members of the Holy Club. Their pastoral work and ministry among these poverty-stricken masses, broken families, the coal-miners, the sick in distress and the slaves led to the founding of the "classes". This was a significant step in pastoral care and counselling of the poor following the constituting of the Holy Club and the 'Society' of the Methodists. This reflection-action involvement in the life of the poor and for the poor led to the crystallization of Methodist theology of people. This also set a pattern for leadership development and pastoral care among the people who were the precious ones and the vile one; both needing healing grace of the Saviour.

For their theology the main source of theological and doctrinal basis was the Holy Bible. The doctrine of human sinfulness as found in the biblical narratives of the Old Testament was accepted and expounded in simple theological terms. This understanding implied that humanity was perfect before the Fall of Adam as described in the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden. After the Fall, sin became basic to the fabric of human nature. As humanity multiplied, sin spread and pervaded all humankind. There are two kinds of sins - original sin and the actual sins. Original sin is the hereditary human state of sin. No human being can escape from it. One cannot overcome sin alone and by one's own efforts. Every sinner must accept the redemptive grace of the only Saviour - Jesus Christ. The actual sins are intentional transgressions of the law of God. These are the individual and corporate unethical acts which alienate people from God. By "going on to perfection", the famous theological phrase so typical of John Wesley's preaching and teaching, was meant that one was engaged in a constant spiritual struggle to overcome actual sins. It is obvious that these early Wesleyan thinkers were not theologizing in thin air or an ivory tower of academy where the ground
realities of life were far-removed. They were both thinkers and doers of their theologizing. Their reflection was steeped not in a glorified pietism, self-righteousness and exotic mysticism, sanitised and separated from the harsh realities of the sinful world. Their times and situation brought home the blunt reality that problem of human sinfulness was inseparable from society and evils prevailing in it. Their theology had an outspoken relevance to the contemporary social, economic and political realities. Those theologians did not enunciated any new theories of sociology or postulated any new manifesto of political economy based on their understanding of the biblical idea of righteousness of God. The truth is that their reflections and articulations resulted into shaping a uniquely fresh way, the typical Methodist way of looking at the ultimate problems. It was indeed a radical reconsideration and reformulation of human to human, human to nature and human to God relationships. Many global events of historic impact happened during the life time of these theologians. The French Revolution, the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution in Europe happened in their life-time. They did not ignore these but their concern was to make men and women, sons and daughters of God. Therefore no social, economic or political issue, large or small escaped their concern. Their sermons and writings took note of the political power struggle in Europe. They were conscious of the problem of unity, of world market and of slave trade, commerce and economics in Europe. John Wesley denounced the greed for wealth and affluence of colonial America which was tainted with exploitation of the slaves. He condemned the idleness, the greed and lust and the decline of the Word of God in the American colonial society. They condemned unrealistic abundance of food while the poor still starved and suffered amidst the rich.
The thrust of the theology of these early peoples' theologians was compassionately concerned about poverty, and its relationship with economics and moral values. They articulated and applied in the lives of the poor people a practical concept of the Christian stewardship and an ordering of human affairs in obedience to God's righteousness. Their preaching ministry largely addressed the poor and its focus was the salvation of soul, where the fulfilment of the basic and legitimate needs of the body also mattered. They were pastors and keepers of their poorer sisters and brothers the lowly peasants uprooted from their rural moorings and conscripted for hard labour into newly mushrooming factories and coal mines. Their working and living conditions were miserable and beyond description. There were no concern and laws protecting children and women in this society. There were no standards for working hours, wages and employment terms. Vices of drunkenness, theft, mugging and all other criminal and sinful ways of debauchery were rampant among them. The poor hit and exploited the poor. It is amazing that a large number of poor men and women from such a situation heard and responded to the spiritual call of these leaders. It was a miracle that from lawlessness and chaos they were led into social and spiritual discipline in the Methodist "classes" and "societies". These Methodists were staunchly against the evil of slavery and vigorously attacked it. They believed that honest poverty was far better than all the riches gained at the cost of tears, sweat and blood of the fellow creatures. *1

The distilling of liquor, the over-production of beef, mutton, pork, poultry, eggs, wheats, oats and all the food in which the poor had no share was produced in sinful ways and was abominable.
Albert C. Outler has classed John Wesley a 'folk theologian' whom ordinary people heard gladly. Wesley was a popularizer to whom the common people responded with uncommon enthusiasm. Although he was a man of training, sophistication, culture, and letters, he could talk to people in ways they heard and responded to, while others in his day were failing to reach them. He was a working theologian in the sense that his theology was worked out in the midst of the concerns and needs of real people in his day. He cared for people. His theology was always for people, and never placed people at the service of theology. It always served to illuminate their faith and to enable their salvation. The Methodists had the bias that God has had through history "for those on the bottom, for those most in need, for those hurting the most and for those suffering the most."  

They pinpointed the unjust system of society which inflicted and perpetuated suffering in the poor. The conclusion of their theological analysis was that the worldly riches have an inevitable tendency to corrupt people. They yearned for salvation in terms of the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Backed up by this theological tradition and afire with missionary zeal, the Methodist missionaries from the West came to India. The year 1856 marked the arrival of the first missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church in India from the U.S.A. Dr. William Butler and his family travelled by the sea route from America and landed in Calcutta. They moved on to Lucknow, Allahabad and finally came to Bareilly in 1856. Before him, the missionaries of other American and British societies had been at work in these parts of India. Dr. Butler was the native of Ireland who migrated to America as a young man and from there came as a missionary to India. He is remembered as the founder of Methodist Mission in British India. Dr. Marvin Henry Harper, the former Professor of Church History and the Principal of
Leonard Theological College writes that after the 1857 "mutiny" which is now called the First War of Independence, Dr. Butler innocently chose as field of mission that particular area of India which still harboured the bitter memories of the mutiny. The hatred and fanatical opposition of the Indian people persisted not only against the foreign rulers but also against Christianity. Conversions from among the high caste Hindus and Muslims of positions were very exceptionally few. The Methodist missionaries naturally focussed their evangelical concern to those poor and humble people who would willingly receive them. They were in general people of the lowest stratum of society. This fact proved extremely significant in the growth of Dalit-based Church in India. A large number of early converts came from low or outcaste groups. As the Methodist mission consolidated, its number grew through mass conversions. At the close of 1889 the membership of the Methodist Church in India was estimated at 11000. In 1906 it was more than 175000. Dr. J.W. Pickett called this phenomenon a group movement rather than a mass movement. It was characterized by a group decision to accept baptism rather than the disorganized action of a mass of people. From such groups of converts of low origin came the Indian or national Christian Dalit teachers and preachers who were sent back to their own people for evangelizing. Other factors for mass influx were the frequent occurrence of famine and epidemics of plague and cholera. A large number of orphans were received and brought up in the orphanages and the mission boarding schools. The seeds of the present dalit movements were sprouted among the later generation of the descendants of these converts. The origin of the word dalit has already been mentioned. The progenitor of dalit identity is Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a political stalwart and an intellectual who belonged to a Hindu low caste. He rebelled against the stigma of low caste
and embraced Buddhism. He spear-headed a revival in India called neo-Buddhist movement but his followers adopted the name Dalits as they came from the depressed castes of Hinduism. Similarly, a large section of Indian Christians with their roots in lower castes of Hinduism before their conversion mobilised themselves as Christian Dalits. Some of them, particularly in South India still faced discrimination based on caste distinctions from their fellow Christians who claimed nobler 'caste' background.

The Dalits who are a broken, humiliated, despised, and dispossessed people claim that they are the true heirs of the new community called Church because only they have the experience of brokenness. They say that only when the church takes on itself the despised identity of the Dalits, she becomes the body of Christ.

This despised identity is the predicament and power of the Dalits. The Dalits have come of age with the affirmation of the identity as the community identified with the suffering God. The Church will find its fulfillment and mission in solidarity with the struggle of the Dalits.

The Dalits today are not only struggling for human dignity but also against their deprivation from their land and resources. Dalits recognize that political involvement in defence of justice and human dignity is one of the ways of Christian mission. It is interesting to note that the Dalit Christians who are a product of the mission enterprise find resonance in the theology of the early Methodists. It is way beyond discovering one's roots, one's identity and heritage and one's liberation. It is engaging in the mission of God in the broken world of poverty, hatred, disease and death. Besides discovering lessons of history, it is relevant to reflect and look critically at the relation of history
and its bearings on the present. Therefore the Gospel as brought by the Methodist missionaries has a vital and living relationship with the struggle of the Christian Dalits in India.

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