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The Image of Christ in the Poor: On the Medieval Roots of the Wesleys' Ministry with the Poor

Synopsis

Ted A. Campbell

This essay extends the author's earlier research on "John Wesley's Conceptions and Uses of Christian Antiquity" (SMU dissertation, 1984; subsequently published as *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* by inquiring about the ways in which medieval Christian attitudes towards the poor might be reflected in the work of John as well as Charles Wesley.

The essay begins by examining the development of medieval attitudes towards the poor, with a particular focus on the exaltation of poverty in the mendicant movements (Franciscans, Dominicans, and others) in the thirteenth century and later, and the *Devotio Moderna* movement of the later middle ages. Three characteristic teachings emerge in this discussion: (a) the salvific significance of the poverty of Christ, (b) the notion of the poor as the beloved of Christ, and (c) the call to a life of voluntary poverty. The essay also shows that some Anglican authors of the seventeenth century (such as Jeremy Taylor) reflected these views, and took them from their medieval sources.

The essay then examines how these three medieval themes appear in the works of John and Charles Wesley. With respect to the first point, the saving relevance of Christ's human poverty, both John and Charles Wesley reflected a kenotic Christology that understood Christ's human poverty as a significant element in the Incarnation. An example would be Charles Wesley's typical juxtaposition of humility and exaltation in the line, "Praise we all our lowly King!"

John and Charles Wesley also reflected the notion of the poor as the beloved of Christ. John Wesley has sermon references to the poor as beloved of God, but it was Charles Wesley, especially in the poetry that has been published only in the last few decades, who gives the clearest indication of this theme,

The poor, as Jesus' bosom friends,
The poor He makes His latest care,

etc. In one place, in fact, Charles Wesley reflected the typically mendicant idea that the poor stand in the place of Christ on earth,

Yes; the poor supply thy place,
Still deputed, Lord, by Thee.

The third theme is that of the call to voluntary poverty, and both John and Charles Wesley reflected this theme. Charles Wesley reflected this idea in some of his poetry, but we find that it is John who most consistently reflected this

notion, both in his castigation of the rich and in his call for Christians to divest themselves of earthly goods. This may be consistent with the fact that John, unlike Charles, can be said to have led a *de facto* mendicant lifestyle.

The essay draws a number of conclusions, most significantly that the connection with Christ's poverty links our ministries with the poor to the religious heart of Christian faith, namely, our devotion to Christ.