

**John Wesley—Public Intellectual:  
Recovering Wisdom, Courage, and Justice in a Broken World**

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**Abstract:** John Wesley served as one of the foremost public intellectuals of the eighteenth century. He was exceptionally well-informed and one of the most widely-followed public figures in England regarding not just spiritual and religious issues, but political and social issues as well. Wesley provides a model for Christian scholars in the twenty-first century as we face militant secularism, ambivalent evangelicalism, and a politically divided world. His example teaches us to be well-read, well-informed, committed to the authority of Scripture, soaked in the biblical truth, and willing to risk publicly applying Scripture to current controversial issues, not only in the church, but in the popular media.

Through his sermons and his ministry, we see a robust, vibrant application of Scripture and of Christ's Lordship to every facet of life and culture. Indeed, Wesley's sermons and ministry serve as one of the most well-rounded applications of a fully-orbed Christian worldview in the history of the Church. In contrast to many modern Christian scholars who focus on a merely *cerebral* consideration of the contours of a Christian worldview, Wesley both viewed the world through a biblical lens and he *applied* that worldview in his ministry and in his preaching. Evangelicals today can learn much from Wesley's thoroughly Christian worldview and from his careful and thoughtful application of Scripture to current issues as he addresses those issues in specific and practical terms.

Most evangelical academics today readily affirm that Christ is the Lord, not just of our hearts and spiritual concerns, but He is Lord over all of life—education, politics, economics, the arts, science—everything. So it is ironic that we have few Christian public intellectuals—evangelical social critics who address public concerns from a Christian perspective. Thankfully, we have voices like Jordan Peterson, Roger Scruton, and Jonathan Sacks, who while they themselves are not Christians, they articulate many biblical principles more widely and more effectively than we evangelicals seem to be doing. But the silence of a cogent, articulate, well-informed Christian perspective on most current issues is deafening.

In my work with The Leadership Anvil, one of my goals is to encourage Christian professors to not only develop a biblically-grounded Christian worldview but to apply biblical principles and a Christian worldview to public, social, and cultural issues, to speak into the public marketplace of ideas, to voice biblical truth winsomely, firmly, clearly. We need Christian public intellectuals. We need believers who are grounded in biblical truth and who are trained to assess and analyze social and cultural issues who then can apply biblical principles to current issues.

Why is this important? Because, as Richard Weaver reminded us a few decades ago, "Ideas have consequences." One of my heroes, African-American conservative scholar Thomas Sowell, put

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it like this in his book *Intellectuals and Society*, an intellectual is a “dealer in ideas” and a “public intellectual” is “someone known for comments on issues of the day, whether within or outside that person’s specialty.”<sup>1</sup> The intellectual may not be widely read in his own day, but his ideas can have a ripple effect over several generations.

In this paper I will address four matters regarding Wesley as a public intellectual. I will:

- 1) Demonstrate that John Wesley was not only a preacher, itinerant evangelist, writer, and founder of Methodism, but that he was also what we now know as a public intellectual,
- 2) Show the breadth of public issues he addressed.
- 3) Explain why he devoted his precious time to these public issues.
- 4) Present lessons we can learn from his work as a public intellectual, lessons which can help us be faithful in the public marketplace of ideas in our generation.

## I. Was John Wesley a Public Intellectual?

As we seek to encourage evangelical academicians today to come forward as public intellectuals, it can be helpful to see models of public intellectuals throughout history. One of the best historic models of an effective Christian public intellectual was John Wesley. He serves as a superb example to emulate. Wesley is famous for many things: preacher, writer, and founder of Methodism. But probably most people—Wesleyan or not—are not familiar with Wesley’s role as one of the premier public intellectuals of his time.

But is it accurate to refer to him in this way? Or was he simply an itinerant preacher who spoke so much that some of what he said was heard? Let’s consider several indicators supporting my claim of his role as a public intellectual. Let’s start with the “intellectual” half of this term and see if it applies to Wesley.

### 1. Intellectual by virtue of his education and scholarship.

First, we can certainly designate Wesley as an intellectual, because of his training and scholarship. He was trained at Oxford and he was definitely a “dealer in ideas,” as Thomas Sowell puts it. He held his appointment as a Fellow of Lincoln College at Oxford until 1751, having spent about fourteen years as an Oxford fellow.<sup>2</sup>

He was intellectual in his personality and his manner of speaking. “I love the very sight of Oxford; I love the manner of life; I love and esteem many of its institutions.”<sup>3</sup> As passionate as he was in his preaching, he was aware that often his words were heard as “the words of a scholar” as he said after trying to preach to a group of soldiers in Newcastle.<sup>4</sup> His life and ministry were marked as that of an intellectual, dealing in ideas, through his constant writing, preaching, and promotion of ideas.

Whiteley asserted that Wesley “was one of the ablest scholars of his generation as is evidenced by his masterly translations of poems from German, French, and Spanish sources....His *Notes on*

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley, Evangelist* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1967), 37.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Third Edition, (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 13:296 (“A Plain Account of Kingswood School”).

<sup>4</sup> Wood, 143.

*the New Testament* again indicate his excellent scholarship, and show that he had a sounder knowledge of Greek than that displayed by the translators in 1611.”<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Intellectual by virtue of his social circle.

Although Wesley made it clear that he was called as a minister to the poor, his education and social standing gave him access to the elites of England, both intellectuals and aristocracy. John and his brothers Samuel and Charles, were “in contact with those who led eighteenth-century society, politics and State Church” and they often “met Pope, Swift, Burke, Johnson, and the more musical aristocrats on terms of mental equality.” Wesley was held in high esteem by “such bishops as Potter, Gibson, and Lowth, and contemporary theologians like Butler, Paley, Lavington, Warburton, respected or feared him.”<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Intellectual by virtue of his approach to issues.

Wesley as an intellectual by virtue of his approach to issues, his life and ministry and clearly in his well-articulated Christian worldview. Elsewhere I have demonstrated that John Wesley embraced, affirmed, communicated and implemented a comprehensive biblically-grounded, Christ-centered worldview (some might even call it a Reformational worldview, without of course the Calvinistic doctrines of predestination and election).<sup>7</sup>

This academically-grounded and biblically-informed worldview provided the foundation for Wesley’s work as a public intellectual. Whiteley says, “It seems within just surmise, too, that if he had been drawn to politics, his resonant eloquence and masterly handling of facts would have given him Cabinet rank. . . . he ever lived in the habitual contemplation of the unseen world. . . . He had the eloquence, knowledge, financial skill, moral fiber, self-mastery, concentrative power which made him superior to any of the contemporary statemen, whether judged by the mental powers of Pitt, Fox, Burke and Rockingham, or by the stainless lives of Somers, Cowper, Townshend and Grenville. . . .”<sup>8</sup>

Bready in *England Before and After Wesley* notes that some have assumed or even “glibly asserted” that Wesley had little understanding of “worldly affairs, that social questions were of little or no concern to him.” But he responds that this is a “contortion of truth. It contains too little veracity for even the sorriest caricature. . . . Those economists and social historians who airily brush Wesley aside as a fanatical enthusiast, hopelessly out of touch with the practical problems of life, are reflecting not on Wesley but on themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

Wesley’s positions on public and cultural issues were rooted not only in Scripture and theology, but in his wide and extensive reading and research. In just one article about science and philosophy, he knowledgeably discussed the various schools of Greek philosophy, anatomy, botany, fossils, microscopes, telescopes, diving bells, gunpowder, and theories of the universe.

<sup>5</sup> John Harold Whiteley, *Wesley's England; a Survey of Eighteenth Century Social and Cultural Conditions*, Fourth ed. (London: Epworth Press (E.C. Barton), 1938, 1954), 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Daryl McCarthy, “John Wesley’s Reformational Worldview.” (unpublished) Presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, Providence, Rhode Island, November 15, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Whiteley, 21.

<sup>9</sup> J. Wesley Bready, *England: Before and after Wesley; the Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1971), 225.

He talks with easy familiarity about Harvey and the circulation of blood, Copernicus, Galileo, the Lutheran astronomer Tycho Brahe and many others.<sup>10</sup>

In another article, he explored questions related to the extent of the universe, celestial bodies, the sun and the planets, the nature of light, electricity (he was particularly fascinated with electrical power), the nature of the atmosphere, geography, vegetables, zoology, insects, oceanography, and ornithology.<sup>11</sup>

In his sermon, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” Wesley begins by saying, “How small a part of this great work of God is man able to understand! But it is our duty to contemplate what he has wrought, and to understand as much of it as we are able.”<sup>12</sup> He proceeds to give a detailed overview of the world God created and discusses the plant kingdom, the center of the earth, water, air, the sun and moon, weather and climate, the atmosphere, the animal kingdom—insects, birds,

Wesley’s “Christian Library” was the equivalent to a *Reader’s Digest* Condensed Books version of some of the great Christian classics, or he called it, “Extracts from, and Abridgments of, the choicest Pieces of practical Divinity which have been published in the English Tongue. In Fifty Volumes.”<sup>13</sup> But his definition of “practical Divinity” was much broader than you might think, because it included non-theological topics, including linguistics, history, science, medicine, and health studies, among others.

Here are just a few of the books and subjects in his “Library” which address issues of public or academic interest:

- Ever the wordsmith, Wesley includes a dictionary, “Complete English Dictionary, explaining most of those Hard Words which are found in the Best English Writers. By a Lover of Good English, and Common Sense.”<sup>14</sup>
- “Electricity Made Plain and Useful,” a book on everything known about electricity to that point, including insights from Ben Franklin.
- How to maintain good physical health.
- *A Short Roman History*
- *A Concise History of England*
- American Revolutionary War
- History of the Church
- Wesley’s own work on “Natural Philosophy” or we might call it, a theological perspective on science and the natural world
- Several biographies
- Wesley’s *Primitive Physic: Or, An Easy and Natural Method of curing most Diseases*.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 13:482 (Article, “Of the Gradual Improvement of Natural Philosophy”).

<sup>11</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, (Logos Bible Software; London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872). 13: 488-499 (essay, “Remarks on the Limits of Human Knowledge”).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:206 (Sermon 246, “God’s Approbation of His Works”).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:220 (“List of Works Revised and Abridged from Various Authors”).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:233.

Wesley admired saintly intellectuals. In the preface to his “Christian Library,” Wesley notes his admiration for great thinkers who were also great saints, “the piety which has shone in many of our countrymen has been equal to their learning.”<sup>15</sup>

He wrote and published widely. He wrote grammars for English, Greek, Hebrew grammar, Latin, and French, as well as a book on logic. Today I imagine that would merit the title of “intellectual” at least. So what we see in Wesley is no narrow, iconoclastic, ignorant zealot scoffing at the big world outside the Church. Rather, this is an articulate, well-educated Oxford don ever-analyzing the world through his Christian worldview.

Now let’s take a look at the “public” side of Wesley being a public intellectual.

#### 4. The breadth of his influence and national audience

“Public” is the easy part of “public intellectual” to demonstrate, because Wesley’s national influence is well-documented. What is not known nearly as well is the way in which Wesley spoke to the broader culture. He was not simply a preacher or an evangelist. He addressed the whole of life from the whole of Scripture and he did this in a very public manner.

The amount of traveling, writing, and speaking Wesley did is staggering. Based on the careful record of his journals, we can document that he traveled over 250,000 miles by horseback during his ministry (that would certainly earn him lifetime platinum status at the most prestigious travel club) and he preached around 42,000 sermons, often preaching to thousands of people at a time.

*Christian History* asserted, “No Protestant leader in the eighteenth century made better use of print media than John Wesley.”<sup>16</sup> “Because of the enormous output of publications designed for the common man, John Wesley has been called ‘*The Father of the Religious Paperback*.’ Sermons, tracts, pamphlets of every kind—numbering around 5000 items came from his pen!”<sup>17</sup>

Wesley was not blind to his own influence. In his “A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England,” he mentions that after he published his article on “Calm Address to Our American Colonies,” “within a few months, fifty, or perhaps an [sic] hundred thousand copies, in newspapers and otherwise, were dispersed throughout Great Britain and Ireland. The effect exceeded my most sanguine hopes. The eyes of many people were opened; they saw things in a quite different light.” He was pleased that many people’s eyes “were opened” and they saw they had been “hoodwinked” because they had been led away from “truth and common sense, as from the real love of their country.”<sup>18</sup>

He stated very clearly his desire to influence people with truth. He said simply, “I have no private views in doing this. I attend no great man’s table. I have nothing to ask, either of the

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:220 (“List of Works Revised and Abridged from Various Authors”).

<sup>16</sup> Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., “Start the Presses,” *Christian History* Issue 69 (vol XX, no. 1), 36.

<sup>17</sup> “John Wesley: Did You Know?” *Christianity Today* 1983.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-2/john-wesley-did-you-know.html>. Accessed November 16, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 11:129 (“A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England”).

King, or any of his Ministers. You may easily believe this; for if I had sought wealth or preferment half a century ago, I should hardly think it worth while to seek it now, when I have one foot in the grave. But I have a view **to contribute all that in me lies to the public welfare and tranquillity.**<sup>19</sup> What a statement! He wanted to do everything he could to “contribute...to the public welfare and tranquillity.” This is the heart of a Christian public intellectual.

Bready asserts that by 1774 when Wesley wrote *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, he “was revered by more people and influenced more consciences than any other man in England.” Consequently, it was no accident that Wilberforce who became known as the “Great Emancipator” “was a spiritual son of Wesley.”<sup>20</sup> “Wesley...was a mighty social reformer; for by initiating and directing a marvelous spiritual movement latent with moral imperatives, he opened the springs of human sympathy and understanding, which in turn inspired and nourished a glorious succession of social reforms.”<sup>21</sup>

Wesley biographer Henry Rack calls Wesley a “propagandist and cultural mediator.”<sup>22</sup> He claims that Wesley “aspired to be a semi-popular educator catering to the growing reading public of Georgian England, men of modest means eager for culture whom he no doubt hoped to capture for his view of the world.” Even his *Arminian Magazine* was not simply for promoting Wesley’s theological views; “it was a kind of religious *Reader’s Digest*; a sanctified version of the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* for pious persons of moderate means and education, especially Methodists....obviously he wished it to be respectable within its limits.”<sup>23</sup>

After Wesley’s death, the prominent *Gentlemen’s Magazine* which had attacked him during his life, wrote a glowing eulogy, “His personal influence was greater perhaps than any private gentleman in the country....as a man, as a writer, he must be considered as one of the most extraordinary characters this or any other age has ever produced.”<sup>24</sup>

Maldwyn Edwards, who is by no means an uncritical admirer of Wesley, reached this conclusion about Wesley, “A man who had transformed the spiritual nature of England as effectively as the Industrial Revolution had changed its physical aspect was of necessity the most influential person of his day. His influence had its source in religion but it overflowed into social and political channels. An England which had been swayed by his tremendous religious message was bound to listen with respect to his political opinions. Even as a politician his significance lies not in the genius of his politics, but in their loftiness. His antipathy against Romanism excepted, he stood consistently for righteousness in social and political life.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 11:129 (“A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England”).

<sup>20</sup> Bready, 228.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>22</sup> Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, Third ed. (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 343.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 349-350.

<sup>24</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century : A Study of His Social and Political Influence*, Rev. ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1955), 196.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

David Hempton asserts, “Apart from Halevy’s thesis and its subsequent refinements, the most common interpretation of Methodism’s impact on English society is that it sowed the seeds of individual responsibility and religious liberty...”<sup>26</sup>

Bready cites several leaders who have pointed to the significance of John Wesley and his influence.

- *The Cambridge Modern History* listed several of the greatest figures of the 1700’s, and then states, “But more important than any of these in universality of influence and range of achievement, were John Wesley and the religious revival to which he gave his name and his life.”
- Augustine Birrell, “No man lived nearer to the centre than John Wesley, neither Pitt nor Clive, neither Mansfield nor Johnson. You cannot cut him out of the national life. No single figure influenced so many minds, no single voice touched so many hearts. No other man, did such a life’s work for England.”
- Archbishop Davidson, “Wesley practically changed the outlook and even the character of the English nation.”
- Lloyd George, Prime Minister, in 1922, Wales “owed more to the movement of which Wesley was the inspirer and prophet and leader, than to any other movement in the whole of its history...It civilized the people...There was a complete revolution in the whole country.”<sup>27</sup>

MacArthur asserts that “The Wesleyan Revival is an outstanding illustration of the efficacy of the combined force of religion and ethics in locating anew the fundamental values of life, and in realizing them in the activities and experiences of the common people.”<sup>28</sup>

She observes that until the 1930’s when she was writing, even scholars who admired Wesley “failed to take notice of his frequent and pertinent comments upon certain principles and practices of economic importance.” Once we take a closer look we realize that “far from being a man hurrying through this mortal vale to an eternal home, and catching up fellow sinners in passing, he is greatly concerned about the life that now is, of the worthiness, usefulness, and enjoyment of it, so that his whole traditional religion, even in its doctrinal aspects, is made to yield ethical guidance as one of its chief products...”<sup>29</sup>

Several scholars have credited Wesley’s wide public voice and influence for playing a role in saving England from the devastation of the French Revolution (which we will discuss later).<sup>30</sup>

As Whiteley states, Wesley “gave thousands upon thousands of English-speaking people, directly or indirectly, a new mind and a new spirit. Because of his influence, [they] knew a higher standard of honesty as citizens, as employers, as employees, and they learned to accept the duties

<sup>26</sup> David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1850* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984), 234.

<sup>27</sup> Bready, 180-181.

<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Walker MacArthur, *The Economic Ethics of John Wesley* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1936), 12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> Whiteley, 21. Whiteley lists Lecky, Green, and Birrell, , and Piette in that number in addition to the more well-known Elie Halevey.

of a full life. The spread of such teaching over vast numbers fired the philanthropists, awoke the social conscience of the country, and stabilized the national temper, at a time when England faced the repercussions of the French Revolution.”<sup>31</sup>

In his biography of Wesley, A. Skevington Wood cites several authorities who refer to the historic impact of Wesley.

- “The greatest force of the eighteenth century.” Augustine Birrell
- “The most striking of eighteenth-century figures.” Sir Charles Grant Robertson
- “No historian can miss the immense raising of the nation’s spiritual temper by Wesley in his own movement and through its effects in the Church of England.” *The Time Literary Supplement*
- Wood concludes that “The recovery of the national mind and character started with Wesley....The man who took the world as his parish now has the eyes of the world upon him.”<sup>32</sup>

Rack who is quite critical of Wesley calls him a “controversialist.”<sup>33</sup> Interesting tag, because most public intellectuals have been considered as “controversialists” as well. Rack goes on to observe that “Wesley saw himself as an educational as well as religious and moral reformer.”<sup>34</sup> Read “public intellectual.”

Rack is skeptical about claims such as J. W. Bready in his book *England Before and After Wesley* claims “that Wesley had a key role in stimulating evangelical zeal for social reform with dramatic long-term effects,....” Rack asserts that “the sources and motives” for these changes “remain rather mysterious” and that Wesley’s personal role was “peripheral.”<sup>35</sup>

My response to objections like Rack’s is to agree that yes, it is difficult to ascertain the exact influence of any particular movement in history. But in truth, there is no need to establish that Wesley himself personally instigated and engineered all, or even many of the reform projects which sprang out of the Methodist revival movement. We could list many great reformers who have been credited with launching massive changes without themselves doing it all or even most of it personally. Rather, it is a matter of influence and tone. Wesley, through his prodigious writing and preaching, inspired reformers who sprang out of the evangelical revival and applied biblical principles to life.

But, unfortunately, this public and intellectual work of Wesley has been largely forgotten, not only by evangelicals in general but even by those who claim to be Wesleyans. Today Wesley is seen the Christian perfection guy (scandalous enough in itself), or as a revivalist focused on experience, on the heart, and on emotions, with little emphasis on thinking Christianly or public impact. This is sad and represents a diminution of the monumental historic impact of this man.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>32</sup> Wood, 280-281.

<sup>33</sup> Rack, 351.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 360-362.



Early in his ministry when Wesley declared, “I look upon all the world as my parish,” he probably could not have envisioned how big that world-parish was or would be. He goes on to explain what that meant for him: “I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.” His calling was “to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous.”<sup>36</sup> When he said, “The world is my parish,” he could have added, “and every part of that world.”

And it worked. It is reasonable to call Wesley a public intellectual because he spoke and wrote extensively, addressing issues of public interest and national significance. And he was heard. He was an opinion-setter.

But only did Wesley have broad influence and a national audience, we also see that he was a public intellectual by virtue of...

### 5. The broad range of issues he addressed

Wesley regularly addressed what many people would consider to be “secular” topics in his sermons, letters and articles. This breadth of topics demonstrates the breadth and comprehensiveness of his worldview. His preaching doesn’t just address “spiritual issues” like so many evangelical leaders today. Wesley regularly affirms Christ as the Lord of all things and then addresses some of the “all things.” For Wesley there was no sacred/secular dichotomy, no separation of the world between sacred and secular, no subject that he could not address from a Christian perspective.

His sermons and articles include references to a wide range of subjects, including grammar, logic, botany, zoology, politics, social issues, government, economics, law, commerce, fashion and style, entertainment, and other issues.

Here are some examples of the breadth of topics he addressed. Later we will take a closer look at what he said about a couple of fields.

- **Politics.** In his 1768 article “Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs” he discusses with great ease a long list of complaints that were being made against the king and several governmental ministers and judges. In this long letter (19 pages) he displays extensive familiarity with the details of each case and quotes frequently from the proceedings of the parliament. Clearly keeping up with current events was a priority for him. And not only did he keep current, but he took time out of his busy schedule to address these ongoing political issues in an impressive manner.<sup>37</sup>
- **Liberty.** Wesley preached about “civil liberty” which includes “a liberty of enjoying all our legal property” and “religious liberty, a liberty of worshipping God according to the dictates of our own conscience.”<sup>38</sup>
- **Rationality and liberty.** He wrote a whole article on “Thoughts upon Liberty.” He begins by declaring, “ALL men in the world desire liberty; whoever breathes, breathes after this, and that by a kind of natural instinct antecedent to art or education. Yet at the same time all men

<sup>36</sup> Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists*, (Logos Bible Software; London,: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870). 1:235.

<sup>37</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 11:14-33 (“Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs”).

<sup>38</sup> Wesley. 7:403 (Sermon, “National Sins and Miseries”).

of understanding acknowledge it as a rational instinct. For we feel this desire, not in opposition to, but in consequence of, our reason....The love of liberty is then the glory of rational beings; and it is the glory of Britons in particular...Liberty! Liberty! sounds through every county, every city, every town, and every hamlet!”<sup>39</sup>

- **Democracy and power.** In his “Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power,” he discusses with ease the nuances of democracy and power, showing he had given it considerable thought. He shows a readiness to consider a challenge to the normal prohibition of that time on women’s rights. He asks, “By what argument do you prove that women are not naturally as free as men? And, if they are, why have they not as good a right as we have to choose their own Governors?”<sup>40</sup> He argued that the people who have the power to vote in eighteenth century England is a very restricted group—restricted to men only and only men who are 21 or older and who own a certain amount of property. He presses his case. “By what right do you exclude a man from being one of the people [who can vote] because he has not forty shillings a year; yea, or not a groat?”<sup>41</sup> Is he not a man, whether he be rich or poor? Has he not a soul and a body? Has he not the nature of a man; consequently, all the rights of a man,...” So as it turns out, in spite of the bold claims of the power belonging to the people, only about ten percent of the people have the power of governing.”<sup>42</sup>
- **Elections and voter fraud, and political bribery.**
- **Voting.** He offered advice on how to vote.<sup>43</sup>
- **Voting rights for women and the poor.** Wesley brings up the subject of women’s rights other times as well. In an article on the American Revolution, he shows that the percentage of people actually participating in a democracy is fairly limited. “Are not women free agents?” he asks, as he pointed out that poor people and women are excluded from the governing process.<sup>44</sup>
- **Suicide.** In his discussion of power, he argues that there is no right or liberty of suicide. “...no man has a right to dispose of his own life. The Creator of man has the sole right to take the life which he gave....no man can give to another a right which he never had himself; a right which only the Governor of the world has,...”<sup>45</sup>
- **Democracy.** In his article on the “Origin of Power” he concludes that the claim that “the people are the origin of power, is every way indefensible.” It is defeated because not every person has the right of participation in governing. “So common sense brings us back to the grand truth, ‘There is no power but of God.’”<sup>46</sup>
- **American revolution.** In his article, “Some Observations on Liberty,” he closed a long article arguing for civil liberty and against the American Revolution by presenting a poem on the sovereignty of God. What a reminder of the breadth of Wesley’s Reformational worldview that he seamlessly moves from a detailed discussion of the political situation in the American colonies to a hymn of worship of the Lord of the universe.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Wesley, *Works* 11:34 (“Thoughts Upon Liberty”).

<sup>40</sup> Wesley. 11:49 (“Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power”).

<sup>41</sup> A groat was a small silver English coin worth about four pence back in the 1600’s. It signified a very small amount of money.

<sup>42</sup> Wesley. 11:50 (“Thoughts Upon the Origin of Power”).

<sup>43</sup> “Words to a Freeholder” (1747), *Works* 11:196-197.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:81 (“A Calm Address to the American Colonies”).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:53 (“Thoughts Upon the Origin of Power”).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:52-53 (“Thoughts Upon the Origin of Power”).

<sup>47</sup> Wesley, *Works*.11:118 (“Some Observations on Liberty Occasioned by a Late Tract”).

- **National pride and arrogance.** “Have not writers of our own remarked, that there is not upon earth a more self-conceited nation than the English; more opiniated both of their own national and personal wisdom, and courage, and strength?”<sup>48</sup>
- **Prison reform.** He spent a great deal of time in prison ministry and advocated for prison reform.
- **Taxes.** Wesley condemned any avoidance of paying taxes. “It is, at least, as sinful to defraud the king of his right, as to rob our fellow-subjects: And the king has full as much right to his customs as we have to our houses and apparel.”<sup>49</sup>
- **Corruption and mismanagement of public charities.** He addresses range of issues including the misuse of donations by non-profits, lack of “care and frugality” in the operations, taking donated funds for personal use, and the refusal of some non-profit leaders to listen to criticism.<sup>50</sup>
- **Financial crimes.** He often addressed common financial crimes, such as smuggling, bribery, keeping inaccurate financial records, and bankruptcy. I am not sure what this involved, but he specifically condemned the practice of avoiding bankruptcy through “that base practice of raising money by coining notes, (commonly called the bill-trade,)....”<sup>51</sup>
- **International relations,** especially the American Revolution.
- **Homosexuality.** “...Is not the sin of Sodom, too, more common among us than ever it was in Jerusalem? Are not our streets beset with those monsters of uncleanness, who “burn in their lust one toward another,” whom God hath “given up to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient?”<sup>52</sup>
- **Litigation and dishonesty in the practice of law** which we will discuss later.
- **Perjury.**
- **Lisbon earthquake.** In his reflections on the earthquake, he presents a comprehensive review of the damage of the earthquake and its effects before discussing the relationship of God, nature and natural disasters. He also deals with the upcoming Halley’s comet which was coming in 1758.<sup>53</sup>
- **High food prices.** He often discussed economic issues, such as the way abuse of commodities increased poverty (which we will discuss later).<sup>54</sup>
- **Slavery.**
- **Education** was a frequent topic. In his 1783 article on “A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children” he deals with a range of educational issues. He critiques Rousseau in his book *Emile* as “the most empty, silly, injudicious thing that ever a self-conceited infidel wrote.”<sup>55</sup> He goes on to commend some educators, such as Mary (Bosanquet) Fletcher, who developed the Sunday school model.
- **Productivity and work.** He wrote a long article on the general sloth, laziness, and unproductivity in England. He talks about what time people get up, the increase in luxurious

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<sup>48</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:170 (article, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>49</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 6:127 (sermon, “The Use of Money”).

<sup>50</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:168 (“A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>51</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:309 (“Minutes of Several Conversations”).

<sup>52</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:164 (Article, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:11.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:53.

<sup>55</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 13:474 (“A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children”).

living, and sloth, in England as well as in other European countries. He then states that the primary characteristic of the English is “ungodliness.” The evidence of this is found in such things as “perjury” which he blames partly on “shameless manner of administering oaths.”<sup>56</sup>

- **Style, clothing and the related economic issues.**<sup>57</sup>
- **Social issues, such as singleness and marriage.**<sup>58</sup>
- **Psychological issues such as “nervous disorders.”**<sup>59</sup>
- **The economic and medical effects of drinking tea.**<sup>60</sup>
- **Comparative religions**, such as an analysis of Swedenborgianism.<sup>61</sup>
- **Mythology.**<sup>62</sup>
- **Philosophy**, such as a critique of Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding*.<sup>63</sup>
- **Aesthetics.** He wrote on taste, beauty and art.<sup>64</sup>
- **The power of music.**<sup>65</sup>
- **Genius.** In his “Thoughts on Genius,” Wesley discussed with equal familiarity such disparate figures as Homer and Milton, Euclid and Archimedes, Cicero and Newton, Raphael and Michelangelo, Purcell and Handel.<sup>66</sup>
- **Memory.**
- **Science.** He wrote extensively about science and scientific discoveries.
- **Linguistics.**
- **Public virtue.** The prevalence of immorality and homosexuality.<sup>67</sup>
- **Working conditions.** He preached not only on the importance of work and earning money, but gave specific guidance on healthy working conditions. In an age when mining and factories were expanding rapidly, his counsel was both needed and unusual. “Some employments are absolutely and totally unhealthy; as those which imply the dealing much with arsenic, or other equally hurtful minerals, or the breathing an air tainted with steams of melting lead, which must at length destroy the firmest constitution.”<sup>68</sup>
- **Business practices.** Wesley was not content to preach in generalities like, “Run your business like Jesus would want you to.” No, he gave specific direction. “We cannot, consistent with brotherly love, sell our goods below the market-price; we cannot study to ruin our neighbour’s trade, in order to advance our own; much less can we entice away, or receive, any of his servants or workmen whom he has need of. None can gain by swallowing up his neighbour’s substance, without gaining the damnation of hell!”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:161 (“An Estimate of the Manners of the Present Times”).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:466ff, 477ff.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 456ff, 463ff.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 515ff.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 504ff.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:425.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:464ff.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:455ff.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:468ff.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:470.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:478 (Article, “Thoughts on Genius,” 1787).

<sup>67</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:164, 192-193 (“A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>68</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 6:127 (Sermon, “The Use of Money”).

<sup>69</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 6:128 (sermon, “The Use of Money”).

- **Alcohol.** He spoke and wrote often in opposition to the liquor traffic and its abuses.<sup>70</sup> “John Wesley became ultimately the most effective temperance advocate the English-speaking world has yet reared....”<sup>71</sup> It was widely acknowledged that alcoholism was a major social crisis.<sup>72</sup> He explained how alcoholism can ruin a family financially. “We may not sell any thing which tends to impair health. Such is, eminently, all that liquid fire, commonly called drams, or spirituous liquors.”<sup>73</sup> In a September 6, 1784 letter to William Pitt, the prime minister, who himself had struggled with alcoholism, he urged him to make it a felony.

This brief list, which could be much longer, reminds us that when Wesley spoke of the world as his parish, he did not mean merely the “spiritual” aspect of the world or the religious institutions of the world. He meant every aspect of life and culture. Wesley did not merely pontificate about the contours of a Christian worldview in various disciplines and facets of culture, as so many self-proclaimed worldview specialists do today. He lived his worldview, he practiced his worldview, and he applied his worldview, not only in his work of evangelism and discipleship, but in his work as a public intellectual as well.

## II. Why Wesley believed Such Issues Should be Addressed

Four core convictions provided the foundation for all that Wesley did in addressing issues of public concern.

### 1. Christ is Lord over all things

Christ is lord over everything—not only over souls and the church, but over government, education, law and every other area of life. Wesley often refers to God as “the great Governor of the world.”<sup>74</sup> Wesley refers to God as “the only-begotten Son of God, the Creator, Lord, and Possessor of heaven and earth and all that is therein; the Judge of all,”<sup>75</sup> He declares that God “governs the world he has made; that he is the supreme and absolute Disposer of all things both in heaven and earth.”<sup>76</sup>

### 2. Christ came not only to save souls, but to redeem all things.

In one of his famous sermons in St. Mary’s Church at Oxford as he was speaking to the leaders of the city and to the intelligentsia, he talked about what it would take to have a “Christian country” or a “Christian city.”

Let me ask you then, in tender love, and in the spirit of meekness, Is this city a Christian city?... Are we, considered as a community of men, so “filled with the Holy Ghost,” as to enjoy in our hearts, and show forth in our lives, the genuine fruits of that Spirit? Are all the Magistrates, all Heads and Governors of Colleges and Halls, and their respective Societies, (not to speak of the inhabitants of the town,) “of one heart and one soul?”<sup>77</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:162 (article, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>71</sup> Bready, 242.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 6:128 (sermon, “The Use of Money”).

<sup>74</sup> Wesley. 6:288 (Sermon, “The General Spread of the Gospel”).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:125 (Sermon, “The Use of Money”).

<sup>76</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:159 (article, “An Estimate of the Manners of the Present Times”).

<sup>77</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 5:48 (Sermon, “Scriptural Christianity”).

Wesley's mandate, preach the Gospel and reform the nation.

For Wesley there was no distinction between preaching the Gospel and changing the nation. He believed God had raised up the Methodist movement, not only for reaching the lost and discipling believers—as important and central as that was—but to reform the nation as well. He declared, “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists? ... Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>78</sup>

So it was only natural that Wesley addressed public issues often in his writing and preaching.

Wesley scholar, Albert Outler notes, “In the Wesleyan tradition, therefore, the notion of spirituality (however exalted) is never split off from the Christian reformation of society.”<sup>79</sup> Consequently, the Methodist movement “was self-consciously a reform movement.”

Hynson concurs saying the fact that Wesley

emphasized reform, both social and ecclesiastical, and the preaching of scriptural holiness...the doctrine of salvation, defined by the full *ordo salutis*, is a crucial foundation of his reform efforts. By reforming the nation and the church, Wesley is defining the work of the Christian ministry in effecting personal and social transformation. Reform means that the full range of God’s saving will for the world is being enfleshed in the persons and institutions of the world. *Salvation* is a comprehensive word, describing all of God’s restoring work for individuals, societies, the world, and the universe.<sup>80</sup>

### 3. Christ calls us to engage with the world around us, not just for spiritual purposes as important as that is, but for God’s will to be done in all areas of life.

Wesley had a keen awareness of the needs and problems facing the common person; he was much more knowledgeable about the daily living conditions and challenges than almost any other person in England. With indefatigable energy, he traveled and preached all over England and Ireland for decades. He was in close contact with people of all social classes and economic ranks. His extensive travel, his keen observation and his careful journaling, gave him an encyclopedic knowledge of social, political, economic and legal challenges people faced. And he had a perspective borne from decades of prodigious travel from one end of Great Britain to another. Thankfully, he “was unwilling to divorce faith and ethics.”<sup>81</sup>

Wesley declared, “A solitary Christian” is “a contradiction in terms.”<sup>82</sup> “Directly opposite to this is the Gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. ‘Holy solitaries’ is a phrase no

<sup>78</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:299 (“Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others From the Year 1744, to the Year 1789”).

<sup>79</sup> Albert C. Outler, “Foreword,” Leon O. Hynson, *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley's Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Francis Asbury Press, 1984), 10.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>82</sup> Wesley. 5:298-299 (“The Sermon on the Mount”).

more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.”<sup>83</sup>

With such a worldview then it was only natural for Wesley to address public and social issues from a biblical perspective.

#### 4. Christ calls us to not only preach and speak, we must also act.

Unlike most public intellectuals who pontificate on issues from the safety of their perch in the academy, Wesley not only articulated the need and possible solutions, but he personally led the way in applying the solution to the lives of individuals.

The most impressive thing about Wesley’s worldview is that he lived it, he put it into practice. It was not theoretical for him. He was always more of an activist than a theoretician. He didn’t just preach and write about his worldview convictions. He acted on his convictions. He established initiatives which applied his worldview in real life.

This important aspect of his life deserves its own treatment, but here are just a few of the projects he initiated to apply his worldview: he established schools, established a publishing company to make educational materials more accessible, established a lending fund for poor people, ministered to prisoners and worked to improve prison conditions, established a program to provide medicine and home-visits to the sick, provided basic medical help and advice, raised money to help the poor, established a micro-loan program for the poor, distributed coal, food and clothing for the poor, established an orphanage, sponsored a non-profit organization to help the poor, established and funded a home for elderly widows and a way for them to earn some money, and raised funds for the Society for the Reformation of Manners to assist in cultural change.

### III. Public Interest Issues Wesley Addressed

Most preachers do not address such things as prison reform, poverty, international affairs, education, or healthcare, in their pulpits and certainly not in the public arena. But Wesley’s activism spurred him to address cultural and social issues both in his preaching and his writing in his role as a public intellectual. Let’s just take a quick look at just three areas Wesley addressed.

#### 1. Politics

No doubt the most significant issue related to politics and Wesley is the theory that the Wesleyan revival helped prevent a revolution in England, similar to the devastating one in France. Elie Halevy (1870-1937), a French philosopher and historian, is most famous for this proposal, but others have advocated it as well. In his history of England, Halevy asserted that "the England of the nineteenth century was surely, above all other countries, destined to revolution, both politically and religiously."<sup>84</sup> Then he posed the question, “Why [is] it that of all the countries of

<sup>83</sup>John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 1 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868), xxii.

<sup>84</sup>Quoted in “Elie Halevy,” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89lie\\_Hal%C3%A9vy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89lie_Hal%C3%A9vy). Accessed November 19, 2019.

Europe England has been the most free from revolutions, violent crises, and sudden changes?" His answer was simple: the Methodist revival which transformed England and saved it from revolution.<sup>85</sup>

The 1700's were indeed tumultuous times in England and revolution appeared to be likely. "The eighteenth century...was a time when rioting, apparently beyond the power of the law to control, was endemic....A chronic cause of disturbance was high corn prices,..."<sup>86</sup>

For many years I had the hazy idea that the way the Wesleyan revivals helped prevent an English revolution was simply by the sheer number of people being converted and consequently being made into more peaceful citizens, in an effect something like the Transformation videos that George Otis has produced in recent years about the holistic impact of revival.<sup>87</sup> Certainly, the tens of thousands of conversions, especially among the restless and oppressed poor, did impact the attitudes of the people.

But somehow, I had missed the fact that Wesley himself played a direct and deliberate role in tamping down the revolutionary impulses and stamping out the fires of rebellion through his writing, preaching and influence.

He feared a revolution and he definitely thought it was a possibility. In his "Seasonable Address" he repeats dire warnings of civil war and revolution. "We are a kingdom divided against itself; and, without a miracle, fall we must!" "An innumerable train of evils necessarily follow; no inconsiderable part of which are the sword, fire, plunder, and famine." He goes on to speak of "gathering blackness, and spreading itself well-nigh over the whole land."<sup>88</sup> It is clear that he was extremely concerned.

He pleads that something must be done. "Then who that has any understanding, any bowels of mercy and compassion, would not do the utmost, that either human or divine prudence can suggest, to prevent it? For who knows, when the sword is once drawn, where it may stop?... We should bring, if in our senses, no combustible matter to increase the flame, but water and a helping hand to extinguish it. This we should certainly do, and our labour would not be in vain....Ye salt of the earth, exert the seasoning, preserving quality which you are favoured with."<sup>89</sup>

In his November 12, 1775 sermon on "National Sins and Miseries" he speaks of widespread "lunacy" and people who were "out of their senses." The cause of this lunacy is "the poison which is so diligently spread through every city and town in the kingdom. They are screaming out for liberty, while they have it in their hands, while they actually possess it;..." Wesley said of these people "their reason is gone; their intellects are quite confounded." He blames it on

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<sup>85</sup> "Halvey, Elie," Encyclopedia.com. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/historians-european-biographies/elie-halvey>. Accessed November 19, 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 13-14.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. <https://www.sentinelgroup.org/documentaries>.

<sup>88</sup> Wesley, *Works*.11:119 ("A More Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of the Inhabitants of Great Britain").

<sup>89</sup> Wesley, *Works*.11:120-123 ("A More Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of the Inhabitants of Great Britain").



“party-zeal” People are “foaming with rage against their quiet neighbours, ready to tear out one another’s throats, and to plunge their swords into each other’s bowels; if you had heard men, who once feared God and honoured the king, now breathing out the bitterest invectives against him, and just ripe, should any occasion offer, for treason and rebellion;...Reason is lost in rage; its small still voice is drowned by popular clamour.”<sup>90</sup>

Early in 1777 when Wesley heard there was “some disturbance in Bristol,” he hurried there to do his part in calming the anti-government mobs. He wrote in his journal, “I went down in the diligence, and on *Tuesday* evening strongly enforced those solemn words, ‘Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to speak evil of no man.’”<sup>91</sup> He took his role seriously and he realized he had an obligation to address real political issues.

So we see revolution was a tangible fear of Wesley’s and he worked to quell it. He wrote, “Loyalty is with me an essential branch of religion.”<sup>92</sup> Wesley had a deep and abiding respect for lawful authority, for government. He states clearly, “We do nothing in defiance of government: We reverence Magistrates, as the Ministers of God.”<sup>93</sup>

Once we understand Wesley’s deep fear and distaste for riots and revolution, his long treatises on political issues and the constant emphasis on loyalty to the king being a part of a Christian’s obedience to God make more sense. Wesley recognized the danger of revolution and he deliberately and repeatedly worked to push these impulses back. Bernard Semmel, who translated Halevy’s piece about Methodism into English, affirms that “Methodism may have helped to block a violent English counterpart to the French Revolution by preempting the critical appeal and objective of that Revolution. Indeed, it might be said that only because of what the Methodist revolution was accomplishing could the Methodist counter to revolutionary violence be effective.”<sup>94</sup>

Wesley himself was probably not aware of how perfectly suited his evangelical Arminian theology was for just that time and place. But in fact, Semmel postulates Wesley’s evangelical Arminian message, in contrast to Calvinist doctrine, may well have played a key role in ensuring an English revolution did not take place.<sup>95</sup> He says it was precisely Arminianism which enabled the Wesley revivals to have such a transformative impact on England. “Methodist doctrine, as set forward by the leading spokesmen of the movement, was essentially a liberal and ‘progressive’ (in the sense of both confirming and helping to advance the movement from a traditional to a modern society) ideology, much more decidedly liberal and progressive than that of Calvinism,...”<sup>96</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Wesley, *Works*.7:403–404 (Sermon, “National Sins and Miseries”).

<sup>91</sup> Wesley, *Works*.4:93 (*Journal* February 3, 1777). Semmel pointed me to this, Semmel, 66. Semmel discusses Wesley’s role in turning back revolution more thoroughly in his chapter, “Confrontation with ‘Practical’ Antinomianism,” 56-80.

<sup>92</sup> Wesley, *Works*.12:435 (*Letters*, CCCCXCII, June 25, 1777).

<sup>93</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:114 (“A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part I”).

<sup>94</sup> Semmel, 6-7.

<sup>95</sup> Semmel points out that many scholars have found Calvinism “more satisfying” than Wesleyanism. After all “Calvin had a ‘system’ and systems have always been congenial to intellectuals.” *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>96</sup> Semmel, 4-5. Cf. Semmel, 79-80, 194-195.

Wesleyanism's offer of salvation to all, in contrast to Calvinism offering salvation only to a few elect, "accomplished for masses of men what sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Calvinism could only confirm for a few."<sup>97</sup> "The Arminian insistence on personal responsibility, on free will and good works" provided "the kind of conduct which 'modern' political and economic life would find essential,...."<sup>98</sup>

Semmel concludes his book on *The Methodist Revolution* with these words: "At its core, the Methodist Revolution,...aimed at countering the destructive spiritual consequences of certain of the illiberal, traditional doctrines preached by the Reformation. It may have been this spiritual Revolution which made possible the essential peculiarity of what Tocqueville called 'Anglo-American civilization'—the 'product' of 'two perfectly distinct elements which elsewhere have often been at war with one another.'....'the *spirit of religion* and *the spirit of freedom*.'"<sup>99</sup>

In January, 1782, Wesley wrote a brief article on why ministers should not preach much on politics. In light of his extensive writing and preaching on political issues, it is ironic that he draws a much tighter boundary on "preaching politics" that he himself practiced. He nuances his answer carefully. First, in the Bible we are commanded not to speak evil of the ruler. What if the sermon is exposing falsehoods and lies which are being told about the king? "If you mean this by the term, it is the bounden duty of every Christian Minister to preach politics." But having said that, our "main and constant business" is to preach Christ.

It was common—then as now—when anything went wrong, to blame the government. But Wesley counsels caution, reminding the people that there are many factors involved with the actions and decisions of government officials which we may not be aware of. So it is good for preachers to warn against the groundless criticism of officials.<sup>100</sup> Given the amount of time and energy Wesley spent addressing political issues, his counsel in this article is carefully circumscribed and cautious, but wise and understandable. Wesley viewed what is addressed in the pulpit in a sermon as decidedly different from what can be addressed in an article. He wanted to make sure pastors were not fomenting rebellion in their sermons, but rather were defending the king and the government from unfounded charges.

Wesley wrote a lengthy three-part article, "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion") in which he deals with a wide range of political issues. Since these articles were written for a broader audience—for the whole reading public, they give us insight into his work as a public intellectual.

He begins by assuming patriotism—a love of country.<sup>101</sup> Then he reviews Scriptures which talk about the sins of the Jews in the Bible: drunkenness, lying, perjury, immorality, homosexuality, injustice, excessive usury, swearing, blasphemy, breaking the Sabbath, disobedience to parents, laziness, luxury, dishonesty in business, oppression of the poor, pride, religious rituals, and false

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 13, 12.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>100</sup> Wesley, *Works*.11:155 ("How Far is it the Duty of a Christian Minister to Preach Politics?").

<sup>101</sup> Wesley, *Works* 8:136 "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II").

worship. He then proceeded to show how these same sins were being practiced in England. He quotes Scripture about Israel forsaking God “And did not England too?”<sup>102</sup>

In Part II of this article he condemns swearing, perjury, law enforcement officials who do not enforce the law, ships’ captains who lie about their cargo, customs officials who take bribes, and members of parliament who take bribes.<sup>103</sup>

He deals extensively with election fraud. He said that there were many voters who vote twice or take bribes to vote a certain way: “those godless and shameless wretches who frequently vote twice at one election, how few are there who can take this oath with a conscience void of offence! who have not received, directly or indirectly, any gift, or promise of any!”<sup>104</sup> He insisted that voter integrity demanded that Christians should not accept even a meal or a drink at the expense of someone running for office. In his *Journal* on October 6, 1774, he wrote that he urged the Methodists “To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy.”<sup>105</sup>

In an article to “freeholders” he offered advice on how to vote.<sup>106</sup> Rack points out that “His strongest and most public involvement in political controversy came in the years between 1768 and 1778.”<sup>107</sup> And he wasn’t content simply to preach and write about political issues. He also petitioned governmental leaders on policy issues.

## 2. Law and justice

Wesley was a sharp critic of the legal system of England. He was clearly well-acquainted not only with the laws, but with the frequent abuses of justice within the criminal system. Bready explains Wesley “felt that Law, instead of acting as a medium of equity and a protection to the poor, frequently was being used to pervert equity and to embezzle the poor; and to him perverted law, like perverted religion, was a loathsome, diabolical thing.”<sup>108</sup>

Wesley demonstrates a detailed knowledge of law, dishonest attorneys and judges, and the abuses within the legal system in his list of twelve specific types of legal dishonesty.

- “(1.) To promote and encourage needless suits, if not unjust ones too:
- (2.) To defend a bad cause, knowing it so to be,—
  - By making a demur, and then withdrawing it;
  - By pleading some false plea, to the plaintiff’s declaration;
  - By putting in an evasive answer to his bill;
  - By protracting the suit, if possible, till the plaintiff is ruined:
- (3.) To carry a cause not amounting to ten shillings into Westminster-Hall, by laying it in his declaration as above forty:
- (4.) To delay his own client’s suit knowingly and wilfully, in order to gain more thereby:

<sup>102</sup> Wesley, *Works* 8:147 (“A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>103</sup> Wesley, *Works* 8:149-157 (“A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>104</sup> Wesley, 8:158 (Article, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>105</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 4:29. Bready pointed me to this journal entry, 246.

<sup>106</sup> “Words to a Freeholder” (1747), *Works* 11:196-197.

<sup>107</sup> Rack, 374.

<sup>108</sup> Bready, 245.

(5.) To draw himself the pleadings or conveyances of his client, instead of giving them to be drawn by able Counsel:

(6.) To charge his client with the fees which should have been given to such Counsel, although they were not given:

(7.) To charge for drawing fair copies, where none were drawn:

(8.) To charge fees for expedition given to clerks, when not one farthing has been given them:

(9.) To send his clerk a journey (longer or shorter) to do business with or for different persons; and to charge the horse-hire and expense of that journey to every person severally:

(10.) To send his clerk to Westminster, on the business of ten (it may be) or twenty persons, and to charge each of these twenty for his attendance, as if he had been sent on account of one only:

(11.) To charge his own attendance in like manner: And,

(12.) To fill up his bill with attendances, fees, and term-fees, though his client is no whit forwarder in his cause?”<sup>109</sup>

He blasted the way litigation was carried out and the widespread dishonesty in the practice of law—frivolous litigation, price gouging, and cheating. He protests, “An *honest* Attorney! Where will you find one?”<sup>110</sup> He charges that the courts and judges were often arbitrary in their decisions with different decisions and sentences being handed down on the same day for the same crime delivered by the same judge. “Have not the same causes been decided quite opposite ways? one way this term, just the contrary the next? Perhaps one way in the morning, (this I remember an instance of,) and another way in the afternoon.”<sup>111</sup> These are the words of a man who views law and justice as being under the lordship of Christ and worthy of the attention of the Church.

He excoriates the excessive cost of litigation and needless delays in justice. He condemns the common practice of perjury. He asked, is not truth, as well as “justice, fallen in our streets?”<sup>112</sup> While he’s on the subject of lying, he pointed out in everyday life it was considered normal to lie for the sake of “flattery and compliment,” as well as when we are buying and selling. He frequently condemned common criminal practices such as smuggling. “No man of his century attacked the common practice of smuggling more stoutly or more effectively than Wesley.”<sup>113</sup>

### 3. Economics

Wesley frequently addressed economic issues as well. In the 1770’s England was going through an economic crisis. Tyerman describes the context for this crisis. “The long continued war, a succession of inferior harvests, and other unfavorable events, had raised the price of provisions to such an extent, that the distress of the nation had become alarming.” There was much discussion in the press and in parliament about solutions to this crisis, such as eliminating tariffs

<sup>109</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:165–167 (“A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>110</sup> Wesley. 8:165 (Article, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:167 (Article, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>112</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:166–169 (Article, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part II”).

<sup>113</sup> Bready, 246.

on imported grain. The king addressed the issue in his speech opening parliament instructing them to pass bills “for alleviating the distresses of the poor.” Tyerman says, “In the midst of all this, Wesley was far from being an indifferent spectator;...”<sup>114</sup> (Once again, we see his call as a public intellectual.)

On December 21, 1772 his letter about “The Present Scarcity of Provisions” was published in *Lloyd’s Evening Post*, and it appeared again in the *Leeds Mercury* on December 29, as well as in other newspapers and magazines.<sup>115</sup> (He was 69 at this point.)

He begins his article with some gentle criticism of the current chatter about the causes of the crisis. “Many causes have been assigned for it; but is not something wanting in most of those publications?” He points out that while one cause or another has been blamed, no one has the big picture. Why hasn’t anyone produced evidence on how a “particular cause affects the price of each particular sort of provision?”<sup>116</sup>

He then gently wades in with “a few hints on this important subject; proposing a few questions,” and a “plain and direct answer.”<sup>117</sup> He asks “Why are thousands of people starving, perishing for want, in every part of the nation?” He calmly points out, “I have seen it with my eyes, in every corner of the land.” He describes in heartbreaking detail one person in London picking through a heap of manure in the street and pulling out sprats, a small, oily, sardine-like fish. He had seen another person picking up bones in the street left by a dog to make broth.

Then he dissects the problem in a clear logical manner:

- The poor are hungry because “they have no work.”
- But why don’t they have work? Because their employers, mostly small businesses, can no longer afford to hire workers.
- But why can’t businesses afford to hire workers? Because food is so expensive.
- And why are the most essential food items so expensive? Because the distilling industry is consuming “such immense quantities of corn.” The distilleries are “converting it into deadly poison; poison that naturally destroys not only the strength and life, but also the morals, of our countrymen”<sup>118</sup> He points out that much of what is distilled from corn does not have duty paid on it. In other words, it is being produced and distributed illegally. He claims it could be as much as six gallons illegal for every legal gallon.
- Why are oats so expensive? Because there are so many horses to be fed.
- Why are beef and mutton so expensive? Many farms had gone from raising sheep and cattle to horses only to feed the demand of the wealthy for “coach and chaise horses,” thousands of which are exported to France.
- He asks why “pork, poultry and eggs” are so expensive. He claims that it is partly “because of the monopolizing of farms.” One landowner now owns the land that formerly ten or twenty farmers kept. Consequently, the prices of the produce from these larger monopolies has gone up.

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<sup>114</sup> Tyerman. III:130.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Wesley. 11:53 (“The Present Scarcity of Provisions,” 1773).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 11:53.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 11:54-55 (“The Present Scarcity of Provisions,” 1773).

- Another cause of rising food prices is, simply put, “luxury” and all the profligate waste of the wealthy. Land is becoming expensive as well, and this requires the tenant farmer to pay higher rent.
- But why are the prices of almost everything going up? Simple: “the enormous taxes.”
- And why are taxes going up? “Because of the national debt.” He claims that 70 years earlier, the national budget was three million pounds. Now with the huge national debt, the interest alone is more than four millions pounds.<sup>119</sup>

He sums up the big picture: “Thousands of people throughout the land are perishing for want of food. This is owing to various causes; but above all, to distilling, taxes, and luxury.”<sup>120</sup>

He then proposes some possible remedies, although he admits that the solution, “Perhaps...exceeds all the wisdom of man....”

1. Abolish distilleries.
2. Reduce the number of horses by taxing horses exported to France and by levying an additional tax on horses used for “gentlemen’s carriages.”
3. Increase the breeding of sheep and horned cattle.
4. Institute rent controls and limits on farms.
5. “Repressing luxury.”
6. Pay off the national debt.
7. Abolish useless pensions as the current recipients die and especially for positions that are no longer necessary, like governors of unused forts and castles.<sup>121</sup>

My point here isn’t where you agree or disagree with his economic plan, but rather that Wesley is demonstrating in great detail his recognition of the economic crisis, his knowledge of the contributing factors, and his assessment of possible measures. This is a Christian with an encompassing vision of Christ’s lordship. He cares about what people are suffering and he knows God cares about issues like poverty, economics, taxes and luxury.

## IV. Lessons We Can Learn from Wesley on How to Approach Issues of Public Interest

### 1. Ground your position in Scripture.

We have seen that Wesley was highly effective in addressing a wide spectrum of issues from a biblical perspective. But what was the secret of his effectiveness? It was simply because he staked his life and reputation on the reliability, inspiration, and trustworthiness of Scripture. Along with the Reformers, Wesley, the “man of one Book,” affirmed that great Reformation pillar, *sola Scriptura*. Wesley embraced the Bible as the final authority, as fully as Luther did. He took the Bible seriously. I have written elsewhere about Wesley’s adamant stand for the

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 11:57 (“The Present Scarcity of Provisions,” 1773).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 11:56-57 (“The Present Scarcity of Provisions,” 1773).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 11:57-59 (“The Present Scarcity of Provisions,” 1773).

inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>122</sup> For him this was not just a doctrinal point. *Sola Scriptura* was how he lived his life. He seamlessly moves from an in-depth analysis of political or economic problems to citing Scriptures which relate to the issue.

## 2. Address current issues from a Christian worldview.

As a public intellectual Wesley articulated a comprehensive Christian worldview which aimed at the transformation of the culture. (I need to point out that I intentionally do not use the term “social justice” because in its current usage, it has become an anti-biblical term with its advocacy of redistribution of wealth and economic equality, both of which deny the biblical teaching of personal responsibility and prohibitions on stealing.) John Wesley was a pioneer—in both theory and practice—of what he called, “social holiness” (which is very different from “social justice”). Wesley was far ahead of his time.

To be sure, the focus of his life was preaching the Gospel throughout the British Isles and leading the Wesleyan Revival in which tens of thousands of people were converted. But his attention was by no means limited to personal salvation. He seamlessly combined evangelism *and* social action. He was convinced that Scriptural holiness—his life-theme—would make a difference in every area of life—business, politics, economics, government, entertainment, the home, education and, of course, the Church. That is why he spent a great deal of time addressing how the Gospel applies to all of life, i.e., speaking as a public intellectual.

For Wesley, *servng a God of mercy and justice* calls for us as his followers to advocate mercy and justice at every level of society. *Servng a God of knowledge* entails making the pursuit of knowledge a priority in our lives. *Servng a God who is Lord* over everything entails exploring how that lordship applies in all areas of life and culture. He showed us how the Good News is good news not just for souls and for eternity, but for society and for all of life here and now. And he did this without in anyway minimizing the passion for evangelism and the longing for heaven. Wesley declared that our goal is “always to be fixed on the glory of God and good of man.”<sup>123</sup> Not one or the other, but both. This is central to why he was so effective in his advocacy of a Christian worldview.

## 3. Do your research.

In his article, “The Present State of Affairs,” he discusses the complexities of the political climate with considerable ease, including references to specific issues, such as “The requiring tonnage and poundage, the imposing ship-money, the prosecutions in the Bishops’ Courts, in the High Commission Court, and in the Star Chamber, . . .”<sup>124</sup>

Wesley was a voracious reader, not just on matters of theology or spirituality, but on a wide range subjects, especially politics. He read an “abundance of letters from persons in America” and took the opportunity to talk “freely and largely” with a number of people from the American colonies. He then compared the many accounts he had gathered to form an analysis of the

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<sup>122</sup> Daryl McCarthy, “Wesleyan Founders and Scripture: John Wesley, Adam Clarke and Richard Watson” (unpublished paper) 2001.

<sup>123</sup> Wesley. 6:162.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:15, 29 (“The Present State of Public Affairs”).

political situation there. Wesley testifies that he saw his role as contributing “to the public welfare and tranquility.”<sup>125</sup>

When writing about the situation in America, he establishes his credibility by explaining, “Over and above those accounts which have been published, I have had abundance of letters from persons in America, on whose judgment, veracity, and impartiality I could safely depend; especially from the provinces of New-York, Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. I have likewise had the opportunity of conversing freely and largely with many that came from those provinces, and of comparing together the accounts of those who were attached to one or the other party.”<sup>126</sup>

Wesley kept his finger on the pulse of the real need of Britishers. His article on “The Present Scarcity of Provisions” is a heart-rending cry for the government and people of means to pay attention to the suffering of the poor in England in the midst of wealth and affluence. “Why are thousands of people starving, perishing for want, in every part of the nation? The fact I know; I have seen it with my eyes, in every corner of the land. I have known those who could only afford to eat a little coarse food once every other day.”<sup>127</sup> Because of his extensive traveling, Wesley had more personal on-site observation of issues facing the population than any other man in England.

#### 4. Focus on truth and facts.

As an intellectual Wesley was focused on truth and facts, whether he was dealing with spiritual issues or politics or science. In one of his many articles related to the American Revolutionary War, he said his purpose was this: “My view is, as far as is possible, to lessen, if not remove, the misunderstandings under which many honest, well-meaning men are labouring to this day;....”<sup>128</sup>

In another article to the general populace, he asks his readers to focus on the facts. “I beg you to weigh the matter calmly; not to be overborne by noisy or wordy men, but to use your own senses, your own eyes and ears, and your own understanding. Do not run away (as many do) with part of a story; but hear the whole, and then judge. Have patience to lay all circumstances together, and then you may form a just judgment.” His intention is to make sure that what people think of the state of the nation is not “misrepresented” so they don’t think are worse than they really are. That is why he asks, “Should not then an inquiry of so important a nature be made with the greatest accuracy?”<sup>129</sup>

He proceeds to explain why we need to start by defining what we mean by “the state of the nation” since some writers and speakers on the topic never bothered to clarify what they meant. He then launches into a detailed and comprehensive review of the political, economic, and social “state of the nation” quoting extensively from an article by the Dean of Gloucester whom he considered to be authoritative. In asking whether things are getting better or worse, he explains

<sup>125</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:129-130 (“A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England”).

<sup>126</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:130 (A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England”).

<sup>127</sup> Wesley. 11:53 (“The Present Scarcity of Provisions,” 1773).

<sup>128</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:130 (A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England”).

<sup>129</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:140-141 (“A Serious Address to the People of England, with Regard to the State of the Nation”).



that they needed to define with what date they are comparing to and he picks 1759 as his comparison point. He reviews population growth, agriculture, manufacturing, transportation, fisheries, slavery, taxation, and national debt.<sup>130</sup> In this article both in his own words and in quoting his knowledgeable source, he ranges freely across a broad range of economic, demographic and political issues.

His overall point was to show that contrary to popular opinion, things were much better in 1778 when he wrote this than they were in 1759. “England is not in a worse but in a far better state than it was eighteen years ago; so far from being on the brink of ruin, that it is in a state of eminent prosperity.”<sup>131</sup> So this is another lesson for modern successors of Wesley: we don’t always have to focus on bad news. We can actually encourage people with good news occasionally.

Wesley wrote a response to an article by a Dr. Price on “Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America.” In this article Price presented a stout defense of the American cause for independence. After complimenting the author on the insights in his “master-piece” article, Wesley then proceeds to engage with Price’s arguments that the colonists right to liberty included their right to independence. Wesley disagrees and proceeds to state his case.

Though I believe Wesley is wrong, both factually and philosophically on many points, he presents a carefully reasoned case which in today’s world would merit publication in *First Things* or the *Economist*. He displays an astounding breadth of knowledge of current political events, economics, trade, military affairs, history, and intellectuals such as Locke. Page after page he seeks to demolish Price’s case. He challenges much of what Price claimed as fake news; he keeps asking for facts, for evidence supporting his claims: “What proof is there of this...?” For instance, Price claimed that there would only be 30,000 soldiers to fight the American revolutionaries, but that a full quarter of the two million Americans would be prepared to fight back. Wesley’s response is a classic response of “The facts please.” He said he didn’t know how many soldiers Britain could marshal, but he had serious questions about the American fighting force. “I doubt, (1.) Whether those colonies contain two millions. I doubt, (2.) Whether a quarter of the inhabitants of any country are fighting men: We usually reckon a sixth part. I doubt, (3.) Whether a quarter of the American fighting men, are determined to fight in so bad a cause; to fight, not for liberty, which they have long enjoyed, but for independency.”<sup>132</sup>

So this is how it’s done. A Christian intellectual, a Christian leader tackles a hot current topic. He does his research, he presents a comprehensive, logical, and fact-based case, and he appeals for action, not just from believers but from all citizens.

## 5. Communicate clearly, simply, and effectively.

In a day when flowery language was in vogue, Wesley wrote in what was simple, understandable prose for that day. His Protestant predecessor Martin Luther is famous for having developed a whole new genre of writing about complex issues with simple, interesting, and understandable

<sup>130</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:142 (“A Serious Address to the People of England”).

<sup>131</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:147 (“A Serious Address to the People of England”).

<sup>132</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:114 (“Some Observations on Liberty Occasioned by a Late Tract”).

language. Wesley followed in Luther's pattern. He never tried to impress with long words or complicated language. He aimed to communicate "in as plain and artless a manner as I can, according to the best light I have, the real state of those affairs."<sup>133</sup>

Wesley understood the power of imagery. He portrayed in descriptive terms the needs he observed. In his sermon on "National Sins and Miseries" he painted a poignant picture of the widespread unemployment and poverty.

I have seen not a few of these wretched creatures, within little more than an hundred miles of London, standing in the streets, with pale looks, hollow eyes, and meager limbs; or creeping up and down like walking shadows. I have known families, who a few years ago lived in an easy, genteel manner, reduced to just as much raiment as they had on, and as much food as they could gather in the field. To this one or other of them repaired once a day, to pick up the turnips which the cattle had left; which they boiled, if they could get a few sticks, or, otherwise, ate them raw. Such is the want of food to which many of our countrymen are at this day reduced by want of business!<sup>134</sup>

He made his case with passion, personal anecdotes, and emotional appeal. He gave clear analogies to help people realize the seriousness of the problem. For instance, in his article about the price of grain, he responds to the objection that distilling large amounts of grain produces income for the king. He asks rhetorically with sarcasm, "Would His Majesty sell a hundred thousand of his subjects yearly to Algiers for four hundred thousand pounds? Surely no. Will he then sell them for that sum, to be butchered by their own countrymen? ... O, tell it not in Constantinople, that the English raise the royal revenue by selling the flesh and blood of their countrymen!"<sup>135</sup>

He sums up the causes of the high cost of food clearly and with simple language. He offers his remedies with humility—"it may not be amiss to offer a few hints on the subject."<sup>136</sup> He uses some tongue-in-cheek humor when in talking about how to reduce prices by "repressing luxury; whether by law, by example, or by both" he adds, "I had almost said, by the grace of God; but to mention this has been long out of fashion."<sup>137</sup>

## 6. Communicate not only with Christians, but with the general populace.

In his "Thoughts Upon Slavery" he rhetorically asks if there is any way to defend such inhumane practices "on the principles of even heathen honesty; whether they can be reconciled (setting the Bible out of the question) with any degree of either justice or mercy."<sup>138</sup> He declares that no one has a right to use another human being as a slave, "even setting Revelation aside ..... Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can

<sup>133</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:130 (A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England").

<sup>134</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 7:402 (sermon, "National Sins and Miseries").

<sup>135</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:55 (sermon, "National Sins and Miseries").

<sup>136</sup> Wesley. 11:57 ("The Present Scarcity of Provisions," 1773).

<sup>137</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:58 ("The Present Scarcity of Provisions," 1773).

<sup>138</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:70 ("Thoughts Upon Slavery").

deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature....Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature.”<sup>139</sup>

This is a reminder that Christian intellectuals speaking in the public arena need to make their case on the basis of truths which are agreed upon not only in the Christian community, but for unbelievers as well. He appeals to natural law in a way which transcends an appeal only to Christians, but to everyone.

Some people objected that slavery is legal. Wesley retorts, “But can law, human law, change the nature of things? Can it turn darkness into light, or evil into good? By no means. Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still. There must still remain an essential difference between justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy. So that I still ask, Who can reconcile this treatment of the Negroes, first and last, with either mercy or justice?....I absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of natural justice.”<sup>140</sup> He repeatedly declares that slavery is a “violation of justice, mercy, and truth.”<sup>141</sup>

He makes reference many times to the breadth of his appeal to all English citizens, whether Christian or not. Here is one example from “A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England.” “Hitherto I have addressed myself to my countrymen in general. But I would add a word to you in particular, who bear a religious character; whether you are members of the established Church, or Dissenters of any denomination.”<sup>142</sup>

## 7. Speak with courage.

He was at one and the same time an unashamed patriot, loyal to his king and the king’s government, *and* a ready critic of sin and immorality wherever it was found within the nation. There was no “England, love it or leave it” with Wesley. It was “England—love it and help make it better.” Immediately following his exhortation for Englishmen to be patriots and to love their country in his article “A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of The Inhabitants of Great Britain, Respecting the Unhappy Contest Between Us and Our American Brethren,” he directly condemns actions England had taken. “One principal sin of our nation is, the blood that we have shed in Asia, Africa, and America, referring to all the blood that had been shed through the slave trade.”<sup>143</sup>

It required courage to condemn the slave trade. It has been said he was the first recognized church leader in England to condemn slavery. Even his fellow evangelist and old friend from Oxford days, George Whitefield, held slaves. The entire religious and political system in England was complicit in its acceptance of this grossly inhumane practice. But he spoke loudly and clearly and never backed away from the issue.

<sup>139</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:79 (“Thoughts Upon Slavery”).

<sup>140</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:70 (“Thoughts Upon Slavery”).

<sup>141</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:73 (“Thoughts Upon Slavery”).

<sup>142</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:137–138 (“A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England”).

<sup>143</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:125 (“A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part Of The Inhabitants Of Great Britain, Respecting the Unhappy Contest Between Us and Our American Brethren,”).

## 8. Communicate with grace as well as truth.

In his article, “A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of The Inhabitants of Great Britain, Respecting the Unhappy Contest Between Us and Our American Brethren with an Occasional Word Interspersed to Those of a Different Complexion By a Lover of Peace,”<sup>144</sup> Wesley begs for peace, even though he has made his strong opinions known. He pleads, “We should bring, if in our senses, no combustible matter to increase the flame, but water and a helping hand to extinguish it.”<sup>145</sup>

And he really tries to follow his own advice when it comes to saying who started the conflict. “I must beg your pardon for not touching this subject now. Excuse my saying anything of the second cause, as I mean only to inquire into the first. I fear doing harm, and this is far from my design.”<sup>146</sup> He explains that this is a sensitive moment. “Argument seems lost in clamour, in confusion of passion and party rage; and the satanic dust of prejudice seems to have put out the eyes of our understanding.”<sup>147</sup> He goes on to claim, no doubt to the chagrin of the Americans, that this had become a political party kind of issue. But he challenges Christians, “Ye salt of the earth, exert the seasoning, preserving quality which you are favoured with.”<sup>148</sup>

While he was not hesitant to denounce the sins of the nation, he was also quick to commend leaders for the good and positive things they had done. One of the most striking cases of this is in his “Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England.”

...what could His Majesty have done for you which he has not done? What would you have? Can you tell? What can you desire more than you have already? Have you not full liberty of conscience in every respect, without any shadow of restraint? In what other nation under the sun is such religious liberty to be found? Have you not full liberty, with regard to your life, to your person, and to your goods? In what other country upon earth is such civil liberty to be found? If you are not thankful to God and the King for these blessings, you are utterly unworthy of them. Is it prudence to speak in so bitter and contemptuous a manner of such Governors as God has given you?<sup>149</sup>

Consistent with his focus on truth and facts, he closes his positive report on the “state of the nation” by warning readers, “Let none then deceive you with vain words! Let none by subtle reasonings, or by artful, elaborate harangues, persuade you out of your senses. Let no sweet-tongued orator, by his smooth periods, steal away your understanding; no thundering talker fill you with vain fears of evils that have no being. Be aware of all who (perhaps sincerely) strive to terrify you with creatures of their own imagination.”<sup>150</sup> After assuring Englishmen that their standard of living was better than ever, he proceeded to give the bad news, launching into a invective against the sins of England.

<sup>144</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:119 (“A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of The Inhabitants Of Great Britain”).

<sup>145</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:120 (“A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of The Inhabitants Of Great Britain”).

<sup>146</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:122 (“A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of The Inhabitants Of Great Britain”).

<sup>147</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:122 (“A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of The Inhabitants Of Great Britain”).

<sup>148</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:123 (“A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of The Inhabitants Of Great Britain”).

<sup>149</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:139 (“A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England”).

<sup>150</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:147 (“A Serious Address to the People of England, with Regard to the State of the Nation”).

When the English were in a panic about being attacked by an alliance of France, Spain, and Portugal at the very time British soldiers were fighting in America, Wesley assured the people. “I would fain speak a word of comfort to my poor neighbours, that they may not be frightened to death. Perhaps, my friends, things are not in altogether so desperate a situation as you imagine.”<sup>151</sup> He proceeds to make a case for all the reasons to be hopeful and even makes a case that they do not need to fear destruction of their country. One of the reasons he was so hopeful was the revival spreading across the British Isles. “I know no instance in all history, from the earliest ages to this day, of the Governor of the world delivering up a kingdom to destruction, while religion was increasing in it.”<sup>152</sup>

He closes another article about unrest in England and especially in America, with a moving appeal to all patriotic Englishmen.

Let all who are real lovers of their country use every lawful means to put out, or, at least, prevent the increase of, that flame which, otherwise, may consume our people and nation. Let us earnestly exhort all our countrymen to improve the innumerable blessings they enjoy; in particular, that invaluable blessing of liberty, civil as well as religious, which we now enjoy in a far more ample measure than any of our forefathers did. Let us labour to improve our religious liberty, by practising pure religion and undefiled; by worshipping God in spirit and in truth; and taking his “word for a lantern to our feet, and a light in all our paths.” Let us improve our civil liberty, the full freedom we enjoy, both as to our lives, goods, and persons, by devoting all we have, and all we are, to his honourable service.<sup>153</sup>

In his “Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” he boldly proclaimed a “never-failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of men.” That cure is love which is called “the medicine of life.” More precisely, this is “the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, as having first loved *us*, as the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we ever hope to enjoy; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every man on earth, as our own soul.” He explains that “virtue and happiness” go “hand in hand,” along with humility, gentleness, patience and “the whole image of God.” He declares that “we should do good unto all men; not only friends, but enemies; not only to the deserving, but likewise to the evil and unthankful? Is it not right that all our life should be one continued labour of love?...<sup>154</sup>

## 9. Speak with humility

Wesley maintained a humility which would serve evangelical leaders well in our day. In one of his articles on politics, “The Present State of Public Affairs,” he addresses “the present public commotions, of the amazing ferment among the people, the general discontent of the nation.” He begins by disarmingly admits, “I am no politician; politics lie quite out of my province. Neither have I any acquaintance, at least no intimacy, with any that bear that character.”<sup>155</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:150 (“A Compassionate Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland”).

<sup>152</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:154 (“A Compassionate Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland”).

<sup>153</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:118 (“Some Observations on Liberty Occasioned by a Late Tract”).

<sup>154</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 8:3-9 (“Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion”).

<sup>155</sup> Wesley. 11:16, 14 (“The Present State of Public Affairs”)

It was commonly said that “every Englishman is a politician,” because everybody seemed to feel competent enough to tell the king and the parliament how to do their business. In contrast, Wesley demurs

but I am not so deep learned: While they are sure of everything, I am in a manner sure of nothing; except of that very little which I see with my own eyes, or hear with my own ears. However, since you desire me to tell you what I think, I will do it with all openness. Only please to remember, I do not take upon me to dictate either to you or to any one. I only use the privilege of an Englishman, to speak my naked thoughts; setting down just what appears to me to be the truth, till I have better information.<sup>156</sup>

He goes on to point out that he has an advantage over either of the political parties, namely, that he is not angry at either one of them. So his perspective is “unclouded by passion.” But he wryly observes that in a conflict, not being angry and speaking gently can actually make the other person even angrier.

Today we need to speak into public issues with humility and grace. After all, we could be wrong. Unfortunately, being a man who was powerfully anointed of God did not give Wesley perfect judgement or prescience. One glaring instance was when he predicted that the American Continental Army would be soundly defeated. “Whatever they do, they will not fight. I believe they cannot; for the hand of God is upon them.”<sup>157</sup> Wesley just couldn’t grasp that just maybe God was on America’s side. In another article, he speaks without a hint of doubt or hesitation, “Never fright yourselves, therefore, about General Washington’s huge army, that melted away like snow in harvest. The English forces meantime are in perfect health, (about sixteen thousand,) and have plenty of all things.”<sup>158</sup> My point is not how wrong he was, but rather that he was closely following the military actions and believed as a minister it was perfectly normal for him to address such issues.

In declaring the Gospel, he included himself as being in need of the Gospel. In his sermon on “National Sins and Miseries,” he declared, “We all suffer; and we have *all* sinned.”<sup>159</sup>

In another article, he declared, “as none can harm us if we have Him for our friend, so none can help us if we have Him for our enemy. Is it not wise then seriously to consider this, Is God our friend or our enemy?”<sup>160</sup> (Shades of Abraham Lincoln there.)

## V. Conclusion: The challenge of our day

Wesley provides a model for Christian scholars in the twenty-first century as we face militant secularism, ambivalent evangelicalism, and a politically divided world. His example teaches us

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 11:15 (“The Present State of Public Affairs”).

<sup>157</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:135 (“A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England”).

<sup>158</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:150 (“A Compassionate Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland”).

<sup>159</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 7:402 (Sermon, “National Sins and Miseries”).

<sup>160</sup> Wesley, *Works*. 11:148 (“A Serious Address to the People of England,” 1778).

to be well-read, well-informed, committed to the authority of Scripture, soaked in the biblical truth, and willing to publicly apply Scripture to current controversial issues, not only in the church, but in the public marketplace of ideas.

Through his sermons and his ministry, we see a robust, vibrant application of Scripture and of Christ's Lordship to every facet of life and culture. Indeed, Wesley's sermons, writing, and ministry serve as one of the most well-rounded applications of a fully-orbed Christian worldview in the history of the Church. In contrast to many modern Christian scholars who focus on a merely *cerebral* consideration of the contours of a Christian worldview, Wesley both viewed the world through a biblical lens and he *applied* that worldview in his ministry and in his preaching. Evangelicals today can learn much from Wesley's thoroughly Christian worldview and from his careful and thoughtful application of Scripture to current issues as he addresses those issues in specific and practical terms.

Bready said it well: "Wesley triumphed because of the purity of his soul, the majesty of his message, the singleness of his purpose, and the sheer magnificence of his moral and spiritual stature.... Wesley was concerned with every aspect of man's welfare."<sup>161</sup>

Today there is an urgent need for evangelicals to address public issues from a Christian perspective. We need articulate voices of reason in the public marketplace of ideas which are not lacking in passion, emotion, and the power of logic, but devoid of hysteria and mindless reactionism—a clear and consistent Christian worldview which recognizes Christ as the Lord of all facets of life, and not merely of our "hearts" and spiritual activities.

Recently my wife, Dr. Teri McCarthy, has written articles presenting a Christian worldview on such disparate issues as immigration, marijuana, abortion, education, vampires, millennials, and missions.<sup>162</sup> Her articles are well-written, but we need an army of Christian academics to speak from a Christian perspective into the public marketplace of ideas.

Let us preach sermons which address real life issues. Let us write op-ed pieces, blogs, books, articles which will arrest the attention not only of believers but of unbelievers as well and cause them to ask, "What would a world in which I loved and obeyed God with all my heart, mind, body, and soul be like?"

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<sup>161</sup> Bready, 450-451.

<sup>162</sup> You can read her blogs "Thoughts on Life," at <http://terimccarthythinks.com>

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