

In *The Wesleys and the Poor:*
The Legacy and Development of Methodist Attitudes to Poverty, 1729–1999, 59–81.
Edited by Richard Heitzenrater. Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2002.
(This .pdf version reproduces pagination of printed form)

**“VISIT THE POOR”
JOHN WESLEY, THE POOR,
AND THE SANCTIFICATION OF BELIEVERS**

Randy L. Maddox

Few will question the warrant for holding a conference like this one, focused on the concern for and engagement with the poor that was clearly demonstrated by the Wesleys and many of their spiritual descendants. Neither would there be much surprise about discussion of differing models for the sanctified life within the Wesleyan tradition. By contrast, the connection between these two topics that is proposed in my title may provoke some puzzlement. There is little emphasis on such a connection in standard studies either of John Wesley’s economic ethics and social ministries or of his model of spiritual formation. I could ignore this reality and plunge ahead with my argument. But it might be more helpful to set these standard studies in contextual perspective, as a way of “clearing the ground” to consider Wesley afresh.

A Frequently Overlooked Connection

The topic of Wesley and the poor has been a popular one in the twentieth century. It drew particular attention as North Atlantic Methodists engaged the Social Gospel movement in the first half of this century,¹ and it has become prominent again in the last quarter of

¹Note how this issue predominates in Francis J. McConnell’s survey: “New Interest in John Wesley,” *Journal of Religion* 20 (1940): 340–58.

the century as Wesley's various descendants have struggled to come to terms with the challenge of (particularly Latin American) Liberation Theology.²

The strength of these twentieth-century analyses of Wesley and the poor has been the passion that drives their reconsideration of traditional images and materials, and the forthrightness with which they have championed alternative readings of Wesley. But this strength has its correlated dangers: historical appeal can turn into hagiography, and present ideologies and concerns can obscure relevant evidence that challenges one's reading—and proposed appropriation—of the past. Liability to such dangers is also evident in twentieth-century analyses of Wesley and the poor.

For example, the desire to emphasize Wesley's concern for and ministry among the poor has tempted some authors toward hagiographical exaggeration, in part by taking Wesley's own rhetorical exaggerations at face value. Such interpretations do not do justice to the socio-economic complexity of either eighteenth-century Britain or early British Methodism. There is a tendency to paint a picture that places the large masses of Britain in abject poverty, abandoned and ignored by their government, the church, and the upper class until noble Wesley comes along. Wesley is then portrayed as spending his ministry almost entirely among the poor, voluntarily embracing poverty himself to stand in their midst. Early Methodism, resulting from this focus of his ministry, is assumed to be comprised primarily of manual laborers and the destitute. Then the drama ends on a tragic note as the second generation is presented as ushered *en masse* (by their parsimonious Methodist lifestyle) into the ranks of the respectable middle-class, at which point they summarily abandon their ministry to and with the poor.

This version of the Wesley story must be judged a caricature, and my summary perhaps a caricature of a caricature—it emphasizes truly existing characteristics by overdrawing them and flattening out their contextual background.³ While caricature is a legitimate and often highly appropriate form, it tends to provoke responses that are

²See especially *Sanctification and Liberation*, edited by Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981); *La Tradición Protestante en la Teología Latinoamericana*, edited by José Duque (San Jose, Costa Rica: DEI, 1983); *Faith Born in the Struggle for Life*, edited by Dow Kirkpatrick (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Theodore W. Jennings Jr, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); and *The Portion of the Poor*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994).

³A good moderate example to consult in testing my summary would be Oscar Sherwin, *John Wesley: Friend of the People* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961).

little more than inverse caricatures.⁴ What is needed instead is to balance the aspects highlighted in the caricature by fleshing out the less dramatic characteristics of the subject and filling in the contrasting backdrop. In the case of Wesley and the poor, this means seeking greater historical clarity about the numbers, contributing causes, and self-understanding of the “poor” in eighteenth-century Britain; about the types of government and ecclesiastical efforts already being made to address the situation of the poor; about the actual socio-economic constitution of Methodist societies; and related issues. The fruit of such work (which is underway) is growing agreement about what was truly characteristic, and possibly unique, about Wesley’s ministry to and with the poor.⁵ We will examine some of these agreed-upon characteristics later in this essay.

The passionate nature of twentieth-century considerations of Wesley and the poor has also produced a number of directly contrasting readings, which sometimes appear to lose touch with their historical base in the argument. There is no better example of this than the range of evaluations of Wesley’s economic ethic—an ethic that Wesley once paraphrased (in specific relation to money) in three rules: Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.⁶ Some have quoted this maxim (in either praise or condemnation) as evidence that Wesley epitomized Max Weber’s “Protestant Ethic,” embracing laissez-faire capitalism.⁷ Others have vigorously protested this characterization,⁸ with a few arguing instead that Wesley was a prototype of Christian socialism.⁹ The reality is that while each of

⁴A relevant example would be Henry Diamond Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), which portrays Wesley’s focus on and success among the poor in neo-Freudian categories as his “seduction” of the poor (cf. the incisive critique by Richard Heitzenrater in *Methodist History* 30 [1992]: 118–20).

⁵Many historians of early Methodism are working on aspects of this larger task. For a good overview of the findings, see Richard Heitzenrater, “The Poor and the People Called Methodists,” above.

⁶Sermon 50, “The Use of Money,” *Works* 2:266–80.

⁷E.g., Ernst Cahn, “John Wesley als Vorkämpfer einer christlichen Sozialethik,” *Die Christliche Welt* 46 (1932): 208–12; Robert Kingdon, “Laissez-Faire or Government Control: A Problem for John Wesley,” *Church History* 26 (1957): 342–54; Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 75ff; and Roy Sturm, *Sociological Reflections on John Wesley and Methodism* (Indianapolis: Central Publishing, 1982), 137.

⁸For specific critique of the Weber comparison see Charles Elliott, “The Ideology of Economic Growth: A Case Study,” in *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution*, eds. E.L. Jones & G.E. Mingay (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), 75–99; Yuki Kishida, “John Wesley’s Ethics and Max Weber,” *Wesleyan Quarterly Review* 4 (1967): 43–58; Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 41–42; and Thomas Madron, “John Wesley on Economics,” in *Sanctification and Liberation*, 102–15 (p. 109).

⁹E.g., W. H. Meredith, “John Wesley, Christian Socialist,” *Methodist Review* 83 (1901): 426–39; Kathleen Walker MacArthur, *The Economic Ethics of John Wesley* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1936); and Robert Hughes, “Wesleyan Roots of Christian Socialism,” *The*

these later models find points of similarity in Wesley, none capture his overall position.

Wesley's actual economic ethic can be summarized in four points: 1) ultimately everything belongs to God; 2) resources are placed in our care to use as God sees fit; 3) God desires that we use these resources to meet our necessities (i.e., providing shelter and food for ourselves and dependents), and then to help others in need; thus, 4) spending resources on luxuries for ourselves while others remain in need is robbing God!¹⁰ On the one hand, we sense here that Wesley did assume the (socialist) ideal of community of goods as he saw it described in Acts, but he supported only voluntary means for effecting this ideal, not social-political coercion.¹¹ On the other hand, his encouragement of his Methodists to earn and save money is suggestive of—but hardly an endorsement of—laissez-faire capitalism. In the sermon where Wesley introduced this threefold rule his discussion of the first rule (earn) focused on enjoining social responsibility in the manner in which one acquires property, capital, or the means of production. Concerning the second rule (save), he placed primary emphasis on self-denial in use of one's resources, not wasting them on idle expenses or luxuries. Then, in the third rule (give), he renounced accumulation of anything above what meets one's basic needs, directing it instead to meet the needs of our neighbors.¹²

In other words, while Adam Smith held that surplus accumulation was the foundation of economic well-being, Wesley viewed it (at least in the present situation of being surrounded by those whose basic needs are not yet met) as mortal sin! However, he found it hard to convince his people of this. They were prone to retain any hard-won surplus for themselves. Wesley considered this more than a minor deviation. Through the final decade of his ministry he issued a series of warnings that the increasing tendency of Methodists

Ecumenist 13 (1975): 49–53.

¹⁰This stance is first articulated in Sermon 28, “Sermon on the Mount VIII,” §§11, 25–26, *Works* 1:618–19, 628–29. A good overview is Gary Ball-Kilbourne, “The Christian as Steward in John Wesley’s Theological Ethics,” *Quarterly Review* 4.1 (1984): 43–54. See also Clarence Haywood’s helpful comparison of Wesley to the traditional Aquinian ethic of a just price in “Was John Wesley a Political Economist?” *Church History* 33 (1964): 314–21.

¹¹See the fine study by John Walsh, “John Wesley and The Community of Goods,” in *Protestant Evangelicalism*, edited by Keith Robbins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 25–50.

¹²This distillation of “The Use of Money” is taken from Albert Outler, “How to Run a Conservative Revolution ...,” in *Albert Outler the Preacher*, ed. Bob Parrott (Anderson, IN: Bristol House, 1995), 411.

to retain wealth instead of sharing it with those in need correlated directly with a decline in their spiritual growth and in the progress of the revival.¹³

This suggested correlation between engagement with the poor and spiritual *growth* sets the background for noting one other impact of their partisan contexts on twentieth-century studies of Wesley and the poor. Most of the studies appropriate, in varying degrees, the tendency that was becoming prominent in North American Protestantism by the turn of the century to cast concern for personal spirituality in antithetical relationship to concern for social ministry and activism.¹⁴ At its most extreme this appropriation could lead Wesley's heirs to misapprehend and disavow his precedent, in defense of either a "pure" spirituality or a "social" Christianity. Thus we find the ground-breaking Black Liberation theologian and African Methodist Episcopal elder James Cone initially dismissing Wesley's relevance on the assumption that his concern for "the warm heart and all that stuff" necessarily distracted Wesley from attention to social, political, and economic needs.¹⁵ The appropriation shines through more discretely in studies where discovery of Wesley's concern for the poor has served to rehabilitate the author's interest in a founder whose broadly touted emphasis on religious experience and disciplined spiritual life had not been attractive, in part because of caricatured presentations of the latter emphasis.¹⁶ In its most subtle expression the appropriation has become an interpretive filter that translates potentially contrasting aspects of Wesley into supporting evidence for one-sided emphases on social concern or spiritual formation. A particularly relevant example of this is the way that arguments in Methodist circles for embracing both the Social Gospel and Liberation Theology have often appealed, for warrant, to Wesley's claim that there

¹³E.g., Sermon 87 (1781), "The Danger of Riches," *Works* 3:228–46; Sermon 61 (1783), "The Mystery of Iniquity," §34, *Works* 2:468; Sermon 68 (1784), "The Wisdom of God's Counsels," §§16–18, *Works* 2:560–63; "Thoughts upon Methodism" (1788), *Works* 9:527–30; Sermon 108 (1788), "On Riches," *Works* 3:519–28; Sermon 122 (1789), "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," §§9, 17–18, *Works* 4:91, 95–96; Sermon 125 (1789), "On a Single Eye," *Works* 4:120–30; Sermon 126 (1790), "On Worldly Folly," *Works* 4:132–38; and Sermon 131 (1790), "The Danger of Increasing Riches," *Works*, 4:178–86. Cf. the discussion in Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 118ff.

¹⁴For more on this, see Jean Miller Schmidt, *Souls or the Social Order: The Two-Party System in American Protestantism* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1991); and David Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelicalism versus Social Concern* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1970).

¹⁵James Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 72.

¹⁶Note the disarming admission of this in Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 9–11.

is “no holiness but social holiness.”¹⁷ One could hardly guess from these appeals that the primary stress of Wesley’s original claim was on the vital contribution of “society” with other Christians to our pursuit of holiness of heart and life.¹⁸

Wesley assumed that consistent and faithful social action must be grounded in such communal spiritual formation. The tendency to counterpoise concern for spiritual formation against concern for social service and activism, which his twentieth-century heirs appropriated from their culture, has inclined them to overlook this connection. Thus recent works calling for a recovery of Wesley’s ministry to and with the poor devote little attention to the spiritual formation that Wesley believed *empowers* and *inclines* one to be involved in this ministry. The authors appear to assume that it is sufficient simply to make clear the “duty” of such involvement.¹⁹ Meanwhile books calling for a recovery of Wesley’s spirituality devote little attention to the *formative* role he assigned to works of mercy. These authors appear to view such works mainly as ways that we express our spirituality, not ways we develop it.²⁰ My goal in this essay is to clarify the more integral connection that Wesley was convinced existed between one’s sanctification (as the recovery of holiness of heart and life) and one’s involvement with the poor.

The Consistency of the Connection

When one surveys Wesley’s writings with this specific issue in mind, it is striking how consistently he connected engagement in ministry to and with the poor, often under the heading of “works of

¹⁷See, for example, the programmatic article by Herbert Welch, “The Church and Social Service,” *Methodist Review* 90 (1908): 707–15 (quotes Wesley on p. 710); Mortimer Arias, “Distortions in the Transmission of the Original Legacy of Wesley,” in *Faith Born in the Struggle for Life*, 229–43 (p. 230); and Aldo Etchegoyen, “Theology of Sin and Structures of Oppression,” in *ibid*, 156–66 (p. 164).

¹⁸The two relevant passages are: *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, §§4–5, *Works* (Jackson) 14:321; and Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount IV,” §I.1, *Works* 1:533–34. In the latter passage Wesley explains: “I mean not only that [holiness] cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with [others].”

¹⁹Note how little discussion there is of any positive contribution of spiritual disciplines in either Marquardt’s *John Wesley’s Social Ethics* or Jennings’ *Good News to the Poor*. Cf. the critique of one-sided emphasis on “duty” in Richard P. Heitzenrater, “The *Imitatio Christi* and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley’s Ministry with the Poor,” in *The Portion of the Poor*, edited by M. D. Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995), 49–63.

²⁰See, for example, two of the best such books: Steve Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1983), 64; and Gregory S. Clapper, *As if the Heart Mattered* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1997), 95.

mercy,” to the existence or retention of the sanctified life. The connection is evident already in *The Character of a Methodist* (1742), which Wesley considered his first tract on the subject of Christian perfection. There he offers the following emphases as most characteristic of his movement:

4. By *salvation* [the Methodist] means holiness of heart and life. ... We do not place the whole of religion (as too many do, God knoweth) either in doing no harm, or in doing good, or in using the ordinances of God. ...

5. What then is the mark? ... a Methodist is one who has ‘the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given to 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’. ...

9. And while he thus always exercises his love to God ... this commandment is written in his heart, that ‘he who loveth God, loves his brother also.’ ...

13. ... His obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows. And therefore, loving God with all his heart, he serves him with all his strength. ...

16 Lastly, as he has time, he ‘does good unto all men’—unto neighbours, and strangers, friends, and enemies. And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by ‘feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison’, but much more does he labour to do good to their souls, as of the ability which God giveth.²¹

The connection recurs in the sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765), which marks Wesley’s mature integration of the twin emphases that 1) salvation is by grace, yet 2) God upholds a place for our responsive appropriation of this grace. In this sermon Wesley insists that both works of piety and works of mercy are “necessary to sanctification,” being the way that God has appointed us to “wait for complete salvation.”²² And the connection remains prominent in his classic sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” (1785), where the major means Wesley recommends for working out full salvation is faithful engagement in both works of piety and works of mercy.²³

The integral connection for Wesley between sanctification and concern for the poor is even more evident when one considers the

²¹ *Works* 9:35–41.

²² See Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §III.5–10, *Works* 2:164–66.

²³ See Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §II.4, *Works* 3:205–6.

structures he created for his movement. These would include the various structures he created specifically to offer help to the poor: clinics, boarding schools, loan programs, and the like.²⁴ But even more relevant to our topic is the “select society,” a substructure that he created specifically for those in the Methodist movement who had claimed the experience of entire sanctification—to help them “press after perfection.” Wesley decided that not many rules were needed for folk in select societies since “the best rule of all was in their hearts.” Therefore he stipulated only three matters: that they maintain confidence about their discussions, that they submit to their minister as spiritual director, and that they bring all the money they can spare once a week “toward a common stock.”²⁵

The third stipulation is striking as the only programmatic suggestion specific to these Methodist subgroups; and it is important to see that it was not tangential, nor only a passing fancy for Wesley. It reflected one of the most consistent assumptions he held through his life about the nature and evidence of a community of fully sanctified believers. This assumption was grounded in his characteristically Anglican commitment to the pristine nature of the New Testament church and his specific definition of that church by the Pentecost passages in Acts. Wesley came early to understand these passages to be affirming that the community present at the first Christian Pentecost were so open and responsive to the Spirit that they were *unanimously* and *immediately* transformed into *full* holiness of heart and life, and that a primary expression of this transformation was the members’ love for one another, which constrained them to hold all things in common!²⁶ In good Anglican fashion he lamented the way that the later Christian church had fallen from this pristine model, and he longed for his Methodist movement to become the pioneering community that led to the church’s recovery.²⁷

²⁴The best survey of these is in Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics*.

²⁵See Minutes, 28 June 1744, Q. 5, *Minutes* (Mason) 1:23; and *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §VIII.2–3, *Works* 9:269–70.

²⁶This romantic view of “Pentecostal communalism,” and its assumed precedence for the current church, are evident already in his Letter to John Burton (10 October 1735), *Works* 25:441. Likewise, his famous 1744 sermonic indictment of contemporary Anglicanism was framed by specific reference to the model of the Pentecost church; cf. Sermon 4, “Scriptural Christianity,” §I.10, *Works* 1:165.

²⁷Wesley’s (weakening) hope in this regard is most evident in late sermons like Sermon 61, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” *Works* 2:452–70 (note the appeal to Pentecost in §8); Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” *Works* 2:485–99 (note hope for a New Pentecost evidenced by sharing all things in common in §20); and “Thoughts upon a Late Phenomenon,” *Works* 9:534–37.

But Wesley also wanted to keep participation in the Methodist movement open to all who sensed a spiritual need—not requiring assurance of saving faith for initial membership, let alone a claim of entire sanctification. This put the select societies in the default role of mentors, modeling the sanctified life for the larger movement. For Wesley this modeling necessarily included a *voluntary* sharing of one’s resources with the poor, in order to return to the biblical ideal of holding all things in common. The programmatic guideline of contributing toward a common stock was his prod toward this goal, issued as the spiritual director of the movement. His profound disappointment over how few even in the select societies actually embraced the voluntary program becomes increasingly apparent.²⁸

The Rationale for the Connection

Once it is recognized that Wesley so consistently connected affirmation of the sanctified life with encouragement to engage in works of mercy, the obvious issue becomes the nature of this connection. What rationale does he offer for why these two go together?

We have already seen one way that Wesley could answer this question; namely, that the connection reflects faithfulness to the model of the early church. But this simply pushes the question back a level: Why did the early church connect these two together? Wesley’s likely response would be that they were simply seeking to “imitate Christ.” As he put it in one sermon, all those who claim to be Christ’s disciples will (or should) embrace lives of self-denial, because self-denial for the sake of the other was a defining characteristic of Christ’s life.²⁹ By probing this response we can discern the foundational level of Wesley’s rationale for connecting the reality of sanctification in our lives to our active ministry to and with the poor.

One way to probe this response is to ask why Christ himself was so concerned with works of mercy, or ministering to the physical needs of persons. While some might wonder whether the question is sacrilegious, it has been debated often in the history of the church. This debate was set up by a tendency that made its way into the tradition

²⁸See in particular Sermon 68, “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels,” *Works* 2:552–66 (appeal to Pentecost in §7).

²⁹Note the prominence of this theme at the beginning of Sermon 48, “Self-denial,” *Works* 2:238–50.

to understand “salvation” primarily, if not entirely, in terms of the spiritual dimension of life. On such terms Jesus’ mission was to offer persons the chance for their *souls* to attain eternal life, and it becomes puzzling what part ministry to their physical or temporal needs would contribute to this goal. One common answer to this puzzle was to assume that Jesus engaged in works of mercy for strictly instrumental reasons—that is, he ministered to people’s bodies only because this helped him gain the access to offer real “saving” ministry to their souls.

The integral connection that Wesley makes between works of mercy and the sanctified life reflects his deep disagreement with any such merely instrumental valuation of the works of mercy, and with the spiritualized view of salvation that underlies it. When viewed both in his specific context and against the broader Christian tradition, Wesley’s concern to retain (or recover) the *holistic* understanding of salvation in scripture is unmistakable. This concern is evident in the way he weaves together the juridical emphasis of salvation as forgiveness (justification) with the therapeutic emphasis of salvation as healing the various faculties or dimensions of the human soul (sanctification). It shines through in his insistence that God is not only the physician of the soul, but longs to aid us as well in recovering and maintaining physical well-being in this life. And it is particularly striking in his growing retrieval of the biblical theme that ultimate salvation includes the whole creation, not just humanity.³⁰

When salvation is understood in such holistic terms, Christ’s ministry to the temporal and physical needs of people is not viewed as merely instrumental to offering them salvation, it is an integral part of his saving work. Likewise, Wesley considered providing such things as subsidized boarding schools for children of the poor, free health clinics, and a carefully collected set of inexpensive medical remedies (his *Primitive Physick*) to be an integral part of the salvific mission of Methodism. That is why the select societies, which were committed to promoting the “full salvation” of their members, were specifically instructed to focus attention on addressing the needs of those who lack basic temporal well-being.

Because he understood salvation in truly holistic terms, Wesley was quick to insist that it was both unfaithful and unloving to minis-

³⁰For more details on the following points, see Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 141–47, 252–53.

ter only to people's physical needs, neglecting to convey to them God's offer of gracious transformation of the spiritual dimensions of their lives as well. Indeed, if (in theory) we had to choose between these two, Wesley would prioritize the need to address their spiritual healing because of its eternal dimensions.³¹ But in practice Wesley resisted acquiescing to such a forced priority. And he specifically rejected valuing works of mercy in mere instrumental connection to evangelization. Throughout his ministry he admonished his people that they should not limit their works of mercy to only those who respond (or are likely to do so). Rather they should offer this ministry as Christ did—to all who are in need, and simply because of their need!³²

Wesley did not overlook the possible positive evangelistic impact resulting from Christian engagement in such open-ended works of mercy. But the specific potential effect that he highlighted was not the enticement of uncommitted persons to embrace the Christian faith by addressing their physical needs. Rather, he hoped to overcome the widespread crisis of credibility of Christian witness through the increased number of Christians who would model authentic loving care for others! Wesley considered the failure of most Christians to imitate Christ-like sharing with those in need to be the grand stumbling-block that prevented other groups from taking seriously Christian evangelistic efforts. He could even suggest ironically that the so-called "Christian" British were the ones standing in need of conversion into "honest heathens" like the native Americans, whom he praised for more typically sharing with those in need than hoarding their resources.³³

In all of this we see that one central aspect of Wesley's rationale for connecting the reality of sanctification in our lives to our active ministry to and with the poor was his conviction of the holistic nature of salvation, as modeled by Christ. Another aspect of this underlying principle emerges when we probe specifically why he believed that Christians (particularly those seeking or claiming "full salvation")

³¹Recall the language in *Character of a Methodist*, §16 that love moves Methodists to minister "not only to [other people's] bodies ... but much more ... to do good to their souls" (*Works* 9:41). See also Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," §I.5 & §II.4, *Works* 3:389, 391. For emphasis on this priority see Kenneth Collins, "The Soteriological Orientation of John Wesley's Ministry to the Poor," *Asbury Theological Journal* 50 (1995): 75–92.

³²On this point see Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," §I.1, *Works* 3:387; and Sermon 24, "Sermon on the Mount IV," §III.7, *Works* 1:546.

³³Cf. *Journal* (8 February 1753), *Works* 20:445; Sermon 28, "Sermon on the Mount, VIII," §9, *Works* 1:617; and Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," §21, *Works* 2:495.

will—or *should*—imitate Christ’s model. I have italicized the alternative helping verbs to reflect polar directions in the classic Christian debate over the relation of “good works” to Christian status and character. At one end of the spectrum in this debate are those who view (or, are accused of viewing) good works as duties that we must fulfill to *qualify* for Christian status or to *maintain* pure Christian character. At the other end of the spectrum are those who decry such apparent “works-righteousness,” and argue that good works are simply the *expression* of the faith or holy dispositions that are graciously infused in Christians by the Spirit at their conversion. For this group good works are impossible prior to attaining Christian status and character, but become natural (at the most extreme, inevitable) after regeneration.

When Wesley’s comments connecting works of mercy with the sanctified life are read in light of this debate it is striking how he strives to weave together these supposed polar emphases, reflecting his conviction of God’s *responsible grace*.³⁴ For example, the rhetoric of some of his exhortations to engage in works of mercy casts them as “duties” that serve as the crucial test for determining our holy standing, and hence our eternal salvation.³⁵ He can even encourage their practice by promising supplementary heavenly reward.³⁶ If such language is isolated Wesley appears in danger of straying into works-righteousness, where works of mercy “earn” sanctification. But when confronted with such accusations, Wesley insists that our works of mercy are always dependant upon God’s gracious transforming work in our lives.³⁷

Coming at this integration from the other direction, we noted above in *The Principles of a Methodist* that Wesley described the charitable work of Methodists as “flowing” from the love of God and neighbor in their heart (§13). This language could suggest that works of mercy should be expected only after one attains holiness of heart, as a natural expression of this holiness. Such suggestion comes through even stronger in places where ministry to the poor is highlighted as

³⁴For how central this “orienting concern” is to all of Wesley’s theology see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*.

³⁵See in particular Sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” §III.2, *Works* 3:392–93.

³⁶See particularly *Journal* (15 January 1777), *Works* 23:40; and his comment on Matthew 26:11 (The poor you have always with you) in the *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*: “Such is the wise and gracious providence of God, that we may have always opportunities of relieving their wants, and so laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven.”

³⁷See particularly Sermon 99, “The Reward of Righteousness,” *Works* 3:400–14 (esp. pp. 403–5).

the decisive evidence that God has poured the sanctifying Spirit into one's heart. Consider a hymn that John, in *A Collection of Hymns* (1780), wove from two separate hymns in Charles' *Scripture Hymns* (1762):

1. Jesus, the gift divine I know,
 The gift divine I ask of thee;
 That living water now bestow,
 Thy Spirit and thyself on me.
 Thou, Lord, of life the fountain art;
 Now let me find thee in my heart!

2. Thee let me drink, and thirst no more
 for drops of finite happiness;
 Spring up, O well, in heavenly power,
 In streams of pure, perennial peace,
 In peace, that none can take away,
 In joy, which shall forever stay.

3. Father, on me the grace bestow,
 Unblamable before thy sight,
 Whence all the streams of mercy flow;
 Mercy, thy own supreme delight,
 To me, for Jesu's sake impart,
 And plant thy nature in my heart.

4. Thy mind throughout my life be shown,
 While listening to the wretch's cry,
 The widow's and the orphan's groan,
 On mercy's wings I swiftly fly
 The poor and helpless to relieve,
 My life, my all for them to give.

5. Thus may I show thy Spirit within,
 Which purges me from every stain;
 Unspotted from the world and sin
 My faith's integrity maintain,
 The truth of my religion prove
 By perfect purity and love.³⁸

In isolation such texts value acts of relief for the poor and helpless primarily as manifestations of the sanctifying work that God has already completed in our lives. But Wesley balances affirmation that

³⁸*Collection of Hymns*, #354, *Works* 7:521–22.

works of mercy flow from the love of God and neighbor existing in our hearts with reminders that this responsive expression of love is not inevitable. While God's gracious sanctifying work enables us to love God and others, it does not coerce this response! As Wesley saw clearly among his Methodist people, humans can resist even the strongest loving inclination to reach out to the poor and helpless. His rhetorical appeals to the "duty" of works of mercy were actually aimed at breaking through such resistance to God's gracious leading.

In short, the second central aspect of Wesley's rationale for connecting the reality of sanctification in our lives to our active ministry to and with the poor was his rejection of the false dichotomy of (1) works of mercy, or any other "good works," as mere human efforts to earn holiness, and (2) works of mercy as mere epiphenomena of unilaterally infused holiness. But how do we move beyond this dichotomous understanding in a way that preserves both the reality of God's gracious prevenience to all human response and the integrity of that response? The most distinctive avenue that Wesley chose made central a dimension of the connection between sanctification and works of mercy that he believed was often overlooked.

The Empowering/Formative Dimension of the Connection

This distinctive way of transcending dichotomous understandings of the works of mercy was to defend their role as "means of grace." Wesley recognized that many Christians equate the means of grace solely with activities like bible study, prayer, and worship, practices that he grouped together as "works of piety." As such, in discussions of the works of mercy he frequently emphasized that these too can be means of grace.³⁹ One of his most enlightening comments comes in a proposed sketch of the relative comparative value of the different aspects of the Christian religion:

"In a Christian believer *love* sets upon the throne, ... namely love of God and [other humans] In a circle near the throne are all *holy tempers*: long-suffering, gentleness, meekness [etc.] In an exterior circle are all the *works of mercy*, whether to the souls or bodies of others. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that these are real *means of grace*, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next

³⁹See esp. Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," §1, *Works* 3:385.

to these are those that are usually termed *works of piety*: reading and hearing the word; public, family, private prayer; receiving the Lord's Supper; fasting and abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one—the church."⁴⁰

Embedded in this quote are the assumptions that under girded Wesley's conviction that engaging in works of mercy has an empowering and formative impact on those *offering* help, beyond whatever positive impact there is upon the recipients of the works.

The foundational level of these assumptions is reflected in the immediate connection that Wesley makes between our love for God and others and having specific holy tempers. Many people find this connection puzzling because "temper" is usually associated with connotations that have little to do with either love or holiness. Wesley's use of the term reflects both a meaning that was more typical in the eighteenth century and his distinctive convictions about the dynamics that account for human moral choice and action—i.e., his moral psychology.

Moral psychology deals with the range of possible responses to such questions as: Are our options truly open in any sense at the juncture of a moral choice or act? If so, what hinders us from choosing as we ought? And, what would most effectively free us to choose differently? Christian debates over these issues have again often bifurcated: into those who insist that humans are graciously created with a resident ability to initiate moral choice and those who deny all human initiative in truly moral actions, at times reducing these to passive experiences of God-choosing-through-us. There has also been great divergence over the specific contribution of reason to enabling authentic human moral choice.⁴¹

Wesley struggled within the various reigning stances of these issues to articulate his fundamental conviction that all human choice and action is rooted in God's redemptive (not just creational) initiative, but that God exerts this initiative in a way that honors the integrity of our human response. He found his way forward by transferring his empiricist commitments in epistemology to the arena of moral psychology. Central to empiricist philosophy is the rejection of any innate ideas or

⁴⁰Sermon 92, "On Zeal," §II.5, *Works* 3:313.

⁴¹For more reflection on alternative moral psychologies and detailing of Wesley's stance, see Randy L. Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End: A Wesleyan Prescription for the Holiness Movement," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33.2 (1998): 29–66.

truths in the human mind. They insisted that we only begin to form ideas after we have been exposed to sufficient experiences. Analogously, Wesley argued that there is no innate reservoir of love (or any other power from which moral acts might flow) in the human soul. We are only enabled to act *in response* to experiencing the actions of others upon us. In what Wesley held as the crucial instance, our love for God and others can awaken and grow only in response to experiencing God's gracious love for us, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.⁴²

The technical way that Wesley expressed this general conviction was by equating the human faculty of the "will" with our "affections." Since the will is usually understood to be the springboard of human acts, Wesley's equation allowed him to stress that we must be *affected* before we can act; i.e., the will is more like a mirror than a pre-charged battery. He also valued the connotations of *desire* in "affections," which allowed him to stress that reason alone is never a sufficient motivation for action—intellectual conviction without desire remaining merely theoretical. We are ultimately able to act only when there is a holistic inclination, which was initially awakened responsively.

While the affections are responsive, they are not simply transitory. Rather, through engagement they are progressively strengthened and shaped into enduring dispositions. Wesley's term for such dispositions was "tempers." Enduring sinful dispositions are "unholy tempers," while "holy tempers" encompass the range of virtues that are awakened by our experience of love and dispose us to responsive acts of love to God and others. On these terms, the essential goal of all true religion becomes the recovery of holy tempers.⁴³

But how does this recovery take place? How did Wesley assume that our sin-debilitated affections are re-empowered and the distortions of their patterning influence reshaped? He was quite clear that we cannot accomplish this through our human efforts alone. The possibility of change lies instead in God's gracious regenerating work in the lives of believers. But God does not infuse holy tempers instantaneously complete. Rather, God awakens in believers the "seed" of every

⁴²This point permeates Wesley's works. For a few examples, see *The Character of a Methodist*, §13, *Works* 9:39; *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §61, *Works* 11:70; *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §I.3, *Works* 11:106; Sermon 10, "The Witness of the Spirit I," §I.8, *Works* 1:274; and Sermon 120, "The Unity of the Divine Being," §17, *Works* 4:67.

⁴³Sermon 91, "On Charity," §III.12, *Works* 3:306.

virtue. These seeds then strengthen and take shape as we responsively “grow in grace.”⁴⁴

The specific context that God has graciously provided for such growth, Wesley insisted, was the means of grace! This insistence reflects his hard-won conviction, against various other one-sided perspectives in the Christian tradition, that the means of grace serve *both* as avenues by which God conveys empowering gracious encounter *and* as formative disciplines by which we strengthen and shape our character into Christ-likeness.⁴⁵ He charged those desiring holiness of heart and life to seek it in the means of grace because within these various means they will be opened to the ever-deeper empowering affect of God’s presence and they will be prodded to exercise their affections, shaping them into holy tempers.

The importance of the works of mercy for those pursuing full salvation takes on an added dimension when they are considered as means of grace in Wesley’s sense. We do not engage in works of mercy just because we “feel like it,” or only when we feel like it. Neither do we engage in them only because it is what God commands, or because it helps others. We are also encouraged to engage in works of mercy because God has graciously designed this engagement to have an empowering and formative impact upon us!⁴⁶ To pursue the sanctified life while leaving out this or any other means of grace would be foolhardy. It would be falling into the mistake of the “enthusiasts,” who fail to reach their desired end because they ignore the graciously provided means.⁴⁷

When one looks at Wesley’s specific instructions for promoting works of mercy it becomes clear that he was also sensitive—arguably in a unique degree for his time—to the potential empowering (or disempowering!) and formative (or deformative!) impact of works of mercy upon those receiving help. One way this comes through is his repeated critique of stereotypes of the poor as “lazy,” testifying to the legitimacy of their need and the integrity of their efforts to help themselves.⁴⁸ This critique served not only to counteract a rationalization

⁴⁴E.g., Minutes, 2 August 1745, Q. 1, *Minutes* (Mason) 1:10. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 178–79 for discussion of two passages where Wesley argues that holy tempers can be implanted in a fully mature state.

⁴⁵Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 192–201.

⁴⁶See in this regard Jörg Rieger, “The Means of Grace, John Wesley, and the Theological Dilemma of the Church Today,” *Quarterly Review* 17 (1997): 377–93. While our foci are different, there is significant overlap between Rieger’s major point and my own—we both insist that the works of mercy convey transforming encounter with and knowledge of God.

⁴⁷See Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §I, *Works* 1:378–80.

⁴⁸Cf. *Journal* (9–10 February 1753), *Works* 20:445.

of withholding aid by the well-to-do, it also helped the needy resist the subtle pressures to think of themselves as distinguished by their poverty or as a disadvantaged class. Taking it a step further, Wesley rejected static classifications into the “rich” and the “needy.” He relativized poverty by suggesting that those who barely have their necessities met should still ask whether there was someone in more dire need with whom they might share. And he gave specific instructions that poor Methodists should be allowed, and expected to contribute to the aid of the poor as they were able.⁴⁹ Behind these instructions is his concern that poor Methodists should experience themselves not only as recipients of *grace* but also as *responsible* participants in sharing that grace. Given his conviction of the empowering and formative impact of such balanced experience, he could not withhold it from the poor.

The Indispensable Contribution of Works of Mercy

In the quotation that began the previous section of this paper, one final assumption of Wesley is striking. Not only does he insist that works of mercy belong among the means of grace along with works of piety, but he also seems to place works of mercy in more immediate relation to forming holy tempers than he does works of piety! Once again, any relative comparison here does not mean that Wesley would easily acquiesce to forced choices between engaging in works of mercy or works of piety. He considered the empowering and formative impact of both to be essential to nurturing holiness of heart and life. However it appears that he believed works of mercy make a unique contribution among the other means of grace to well-rounded Christian formation, and that he worried his followers were neglecting its benefit. What might this contribution be?

One way to understand this uniqueness is to suggest that certain virtues constitutive of the holy life are best awakened and strengthened into enduring patterns by the works of mercy. As Ted Jennings shows, Wesley repeatedly warned that hoarding one’s resources in the face of the needy others directly endangers such virtues as humility and patience, while fostering such vices as resentment and contempt.⁵⁰ These warnings echo the insights emerging from

⁴⁹See particularly Sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” §III.4, *Works* 3:393–94.

⁵⁰Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 33–38.

recently renewed interest in the moral psychology of the virtues that neither development of virtues nor counteracting of vices is not a generic process.⁵¹

A particularly relevant example is compassion. The fact that we argue over whether compassion is more an emotion (something we “suffer”) or more a disposition (something over which we have control) reflects an awareness that one is not likely to develop compassion without undergoing specific experiences. We must usually experience some type of hardship ourselves to be able to identify with the hardship of others. But we must also experience true suffering or neediness on the part of another.⁵² This means that it is not enough to “send in our money” dutifully, in response to reports of need. Authentic compassion can only take form through sincere encounter with those in need. This is why Wesley emphasized the need to *visit* the poor and sick even more than he did the need to offer them aid. He recognized that failure to visit was the major contributing cause of the lack of compassion that lay behind withholding aid.⁵³

Wesley’s extended correspondence with Miss J. C. March is revealing on this point. Miss March was a woman of wealth and education who became active in the Methodist revival around 1760. Wesley’s initial correspondence with her reflects that she was very serious about pursuing full salvation, and his worry that she was setting the goal for this experience too high.⁵⁴ His respect for the seriousness of her commitment remains clear throughout their correspondence, but his concern shifted. Miss March eventually admitted that she struggled with the fact that affiliating with the Methodists put her in connection with so many who were of “lower character” or unrefined. Wesley gently reminded her that she was no longer just a gentlewoman, but now had a “higher character” as one whose life was a temple of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ He returned to this point a year later and advised her that the best way to “improve her life and use her health” was to visit the poor:

⁵¹See in particular: Robert Kruschwitz & Robert Roberts, *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1987); and G. Simon Harak, *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist, 1993).

⁵²For a particularly insightful analysis of this dynamic (in a more specific context), see Richard B. Steele, “Unremitting Compassion: The Moral Psychology of Parenting Children with Genetic Disorders,” *Theology Today* 57.2 (2000): 161–74.

⁵³See esp. Sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” §I.3, *Works* 3:387.

⁵⁴See the letters of 17 June 1761 (*Letters* [Telford] 4:157), 30 January 1762 (4:170), and 24 June 1764 (4:251).

⁵⁵Letter to Miss March (3 June 1774), *Letters* (Telford) 6:88.

Go and see the poor and sick in their own poor little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the gentlewoman; you bear an higher character. You are an heir of God and joint-heir with Christ! Are you not going to meet Him in the air with ten thousand of His saints? O be ready!⁵⁶

When Miss March objected that a Christian should associate with people of taste and good character, Wesley responded:

I have found some of the uneducated poor who have exquisite taste and sentiment; and many, very many, of the rich who have scarcely any at all. But I do not speak of this: I want you to converse more, abundantly more, with the poorest of the people, who, if they have not taste, have souls, which you may forward in their way to heaven. And they have (many of them) faith and the love of God in a larger measure than any persons I know. Creep in among these in spite of dirt and an hundred disgusting circumstances, and thus put off the gentlewoman. Do not confine your conversation to genteel and elegant people. I should like this as well as you do; but I cannot discover a precedent for it in the life of our Lord or any of His Apostles.⁵⁷

Miss March continued to protest that she could not form real friendships with the poor. With some resignation, Wesley replied:

What I advise you to is, not to contract a friendship or even acquaintance with poor, inelegant, uneducated persons, but frequently, nay constantly, to visit the poor, the widow, the sick, the fatherless in their affliction; and this, although they should have nothing to recommend them but that they are bought with the blood of Christ. It is true this is not pleasing to flesh and blood. There are a thousand circumstances usually attending it which shock the delicacy of our nature, or rather of our education. But yet the blessing which follows this labour of love will more than balance the cross.⁵⁸

Within a couple of months Wesley reveals his concerns about the potential (de)formative impact of this concession when he tells Miss March, “Sometimes I have been afraid lest you should sustain loss for want of some reproach or disgrace. ... The knowledge of ourselves is true humility; and without this we cannot be freed from vanity, a desire of praise being inseparably connected with every degree of pride.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶Letter to Miss March (9 June 1775), *Letters* (Telford) 6:153–54.

⁵⁷Letter to Miss March (7 February 1776), *Letters* (Telford) 6:206–7.

⁵⁸Letter to Miss March (26 February 1776), *Letters* (Telford) 6:208–9.

⁵⁹Letter to Miss March (30 May 1776), *Letters* (Telford) 6:220.

Her apparent response to Wesley's renewed prodding was to protest that she needed times of seclusion for her spiritual life and could not add visiting the sick and poor to her schedule without being overly busy, as he was! In his final extant response Wesley first insisted that while he was indeed always active he did not lack calmness of spirit, nor times of seclusion. Then he added:

Yet I find time to visit the sick and the poor; and I must do it, if I believe the Bible, if I believe these are the marks whereby the Shepherd of Israel will know and judge His sheep at the great day. ... I am concerned for you; I am sorry you should be content with lower degrees of usefulness and holiness than you are called to.⁶⁰

Note how his final concern is that her lack of willingness to visit the poor will leave her with "lower degrees of holiness" than God desires of her. Wesley clearly saw some virtues in the life of holiness as only available through engaging in works of mercy.

Beyond this role of helping to form certain virtues, two broader conceptions of the indispensable contribution of works of mercy among the means of grace are hinted at in Wesley's dialogue with Miss March and developed elsewhere. One of these conceptions considers the contribution of works of mercy to the formative effectiveness of the various other means. Wesley develops this conception most directly in his sermon on "Self-Denial." He argues therein that self-denial is central to the Christian life because it most directly counters the corruption of our nature by sin. Developing this point, he notes that while neglect of such means of grace as sermon, sacrament, and fellowship will surely weaken our growth in grace, these can all be used and our growth still be hindered. In these cases, he suggests, the lack of self-denial is what limits the full effectiveness of the other means.⁶¹ Since Wesley equated engaging in works of mercy with self-denial, this would tie the effectiveness of the other means of grace to some engagement as well in the works of mercy!⁶²

The other way that Wesley developed the interdependence of works of piety and works of mercy in the Christian life was in his insistence upon the interdependence of love of God and love of neighbor. We

⁶⁰Letter to Miss March (10 December 1777), *Letters* (Telford) 6:292–93.

⁶¹See Sermon 48, "Self-denial," *Works* 2:238–50; esp. §I.10 (244) & §II.1 (245–46).

⁶²On the equation of works of mercy with self-denial, see Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," §II.4, *Works* 3:205–6.

noted above Wesley's conviction that we cannot return our love for God until we first experience God's love for us, and that as we do return this love our ability to experience God's love is deepened. But where do we experience God's love for us, and how do we return it? Wesley recognized that God's love is conveyed to us in a variety of mediated forms, and he gave particular prominence to corporate forms of mediation like the class meeting and the love feast, occasions where we experience the love of God through the love others show for us.⁶³ Similarly, he connected our love for God integrally to our love for our "neighbors," which he defined to include specifically those around us in need. This connection means that we cannot really love our neighbor without loving God.⁶⁴ But it also means that we cannot truly love God without loving our neighbor.⁶⁵ Therefore Wesley refused to let Miss March play off times of seclusion experiencing God's presence against times of ministry to and with the poor. To limit ourselves to either of these options would drastically impair our transformative engagement with God's love!

Conclusion

While Wesley wove engagement with the poor integrally into his model of holiness of heart and life, the movements descended from his ministry have repeatedly severed this connection. The reasons behind this are complex. Among those frequently identified are the dynamics of rising class status and the cultural trend to bifurcate the public from the private. Another significant contributing factor, however, is that his later descendants lost touch with Wesley's assumptions about the responsive and formative nature of the will. They adopted instead the "decisionistic" assumptions of modern culture—where humans are considered most free when we throw off external expectations and break out of past habits, liberating our innate power of choice. This switch has rendered Wesley's affectional model of sanctification puzzling and reduced his appreciation for the various

⁶³Note the hymn for the love feast which talks about how here God nourishes us with "social grace," *Collection of Hymns*, #507, st. 1, *Works* 7:698.

⁶⁴See his comment on Gal. 5:14 in *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*; and his attack on Frances Hutcheson's claim that gratitude or love of God is NOT the foundation of love of our fellow creatures in Sermon 90, "An Israelite Indeed," *Works* 3:279.

⁶⁵See Letter to John Glass (1 November 1757), *Letters* (Telford) 3:237.

dimensions of the means of grace into an exclusive emphasis on the “duty” of observing them.⁶⁶

Our churches have thereby largely inherited an approach to the means of grace that focuses on reminding our people, at each new point of decision, of their duty to fulfill these acts. Their natural response has been to question who has the right to impose duties upon them, and why they have a duty to do something that they do not “feel” like doing. In all of this what is lost is the sense that activities like ministry to and with the poor are not simply duties, they are also gracious means that God has provided to “free” us to become progressively the kind of people that we really long to be. I suspect that ministry to and with the poor will become central to contemporary Methodist/Wesleyan practice of Christian life only as we recover this richer sense, and *experience*, of the means of grace.

⁶⁶For more on this change and its impact on both the understanding of holiness and the role of means of grace in forming holiness, see Randy L. Maddox, “Holiness of Heart and Life: Lessons from North American Methodism,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 51.1 (1996): 151–72; and Maddox, “Reconnecting the Means to the End.”