

A Heritage of Social Holiness
Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 25:31-46
April 20, 2008

On the Sunday before Christmas several years ago, a television evangelist was rehearsing the political events of the past year. Things had not gone well for him and others who shared his political values, he maintained. The forces of evil had won too many victories. Those fighting for the right, as he was, were under siege. He completed the message with a financial appeal in light of these circumstances. "Make a Christmas gift to Jesus," he encouraged, "and send it to me at the address on the screen."

Contrast that with these words spoken by John Wesley to early Methodists about the use of money: "...first supply your own reasonable wants, together with those of your family; then restore the remainder to me for distribution to the poor" (contemporary paraphrase). Wesley took to heart the gospel message of good news for the poor. He was passionate about reaching the poor, who were often the unchurched of his day.ⁱ

One of the hallmarks of the Wesleyan movement was holiness in various aspects. The purpose of the Methodist movement was to "spread scriptural holiness throughout the land." Through the spread of holiness, John Wesley envisioned the transformation of the economic and political order. He spoke of holiness of heart and life, both inward and outward holiness, personal and social. Personal holiness is more interior and individualistic, one's personal relationship with God. Social holiness is external and communal, shaped by relationships with fellow Christians. One can't be a Christian alone. It is within Christian community that holiness of life is realized. It is as if the church is a laboratory in which we are held accountable for our thoughts and actions, made to recognize our errors and encouraged toward growth.

As the Methodist movement evolved, social holiness came to be understood as ministries of social justice and works of mercy. This is consistent with Wesley's own ministry in eighteenth century England. The church of Wesley's time "had exchanged its true vocation of mission for maintenance....It had become distant from and irrelevant to the world it was called to serve. It needed to reclaim its true identity as God's agent of love in the world."ⁱⁱ

As students at Oxford University, the "Holy Club" focused their outreach on two Oxford prisons, poor families, the workhouse, and a school for underprivileged children. The Holy Club firmly planted in Wesley the concept of practical love for neighbor. He believed that love was the indispensable condition for all deeds that might be called good.

John's regular practice was to go to the poor and help the 'common wretches,' as he called them, find a sense of self-worth. He sought to give them 'a sense of their power over their own destiny.' They were trained in organizational skills to be their own advocates.

Wesley had a three-part plan for addressing the needs of the poor:

1. Meet the needs yourself.
2. Solicit resources for the poor.
3. Become an advocate for the poor.ⁱⁱⁱ

He encouraged his classes to collect funds, food, clothing, fuel, and medicine for distribution to the poor. He even argued that by letting his hair grow unfashionably long he was able to save money to give to the poor.^{iv} (Letter to brother Samuel, Nov., 17, 1731).

A regular program of visiting the sick was instituted among the early Methodist 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. He researched basic hygiene and home remedies, consulting a doctor and a pharmacist, and gathered this basic health care information into a manual for use by those who could not afford to consult a physician.

With his own meager capital, he created a loan fund which saved many from the predatory interest rates of unscrupulous lenders. As small farmers were dislocated from their land, he set out to find them jobs. He established cottage industries where he could make self-help and independence possible.^v

He opposed the widespread use of liquor not for moralistic reasons as commonly thought, but for economic reasons. Half of the wheat produced in Britain was going to the distilling industry to make liquor. This made wheat and in turn bread very expensive, beyond the means of the very poor. In reality he was attacking inflation. Meat was expensive because gentlemen farmers found it more profitable to breed horses for export to France and meet the increasing demand for horse carriages. Pork, poultry, and eggs were so expensive because owners of large estates were earning more from cash crops than from leasing land to small tenant farmers.

In response to these economic problems, Wesley called for government intervention, increased employment opportunities, a prohibition on the distilling of hard liquor, a reduction in the demand for horses, an additional tax of gentlemen's carriages, and a tax of 10 pounds on every horse exported to France.^{vi}

Another issue of social justice addressed by Wesley was the 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 afford to buy in order to keep themselves and their families alive. Even small thefts could be punished by hanging. Debtors would languish in jail unless their accounts were paid. Prisons lacked sanitary facilities and medical treatment for those infested with contagious diseases. Sometimes whole prison populations would die from an outbreak of typhus. Prisoners of all ages and sexes were usually housed together, leaving the weaker vulnerable to brutality and exploitation by the stronger.

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. In response, Wesley established schools for the children of miners. He himself taught in these schools, and prepared books and curriculum in reading, writing, computation, and religion. For children who worked, Methodist Sunday schools offered not only religious training but also basic literary skills.

Wesley also supported structural change in relation to the evil of slavery. He strongly opposed the denial of natural rights and the pro-slavery argument that slaves were necessary to cultivate crops in hot climates. He addressed ship captains, merchants, and plantation owners. From his deathbed Wesley wrote a letter of encouragement to William Wilberforce, whose story has recently been told in the movie *Amazing Grace*.

This rich heritage of social holiness established by our founder has been continued throughout the history of Methodism. At the General Conference in 1908 a Social Creed was adopted. The church took a stand in favor of "equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life." The creed advocated for industrial arbitration, factory safety, abolition of child labor, reduction of hours of labor, and guarantee of a living wage. These principles served as a foundation for much social legislation of later years directed to the eight-hour day and six day week, workingmen's safety and compensation, social security, unionization, insurance, and retirement.

This is the backdrop for much of the conversation and decision making regarding issues of social justice that will take place at the United Methodist General Conference beginning on Wednesday in Fort Worth. One quarter of the petitions to be considered by the nearly 1,000 delegates relate to social justice issues. They will consider revisions to the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church. The Social Principles state the official position of the denomination on social issues. They are contained in approximately 30 pages and organized into six sections which address The Natural World, The Nurturing Community, The Social Community, The Economic Community, The Political Community, and the World Community. They have evolved over time in light of new information, new biblical and theological insight, and the changing nature of our world. Only in recent years has the church needed to address issues like organ transplantation, stem cell research, or the Internet. These join long-standing positions taken by the church against the use of tobacco and alcohol, against the death penalty, advocating for stronger child labor laws, and the request for a livable wage, among many others.

The Social Principles provide the foundation for *The Book of Resolutions*, published every four years. It contains the official church policy on approximately 200 specific issues affecting the lives of people and God's creation today. The Resolutions offer in-depth information for study and reflection on various social issues. They are intended as a tool to guide the church in responding to issues of concern.

You might wonder why the church doesn't just let us make up our own minds on these matters after it presents neutral information on both sides of an issue. "The United Methodist Church believes God's love for the world is an active and engaged love, a love seeking justice and liberty. We cannot just be observers. So we care enough about people's lives to risk interpreting God's love, to take a stand, to call each of us into a response, no matter how controversial or complex. The church helps us think and act out of a faith perspective, not just respond to all the other [influences] that exist in our society."^{vii}

To offer a timely example as we approach Earth Day, there are 14 resolutions addressing the environment and stewardship of the earth. One of them specifically addresses recycling and, among other things, suggests that "United Methodist agencies and churches participate in recycling programs for paper, plastic, glass, and metal." Every week there are bins for disposal of paper, plastic, glass, and aluminum cans at our church. This weekend we have gone beyond the call and recycled rummage and electronic devices! Well done, good and faithful servants!

There is a story out of John Wesley's student days at Lincoln College in Oxford which illustrates how serving the poor reaps blessings. A porter knocked on Wesley's door one evening and asked to speak with him. After some conversation Wesley noted the man's thin coat, for it was a cold winter night. Wesley suggested that he had better get another coat. The porter replied, "This coat...is the only coat I have in the world and I thank God for it."

Wesley asked the man if he had eaten and the porter replied, "I have had nothing today but a draught of spring water...and I thank God for that."

Wesley, growing uneasy in the man's presence, reminded him that he would have to leave the quarters soon or be locked out. "Then what shall you have to thank God for?"

"I will thank Him," replied the porter, "that I have dry stones to lie upon."

Wesley was deeply moved by the man's sincerity and said, "You thank God when you have nothing to wear; nothing to eat...[and] no bed to lie on. I cannot see what you have to thank God for."

The man replied, "I thank God...that he has given me life and being, and a heart to love Him, and a desire to serve Him."

After the man had left with a coat from Wesley's closet, some money for food and words of appreciation for the witness he had made, Wesley wrote in his Journal: "I shall never forget that porter. He convinced me there is something in religion to which I am a stranger."^{viii}

As the General Conference of the United Methodist Church convenes this week, we will likely begin to hear "sound bites" from the media about issues under consideration. Remember the rich heritage of holiness, both personal and social holiness, emphasized by the founder of Methodism. Let us remember the call to justice heralded by the ancient prophets of the Hebrew people and by Jesus Christ. Let us remember the General Rules of Methodism: Do no harm. Do good of every possible sort and as far as possible to all people. Stay in love with God. Let us pray that we are faithful to the call of Jesus Christ.

ⁱ Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), pp. 46-47.

ⁱⁱ Paul W. Chilcote, "Servants of Shalom in the World," *Covenant Discipleship Quarterly*, Summer 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Craven E. Williams, President, Greensboro College, "Origins: Social Holiness," www.gborocollege.edu/prescomer/holiness.html, retrieved April 14, 2008.

^{iv} Letter to brother Samuel, November 17, 1731. Ibid, Craven E. Williams.

^v Sondra Wheeler, "John Wesley and 'Social Ethics,'" Project on Lived Theology, www.livedtheology.org/pdfs/Wesleyt.pdf, retrieved April 14, 2008.

^{vi} Johnston McMaster, "Wesley on Social Holiness," www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/emtc-paper-wesley_on_social_holiness.doc, retrieved April 14, 2008.

^{vii} *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church* 2004 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), pp. 25-26

^{viii} John Reynolds, *Anecdotes of the Rev. John Wesley*. Quoted by *Homiletics Online*, retrieved April 19, 2008.

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