

John Wesley and the Poor: From a Liberation Perspective
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The intention of this essay is to explore the way in which Wesley's doctrine of sanctification could impact our lives. In addition, I will be exploring how this doctrine fills Wesley's understanding of *diakonia* and how this illuminates the work the church is called to do on behalf of the impoverished.

For a clear exposition on what sanctification is, there is no better description than the one offered by Kenneth Collins. Collins states:

Entire sanctification, then, is love replacing sin, love conquering every vile passion and temper. The *imago Dei*, especially the moral image, has been renewed in its glory and splendor. The creature, once steeped in sin, now reflects the goodness of the creator in a remarkable way. There is nothing higher than this, nothing greater than the love of God reigning in the soul without a rival.¹

This definition of sanctification is very helpful. Sanctification as "love replacing sin," as love "conquering every vile passion and temper," and "the love of God reigning in the soul without rival" helps us to realize the significance of love as the pure expression (fruit) of sanctification. Of course, this is what we also find in the first epistle of John:

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us --and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.²

Thus, Wesley clears the concept more so that we are not deceived by a theology that has sought to "spiritualize" everything associate with the language of "holiness," or sanctification. On Wesley's sermon "The Marks of the New Birth," he conveys his understanding that sanctification is bound to love for the other as a clear sign that we are truly children of God.

A third scriptural mark of those who are born of God, and the greatest of all, is love... The necessary fruit of this love of God is the **love of neighbour**, of every soul that God hath made...³

¹See Kenneth J. Collins **The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 177.

²The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version (London: Harpers CollinsPublisher, 1993), I John chapter 3 verses 11, 17, 15-16. See also chapter 4:7-12.

³See Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. **John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 179.

And, on his sermon “On Zeal,” Wesley insists that love is the true mark of true holiness.

In a Christian believer *love* sits upon the throne, which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers: long suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance --and if any other is comprised in ‘the mind which was in Christ Jesus.’⁴

Now, since Wesley did not see love as a metaphysical enterprise, one can see that the clear continuation of love is good works. Therefore, Wesley lift the importance of good works in his sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” where he states:

And the ‘God of peace, who brought again from the dead the greater Shepherd of the sheep’ --Jesus— ‘*make you perfect in every good work* to do his will, working in you what is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever.’⁵

Wesley does not leave room for misconceptions, sanctification, or holy living, is not merely something that happens in the soul, but rather it is something that has repercussions in human life, in history. As he again reminds us in “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law:”

And if thou art thoroughly convinced that it is the offspring of God, that it is to copy of all his imitable perfections, and that it ‘is holy, and just, and good’, but especially to them that believe; then instead of casting it away as a polluted thing, see that thou cleave to it more and more. *Never let the law of mercy and truth, of love of God and man, of lowliness, meekness, and purity forsake thee.* Let this continually lead thee to the atoning blood,... and thou art ‘filled with the fullness of God.’⁶ (Christian perfection).

And,

While thou seekest God in all things thou shalt find him in all, the fountain of all holiness, continually filling thee with **his own likeness**, *with justice, mercy and truth.*⁷

It is incredible the presentation of Wesley concerning sanctification. In order to be “filled with the fullness of God,” one may not let go of “the law of mercy and truth, of love of God **and** man.” Then he declares that to be filled of God’s likeness is to be filled “with justice, mercy and truth.” This is why Thomas A. Madron could say:

The process through which perfection is realized is sanctification. Sanctification makes

⁴Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. **John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 468. See “On Zeal,” pages 470-ff, for an in-depth exposition of the theme of love and its necessity in the believer’s heart.

⁵Ibid. p.492.

⁶Ibid. Pp.265-66. Bold and italics are mine.

⁷Ibid. p.241. Bold and italics are mine.

righteousness possible --not good and gracious acts themselves, but the operation of God in us produces these acts. The goal of the process of sanctification is perfection in this life --that is, the perfect possession of the **perfect motive**— love of God and love of others.⁸

This by no means implies that Wesley rejects piety, on the contrary, Wesley does not abandoned piety as part of a holy life. However, he points out something that during his time, and most certainly during our time as well, the church seem to have forgotten. That is, to live a life of holiness one must be committed to be in ministry with the poor and the dispossessed. As Wesley explains: “It is incumbent on all that are justified to be *zealous of good works*. And these are so necessary that if a man willingly neglect them, he cannot reasonably expect that he shall ever be sanctified.”⁹ Or, as Theodore Runyon puts it: “A piety that does not result in works [justice and mercy] is alienated from its source in the redemptive activity of God whose love toward all his creatures cannot remain within him-self, but must be expressed.”¹⁰

The above only leads us to the beginning of the Biblical story were we find God intervening in human affairs. The act of creation is an act where God defines God’s interest for that world that was around him. The community of the trinity (however far from the writer’s perspective this doctrine might have been) is shown here interested in sharing the reality of its own presence.¹¹ Even more, one finds that the Trinity affirms the belief in a God whose true essence is sharing, this doctrine affirms that God is Love. Therefore, if we can affirm that the Trinity’s essence is sharing the love present in the Godhead, then we can affirm with Justo González that:

This love of God, however, is not only something we receive, or something we must praise. It is also something we must imitate, for if God is love, life without love is life without God; and if this is a sharing of love, such as we see in the Trinity, then life without sharing is life without God; and if this sharing is such that in God the three persons

⁸See Thomas A. Madron “John Wesley and Economics.” **Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition**. Theodore Runyon, Ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 105-106. In his most recent work, **The New Creation**, Professor Runyon makes the assertion that “Faith working by love,’ is the root of all goodness and holiness. This is a fundamental reorientation in Wesley’s understanding of his relationship with God, which developed in the spring of 1738, and is not easily reducible to the one event of May 24,” p.54. See also his section on *Roman Catholic Mysticism*, pp.212-213.

⁹Ibid. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (1991), 377. See also p.374, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” p.489; “Upon Our Lord Sermon on the Mount,” p.252. See also Kenneth Collins, **The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley’s Theology**. “If, for example, faith does not produce obedience to the moral law of God, works of charity and mercy, and holiness, it is clear to Wesley, at least, that such is a dead and not a living faith”(162).

¹⁰See Theodore Runyon **Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), p.41.

¹¹See M. Douglas Meeks, **God The Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). “God is rather a community, a community of persons united in giving themselves to each other and to the world,” p.111.

are equal in power, then life without such power sharing is life without God.¹²

González goes a little further to say that:

This must be carried beyond the purely individual, and therefore those of us who believe in the God who is love, in the Triune God, must also affirm that a society --or a church— in which such love is not manifest is a society --or a church— without God.¹³

Out of this loving community creation emerges and human history begins. God's acts of sharing with his creation his own essence are witnessed in the first few chapters of the story of Genesis. On the other hand, after the fall one can see how God's acts of intervention in human history began. In the chapters following the creation and fall, we find that the God of Genesis is presented as a God who intervenes in history again, and again.

It is thus, from this intervention of God in human affairs, that we find how the story that gives life and meaning to a band of wondering tribes is found in the book of Exodus. This story is the paradigm for God's intervention with his people.¹⁴ It is in Exodus where God intervenes in history in a very dramatic and powerful way to bring liberation to a band of slaves, a band of nobodies. We can affirm that this story clearly serves as the paradigm to understand the Biblical narrative of God's continuing attempts to liberate the oppressed and disinherited. Thus the history of the Hebrews revolves around God's attempts to bring humanity to be in communion with him and one another, that is, to be in his will (Exodus 20-40, the same is found in the story of Joshua in Shechem --24:1-28-- where a covenant agreement was reached with the same intent and purpose as in the first five books of the Bible).

Later we find that after much sin and apostasy of the people, God again intervenes in history to save his people and to bring them back home safely (see Isaiah 1-10 where the people's sins are exposed and later we find God's promise of forgiveness and restoration --chapters 50 to 65--, Amos 9:11-15, Ezekiel 36:26-28, Zechariah 8-10:12). Thus we can say that God's actions in human history, as illustrated by the movement of God's intervention with the Hebrew people was a history of separation due to sin, and of reconciliation due to God's unfailing love.

Notwithstanding, the greatest manifestation of God's intervention in human affairs came to us in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, where the above is clearly illustrated. This is why Pablo Richard

¹²See Justo González, **Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 115.

¹³Ibid. p.115.

¹⁴See Hans Schelkshorn's article, "Discourse and Liberation: Toward a Critical Coordination of Discourse Ethics and Enrique Dussel's Ethics of Liberation," in **Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology** (Vol. 5, No. 2, November 1997), where the connection to the Exodus is lifted as the authentic paradigm for biblical liberation (58-61).

can affirm that “Jesus, as the fullness of the Father’s revelation, is the perfect hermeneutical key in order to see God in history. Jesus inaugurates a new time where God’s communication [*koinonia*] with his people is more abundant.”¹⁵

Therefore, what is most significant about Jesus’ story is that in all previous acts of God’s intervention in history (human affairs), God intervened in history from above, from the outside, through intermediaries. This time “the [logos] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father’s only son... (John 1:14).” No longer could we speak of a God that is out of history separated from history due to his “holy” status of transcendence because this God “emptied himself, taking the form of a [household] slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death --even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8).” Him in whose life “the whole fullness of deity dwells” (Colossians 2:9) disregarded such position just to bring us the good news of God’s salvation, of God’s reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). This is how we can see why “the fundamental logic of the economy of God is that Jesus Christ is the *charis* (which means both gift and grace), the unexcelled generosity by which God has gifted us with God’s own life in order to redeem us from the nothingness of death, and that this gift is what obligates, moves, and empowers our lives for serving life against death in the world.”¹⁶ All that, just to bring us closer to him and to each other.

It is this story of God’s interventions in human history what gives us the clear idea about the responsibility to incarnate in our lives the example of God’s interest in human affairs. As John Wesley so eloquently stated in his sermon on “The Marks of the New Birth:”

Accordingly the commandment written in the hearts of all those that love God is no other than this, ‘As I have loved you, so love ye one another.’ Now ‘herein perceive we the love of God, in that He laid down his life for us. We ought,’ then, as the apostle justly infers, ‘to lay down our lives for our brethren’ (I John 3:16).”¹⁷

Therefore, we cannot speak of a God that is transcendent, immutable, disconnected from human suffering and pain because this God loves us so much that he came to be with us in order to

¹⁵See “Lectura Popular de La Biblia en America Latina: Hemenéutica de la Liberación.” **Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana**, 1 (1988): 36.

¹⁶Meeks, **God the Economist**, 119. See also Harold J. Recinos’s **Who Comes in the Name of the Lord: Jesus at the Margins**, where he states that in God’s gift “...too may have forgotten that the cross points to the experience of rejection. Jesus on the cross died as one who was rejected by the law, society, and religion. All of society’s rejects and outcast look to the cross that condemns their status as nobodies and empowers them to be fully human in Jesus” (62).

¹⁷ See Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. **John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 179.

reconcile us to himself. Thus, we can echo the words of Douglas Meeks when he said: “Who God is we know through the story of Jesus, which is continues with the story of Israel and ultimately includes the creation and the eschaton.”¹⁸ And we can affirm with J. W. Hill that “[t]he Trinity is thus the conceptual framework for understanding that the history of Jesus crucified and raised is the history of God.”¹⁹ This is the God, I will dare say, present in the most recent movement of theological enterprise: liberation theology.

However, to the modern reader it might be odd that about two hundred years ago there was a theological and pastoral movement exposing very similar propositions about God and Christian responsibility that are so similar to liberation theology. This movement was the Methodist’s movement that John and Charles Wesley began more than two centuries ago.

This theology of incarnation presents to us the most significant locus of liberation theology, that is to say, that God is with the poor, the oppressed, and the disinherited; “God’s preferential option for the poor.” Likewise, we find in Wesley that the theme of the “preferential option for the poor” takes a central role in his understanding of God’s act of salvation. As Ted Jennings so eloquently put it:

But for Wesley, concern for the poor could not be something peripheral. Thus it became a critical test for the appropriateness of other activities of the Christian community. We have already seen that for Wesley the significance of the Methodist revival had to do with its concentration on the poor. Even the work of evangelization must meet the test: How does it benefit the poor?²⁰

And,

From Wesley’s practice, we may learn that solidarity with the poor is not one program among others, however important, but is the norm of all activity of the people called Methodists, of those who seek to embody scriptural Christianity.²¹

Now, how does this focus play out in Wesley’s theology? How are we directed to achieve this goal? For that we must see Wesley. In Wesley’s sermon “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, VIII,” we find some good clues on how we are directed towards the poor.

Wesley said:

Be ye *‘ready to distribute’ to everyone according to his necessity*. Disperse abroad, give

¹⁸See M. Douglas Meeks, **God The Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 71.

¹⁹See J. W. Hill, **The Three-Personnel God: The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation** (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1982), 172. As cited in Meeks, p. 71.

²⁰See Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., **Good News to the Poor: John Wesley Evangelical Economics** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 63.

²¹Ibid. 66

to the poor: deal your bread to the hungry. Cover the naked with a garment, entertain the stranger, carry or send relief to them that are in prison. Heal the sick; not by miracle but through the blessing of God upon your seasonable support. *Defend the oppressed, plead the cause of the fatherless, and make the widow's heart sing for joy.*²²

These words from Mr. Wesley are very telling, especially when one reads “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” where Wesley makes a powerful declaration: “The rich, the honorable, the great, we are thoroughly willing (if it be the will of our Lord) to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcast of men.”²³ It is clear that Wesley’s emphasis on the poor was not just a modality or a fad, but rather, the core of the movement. Wesley’s disdain for the wealthy and love for the poor could not have been better expressed by one of his disciples as it was from one of his adversaries. In a letter written by the Duchess of Buckingham to the Countess of Huntingdon she puts Wesley’s emphasis on the poor in the “right” light.

I thank your ladyship for the information concerning the Methodist preachers. Their doctrines are most repulsive, and strongly tincture with the impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavoring to level the ranks, and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have the heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting, and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiment so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.²⁴

Wesley’s commitment to the poor comes out of the love that God, through Jesus Christ, has shared with us. As the Apostle Paul declared: Freely received, give freely. This giving out of joy is the sign that shows that we are saved. As Wesley stated in “The Mystery of Iniquity:”

They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine, and in the fellowship... And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions, and parted them to every man, as every man had need. Neither said any of them aught of the things which he possessed was his own. Neither was there any among them that lacked...²⁵

²²See Outler and Heitzenrater, **John Wesley’s Sermons**, 252. Italics mine.

²³As quoted in Jennings (1990), p.49.

²⁴As quoted in Donald W. Dayton, “Good News to the Poor: The Methodist Experience After Wesley.” **The Portion of The Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition**. M. Douglas Meeks, Ed. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 69.

²⁵See **The Works of The Rev. John Wesley, A.M.** (Vol. VI, London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, (1900), “The Mystery of Iniquity,” 255. See also Acts 2:43-4:37. For an in-depth exposition of the early fathers’ understanding of wealth, the use of money and the preferential place of the poor in the life of the church see Justo González’ work **Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of money** (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990). Especially chapters 2 to 4.

The above shows us how important was for the early church and for John Wesley the idea of ministering to the poor, the dispossessed, and the marginalized. This argument then lead us to Wesley's understanding of diakonia. *Diakonia* is a consequence of the new life in Christ. In *diakonia* a person incarnates the message of the Gospel, and brings it to fruition. The expression is best illustrated by its use in the book of Acts. In the Acts of the Apostles we find the first group of deacons (term that was used to illustrate their office) are those who will attend the needs of the poor (of the widows, in the text --Acts 6:1-2). The term, however, expanded its definition to then include not just a specialized group of people in the church, but rather, to signify the ministry of Jesus himself, therefore, it signifies the ministry of the church. That is to say, that the church is called to serve.

Every member of the household of God is called to serve those who are in need around us (Matthew 25). As Orlando Costas eloquently describes it for us:

The New Testament describes the diaconal mission of the church as that of serving the poor, the dispossessed, and the oppressed. These are widows, orphans children, prisoners, strangers, the thirsty and the hungry --in short those who lack materially what is essential for life. Evangelization incorporates the ministry of service without taking away its authenticity or undermining its evangelical legitimacy. Service complements the process of communication and reception of the Gospel until implicit faith becomes explicit and incipient faith is transformed into a mature faith.²⁶

Perhaps, in a more drastic way, Meeks explains to us who are the *diakonos*. This is not about just anyone, he or she that wants to serve God has to be clear about the implications for his/her life, since Meeks calls them the "martyr of Jesus."²⁷ Those who are baptized enter in this special relationship where his or her life is given over to God's distribution of life through the 'standing up' community. Giving up one's life to God, becoming God's diakonos, brings us closer to God so that we may become "housekeeper," "homemaker," "the steward," "the diakonos, or the household slave."²⁸

Therefore, this brings us back to what was stated earlier, that is, Jesus was the greatest example of *diakonia*. Jesus became the "household slave" so that we could fallow his example (Philippians 2:6-7) in the service of God's people (the poor). In this, Wesley was also a true disciple, for we find Wesley at the age of eighty-two still going around "begin for the poor," serving God's children.²⁹

²⁶Orlando E. Costas' work **Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization** (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 140-141.

²⁷Ibid. Douglas Meeks **God the Economist** (1989), 92.

²⁸Ibid. p.92.

²⁹Theodore Jennings (1990), 59.

This is why John Wesley Could say without any fear or trepidation that the entrance of “wisdom from beneath, which was ‘earthly, sensual, devilish’” gave rise to “envy, strife, confusion, and every evil work,” and that this was due to “[t]hat grand pest of Christianity, *a faith without works*.”³⁰ If we do not follow the example of Christ, if we abandon the poor and dispossessed we have negated our faith, our baptismal covenant, and will continue to make “Christianity a pest.” As Alan Padgett so eloquently stated:

We cannot be content with a false dichotomy between evangelism and social action, for example. Evangelism without enacting the Gospel is just as untrue to genuine Christianity as social action without verbal witness to our faith in Jesus.³¹

This, of course, reminds us of the early church fathers who clearly understood that we cannot say that we follow Christ if we are not willing to take care of the poor. The author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* explains to us:

Do not wonder that a man become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing. For it is not by ruling over his neighbor, or by seeking to hold the supremacy over those that are weaker, or by being rich, and showing violence towards those that are inferior, that happiness is found; nor can anyone by these things become an imitator of God. But these things do not at all constitute His majesty. On the contrary he who takes upon himself the burden of his neighbor; he who, in whatsoever respect he may be superior, is ready to benefit another who is deficient; he who, whatsoever things he has received from God, by distributing these to the needy, becomes a god to those who receive (his benefits): he is an imitator of God.³²

Wesley’s experience brought him to the realization that the movement that he started was lacking this true faith because the Methodists were becoming wealthy themselves. This, of course brought some of Wesley’s stronger words against his own movement. Wesley, speaking of the downfall of the Church in his sermon “The Mystery of Iniquity,” deplores how riches have had a “baleful influence” upon the church. He goes on to say:

Not that money is evil of itself: it is applicable to good things as well as to bad purposes. But, nevertheless, it is an undoubted truth, that ‘the love of money is the root of all evil;’ and also that the possessions of riches naturally breeds the love of them. ‘As money

³⁰**The Works** (Vol. VI), “The Mystery of Iniquity,” 259. Italics are mine.

³¹Alan Pagett states in his Introduction to **The Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective** (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press: 1992), 6.

³²As quoted in Justo González’ work, **Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, significance, and Use of Money** (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 96. In Wesley’s sermon “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” he states: “And as he knows the most acceptable worship of God is to imitate him he worships, so he is continually labouring to transcribe into himself all his imitable perfections: **in particular, his justice, mercy and truth**, so eminently displayed in all his creatures.” Albert C. Outler, Ed. **John Wesley** (New York: Oxford University, 1964), 184.

increases so does the love of it,' and always will without a miracle of grace. Although, therefore, other causes may concur; yet this has been, in all ages, the principal cause of the decay of true religion in every Christian community.³³

And, then, reflecting on his own experience within the movement he writes in his article on the "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," that:

The Methodists grow more and more self-indulgent, because they *grow rich*. Although many of them are still deplorably poor, yet many others, in the space of twenty, thirty, or forty years, are twenty, thirty, yea, a hundred times richer than when they entered the society. ...nine in ten of these decreased in grace in the same proportion as they increase in wealth. Indeed, according to the natural tendency of riches, we cannot expect it to be otherwise.³⁴

This way of living the Christian life was so strong for Wesley that the movement that he started and the people that followed afterwards were very strong about keeping up their work among the impoverished. This is the case of people like William and Catherine Booth who formed the Salvation Army after the Methodist in England did not want to acknowledge their ministry to the impoverished.³⁵

People like B. T. Roberts whose "preferential option for the poor" was unparalleled. He was someone who grew tired of the elitism of the Methodist Episcopal Church in North America and formed the Free Methodists of North America. He understood the ministry of the church to be to reach the masses. Roberts explains:

Jesus settles this question... When John sent to know who he was, Christ charged the messengers to return and show John the things which they have seen and heard. 'The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up,' and if all this would be insufficient to satisfy John of the validity of his claims, he adds, 'AND TO THE POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.' This was the crowning proof that he was the one that should come. He that care for the poor must be from God.³⁶

A last example of Wesley's teaching and practice we find in a Methodist preacher who left his Church in California and found the Church of the Nazarene, the Rev. Phineas Bresee. The very

³³**The Works** (Vol. VI), "The Mystery of Iniquity," 265.

³⁴Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. **John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 556. See Wesley's sermon on "The Danger of Increasing Riches," "The Danger of Riches," and "On Riches," in order to get a clearer view on Wesley's views on wealth and its impact on the believer and the Christian community in **The Works of John Wesley**. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Vol. 3. Edited by Albert Outler.

³⁵Donald Dayton, "Good News to the Poor: The Methodist Experience After Wesley." **The Portion of The Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition**. M. Douglas Meeks, Ed. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 86.

³⁶Ibid. p.84.

name of the church he found expressed their “preferential option for the poor,” they wanted to commit the ministry of the church to serve the “lowly Jesus of Nazareth.”³⁷ In the preface of the first Articles of Faith and General Rules of the new Church (1895), he wrote:

The first miracle after the baptism of the Holy Ghost was wrought upon a beggar. It means that the first service of a Holy Ghost baptized church is to the poor; that its ministry is to those that are lowest down; that its gifts are for those that need them the most. As the Spirit was upon Jesus to preach the Gospel to the poor, so His Spirit is upon his servants for the same purpose.³⁸

Today we find people like Bishop Kenneth L. Carter who stated at a consultation in Vienna, Austria:

Ultimately, the church will be judged, not on the basis of the verbal correctness of its creedal statements nor the number of members on the roll. It will be judged by its presence with the poor and marginalized of the earth, for that is where God is. The God of the Exodus and of Jesus Christ cannot be known or served apart from relationships and ministry with the poor, the outcast, the despised.³⁹

This *diakonia*, this commitment to the impoverished is followed by a strong understanding of advocacy, or as Orlando Costas describes it:

A ministry that runs parallel with *diakonia* is the church’s activity as advocate for justice and peace. It is what the New Testament calls *dikaionoma*, which literally means ‘a just action’ (cf. 2 Cor. 9:8-15; I John 3:10; Rev. 22:11). According to the prophetic tradition, this is the kind of endeavor that is the guarantee of *shalom*. In worship the church proclaims the gospel of justice and peace, in communion it demonstrates its first-fruits, and in *diakonia* it incarnates its love. In the ministry of justice and peace the church bears witness to the power and grace of the Kingdom of God as a new order of justice and peace in the public realm.⁴⁰

Wesley was not a man who avoided controversies when controversies arose. Even when people argue that Wesley did not seek political (public policy) remedies to social ills, it cannot be more further from the truth. Wesley might not have been as clear as Costas regarding the implications of *dikaionoma* for the church. However, his practice took him there. We find in Wesley a man who in his commitment to the impoverished sought ways to ameliorate the conditions in which

³⁷Ibid. p.90.

³⁸Ibid. p.91.

³⁹Conference presented by Bishop Kenneth L. Carter, “Is The Church Still of God?” Third International Consultation, Vienna, Austria. March 31-April 5, 1998. See also Donald Dayton exposition on the subject in “Good News to the Poor: The Methodist Experience After Wesley.” **The Portion of The Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition** (1995), Pp. 67-70.

⁴⁰Orlando E. Costas’ work **Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization** (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 141-142.

the impoverished lived. In his tract “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions,” Wesley calls for his government to take actions that could alleviate the conditions of the impoverished in England. He asked government to make employment accessible, prohibition of “distilling,” taxing the export of horses to France and taxing “the carriages of gentleman,” encourage the production of cattle, reduce the size of farms, repressing luxury (whether by laws, by example, or by both), and by paying the national debt. This seems to me like seeking to influence public policy out of his faith and commitment to the impoverished. Wesley did believe in “meddling” in government policies.⁴¹

Another example of Wesley’s advocacy efforts is found in his work against slavery. In his tract “Thoughts Upon Slavery” (published in 1774), Wesley condemns slavery and the institution of slavery. He called the suffering and hardship of the slaves “The blood of thy brother,” to argue for the responsibility that the English had to put an end to that onerous institution.⁴²

For those public officials that were doing a good job Wesley also had words of praise. In a letter he wrote on May 12, 1787 to the Mayor of Cork he praised the mayor for his good policies towards helping the impoverished and the disinherited.⁴³ In another letter he wrote to William Wilberforce on February 24, 1791, not only did he encourages Mr. Wilberforce to continue his work in Parliament against the institution of slavery, he also believed that God had lifted him up to be God’s voice in parliament.⁴⁴

This commitment to change the structures of oppression through any possible (legal) means was what made the societies’ activities creators of groups of people that will not move from the public arena for years to come. As Professor Runyon states: “This is why the leaders of the labor movement in nineteenth-century Britain were largely Methodist local preachers and class leaders, natural leaders experienced in speaking, personal evangelism, organization, and leadership skills, which they applied to recruiting and organizing unions.”⁴⁵

Yet, Wesley did not wait for the government to act. He took things into his own hands. By using the visitation to the sick, Theodore Jennings tells us, Wesley “has provided the Methodist with a practical grounding for what can become a radical praxis. In visiting the marginalized,

⁴¹Theodore W. Jennings, **Good News to the Poor**, 69. See also Theodore Runyon’s **Sanctification and Liberation** (1998), 189-193.

⁴²**The Works** (Vol. VI), 53-79.

⁴³Theodore W. Jennings, **Good News to the Poor**, 69.

⁴⁴See Outler and Heitzenrater, **John Wesley’s Sermons**, 85-86. Also Manfred Marquardt **John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 72-75.

⁴⁵Theodore Runyon, **The New Creation**, 186-187.

we invite them to transform us, to transform our hearts, to transform our understanding, to transform us into instruments of the divine mercy and justice.”⁴⁶ “The point,” Jennings tells us, “is that Wesley does not countenance an anonymous charity that leaves in place the barriers that separate us from the poor we design to aid.”⁴⁷

As Professor Recinos shows us, “[s]olidarity with the way of the cross includes joining with the powerless against the injustices of the powerful.”⁴⁸ In addition, says Recinos,

“a theology of ministry is incomplete without *dikaioma* (historical action that issues forth in partial realizations of divinely mediated peace with justice). *Dikaioma* demands the human beings become more humans by announcing and working for a new social order where the poor and uninvited guests find justice with peace. ...embodiment of this form of ministry means seeking to eradicate economic injustice, hunger, alienation, xenophobia, violence, and other systems of anti-life.”⁴⁹

Wesley was willing to join coalitions with those who oppose injustice. Indeed, “his experience with the poor leads him to apply his view of human rights in such a way as to open the door to a solidarity with the oppressed that accepts the right to rebel against their oppression.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

When I look at Wesley’s work, I am impressed with the way Wesley still speaks to us today. He lived in a time that people say was so different from our reality in the 20th century, and to a degree they are right. However, the scripture clear commitment to the impoverished, as well as Wesley’s commitment to the impoverished and marginalized of his time leaves little room for misunderstandings. The believers are called to advocate for the impoverished, the destitute, the oppressed who dwell amongst us.

Advocacy for those who suffer, for those who do not have a voice is not only important but a duty, a responsibility. This is why the ministry of the church is not complete if advocacy (which means, speaking for those who have no voice --an act of justice) is not an integral part of its ministry. Indeed, advocacy is the political action, the political term that we can use to refer to the Biblical mandate to love our neighbors.

If the church, says Orlando Costas, “would criticize and denounce with words and deeds those

⁴⁶Theodore W. Jennings, **Good News to the Poor**, 58.

⁴⁷Ibid. p.60.

⁴⁸Harold J. Recinos. **Who Comes in the Name of the Lord: Jesus at the Margins**. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 71

⁴⁹Ibid. p.146.

⁵⁰Theodore W. Jennings, **Good News to the Poor**, 95.

who oppress and mistreat the multitudes' right to projects and programs that promote their social, cultural, economic, and political well-being, it would be stating publicly that God is their defender, that those who work against these people are opposed to God and that in the Kingdom of God there is space to live in justice and peace.⁵¹

This becomes ever more clear through "sociopolitical praxis." The work of the church in the public/political arena is not just important but a demand of the Gospel. God did not come to be with us as a spiritual exercise, God came in order to bring liberation to his people. God decided that it takes incarnation, to be among the oppressed and destitute, in order to make a difference. So the church and all of God's people need to be incarnated in the impoverished (God's little ones) in order for true change, true love, true justice, true peace to come through.

For this work there can be no ambiguity in the heart of the believer or the church. As people who have been sanctified by God's grace, we have received our call to serve and advocate for (*diakonos* and *dikaioma*) the impoverished. Either one lives for the Kingdom of God, or one does not. Either one is with God, or one is with his or her own interests. Anyone who wants to be in good standing with the world becomes an enemy of God (James 4:4). Either we are with God, and God's people, or we are not.

⁵¹Orlando E. Costas' work **Liberating News**, 143.

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