

Wesley's Principle for Social Action

by
Frank Baker

During this century there has been an increased emphasis upon the social dimension of Methodist witness. In 1908, inspired by a theology of the social gospel proclaimed by the Baptist, Walter Rauschenbusch, the Methodist Episcopal Church set forth the Methodist Social Creed. It became the nucleus for a similar statement adopted by the Federal Council of Churches.

More recently our brothers and sisters in Latin America have extended this approach still further. In their liberation theology they seek to remove both the dependence of the poor upon the rich and of Christian theology itself upon those who are economically comfortable. They have begun to search the writings of John Wesley for support—and with considerable success.

True, it is unthinkable that Wesley would have echoed in his

day the revolutionary demands of the liberationist. True, he seems never to have used the phrase "social gospel" though he did speak approvingly of "social religion" and "knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness" (preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*).

Wesley's constant emphasis upon the dangers of riches makes many of us in a wealthy society very uncomfortable. Yet, even more intense than his condemnation of luxurious living and unconsecrated wealth is his passionate concern for the poor. Wesley demonstrated this concern primarily in various forms of Christian philanthropy rather than in social reforms. He seems to have regarded social service as a more natural and inevitable outflow of Christian love than using the somewhat tainted weapon of politics.

Yet there can be no doubt that Wesley's social practices were the necessary outcome of his social principles, that his philanthropy sprang from his theology. It all began with the New Testament, of course. The Lord Jesus Christ had taught Wesley to say, "Our Father." And the fatherhood of God implied the brotherhood of man. Wesley's favorite epistle challenged him, "that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (I John 4:21). And Wesley's comment on this verse carefully defined the term "brother" as "everyone, whatever his opinions or mode of worship be, purely because he is the child and bears the image of God. Bigotry is properly the want of this pure and universal love."

Our Lord's two great commands were to love God and to love your neighbor—the latter defined by the parable of the Good Samaritan as *anyone in need*. In 18th-century England the distinctions between rich and poor were as outrageously visible as in first-century Palestine, and one's most needy neighbors were obviously the poor.

The coin of Christianity was two-sided for Wesley and was meant to be spent in two ways: in securing and maintaining personal salvation and in serving one's neighbors. Both separately and jointly these formed the unity of living to the

glory of God, of doing God's will. Charles Wesley captured this duality of the Christian calling as he paraphrased Matthew Henry's comment on Leviticus 8:35:

*A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky;
To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill;
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will.*

For a time John Wesley toyed with the idea of a separated Christian community modeled on early Christian communism—when “all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common.” His comment on Acts 2:45 exclaims wistfully: “It was a natural fruit of that love wherewith each member of the community loved every other as his own soul. And if the whole Christian Church had continued in this spirit, this usage must have continued through all ages.” Wesley never quite forsook this dream. And during his last three decades he encouraged “The Community” formed by his followers for social service in London.

Soon after the development of his United Societies in 1739, however, he deliberately set aside any plans to organize Methodist monastics. He maintained in one of his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, that “Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.” He realized that we must come to terms with the society in which we live, with all its faults.

In turn this implied dealing seriously with the problem of money—gaining it, saving it, and spending it, as good stewards exercising one's stewardship to the glory of God. Speaking of Wesley's “radical rejection of surplus accumulation,” Dr. Albert Outler claims: “On no other single point, save only faith and holy living, is Wesley more insistent, consistent—and out of step with the bourgeois spirit of his age” (*The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 2).

DO GOOD UNTO ALL MEN

Thus, Methodism's ministry to society was, in Wesley's view, inseparable from the preaching of salvation by faith. And he sought to make this clear in the major documents in which he introduced his societies to a skeptical and often antagonistic public. In *The Character of a Methodist* (1742) he stated that a Methodist was not distinguished from others by peculiar opinions, words and phrases, customs, or even by the proclamation of salvation by faith alone.

“A Methodist” Wesley claimed, “is one who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him, one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength” (section 5). After expounding the spiritual implications of this (largely from I Thessalonians 5:16-18), Wesley continues:

And while he thus always exercises his love to God by prayer without ceasing, rejoicing evermore, and in everything giving thanks, this commandment is written in his heart, that “he that loveth God, loves his brother also.” And he accordingly “loves his neighbour as himself;” he loves every man as his own soul (section 9).

A year later Wesley took the same Methodist social principles which he had thus announced to the general public, and summarized them as *General Rules* for his own people. Although he claimed there was only one condition for Methodist membership, “a desire . . . to be saved from their sins,” he insisted that for continuance in the society this must be confirmed by steady behavior befitting such a desire: avoiding evil, doing good, and attending upon all the ordinances of God. Wesley provided an all-embracing understanding of “doing good”:

By doing good . . . as they (Christians) have opportunity . . . of every possible sort and as far as is 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.

To their souls, by instructing, reproofing, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with. . . .

For Wesley the most *immediate* thing (whether or not it was in the long run the most important) was caring for bodily needs—there was no point in making even the most eloquent evangelical appeal to a starving man!

SEND RELIEF TO THE POOR

Wesley's *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (1749) was again roughly divided into halves, the first devoted to spiritual principles and practices, the second to the social. He showed how the Methodist social principles were being worked out in practice, usually with an eye to similar precedents in the early Christian church.

The essential function of his stewards, for example, was "to send relief to the poor" with the added rule: "Give none that asks relief either an ill word or an ill look. Do not hurt them, if you cannot help." Soon the stewards found it difficult to keep in touch with all the sick, especially since none of these ministries were confined to Methodists only. At a general meeting of his London society, therefore, Wesley called for voluntary "sick visitors" and sent them out by couples into 23 divisions of the city.

Medical care for the poor then forced itself upon Wesley's attention, and he "thought of a kind of desperate expedient," and began the first free clinic and dispensary in London. He also sponsored a poorhouse (financing it by faith), in which he housed "nine widows, two poor children, two upper servants, a maid and a man," as well as a school both for basic education, for spiritual training, and for reaching the parents. Another venture which was of immense social assistance was Wesley's "lending fund" from which he was able to rescue some people from debtors' prisons, and to set others up in honest work. He appealed for financial aid to this cause by an adaptation of a line by George Herbert: "Join hands with God to make a poor man live."

This varied social ministry was not unique to Methodism, but it was characteristic. And several of Wesley's social ventures

were pioneering experiments of great value. None of these, or his later developments, formed a blueprint for saving society.

Wesley believed in the leading of the Holy Spirit as he pursued the call to serve his contemporaries. He had no carefully thought-out scheme for social renewal, no political program for Methodism. Nevertheless, he did also urge the honest, diligent, and caring exercise of voting, upon the minority who possessed that privilege. And he was ready to cooperate with other influential leaders, even in the world of politics.

Wesley's most noteworthy effort in this field was his lifelong campaign, first, to improve the lot of the black slave, and then to banish from the earth what he called "the execrable villainy" of slavery itself, "the scandal of religion . . . and of human nature" (Letter to William Wilberforce, Feb. 24, 1791). Even on his deathbed, because Wesley loved the God whom he was going to meet, he continued to love his brothers and sisters also.

Frank Baker is the emeritus professor of English church history at Duke University Divinity School, and the editor-in-chief of Abingdon's bicentennial edition of the *Works of John Wesley*.

Born in Kingston-upon-Hull, England, Dr. Baker pastored Methodist churches in Great Britain for 25 years, and earned his Ph.D. from Nottingham University, before emigrating to the United States in 1960. He has written or edited over 300 articles and 18 books, of which his latest are *John Wesley and the Church of England*; *From Wesley to Asbury: Studies in Early American Methodism*; and the first two volumes of Wesley's *Letters* for the bicentennial *Works* project. In 1969,

Dr. Baker was honored with the St. George's Gold Medal for distinguished service to the United Methodist Church.

STUDY GUIDE

1. Consider the familiar phrase of John Wesley that he "knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness." What does he mean?
2. A key to understanding Wesley is to realize that he had a "passionate concern for the poor." Do you? Does your church? If not, discuss the reasons why this concern is not as strong as it might be. What does the Scripture say concerning the poor? (See Isaiah 1; Amos 2; 2 Corinthians 9; Romans 16:26.)
3. The author refers to Wesley's two-sided coin: (1) maintaining personal salvation and (2) serving one's neighbors. "Both separately and jointly these formed the unity of living to the glory of God, of doing God's will." How do you see this unity expressed in your church today? Is there balance?
4. Discuss Wesley's words about money, "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can" as well as his "radical rejection of surplus accumulation." Are these principles relevant for today's more sophisticated society?
5. Some people suggest there is division between those United Methodists who believe in social action versus those who believe in personal faith. What do you believe are the real issues in regard to social action that divide United Methodists?
6. As you read of Wesley's ministries to the poor, including a free clinic, a dispensary, a poorhouse, schools for basic education, and a "lending fund," what becomes clear about Wesley's commitment to helping the poor? Yet, the

- author notes he had "no scheme for social renewal, no political program for Methodism." Discuss.
7. Wesley was, however, ready to cooperate with other influential leaders, even in the world of politics. How does Wesley's view of the political world compare with that of the United Methodist Church today? What are the dangers, if any, of too close a linkage between the Church and the political world?
 8. One often hears the phrase, "You can't legislate morality." How do you respond to that phrase? How did Wesley respond? To this claim, some have responded, "Yes, but you can use legislation to help protect the poor from exploitation." Discuss.
 9. Consider the *balance* of Wesley the evangelist and winner of souls with Wesley the reformer whose social consciousness helped save England from a violent revolution. Why is this kind of balance, this full-orbed kind of ministry, difficult to attain?
 10. What do you question most about today's forms of social action? What can you affirm most?