John Wesley and "Social Ethics"

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I. Why Wesley Didn't Have "Social Ethics"

The first thing I have to say is that, despite our modern Methodist fondness for addressing the moral questions of our society, our founder John Wesley didn't have "social ethics." I say that because both of the distinctions implied in that term-- the distinction between social and personal ethics and the distinction between ethics and theology-- are alien to Wesley's thought and to his life. Moreover, this language is not merely foreign and a little historically inappropriate: it is misleading and even downright distorting. It follows and reinforces a way of thinking about faith and life that seems natural and almost inevitable to us, because our own thought and language are so deeply shaped by the thought world of the Enlightenment. But we must remember that this was not the way Wesley thought. Enlightenment thinkers, desperate to avoid the bitter religious and ideological conflicts of the preceding two centuries, sought to relegate religion to the realm of the private and personal. But Wesley thought that this kind of compartmentalization, however well intentioned, was fatal, and it was something he protested against throughout his life. You will no doubt think I'm just being fussy and academic about terminology. But precisely because we are inclined by our own culture and education to miscast Wesley's thought, we need to understand the difference between how we think about Christian belief and practice, and how Wesley thought and encouraged others to think. In fact, if we do not come to understand why speaking of Wesley's social ethics is a misnomer, we will not be able to use and extend this rich moral heritage. Instead, we can only try (unsuccessfully) to duplicate it, and we risk perverting it. To try to make plain what is at stake in the language we use, I will begin by reminding you of what has already been said about Wesley under the headings of his theology of grace and his view of discipleship.

My colleague Jim Logan has already talked about the Wesleyan understanding of grace. Prevenient grace is the grace of God universally bestowed which enlightens the conscience and makes possible any knowledge of God. Justifying grace is the pardoning and reconciling act of God which forgives our sins and restores us to peace with God. And sanctifying grace is God's ongoing work within us to bring about holiness of thought and conduct. For many purposes, the distinction between justifying and sanctifying grace in particular is absolutely crucial: it

serves to make clear the divine source and initiative of Christian regeneration and transformation, and to avoid any suggestion that our salvation is the product of, or in any sense contingent upon, our moral efforts. But in another sense, the grace of faith (which justifies) and the filling of the heart with God's love (which is the core of sanctification) can no more be separated than can the sun and its light. Therefore, I want to emphasize a different category: renewing grace. This includes both justifying grace and sanctifying grace together. It is a way of talking about Wesley's understanding of the operation and effect of grace. For grace is not a thing, an object acquired and stored like a talisman to ward off guilt and anxiety. It is the divine activity whereby we are reconciled and reconstituted as whole human beings, and the image of God so drastically damaged in us by sin is restored. When that happens, what we are restored to is sociality: we are initiated into the community created by what Christ has done for all in common, and into the love which both binds and marks that community.

Much has been made of the "individualism" of Wesley's preaching and of the Methodist movement generally, with its appeal to personal conviction and personal conversion, and its emphasis on religious experience. And it is certainly true that our experience of ourselves as sinners is deeply individual, as is the inner apprehension of God's gracious acceptance which triumphs over our alienation. It is to this, the loneliness of guilt and the intensely personal affirmation of knowing oneself embraced by God, that Wesley addressed much of his preaching. But I suspect that this tells us more about the effects of sin than about the nature of God's grace. It is because we are encountered by God in our sins that we are encountered alone; as in the Garden, where the first disobedience leads immediately to the first recrimination, our relation with others is the first casualty of sin. Conversely, the first effect of grace received is to unite us into a body, and to turn us outward toward the world as the immediate venue of Christian life and growth. To be born again is immediately and essentially to be born into a family constituted by God's universal grace.

Doug Strong has made the point that the distinctiveness of Wesleyan theology is in its insistence on the life of faith as only begun in conversion. Conversion is simply the punctuation that marks the start of discipleship, a process in which "God's love shed abroad in our hearts" effectively transforms both our consciousness and our actions. So then, for Wesley the life of Christian discipleship simply is the life impelled by active and universal love. There is no other saving faith than that which awakens the heart in joy and gratitude to God, prompting it to respond to love in love for God and for the neighbor in all her concreteness. Wesley knew and taught this, and in

doing so followed the best traditions of the Reformation. Even Luther, hardly known for teaching "works righteousness", recognized the practical vitality of the faith that justifies:

> When it comes to faith, what a living, creative, active, powerful thing it is! It cannot do other than good at all times. It never waits to ask whether there is some good which is to be done; rather, before the question is raised, it has done the deed, and keeps on doing it. A man who is not active in this way is a man without faith. (Preface to the Commentary on Romans.)

Nor has anyone ever had a greater consciousness than Wesley that the good to be done to neighbors had to be done to them in the situation in which they were found. Wesley did not entertain the illusion that we could bring the good news of God's limitless love to those immersed in suffering without addressing that suffering. How can we expect anyone to understand (much less believe) the news that they are prized and welcomed by God when they are despised, disdained, abused and rendered nearly invisible by the human world on which they depend for identity and for sustenance-- and when the bearer of God's invitation is content to leave them there? For Wesley, the Christian affirmation of the sacredness of human personality (the real reflection of 18th century individualism in his thought) was inseparable from address to the realities, economic, political, social, and technical, which battered and suppressed that humanity and which wreaked such physical, moral and spiritual destruction among the poor.

Wesley knew nothing of our modern distinction between evangelism and social action because the only gospel he had to preach was the good news that in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God has come near to us. In Wesley's preaching the kingdom of God is both inward and outward, both earthly and heavenly, both present and eschatological. Thus he could speak of the kingdom both as "the final renovation of all things" ("Upon the Lord's Sermon on the Mount"), and as the "immediate fruit of God's reigning in the soul". ("The Way to the Kingdom"). The gospel of that kingdom by its nature is both declared and enacted; better yet, it is preached in action and brought to birth in proclamation, and all authentic Christian evangelism in this tradition marries liberating word to witnessing deed. This is the context which we keep in mind as we look at Wesley's constant work with the poor and the despised of the earth, and his involvement in the societal problems and controversies of his day.

II. What Wesley Did

From the earliest days of the Holy Club at Oxford, John Wesley was involved in ministry to the poor: in

their homes, in the workhouses of mid-18th century England, and in the few schools available for their children. Initially, this was part of the program of good works by which he hoped to please God and win his own salvation. Later, when Wesley's encounters with Lutheran and Moravian thought and his own experience of grace had enabled him to abandon his effort to satisfy God, the conviction that bringing good news to the poor was an essential aspect of faithful living remained constant.

The initial means of service to the poor was the same as to anyone else; it began with the preaching of justification by faith and transformation by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and with the establishment of small "class meetings" for Christian growth and nurture. Part and parcel of these meetings (as well as of larger assemblies) was the regular collection of contributions for the needy, whose suffering in this period was dire. These were then distributed, always in person, to those in distress either in cash or as food, clothing, fuel or medicine. When some especially pressing or unusual need arose, Wesley himself would travel to make appeals for the needed funds, often collecting several times his own annual living expenses on such trips which he did not scruple to describe as begging for the poor.

There was also a regular program of visiting the sick that Wesley instituted among the Societies. Wesley himself dispensed medicine and provided simple treatments, seeing as many as a hundred patients a month for extended periods, always at no cost, and with a success rate no worse than most 18th century practitioners. When these measures could not provide care for everyone, Wesley undertook himself to research basic hygiene and home remedies, consulted a doctor and a pharmacist, and gathered this basic health care information into a manual for use in the homes of those who could not afford to consult a physician.

Beside these provisions, Wesley created with his own meager capital a loan fund which saved many from the predatory interest rates of unscrupulous lenders. In a context where the dislocation of small farmers from common land had created devastating unemployment, Wesley set out to find jobs for the needy and established cottage industries where he could to make self-help and independence possible.

Closely related to the grinding poverty and even outright starvation that Wesley saw among the lower classes were the problems of a harsh penal system and appalling conditions in jails. The poorest were sometimes faced with a stark choice between borrowing what they could not repay, and stealing what they could not buy in order to keep themselves and their families alive. Either course could result in prison or worse, since even small

thefts could be punished by hanging, and debtors would languish in jail unless their accounts were paid. Within the prisons, sanitary facilities were nonexistent, as was medical care for those who became infected with contagious diseases. Sometimes whole prison populations would die from an outbreak of typhus. Meanwhile, since prisoners of all ages and sexes were usually housed together, the stronger would often prey upon the weaker, and brutality and exploitation prevailed.

These were the prisons that Wesley and his followers visited with such regularity, the places where they preached and taught and delivered aid, counsel and encouragement to the abandoned and the condemned. They also brought food, clothing, bedding and medicine to prisoners, and provided them with news and messages from home. Not content with seeking to ameliorate the horrors he had seen, Wesley preached and wrote denouncing the state of England's prisons, and sought to analyze the causes of corruption in the penal system and to offer recommendations for its reform.

Besides the lack of basic support, medical care and access to justice under the law, the poor of Wesley's day suffered from the lack of even a rudimentary education. Schools were generally either private or church-run academies, but the children of the poor could neither pay the tuition nor spare the time from whatever gainful employment would add a few pence to the household income. There were a few charity schools for the poor run by religious societies, but these were no where near enough, and dating even from his time in Georgia Wesley concerned himself with educating both his uninstructed converts and the children of the lower classes generally. In England, Wesley established a school for the children of miners near Bristol, followed by others in London, Newcastle, and elsewhere. He himself taught in these schools, and prepared books and curriculum for them in reading, writing, computation and religion. For those many children who worked, Methodist Sunday schools offering both religious training and basic literacy skills were the only available instruction; recognizing this, some of these schools included writing and arithmetic in their lessons.

Nor were Wesley's educational efforts limited to children. Through preaching, teaching and example he instilled in his congregations a great sense of responsibility for the instruction and nurture of new converts to the faith. Class and Society meetings were aimed at fostering an intelligent and reflective Christian faith, and Wesley personally selected, edited and published a series of good books in cheap editions which were both sold and given away. These books included not only religious texts, but poetry, philosophy, and basic school texts; a later 50-

volume Christian Library presented a rich collection of theological and devotional works from across Christian history for the edification of preachers and laity alike. For those excluded from schooling in childhood, Adult Sunday schools also sometimes provided special classes for literacy training and instruction in school subjects.

Complementing all these various forms of practical service was Wesley's public ministry of preaching, teaching and writing about the suffering that he saw and the abuses that caused it. In oft-reprinted sermons that became famous (or notorious depending on the point of view) he attacked the habits and the hypocrisy of the respectable classes, exposing the comforting lies that allowed them to blame the destitute for their own misery. He called upon those with means who professed Christianity to use the resources entrusted to them by God to alleviate the hardships caused in part by their own luxuries. His frequent ministry in prisons gave him an opportunity to expose the barbaric conditions that prevailed there, and expose them he did in sermons, letters to the authorities and Methodist publications.

After 1770, he publicly attacked the slave trade and the institution of slavery itself, decrying the greed that supported it and the cruelties it imposed. After years of seeking to mitigate its harshness, he had come to recognize and to declare the inherent injustice of forced servitude even in its more humane forms. Thus, he appealed to Christians to free their slaves and sever all connection with slavery as an immoral practice. (His preaching and influence led to the decision of the 1784 Conference in the United States to require members to free their slaves and end any participation in the trade.) When his efforts at moral suasion were largely unsuccessful in the public arena, he moved to support the abolitionists' drive for legislative reforms to end slavery and England's prominent role in the slave trade. This is one of the rare instances in which Wesley sought to achieve moral ends by governmental means.

III. How Wesley Thought About What He Did

As important as the wide range of social maladies that Wesley set out to oppose, ameliorate and remedy was the way in which he understood the tasks he undertook and encouraged others to shoulder with him. He was frankly amazed by those who would oppose his work as "unwarranted meddling in issues that were outside the province of the church and its ministers". For from first to last, John Wesley understood and characterized all his work as a matter of preaching the good news to those who most needed to hear it, offering the gift of justification and the promise of holiness to people debased by suffering and sin. If he taught them to read, it was in order that

they should come to a mature, informed, conscious faith and a reasonable, responsible service worthy of human creatures. If he sought to reduce their misery, it was inseparable from declaring to them the welcoming grace of a living and loving God. If he helped them to find jobs or provided opportunities to earn a livelihood, it was to enable them to live decent and responsible lives of diligence, thrift and generosity. If he denounced the burdens placed on women and men by their fellows, it was to declare God's judgment on sin, and God's will for righteousness and compassion among his children. In prison and workhouse, factory and mine, sickroom and schoolroom, and in the public forum, Wesley simply preached the fullness of the gospel to whole human beings in all dimensions of their lives. What we call his "social ethics" was simply the result of a serious and consistent obedience to the gospel as he found it in scripture and in his experience of Jesus Christ.

In all of these areas, Wesley looked for and held up to view the connections between things. His lifelong work with the poor was rooted in an understanding of Christian vocation founded in turn upon a theology of creation and redemption; every person was the object of God's mercy and God's desire for reconciliation and reunion with his fallen creatures. These fundamental equalities of sin and grace were the reality obscured by all social distinctions, distinctions which had no place in the preaching or practice of the church. His work in education was no less "theological". Education could not be deemed a luxury unnecessary for the working class, because it was preparation for the life and dignity that God desires for all whom God calls as rational creatures to a free and loving service. To fail to provide it to children was to fail in our duties of Christian nurture; to deny it to adults desiring to learn was to enforce ignorance and all the ills it entailed. Ultimately, it was to dishonor the image of God in which all were fashioned, and to thwart God's will for his human creatures.

But Wesley did not reserve this kind of analysis for the "theological" aspects of his work. When he confronted problems as massive and widespread as poverty in 18th century England, or the international slave trade, or the decay of justice and respect for law in his own day, he did not stop with condemnations: he searched for causes. He looked for patterns and relationships that explained why problems existed and how they might effectively be attacked. In a 1772 essay called "An Inquiry into the Present Scarcity of Provisions", he sets out to explain the situation of the poor as part of a larger shift in social arrangements and habits. Here is an example of his analysis: Common lands had been fenced off, and farming land concentrated in the hands of fewer and wealthier property owners. Small farmers were displaced, creating large-scale unemployment. This left households in need of

income at the same time that it drove down the price of labor. On top of everything else, the widespread abuse of alcohol and the keeping of numerous horses by the wealthy created a greater market for grain, driving up the price of that portion left for food and leaving the poor unable to buy bread.

Thus, Wesley denounced as "wickedly and devilishly false" the commonplace claim that the poor were poor only because they were lazy or profligate. Instead, they suffered from changes over which they had no control, and from the greed, self-indulgence, and hard-heartedness of the upper classes. Wesley made quite clear the moral and spiritual implications of this analysis, both in sermons and instruction for the members of his Societies, and for the wider public toward whom this polemic was directed. Luxury and the hoarding of resources were denounced as crimes against God and neighbor; even the temperance movement, embraced by the Methodists because of the spread of alcoholism and related vices, had also for Wesley this economic aspect: that it attacked an industry he saw taking bread from the mouths of the hungry.

Perhaps more significant than any of the concrete forms that Wesley's ministry took, or any of the social analyses that he undertook to direct and support it, was the fact that it was not ministry <u>to</u> the poor, but ministry <u>with</u> and <u>among</u> them. Wesley's theology of universal and equal grace, lived out in the egalitarian forms of ministry and accountability in Class Meetings and Societies, gave a unique character to his work. By receiving even the poorest and least schooled of his converts as full partners in the life of discipleship, "co-heirs of the grace of life", by sharing the disciplines and celebrations of the Christian life with them as the people of God, he accorded human dignity to those who had been isolated and debased. In this context help could be received freely and graciously, without the price of humiliation.

Precisely because of this character of his work, Wesley was able to make use of unique experience and insights available to him. Perhaps no other educated person in England in his day had so intimate a knowledge of the day-to-day life circumstances of the poor and those in prison or workhouses. And there was nothing theoretical about his knowledge! When Wesley traveled he made it a practice to go and share his meals with those in the local poorhouse; he himself treated the sick, taught the unlettered, found work for those forced off their land. What he did not know from his own observation he could readily learn of from his far-flung but intimate network of class leaders, local preachers and Society members across England and the United States. In a context where systematic and statistical analysis was nonexistent, Wesley's rich and prolonged engagement with the lives of the poor provided

invaluable "anecdotal evidence" for what was wrong, and what needed to be done to remedy the evil.

At the same time, Wesley turned to the available history, science and economics of his day to understand the underlying causes for what he saw, and to make constructive recommendations for improvement. If the experience of God's grace provided the motive of Christian activity, and love of God and neighbor its form, Wesley believed it was the task of human reason to discern the particular shape of love in a given setting. Accordingly, he studied medicine and consulted with doctors in order to help the sick; he studied the long-term economic effects of slavery in order to answer the arguments of those who claimed it was necessary for the survival of their regions; in short, he sought to understand problems so that he could help effectively both in the personal and the public sphere.

IV. What We Might Learn from Wesley

It is easy to be awed by the breadth, the fervor, the sheer determined diligence of Wesley's practical work among the suffering of his world. But it is not enough, nor is it particularly helpful, to berate ourselves for the relatively pallid and desultory nature of contemporary Methodist efforts to "do justice and love mercy". Instead, we need to recover the way of thinking about and experiencing Christian life that provided not only the impetus but also the spiritual resources for the work of Wesley and his followers. Most of the time in the modern church, the conversation about the heart of Christian faith gets cast as either/or: either Christianity is about worship and devotion toward God, or it is about compassion for the suffering and efforts to improve social conditions; either faith is a celebration of being "washed in the blood of the Lamb", or it is an active commitment to doing the works of God here and now. United Methodism, to its credit, does a pretty good job--not as good as it might, but still pretty good-- at saying it is both/and; Christian life is both worship and compassion, both justice and piety, both glad receptivity and disciplined activity. (Of course, as with all such things, we are better at thinking it and saying it than at doing it.)

But from a study of Wesley's life and thought we might recover something even more distinctive and more valuable: the ability to understand and articulate that receiving saving grace and undertaking works of love are not just natural or even necessary companions. They are the same thing viewed from different angles, at different moments in the process of human restoration and renewal by the grace of a holy God. We might come to believe and to teach one another that we need not and cannot choose between evangelism and social action, or even try to achieve some kind of balance between them, because they are not alternatives, but rather dimensions of a single

reality, the activity of God's grace. And thus we might recover the seamlessness of faith and life as a way of giving concreteness and credibility to our preaching and giving insight, realism and endurance to our social projects.

Through all this it must still be said that justification has a crucial and necessary temporal and, if you will, psychological priority. It is essential that we preserve the understanding that the initiative, the power and the character of conversion have nothing whatever to do us, nor with our best efforts and intentions; they flow forth from the gracious and surpassing goodness of God to Whom belongs all glory. But justification is not for its own sake, but for the sake of reconciliation, for the sake of reunion between the creature and the Creator who (unaccountably, perhaps) longs for our free companionship. God longs to share God's life with us-- and Jesus has shown us what God's life in the world looks like. The reunion for the sake of which we are justified is inseparable from holiness that makes fellowship with God possible, a holiness that cannot fail to reflect God's own character. Understand that this is not a precondition of grace, but simply part of its nature. It is not a rule that light and darkness have no union: it is rather more like a fact. Sanctification-- the living life of love-- is not a requirement of Christian life, it is rather its very substance, the effect of grace received as surely as sunlight warms the surface on which it falls. Wanting to be justified without being transformed, without becoming holy, is like wanting to be a duck without getting wet: it is simply incoherent.

Like Wesley, the only gospel <u>we</u> have to proclaim is the one that announces the Kingdom of God which has come near in Christ and invites us to live accordingly. Finally, we might learn from Wesley to recognize that God's kingdom alone endures, and brooks no challengers in the end. Despite our best efforts-- despite my best efforts-- it is not possible to visit in the Kingdom of God while maintaining legal residence in some safe corner of the kingdom of this world. Wesley's thought and especially his life call into question the possibility of ministering as Christians <u>to</u> the poor and the powerless if we are not willing to minister with them, to minister among them, to minister as those who come to join them in their struggle: not as benefactors, but as friends.