



# Wesley as Abolitionist & Liberating Evangelist

Theodore Walker Jr.

Wesley's continuing influence is partly dependent upon how we choose to remember him. In addition to remembering him as an evangelist and co-founder of Methodism, we should remember Wesley as an abolitionist. Attention to Wesley's abolitionism reveals an essential liberationist component in his evangelism.<sup>1</sup>

## The Abolitionist

During John Wesley's time (1703-1791), England and other North Atlantic maritime nations and colonies were aggressively developing a global free market economy. This free market economy was driven by hugely profitable free trade arrangements that facilitated the purchase, shipment and enslavement of tens of millions of Africans. Like many others, English-speaking Christians were massively invested in transatlantic slave trading. In the North American colonies, many English-speaking Christians were developing life-styles that would come to be almost wholly dependent upon profits generated by slave labor and Native American land.

By the time of Wesley's 1736 visit to colonial North America, much of the white English-speaking world had come to regard slavery as an economic necessity. Some argued that slavery was good insofar as it provided necessary labor for building up the New World, and insofar as it served to rescue Africans from heathenism. Others admitted that slavery was

not good, but argued for accepting it as a necessary evil.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Wesley came to see abolishing slavery as an urgent and essential Christian duty. Warren Thomas Smith's *John Wesley and Slavery* shows that Wesley labored relentlessly for the abolitionist cause. In a 1774 letter to Anthony Benezet, Wesley wrote, "It is certainly our duty to do all in our power to check this growing evil, and something may be done by spreading those tracts which place it in a true light" (JWS, 53). Wesley printed and distributed large numbers of tracts, papers and books condemning slavery.

In 1774 Wesley published his own "Thoughts upon Slavery."<sup>2</sup> Here Wesley argued that slavery was unchristian, unjust, immoral, illegal, and unnecessary. And he made special appeals for ending slavery to captains of slave ships, merchants, and American planters. This was his most popular abolitionist publication. Over the following three decades, thirteen new editions were distributed in North America (JWS, 101).

Ronald H. Stone describes "Thoughts upon Slavery" as "a liberation ethic" (JWLE, 196), and he finds that Wesley's abolitionism was "akin to liberation theology" (JWLE, 187).<sup>3</sup> With respect to abolitionist work, Stone says Wesley "could be regarded as a thoroughgoing liberation theologian and activist" (JWLE, 26).

Throughout his mature career, Wesley presented abolitionist arguments

authored by himself and others in magazines, journals, notes, sermons, and letters. In a letter to Henry Moore dated 14 March 1790, Wesley wrote, "I would do anything that is in my power toward the extirpation of that trade which is a scandal not only to Christianity but humanity" (JWS, 112). Within a week of his death at the age of eighty-seven, Wesley wrote his last letter. In this 24 February 1791 letter of encouragement to fellow abolitionist William Wilberforce, Wesley wrote, "O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it" (JWS, 118). Wesley was an abolitionist to the end. He died on 02 March 1791.

Due in large part to the continuing influence of Wesley's abolitionist publications, slavery came to an official end on 01 August 1838 in the British Empire (JWS, 13-16, 119-120). However, by 1838 the British Empire no longer included those territories claimed by the newly independent United States of America. There, until the close of a civil war, slavery continued.

As indicated in his 1775 "A Calm Address to Our American Colonies," Wesley had opposed the American Revolution. While he was motivated by loyalty to the crown, Wesley was also concerned about slavery. Wesley objected to white colonialists who claimed that they were slaves (because taxation without representation is slavery), when it was

clear that the real slaves in America were black (JWS, 101-102; JWLE, 180-181). Moreover, Wesley trusted colonialists who (like Thomas Jefferson) claimed human rights to liberty while continuing to be slaveholders. American moral duplicity concerning liberty and slavery was unacceptable to Wesley.

## The Liberating Evangelist

For many Wesleyans, the most important event in Wesley's life was his experience of a strangely warmed heart upon receiving assurance of salvation through faith in Christ at a Moravian meeting in London on Aldersgate Street on 24 May 1738 (JWLE, 76-78). For black Wesleyans, equally important events in Wesley's life were his 1736-1738 encounters with enslaved and free blacks, and his subsequent resolve to oppose slavery with all his might (JWS).

We should value Wesley's abolitionism. In addition to historical value, seeing Wesley as an abolitionist has theological value. Attention to Wesley's abolitionism helps us to see an essential liberationist component in his understanding of the gospel.

Many contemporary evangelicals describe the gospel as simply "good news," meaning simply "good news to all." By contrast, Wesley understood the gospel as "good news to all" and especially "good news to the poor/oppressed." Wesley underscored this understanding at the start of his post-Aldersgate ministry.

Wesley's 24 May 1738 Aldersgate experience was followed by a period of soul-searching. Then, on 02 April 1739, Wesley started his new ministry by speaking from Luke 4:18-19 (JWLE). Here Luke says Jesus started his ministry by announcing that "the Spirit of the Lord" had anointed him to bring "good news to the poor... release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind... to let the oppressed go free

...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (NRSV). About John Wesley starting with Luke 4:18-19, Stone says:

"According to Luke, Jesus' use of the text marked the beginning of his ministry. John's choosing of it reflected a changed consciousness of what he was doing. In his commentary on the text, he notes that Jesus was announcing a year of Jubilee when debtors and servants were freed." (JWLE, 85)

Wesley began his revived ministry in the same way Luke says Jesus began his public ministry—by announcing divinely inspired commitment to bring "good news to the poor" and freedom to the oppressed.

Unlike Wesley in England, in each of two North American "Great Awakenings," many American revivalists dropped "to the poor" and "to the oppressed" from their versions of the "good news" or "gospel" that evangelism seeks to communicate.

Albert C. Outler says, "In a way, the Wesleyan Revival did not begin in England but in America," and Wesley learned of its beginning by reading a 1739 publication by New Englander Jonathan Edwards (EWS, 57). From Outler, we learn that during "the First Great Awakening" [1730's to 1776] the emphasis was upon "a vivid personal experience" (EWS, 58). Similarly, the "Second Great Awakening" [1781-1861] focused on personal salvation and "a self-inhibitory personal morality" (EWS, 61).

These two American awakenings shared a seriously abridged version of the gospel—"good news" instead of "good news to the poor." By deleting "to the poor" and other liberating social concerns, American revivalism created a version of the gospel and a notion of evangelism which could accommodate slavery, genocide against Native Americans, poverty, and other social oppressions. Wesley's experience provides a good reason for doubting that the American deletions were divinely inspired.

According to Wesley's experience, when we accept the unmerited gift of divine grace, we receive both the assurance of salvation and the anointing influence of the Holy Spirit. And when we receive this divine inspiration, "the Spirit of the Lord" inspires us to bring "good news to the poor" and liberty to the oppressed. In the context of slavery, poverty, and various other oppressions, God inspired John Wesley to take up abolitionist and other liberationist social causes.

Celebrating Wesley's abolitionism empowers us to appreciate the liberating content of the gospel he was inspired to communicate. Evangelizing under divine inspiration, and in the original Wesleyan spirit, means communicating a liberating gospel appropriate to individual and social concerns.<sup>4</sup> □

1 For viewing Wesley as an evangelist and source of Great Awakenings, I am instructed by Albert C. Outler's *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* [EWS] (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971). For viewing Wesley as an abolitionist and liberating evangelist, I am instructed by Warren Thomas Smith's *John Wesley and Slavery* [JWS] (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986) and Ronald H. Stone's *John Wesley's Life and Ethics* [JWLE] (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

2 Smith includes a readable photographic reproduction of all 28 pages of a third edition of Wesley's 1774 "Thoughts upon Slavery" in the epilogue of his book (JWS, 123-148).

3 Here Stone is correcting James H. Cone for saying that Wesley said and did little about slavery (JWLE, 187-188).

4 Concerning the doctrinal status of churchly commitment to individual and social concerns, see chapter eight—"Social Justice as Sanctification" in Scott J. Jones's *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002). Also, see "Social Principles" in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000).

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