

JOHN WESLEY
and
REVOLUTION

by

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PREFACE

In 1988 Methodist people throughout the world were encouraged to commemorate the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the evangelical conversion of John Wesley. This thesis arises from a questioning of the exclusive emphasis placed by so many upon Wesley's Aldersgate experience. The question asked is whether Wesley's heart warming experience was indeed the turning point of his theology and practice, or whether there were other equally important (or even more important) moments in his life. A fresh reading of Wesley has shown that the promotion of this one event in his life has led to a narrow focus which is not born out by his faith and practice. Not only were there many moments of decision in his life, such as the 1725 discovery of Jeremy Taylor's *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Holy Dying*, his submission to become "more vile" through field preaching in 1739, or his 1784 decision to ordain priests, but each of such moments signified a change in the direction of his life. One such moment was Wesley's decision to respond to the American Revolution. This decision to enter the world of politics proved to be a turning point in his thought and practice, which holds unexplored potential for the political practice of the people called Methodist. It is therefore appropriate that during the anniversary celebrations of Aldersgate, Wesley's thought should be explored beyond the narrow confines imposed by this Aldersgate mania.

I am grateful to three people who enabled this thesis to take shape:

My father, the Rev Stan Grassow, instilled within me a love for the Methodist Church, and recounted stories of John Wesley to me as I sat

upon his knee as a boy. It was this that stirred an admiration of Wesley that led ultimately to the study of his life and thought.

My supervisor, Professor Charles Villa-Vicencio, taught me to expect more of Wesley than that which is generally given. I have benefitted greatly from his incisive criticism and encouragement.

My wife Jenny gave me the space to be able to write. I could not have completed this task without her support and caring, and her willingness to remove my daughters from the study so that I could work.

I have appreciated the support and comments of Alan Brews, and the vital assistance of Arlene Stephenson in the final proofreading. I am also thankful for the financial assistance from the Human Sciences Research Council. I acknowledge that all opinions in this thesis are my own and not those of the council.

Finally I am aware that academic pursuit is primarily the privilege of the wealthy and the powerful in my country, and accept the responsibility that comes with academic progress - to pass on the knowledge thus received. For it is the poor and the weak who are most loved by God, and who most need to know of this.

"...do not grieve the poor. Give them soft words if nothing else. Abstain from giving them sour looks or harsh words. Let them be glad to come..."

John Wesley's Rules for Stewards, London 1747

THESIS IN OUTLINE

Ambiguity: Theological vacillation between legitimation of the status quo, and advocacy of an alternative social order is introduced. This tendency is demonstrated in the history of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. It is argued that this is a theological consequence of the political ambiguity with which Wesley and early Methodism responded to the socio-economic context of Eighteenth Century England.

A Revolutionary Climate: John Wesley's theological understanding of radical social change was influenced by the age of revolution within which he lived, and in particular by the American Revolution. Recognising the importance of context for all theology, Wesley's theology is reassessed in terms of the prevailing ideologies and the social milieu of his time. Thereafter, Wesley's understanding of salvation is examined, with a view to identifying the tendency to exclude human initiative in the process of salvation. It is argued that he fails to adequately develop the imperative of prevenient grace as a theological and ethical instrument. This has important consequences for Wesley's political theology, which too easily and uncritically affirms individual human freedom as a divine gift preserved by the divine gift of human authority. Essentially, Wesley opposed the American revolution because he regarded it to be an act of rebellion against God's earthly authority. He also tended to understand American democratic ideals as a contradiction of God's prerogative to grant authority. Briefly stated, he was trapped within his Tory context.

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis: It is important to discern the extent to which the American Revolution became a determining influence on Wesley's theology. His doctrine of Christian Perfection, which necessarily affirmed radical change in its dissatisfaction with the status quo, is kept almost exclusively to a level of personal religion without the political implications of the doctrine being investigated - this in spite of Wesley's reference to the importance of "social holiness". In later years his doctrine of Salvation reveals a shift from an exclusive emphasis on salvation by grace, to an emphasis that included the fruits of salvation. The intriguing question is whether this is as a result of the Revolution, and his eventual willingness to accept its consequences.

Wesley's political theology is complex, with ambiguous tendencies. His affirmation of the sovereignty of God remains a dominant tendency. He however, eventually begins to relate this dominant theme to the emerging democratic developments of the time, allowing that democracy (rather than the divine right of kings) can be the guarantor of human freedom. This tendency - which Wesley was unable to develop - needs to be explored as a basis for a liberating Wesleyan theology.

Expanding the Limits: Wesley is re-read from the perspective of those in quest of a liberating theology. Latent themes are identified to enable liberation. While Wesley's ideological commitment to the Establishment is to be acknowledged, recognising that his understanding of reform remains within existing structures, his theology offers liberative hope in its acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God, and commitment to a fullness of salvation.

This is explored in terms of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, which is seen to be a church preoccupied with unity at the expense of both obedience to God and human liberty. It is argued that the Wesleyan tradition offers an opportunity to develop a cogent political theology for Christianity in South Africa.

Introduction

AMBIGUITY

An examination of the life and thought of John Wesley within the context of the American Revolution challenges the idea that Wesley, in his support for the established order, contributed to the shaping of English history away from revolution.¹ This conclusion does not do justice to the complexity of Wesleyan theology. The American Revolution reveals an ambiguous Wesleyan political theology which both supported the status quo and at the same time provided resources for radical social change.

TWO TRADITIONS

The examination of Wesley that follows is hermeneutically influenced by Charles Villa-Vicencio's thesis which contends that this kind of ambiguity is inherent to the history of the Christian church.² The Christian church has, at least since the Edict of Milan (312 CE), tended to legitimate the social order. This is evident either in direct support, or indirectly, in failing to provide political criticism because of a preoccupation with an other-worldly salvation. There has been, however, adjacent to the dominant tradition, an alternative theological tradition, in which the church has rejected the status quo in its affirmation of the authority of God. "More often than not," suggests Villa-Vicencio, "the same church has played two different social functions in society, depending on the cultural and ideological milieu which has impinged on that particular church at a given time."³ The role of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) is an apt

example. While presently providing theological legitimation for the existing political order, there was a time when this church was firmly committed to challenging the social⁷ order. During the years of the Depression it argued that

...social legislation is mostly on the side of capital; the labourer constantly loses out. He needs an advocate, a patron. The Church must be his father, his champion; The Church must fight for the cause of the oppressed; the Church must preach social justice.⁴

SOUTH AFRICAN METHODISM

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) is no exception. From the outset it is seen to have vacillated between legitimation of the social order of the day, and support for an alternative society. Three examples serve to make the point: the Nineteenth Century position of the Methodist Church in relation to British imperialism; the response of South African Methodism to the use of political violence in the 1960's; and the decision of the MCSA in 1983 to reject *apartheid* as a heresy.

British Imperialism

The controversy between John Philip of the London Missionary Society, and the Wesleyans led by William Shaw illustrates early Methodist support for the status quo.⁵ While Philip wanted the missionaries to "defend the weak against the strong", the Wesleyans saw this as taking sides between white and black, and so refused to place themselves "at the head of one of the contending parties".⁶ This is not, however, an issue about impartiality. The Wesleyans had no problems with partisanship when it came to defending the political rights of a chief with Methodist sympathies against one without.⁷

The Wesleyan objection was to taking sides against the political order of the Empire.

Adjacent to this dominant position, however, is discovered within Methodism an alternative tradition. This emerges in the 1820 settler story of Richard Gush and the residents of Salem - many of whom had been sponsored by the Queen Street Methodist Church, London. Gush, a Methodist lay preacher in Salem, opposed his church's support for the military domination of the Xhosa in the Sixth Frontier War (1834-1835). One reporter noted that while the Wesleyan Chapel was appropriated as a "citadel for the protection of the place", and its members "had determined to make a stand" against the Xhosa, Richard Gush chose another social praxis:

An inhabitant named R.G. - an excellent man, but of great eccentricity of manner, who held the notion of the unlawfulness of war even in defence of person and family, and who was so far consistent as to refuse to take up arms even at this perilous crisis, - observing a number of the enemy at no great distance off, resolved upon attempting to effect by persuasion what force had not hitherto been unable to accomplish.⁹

Gush became a reminder of another Christian tradition, and in the process not only questioned the methods of the dominant community, but provided an alternative social understanding.⁹

Political Violence

The two sides of South African Methodist ambivalence is again evident in the decision by the World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) to allocate grants to "support organisations that combat racism, rather than the welfare organisations that alleviate the effects of racism".¹⁰ The response of the 1978 Conference of the MCSA to this

decision identifies a church in conflict with itself.' The MCSA, aware of the oppression of many of its members, was anxious to claim its place in the struggle for their liberation. It therefore affirmed its "determination to continue and intensify its own efforts to promote justice, non-racialism, and power-sharing...acknowledging that it has to contend with social and administrative procedures which are indefensible on Christian principles". The MCSA was also aware, however, of the anger of its white members and their government at the international support given to the freedom fighters. It therefore resolved to suspend contributions to the World Council, and called for the PCR to discontinue its grants "to bodies involved in violent conflict in Southern Africa". The inability of the MCSA to accede to requests for a concomitant call upon those who fund the violence of the South African regime to disinvest or to refuse to pay their taxes reveals a partiality on the part of the MCSA to the politics of the status quo. The MCSA is thus seen to have demonstrated a conflict between its desire to be involved in the struggle for justice, and its legitimation of the State.

Religion and Apartheid Politics

This ambiguity has continued to shape the identity of the MCSA, as is illustrated in three examples - the declaration of *apartheid* as a heresy, the *Call to Prayer for the End to Unjust Rule*, and the 1988 municipal elections.

Hersey: In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches denounced *apartheid* as a heresy, which not only soured relationships between it and the Afrikaans Reformed churches, but also initiated a rash of similar declarations amongst the English speaking churches of South Africa. It was

this pressure that caused the 1983 Conference of the MCSA to adopt a statement in which it rejected *apartheid* as a heresy. But the statement is, at best, ambiguous. While *apartheid* is denounced as "a sinful contradiction of the Gospel" and is consequently rejected as a heresy, the statement simultaneously affirms that the Methodist Church "does not seek confrontation with the State". How the MCSA hoped to avoid confrontation with the State while rejecting the cornerstone of the South African political structure is not clear. What is clear however, is the Methodist conflict of interests between legitimation of the status quo, and criticism of its structures.

Prayer: This conflict is again evident three years later in the response of the MCSA to the 1985 *Call to Prayer for the End to Unjust Rule*.¹² The debate throughout the church was sharply divided, with some members supporting the call and others opposed to it. This resulted in the 1985 Conference statement "Politics and Religion", which refused to be anything but ambivalent in its call for Methodists "to act cautiously and humbly but also resolutely and in obedience":

We think and let think. In this spirit, we recognise that there are widely differing interpretations of the precise way in which the justice of God may be manifest in political and economic structures...[the Methodist Church] does not decree in an absolutist or in uncompromisingly prescriptive manner. It rather does so with tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect for all who seek to live responsibly before God but disagree with the mind of the Church at that particular time".¹³

Municipal Elections: The most recent example of this Methodist ambiguity is the Methodist leaders' response to the 1988 local authority elections for

City and Town Councils. At a meeting on June 29, the two most senior Methodist leaders, Dr Khosa Mgojo, the President of the Conference, and Rev Stanley Mogoba, secretary of Conference and President-elect, co-signed a document along with leaders from sixteen other Christian denominations, in which they called upon Christians to refuse to participate in the elections. This was understood to be a call to Christians to distance themselves from the structures of a racially discriminatory constitutional system in South Africa, "which constitute the apartheid system which we have declared to be evil and sinful and its theological justification a heresy".¹⁴ This letter was then distributed throughout the MCSA by the Methodist administration. At the same time another letter ~~was sent to the Methodist people,~~ ^{and sign} again signed by, amongst others, Mgojo and Mogoba.¹⁵ This letter was however, a contradiction of the first. The President and the President-Elect extracted from the text of the church leader's letter the call for "the fullest possible open debate in our Church councils and congregations so that people may arrive at an informed and responsible decision", without telling Methodist people that this debate was supposed to be in response to the decision to boycott the elections. The Methodist people were asked instead to discuss the right to call for non-participation, the right of some to exercise abstinence from voting, and the decision by others to participate. No direction was offered, or response called for. The letter even went as far as agreeing that "those candidates who are openly and sincerely committed to the complete abolition of Apartheid are worthy of Christian support". It is this phenomenon that gives rise to the comment in the *Kairos Document* that "within the same denomination there are in fact two Churches":

In the life and death conflict between different social forces that has come to a head in South Africa today, there are Christians...on both sides of the conflict - and some who are trying to sit on the fence...Both oppressor and oppressed claim loyalty to the same Church, ¹⁶

Methodism's history is thus seen to be one of theological and social ambiguity in which it "obtained its greatest success in serving *simultaneously* as the religion of the industrial bourgeoisie...and of a wide section of the proletariat".¹⁷ Not only has this been demonstrated in South African Methodism, but it can be traced all the way back to the time of John Wesley. One example is to be found in the relationship between Wesley and the Kilhamite Methodist chapels of Leeds and Halifax, where the Wesleyan injunction to "fear God and honour the King" was disregarded in favour of an emergent radical social consciousness. This thesis will show this Methodist ambiguity to be a central tenet within Wesley's response to the American revolution.

Historical Identity

But what has this to do with being a Christian in South Africa? José Níguez Bonino reminds us that our identity is not primarily forged in an identification with the past, but is rather found in identification with the poor and a commitment to a historic project.¹⁸ Is there any value, apart from the academic interest, in comparing the ambiguity of Wesley with the ambiguity of the NCSA; in taking time out from the struggle to be a Christian in South Africa to investigate the history and traditions of John Wesley? In answer, John MacKay has noted that "there are moments in the history of persons and of peoples, particularly in times of crises, when the

memory of yesterday opens a highway to tomorrow; when the awakening of a sense of heredity becomes a powerful determinant of a destiny".¹⁹ This thesis therefore contends that a journey to the roots of Methodism at the time of the American revolution can give direction to those who seek to obey Christ in the revolutionary climate of South Africa today. It will only engage in historical enquiry insofar as it is a basis for a contribution to the renewal of contemporary South African Methodism. Some of the historical detail of the period will therefore be omitted in the interests of uncovering the spirit of Methodism, which this history serves to illustrate.

Here the words of Villa-Vicencio are a fitting summation:

A constant reassessment of historical identity is therefore a prerequisite for social renewal. This is a process that acquires a soteriological function, requiring more than a summation of what a particular theologian or age believed about a particular issue. It demands a more thoughtful answer to the question of how that theologian or age would have responded to a contemporary problem, invoking the more profound discovery of the latent meaning within a tradition that has perhaps become sterile, seen to be far removed from and unrelated to an issue of burning contemporary significance.²⁰

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. Elie Halévy in *History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century* Vol 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) suggested that "England was spared the revolution toward which the contradictions in her polity and economy might otherwise have led her, through the stabilising influence of evangelical religion, particularly Methodism" (p.1). This theory was updated by Bernard Semmel in *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), who argued for the recognition of the social impact of Methodism; this was also used by E P Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968) to support his contention that Methodism dampened the fires of revolution by redirecting discontent towards spiritual preoccupations (p.36). See also discussions by Theodore Runyon "Introduction: Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation" (pp.15-17.), and John Kent "Methodism and Social Change in Britain" (pp 83-86), both in *Sanctification and Liberation* (ed) T Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981). 287.112
2. Charles Villa-Vicencio proposed his thesis in *Between Christ and Caesar* (Published jointly by Cape Town: David Philip, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). He then developed this in relation to the English speaking churches of Southern Africa in *Trapped in Apartheid* (Published jointly by Maryknoll: Orbis, and Cape Town: David Philip, 1988.) In what follows use has been made of Villa-Vicencio's thesis and examples, which are acknowledged each time. SANG
3. Villa Vicencio in the introduction to *Between Christ and Caesar*, p.xv.
4. From the report of the Commission of Inquiry of the Federated Dutch Reformed Churches into ecclesiastical and religious conditions in the cities of the Union of South Africa: in J Kinghorn "DRC, Theology: A Theology of Exploitation", *JTSA* No 49, December 1984, p.8. 26

- ✓ 5. A Hastings *Mission, Church and State in Southern Africa* (Pretoria: The Society for the Propagation of the Faith, 1985) p.5. Also quoted in Villa-Vicencio *Trapped in Apartheid* p.58.
6. William Shaw *A Defence of the Wesleyan Missionaries in Southern Africa* p.xviii in Hastings *Mission, Church and State in Southern Africa* p.6.
7. Shaw *A Defence of the Wesleyan Missionaries*, p.49.
8. Robert Godlonton *The Interruption of the Kaffir Hordes*, in Guy Butler *Richard Gush of Salem* (Port Elizabeth: Maskew Miller, 1982) p.xiii.
9. Johann Baptist Metz develops the idea of one who can become a reminder of a latent liberative theology, which he terms a "dangerous memory". See *Faith in History and Society* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980) pp.184-205.
- ✓ 10. For a discussion on the emergence of the PCR see Elizabeth Adler *A Small Beginning* (Geneva WCC, 1974). See also Villa-Vicencio *Trapped in Apartheid* pp.113-114.
11. *Minutes of the Ninety-Sixth Annual Conference of the MCSA*, 1978 pp.269-270. See *Appendix* to this thesis.
12. Published by the South African Council of Churches, April 16, 1985. See Villa-Vicencio *Trapped in Apartheid* p.155.
- ✓ 13. "Politics and Religion" in *Minutes of the One Hundred and Third Annual Conference of the MCSA*, 1985 p.63. See *Appendix* to this thesis.
14. From a letter to the churches signed on 29 June 1988, and distributed by the Connexional Office of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.
15. Pastoral Letter to the Methodist People, 7 September 1988. Distributed by the Connexional Office of the MCSA.

16. *The Kairos Document* (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1986). —
17. E P Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* p.391
18. José Míguez Bonino *Was Methodism a Liberating Movement?* a transcript from a tape-recorded lecture in the possession of UCT Dept of Religious Studies.
19. John MacKay, quoted by Bonino *Was Methodism a Liberating Movement?* p.2. —
20. Charles Villa-Vicencio *Theology and Violence* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1987) p.4. —

A REVOLUTIONARY CLIMATE

The Introduction pointed to the vacillation within South African Methodism between legitimation of the status quo, and support for an alternative society. It was suggested that this is in keeping with the theology and practice of John Wesley and early Methodism, to which we now turn. We will discover that Wesley's response to the threat of American revolt contained elements that both legitimated the English oligarchy, and supported the struggle for political freedom. It is for this reason that Wesleyan sanction has been invoked for different and often contradictory causes, and has given rise to one description of Wesley as

an evangelist with a catholic spirit, a reformer with a heroic vision of the Christian life created by faith matured in love, a theologian who lived in and thought out of the Scripture and Christian tradition and brought all his judgements to the bar of experience and reason.¹

Another commentator suggests that a lifetime of research is necessary to comprehensively address Wesley, for "Mr John Wesley has not only been used, but greatly abused by many who have had neither the time nor the patience to study the man".² Bearing this in mind, we shall seek patiently to unpack the man in as far as it is possible within the confines of a dissertation.

This thesis will examine two areas in Wesleyan theology - his understanding of the relationship between faith and works, and between human liberty and authority. Although the latter understanding was formally set out by Wesley long after the former, they are interrelated, and as such affected his

thought and practice. In this chapter we will show that his understanding of Salvation contributed to his initial response to the American Revolution, and for this reason cannot be ignored in an enquiry of this nature. But, before examining Wesley's thought, we turn to his context, which was a major factor in the shaping of his theology.

THE WESLEYAN HORIZON

Wesley's proclivity for *ad hoc* commentary on disparate political events, frequently from a decidedly prejudicial point of view, calls for extreme caution in the formulation of any viable synthesis of his political thought.³ It is therefore not adequate to merely catalogue Wesleyan comment on the issue of revolution - as is done by some commentators.⁴ Instead, the broad theological structure in relation to which Wesley made his socio-ethical decisions concerning civil authority will be identified through the examination of his doctrines of salvation and authority relative to the American Revolution. This will enable the examination of Wesleyan praxis in relation to the MCSA, and more importantly, in the light of the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ.

While there is no doubt that the prime object of Wesley's theology was God, it is necessary to be reminded that "understanding God is not a substitute for or alternative to knowledge of the real world".⁵ All theology is governed by its context, and therefore the only "way in" to Wesleyan political theology is through an examination of his context. For this reason our study of Wesley's theological framework begins with an examination of his ideological and social location. An examination of his theology is possible only when his context is understood.

Ideology

The understanding of ideology has been the subject of definition and redefinition, and is still understood in many different ways.⁶ The most influential definition of ideology in the contemporary debate can probably be ascribed to Karl Marx, who recognised the conditioning of all ideas by the material base of a society. He divided these ideas into two categories, namely, revolutionary ideology and ruling ideology, but argued that because of the control of the media by the ruling classes, their ideology is imposed on those they rule, thus forming the cohesive driving force that unifies society into an economic order: "The ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas...The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships."⁷ This ideology then serves to justify the privileges of the ruling classes, and is as such a "false consciousness" of reality, used to enable the oppressed to accept their economic domination. Marx argued for the removal of this false reality through raising the consciousness of the oppressed, so that they can discern their true state and discover an alternative (revolutionary) ideology. This essay will not enter into the debate on ideology as captivity, but instead, recognising the influence of the material base upon ideas, will seek to uncover the "interest factor" that motivates them as they are embodied in the institutions of society, and in particular the church.⁸ It is by examining the function and efficiency of ideology in binding classes together in positions of domination and subordination that we will seek to uncover the perspectives that shaped the practice and beliefs of John Wesley. Here two essential questions are asked of Wesley: Firstly, what was the ruling political ideology at the time, and to what extent did this influence his thinking? And secondly, were there other ideas

that contributed to the shaping of Wesleyan thought, and in whose interests were these ideas maintained?

John Wesley wrestled with the issues of political and religious authority at a time when John Locke encapsulated the essence of English political ideology. In addition to Locke's advocacy of empiricism and of the necessity of a rational approach to life, his *Treatises on Government* provided the basis for a school of political thought that profoundly influenced American revolutionary thought. This held that a republic necessarily involved a contractual agreement on the part of the governed. If this agreement was not constantly renewed, the republic descended into corruption and tyranny and was ready for revolutionary action by its citizens:

If a long train of abuses, prevarications, and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the people, and they cannot but feel, what they lie under, and see, whither they are going: 'tis not to be wonder'd, that they should then rouse themselves, and endeavor to put the rule into such hands, which may secure to them the ends for which government was at first erected.⁹

While the English Establishment understood this to be a justification for the 1688 revolution, many in the American colonies read this in relation to revolt against the eighteenth century British government which oppressively exploited its colonies.

In contrast to this, the Epworth rectory provided John Wesley with both an antipathy to human participation in the process of salvation, and a loyalty to the Establishment. His mother's puritan piety, which combined an aggressive religion of the will with a disciplined High Church devotionalism, influenced him away from the exclusive reliance upon the

powers of reason discovered in the spirit of the age. Albert Outler notes of Wesley that "in his early days, he drank deep of this Byzantine tradition of spirituality at its source and assimilated its conception of devotion as the way and perfection as the *goal* of the Christian life".¹⁰ It was within this crucible of High Church liturgy and devotion, Puritan ascetism, and mystical piety, that the Wesleyan hermeneutic that moved from faith to reason emerged. Another consequence of his Epworth days was Wesley's unquestioning loyalty to the English Establishment.¹¹ Throughout his life he never wavered from his High Church origins, and as late as 1789 his position remained definitively clear: "I declare once more, that I live or die a member of the Church of England; and none who regard my judgement or advice will ever separate from it".¹² Furthermore, his Tory loyalty to God and King was by his own admission the result of an ideological bias learned in childhood: "I am a High Churchman, the son of a High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of passive obedience and non-resistance".¹³

It is important, however, not to ignore a measure of social and theological ambiguity in Wesley. It was Wesley, High Tory in politics and sacerdotal in approach, who encouraged lay participation in preaching and class meetings, and who conducted outdoor revival services. The same Wesley who exhorted Methodists to remain obedient to the Established Church ordained men for ministry in America. Wesley is seen to demonstrate an internal contradiction between loyalty to the established church that preached to the poor the duties of obedience, and affinity for the dissenting church which advocated social reform in favour of the poor. As Thompson acidly remarks: "From the outset the Wesleyans fell ambiguously between Dissent

and the Establishment, and did their utmost to make the worst of both worlds".¹⁴

Society

It is obvious that the contradictions within Wesley's life and thought cannot be ascribed to an ideological perspective alone. We must therefore broaden our understanding of Wesley by looking beyond the narrow confines of ideological interests to the possible influences exerted by his society, and more specifically by his church, his political structures, and his economic environment.¹⁵

Church: We have already noted the influence of the Epworth rectory in shaping Wesley's Tory loyalties. Another influence would have been the church within which he was raised, for the Church of England identified closely with the Establishment. A Bishopric was generally understood to be a reward for loyalty to Establishment politics, while similarly, many of the clergy owed their livings (and thus their loyalties) to the wealthy patrons of the Establishment. It can thus be safely assumed that Wesley unconsciously accepted the Tory bias of the Church as a matter of course. At the time of interest to this essay, Wesley was no longer a persecuted country preacher. He was the principal organiser of the Methodist Movement, which had been meeting in an annual Conference for the past twenty years¹⁶ and was rapidly gaining social recognition along with its burgeoning structural discipline. Wesley drew large crowds wherever he spoke, and open air preaching was no longer a "vile" novelty either to him or to his hearers.¹⁷ This would have given Wesley a sense of social acceptability that he had hitherto not experienced, and was probably a major factor in

his decision to comment on the political life of the nation in his later years. He had operated his own printing press for many years and naturally put his tractarian skills to use in his new-found political confidence.

Politics: Having noted that both Wesley's ideology, and his ecclesiastical context favoured the Establishment, it is to be expected that Wesley would have accepted its political order. This order was ruled by a limited monarchy, in the person of King George III, and appointed Ministers of State. The aristocracy had a hereditary say in the House of Lords, which, while relatively small in comparison to the House of Commons, wielded effective power. Members to the House of Commons were elected by means of a qualified franchise available to English males over the age of twenty-one, who were freeholders earning at least forty shillings a year. This excluded the majority of the English population who were either female, or too poor to pass the means test. The 1688 Revolution had given birth to an undemocratic political dispensation, with its ruling oligarchy resting on the disenfranchisement of the majority of the population, the practice of a rotten-borough system, and a refusal to grant representation to new manufacturing towns. While Wesley acknowledged all this, he was convinced that this limited liberty was preferable to the situation before the 1688 Revolution: "We have certainly enjoyed more complete liberty since the Revolution, than England ever enjoyed before; and the English Government, unequal as the representation is, has been admired by all impartial foreigners".¹⁰ Wesley failed to see that only those who enjoy liberty would believe it to exist. Those who lacked political rights were hardly likely to extol its liberty. His assumption that this was a liberty to be admired

thus reflects his own captivity to the political perspectives of the Establishment, which will be developed later.

Economics: It is when we turn to the influence of the economic environment upon Wesley's thought, that we discover one explanation for the ambiguity outlined on page 16. Eric Hobsbawm places Wesley at the beginning of an age of economic crisis which saw "a transition to the era of modern industrial capitalism, to bourgeois society".¹⁹ He suggests that not only was this the beginning of a crisis in which the ties of earlier social and political orders were broken, but it was also the beginning of a period of time saving inventions and new enclosures which uprooted many cottagers from their lands and drove them into squalid factory towns where they constituted a labour supply for the developing industries. In addition to the resultant loss of social cohesion, this gave rise to a developing industrial serfdom, the exploitation of child labour, and the acceptance of unemployment as a matter of course. The developing industrial capitalism thus created unusually severe hardships for the emerging working class - "a mass of people whom at this stage it was better at uprooting than at finding work".²⁰ It is in considering the effect that this had on Wesley that we discover his ambivalence, for the same John Wesley who supported the political structures of the Establishment was opposed to its economic practices. In *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions* ²¹ Wesley condemned the enclosing of the farms by wealthy landlords, which he termed "as mischievous a monopoly as was ever introduced into these kingdoms". He also criticised the luxury and waste of "the great, the nobility and gentry", which he suggested caused the increase in rentals and hunger. Finally he was critical of the national debt, which he believed

caused "the enormous taxes, which are laid on almost everything that can be named". Wesley believed that the economic hardships of the poor could be lessened by taxing the wealthy, reducing both the national debt and the civil service, and "especially...by restraining luxury, which is the grand and general source of want". While his economic analysis is open to question, we cannot fault his economic bias. Wesley's social environment was the poor, amongst whom he spent most of his time. His experience of their poverty influenced him to take sides with the poor against the rich, and it is here that we find the contradictions within his thought and practice. Wesley tried simultaneously to be critical of the economic privilege of the Establishment, and loyal to the political structures that ensured its privilege. In this regard E P Thompson points to the ambiguity between Wesleyan affirmations of social religion, and aberrations of frustrated social impulses, which gave rise to "a cult of Love which feared love's effective expression...in any social form which might irritate relations with authority".²²

John Wesley is thus seen to have encountered various social contexts, which combined to instill an ambivalence within him. On the one hand he developed an antipathy to human participation in the process of salvation, and a loyalty to the Establishment, while on the other, sensitised to poverty and hardship, and the discontent that this aroused both in England and in America, Wesley felt obliged to participate in its solution. We will see later that while it was the latter exposure that forced him to develop his political theology, it was his Tory predilection that determined the content of this response.

A Revolutionary Climate

It was noted above that the contextual conditioning of theology necessitated an analysis of its social location. Having therefore armed ourselves with an understanding of Wesley's context, we turn to his theology. The question we need to ask is to what extent does he reflect his context, and to what extent does he shape his context - did Wesley engage in orthodoxy or orthopraxis? We shall seek our answers first through an examination of his doctrine of Salvation, wherein we will discover the Wesleyan hermeneutic with which to unpack his political theology.

WESLEY AND SALVATION

Tuttle provides a helpful framework to Wesley's understanding of Salvation.²³ He suggests that Wesleyan thought developed dialectically, beginning before 1738 with an understanding of faith initiated by inward and outward works (*thesis*), to the period between 1738 and 1764 of faith initiated solely by God's grace (*antithesis*), to the post 1764 era of faith initiated by grace and confirmed by works (*synthesis*). The present concern seeks Wesley's understanding of Salvation at the time he was forced to deal with the issue of an impending revolution, the period between 1738 and 1764 (*antithesis*). In order to uncover this, a brief outline of Wesley's journey of faith through his *thesis* period is necessary. The final *synthesis* within Wesley's thought will be dealt with in Chapter Two.

Thesis

The first period of Wesley's life was characterised by two theological imperatives: a radical obedience to God alone, and a commitment to Christian service.

The first, his total commitment to God, is discovered in his account of an event in 1725, when at the age of twenty three he encountered Jeremy Taylor's *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Holy Dying*²⁴ and was challenged to commit his loyalty to God alone:

Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced, there was no medium; but that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or myself, that is, in effect, to the devil.²⁵

This commitment never left him, although it will be seen that there were times when he failed to distinguish between obedience to God and to the State. Of importance to this thesis however, is to note that the cornerstone to his theology and practice was his belief in the subordination of every part of life to God. This acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God provided not only the foundation for his later acceptance of salvation *sola fides*, but more importantly for this thesis, it provided the foundation to his political theology of authority - which is developed on page 27.

Jeremy Taylor's challenge had a second effect upon Wesley. It persuaded him of the value of human participation within the plans of God. Taylor sought to convince his readers to use their God-given talents in fulfilling the tasks to which God had appointed them, for their arrival at a God-ordained life beyond the grave was through this obedient service.²⁶ Taylor thus carried his reader through the duties of life, interpreting each as an expectation of God who is present in all places, sees every action, hears all discourses, and understands every thought. For this reason the individual must practice the presence of God and act as befitting the the company of this ever-present guest.²⁷ Both Wesley's Epworth spirituality, and his subsequent encounter with á Kempis, Law and the early Christian

mystics through the Oxford Holy Club, agreed with that which he learned in 1725: that obedience to God was fundamental to salvation, and that his one intention in life for the sake of his salvation should be to love and obey God.

Looking back on this period sixteen years later, Wesley noted his "diligence to eschew all evil" and his sincere care in "doing all good to all men" and in observing all the means of grace, "having a real design to serve God [and] a hearty desire to do his will in all things".²⁸ Yet despite this he described himself as "almost a Christian" who lived the Christian life but lacked assurance of his salvation.

Antithesis

Wesley's discovery of this "inner assurance" is found in his account of his Aldersgate experience. His *Journal* on 24 May reads:

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

While this event is a useful cameo for locating the Wesleyan emphasis on Christian assurance, it is only one out of a series of significant spiritual experiences, being neither the first, the last, or the most climactic.²⁹ Of importance to us is Wesley's turning away from Taylor's understanding of obedient service being a correlate to salvation, to an emphasis upon salvation *sola fides*. Here William Cannon warns that it is not enough to simply state that Wesley no longer thought of salvation in terms of good works: "in his mind the very faith which replaced works was of an entirely different nature from his old conception of faith as belief which

accompanies works".³⁰ Cannon points to Wesley's *Salvation by Faith*³¹ which sets out his new understanding of faith as being a gift of God's grace: the free undeserved gift; the faith through which ye are saved, as well as the salvation which he of his own good pleasure, his mere favour annexes thereto. That ye believe is one instance of his grace; that believing ye are saved, another,³¹.

Wesley's doctrine of salvation by faith alone, made urgent by the doctrine of universal depravity and a belief "that all men need to be saved",³² was built on the distinct but inseparable doctrines of Justification and Sanctification. Wesley defined Justification as the

salvation from sin and the consequences of sin...a deliverance from guilt and punishment by the atonement of Christ actually applied to the soul of the sinner now believing in him...So that he who is thus justified, or saved by faith, is indeed *born again*.³³

After this came a gradual sanctification, which he termed "growing in grace, a daily advance in the knowledge and love of God".³⁴ For Wesley salvation remained at the level of an individual's personal life and personal relations, first with God and then with neighbours and friends and fellow Christians. While accepting that Wesley did not emphasise personal sin at the expense of social sin, Wesley's framework began with the salvation of the individual as a prerequisite for the removal of social sin.

The implications of Wesley's doctrine for this thesis must be noted: His hermeneutic of *sola fides* excluded human participation from the process of salvation. All salvation, including social liberation, was the work of God alone. Humanity could do no more than trust in the saving power of the divine, and this, coupled with his understanding of a gradual sanctification, allowed no room for revolutionary change. If things were

wrong with the individual or the society this would gradually change under God's sanctifying influence.²⁶ We may therefore conclude that his doctrine of salvation did not provide a sympathetic hermeneutic with which to respond to the social unrest of England and the American colony. What it did provide, however, was a foundation for his political theology. Wesley's theology of authority (already noted on page 22) is unchanged - God is still understood to be the supreme authority. In addition to this is seen the formation of the Wesleyan theology of liberty. Wesley's understanding of salvation as a gift of grace became the theological basis for Wesley's understanding of the grace/gift of political freedom - which is discussed on pages 27 and 28 of this thesis.

Synthesis

It has thus been demonstrated that the Wesleyan hermeneutic immediately prior to the American Revolution was not amenable to human participation in social renewal. In the next chapter it will be demonstrated that it was the American Revolution that effected the synthesis - the development of a Wesleyan theology that held together both an emphasis upon salvation by faith alone, and his earlier understanding of the necessity for Christian service. In approaching Wesley's political theology before the Revolution, however, we can expect to find Wesley emphasising the sovereignty and the activity of God at the expense of human responsibility for social change.

WESLEY'S POLITICAL THEOLOGY

So far we have sought to place Wesley within his context, and in some measure to reach towards his ideological bias. We now turn to examine Wesley's initial response to the unrest of the 1760's, wherein lies his political theology.

A Failed Neutrality

We have already noted Wesley's ambivalence between criticism of the economic privilege of the ruling classes and loyalty towards the political order of the Establishment. This was clearly evident in his initial response to the American discontent. He readily recognised the social problems in both England and America and, says Runyon, realising that poverty could not be blamed on laziness alone, was seen "to oppose the new *laissez-faire* economic policies and to call upon the government to return to mercantilist practices, which would assure a more just distribution (e.g., setting the price of bread at a level the poor could afford)".³⁶ Wesley also admitted sympathy for the American situation: "I do not defend the measures which have been taken with regard to America: I doubt whether any man can defend them, either on the foot of law, or prudence".³⁷ What he could not do, however, was to make the connection between economy and political structures. This is why he did not move beyond speaking on behalf of the oppressed, to enabling the oppressed to liberate themselves. Instead, he tried to remain neutral.

Wesley admitted in a letter to Thomas Rankin, to being "of neither side, and yet of both; on the side of New England and of Old".³⁸ This desire for

neutrality again emerged in his appeal to the English authorities³⁹ after the battles of Lexington and Bunker's Hill a few weeks later:

I do not intend to enter upon the question whether the Americans are in the right or in the wrong. Here all my prejudices are against the Americans; for I am an High Churchman, the son of an High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of passive obedience and non-resistance. And yet, in spite of my long rooted prejudices, I cannot avoid thinking, if I think at all, that these are an oppressed people, asking for nothing more than their legal rights, and that in the most modest and unoffensive manner that the nature of the thing would allow.⁴⁰

Over the next six months Wesley pursued unity and conciliation. He wrote a second letter to the Earl of Dartmouth, emphasising the need to address the growing discontent rather than suppress it, and endorsed an article *An Argument for the Exclusive right of the Colonies to Tax Themselves*. The point came, however, when Wesley discovered events overtaking him, and he was forced to begin to define his political theology, and in the process take political sides.

Wesley: Authority and Liberty.

Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs was Wesley's first venture into the political life. Admitting to being "no politician", he offered a defence of King and Parliament against the furore raised by the John Wilkes episode.⁴¹ Four years later he published in quick succession two "Thoughts", one on Liberty and the other on Power, again in defence of the Establishment, but this time with more theological reflection. Emboldened by this he plagiarized Samuel Johnson's *Taxation no Tyranny*, which he published as *A Calm Address to our American Colonies*. This raised a storm of protest at both his methods and its pro-Establishment content. This was soon followed by *Some Observations on Liberty* and a number of

discovers its legitimacy - initially, continually, and ultimately - in the all-powerful and all-knowing God:

Now, I cannot but acknowledge, I believe an old book, commonly called the Bible, to be true. Therefore I believe 'there is no power but from God; The powers that be are ordained of God' (Rom, xiii, 1.) There is no subordinate power in any nation, but what is derived from the supreme power therein.⁴⁶

The first gift, God's gift of freedom, is thus to be preserved by the second, God's gift of authority. "There is no supreme power, no power of the sword, of life and death, but what is derived from God, the Sovereign of all".⁴⁷ No authority exists by its own merits, but instead is the result of the grace of God. God gives authority, and not the people - thus Wesley's disagreement with the American Revolution and its democratic ideals. Furthermore, human authority is to be a reflection of the divine, given by God to humanity to represent God on earth. "As he has the government of the inferior creatures, he is as it were God's representative on earth. Yet his government of himself by the *freedom of God's will*, has in it more of God's image, than his government of the creatures".⁴⁸ The task of human authority is to act on behalf of God in the preservation of human freedom. The implications of this are twofold: Firstly human authority is of God if it represents God's will in ensuring the preservation of humanity's freedom; and secondly, says Wesley, true freedom is discovered in obedience to God and those to whom he has given authority. If the law is violated then liberty is removed, but obedience to the law ensures the enjoyment of life, liberty, and goods. It was on this basis that Wesley rejected democracy and affirmed the English monarchy.

Because of his belief that true liberty was found in obedience to the authority of God and those appointed by God, democratic government was

incompatible with Wesley's understanding of freedom. Not only did the people jeopardise their freedom in rebelling against authority, but they had never been given the 'right' to choose or to reject their rulers. Government was God's prerogative, and of God's choosing in order to preserve the people's liberties. "Wherever it is, it must descend from God alone, the sole dispenser of life and death".⁴⁹ Accordingly, Wesley believed that obedience to King George offered the only way of guaranteeing God's gift of freedom. This is why he expressed his dismay at the revolutionaries, and especially those who questioned the Establishment on theological grounds:

Mark that man who talks of loving the Church, and does not love the King. If he does not love the King, he cannot love God. And if he does not love God he cannot love the Church. He loves the Church and the King just alike.⁵⁰

Wesley substantiated his theology from his own observations of different systems of government. His examination of democracy led him to conclude that it tended "to unhinge all Government, and to plunge every nation into total anarchy".⁵¹

The greater the share the people have in government, the less liberty, either civil or religious, does the nation in general enjoy. Accordingly, there is most liberty of all, civil and religious, under a limited monarchy; there is usually less under an aristocracy, and least of all under a democracy.⁵²

Accordingly Wesley rejected democratic principles as "incompatible...with the universal practice of mankind, as well as with sound reason".⁵³ In contrast to this, Wesley's experience of King George was positive: "King George, whom the wise providence of God has appointed to reign over us...is a minister of God unto thee for good".⁵⁴ The point has already been made that Wesley was incapable of recognising his ideological captivity - the Marxian

"false consciousness" - and so he universalised his ruling class values in support of his argument.

It was his concern for human liberty that prompted Wesley's opposition to the American Revolution. He believed that the colonies enjoyed liberty to the fullness of their wishes and insisted that "none takes away their lives, or freedom, or goods; they enjoy them all quiet and undisturbed".⁵⁵ Wesley was unable to grasp the exploitation inherent in the economic relationship between England and its colonies,⁵⁶ or to come to terms with the American sense of injustice in being taxed without parliamentary representation. The same is discovered in his response to English political discontent.

We have noted Wesley's England, with its enormous social inequalities. Understandably, the American cause found much English sympathy. In February 1777 Wesley recorded in his *Journal* a journey to Bristol on hearing of a disturbance "occasioned by men whose tongues were set on fire against the Government". Here he wrote *A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England*, in which he extolled the virtues of a perfect liberty enjoyed "under the mildest government on earth":

Every man says what he will, writes what he will, prints what he will. Every man worships God, if he worships him at all, as he is persuaded in his own mind. Every man enjoys his own property; nor can the King himself take a shilling of it, but according to law. Every man enjoys the freedom of his person, unless the law of the land authorises his confinement. Above all, every man's life is secured, as well from the King, as from his fellow subjects. So that it is impossible to conceive a fuller liberty than we enjoy, both as to religion, life, body, and goods".⁵⁷

Once more Wesley's ambiguity is exposed. While he is correct in his assertion that every man could worship "as he is persuaded in his own

mind", Wesley knew full well the debilitating effects of the Conventicle Act, which he himself had termed "that execrable Act" because of its harassment of religious dissenters.⁵⁸ As to freedom of life, body and goods, the same Wesley, who three years earlier had criticised the injustices of the English economy,⁵⁹ in 1777, when the poor rose up in rebellion against their oppression, is discovered to extol the economic liberty discovered under English rule. His commitment to the Establishment prevented him from translating his sympathy for the poor into political practice.

IN CONCLUSION

Having examined his thought it must be concluded that John Wesley was theologically and politically opposed to the revolution. His Doctrine of Salvation left the work of social liberation to God and those appointed by God, thus denying the idea of the people taking power into their own hands. His political theology favoured the Establishment against the oppressed. Although working amongst the poor, John Wesley never allowed the perspective of the poor to interact with his theology. In short, the Wesleyan hermeneutic is informed by a ruling class orthodoxy.

Read from a different ideological perspective, however, Wesley's emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God could have had liberative implications. His was an emphasis that affirmed the preservation of human liberties precisely because they were given by God, and his support for human authority was always in relation to its God-ordained task in protecting these liberties. He never placed the doctrine of the divine right of Kings above the divine bestowal of human liberty. His opposition to the American Revolution was because he did not see it as a genuine quest for freedom,

but instead as the expression of unrest and agitation, fostered by self-serving men.⁶⁰ If he had been capable of understanding the real denial of civil and religious liberties in the English limited monarchy, his theology of liberty would have required him to challenge the monarchy in the name of God. For this to have taken place, however, Wesley would have had to alter his social location, either geographically or economically, or both. This point was made by Francis Asbury, who as a contemporary of Wesley, recognised that Wesley was a product of his context. For this reason he concluded: "Had he been a subject of America, no doubt but he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause."⁶¹ Again the reminder of the Wesleyan ambivalence - whilst Wesley theologically affirmed the sovereignty of God, his ideological captivity prevented him from realising its most radical implications. Unable to sit comfortably with either the powerful or the powerless, he often fell between these two stools in his attempt to keep both together.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. K E Rowe (ed) *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* (Methuen N.J.: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1976) p.32.
2. Robert G Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press/Zondervan, 1978) p.10 & 329.
3. Lynwood Holland & Ronald Howell, "John Wesley's Concept of Religious and Political Authority" in *A Journal of Church and State* VI:3 (Autumn 1964).
4. An example of this is Leonard Hulley *Wesley: A Plain Man for Plain People* (Westville: Methodist Church of SA, 1987).
5. Leonardo & Clodovis Boff *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Trl) Paul Burns (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1987) p.25.
6. See James Leatt, Theo Kneifel & Klaus Nürnberger *Contending ideologies in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1986) part 5.
7. *ibid* p.274.
8. This is closer to Gramsci's definition of ideology as "a lived relation", which needs to be examined in relation, not to an abstract truth, but to its function and efficiency in uniting classes for political mobilisation. Antonio Gramsci *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (ed & transl) Hoare & Smith (New York: Lawrence and Wishard Ltd, 1971.) See also Leatt, Kneifel, & Nürnberger *Contending ideologies* pp. 276-277.
9. John Locke *Two Treatises of Government* (ed) Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) II:225.

10. Albert Outler *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press 1964) pp.8-10. See also Charles Villa-Vicencio "Wesley - a Theological Biography" in *Denominationalism - its sources and implications* ed W S Vorster (Pretoria: UNISA, 1982) pp.70-74; and Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* Ch Three: "The Home Environment".
11. Samuel Wesley, his father, dedicated all three of his principal works to Royalty, with his book *Studies in the Book of Job* being personally presented by John to Queen Caroline on October 12, 1735. cf Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.45.
12. John Wesley *The Works of John Wesley* XIII (London: William Nichols, 1872) p.274; (Hereafter cited as *Works*).
13. John Wesley to Lord North *Selected Letters of John Wesley* (ed) Frederick Gill (London: Epworth Press, 1956) p.166.
14. E P Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968) p.385.
15. Gerald Cragg *The Church and the Age of Reason* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1960) pp.133-134. John Richard Green *A Short History of the English people* (New York: A L Burt, no date) pp.406-407.
16. The first Methodist Conference was held June 25-30, 1744. cf: L Hully *Wesley: A Plain man for Plain People* p.107.
17. Wesley recorded his first outdoor sermon as a result of a decision in which he "submitted to be more vile". *Journal* Monday April 2, 1739.
18. *Wesley Works* XI p.108.
19. Eric Hobsbawm "Capitalist Crisis in Historical Perspective" in *The Capitalist System* (eds) R.C. Edwards, M Reich, T Weisskopf (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1978) p.434.

20. *ibid* p.434.
21. Wesley *Works* XI pp. 53-59.
22. E.P. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* p.44.
23. Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.334. n.10.
24. Jeremy Taylor *Works* 15 Vols ed R Herber (London: Longman 1839).
25. Wesley "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" *Works* XI p.366.
26. Taylor *op. cit.* p.11; quoted in William Cannon *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956) p.55.
27. *ibid* p.55.
28. Wesley "The Almost Christian" *Works* V p.21.
29. Augustin Léger in *La Jeunesse* (1910), noted in Richard Heitzenrater *The Elusive Mr Wesley* Vol 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984) pp 196-197. See also Outler *John Wesley* p.14, and Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.331. Tuttle notes one slight Wesleyan shift in understanding of assurance between 1738 and 1747, and suggests this was as a result of correspondence with the "John Smith" pseudonym. From virtually teaching salvation by assurance, John Wesley admits in a letter to his brother Charles that he understands assurance to be the *common privilege*, as justification by faith does *not necessarily* imply a sense of pardon: (Tuttle p.334).
30. William Cannon *The Theology of John Wesley* p.77.
31. Wesley "Salvation by Faith", *Works* V p.13.
32. Wesley "The Doctrine of Original Sin according to Scripture, Reason and Experience" *Works* IX p.397.

33. Wesley Works V p.12, No7.
34. Wesley Works VIII p.329
35. This is discussed in Rupert E Davies "Justification, Sanctification and the Liberation of the Person" in *Sanctification and Liberation* (ed) T Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) pp.78-80
36. T Runyon "Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation" in *Sanctification and Liberation* p.17.
37. Wesley Works XI p.24.
38. *Selected Letters of John Wesley* p.165.
39. One letter was sent to Lord North, First Lord of the Treasury, and the other to the Earl of Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the Colonies.
40. "Letter to Lord North" *Selected Letters of John Wesley* p.166.
41. John Wilkes returned from France in 1768 and was elected to the House of Commons from Middlesex. He was then gaoled as a result of trouble over his newspaper, the *North Briton*. A popular demonstration in his favour led to several deaths and an accusation by Wilkes of a planned massacre initiated by the Cabinet. After expelling him from the House, and three more elections, each of which was won by Wilkes, the seat was given by Commons to his losing opponent. This led to violent protest against a corrupt Commons that disobeyed the expressed will of the people. Allan Raymond "'I Fear God and Honour the King': John Wesley and the American Revolution" in *Church History* 45 (September 1976).
42. Wesley "The Sermon on the Mount" Discourse I Works V p.247.
43. Wesley Works XI pp. 137.
44. *ibid* p.92.

45. *ibid* p.92.
46. *ibid* p.47.
47. *ibid* p.48.
48. *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament* note on Genesis 1: 26-28. quoted in Leon O Hynson "War, the State, and the Christian Citizen in Wesley's Thought" in *Religion in Life* 45 (Summer 1976). p.208. This idea is also found in "The Sermon on the Mount" Discourse IX *Works* V p.381, where Wesley approvingly quotes a maxim of the desert fathers: *Optimus Dei cultus, imitari quem colis* - "It is the best worship or service of God, to imitate Him you worship".
49. *Wesley Works* XI p.104.
50. *ibid* p.197.
51. *ibid* p.104.
52. *ibid* p.105.
53. *ibid* pp.104 - 5.
54. *ibid* p.197.
55. *ibid* p.92.

56. The mercantilist economic legislation, rooted in the 1651 Navigation Act and limiting the trade of the British Empire to England and the colonies, was overhauled in 1763 to ensure greater English profit. This affected America in the form of the 1764 Sugar Act, the raising of export tax from 2.5% to 5%, and the 1765 Stamp Tax to finance British soldiers stationed in America. A generally expressed feeling in America was that the rich in England were grinding the faces of the American poor. A Nevins & H S Commager *A Pocket History of the United States* (New York: Washington Square Press 1967) pp 61-69.
57. *ibid* p.137.
58. It must be noted that while persecuting zeal had given way to practical acceptance, Parliament's mistrust of emotional enthusiasm led to the retention of the Conventicle Act, which required all Dissenters to register their chapels and preachers, and excluded them from the social privilege accorded the Church of England. Wesley's reference to "that execrable Act" is quoted in W Bardsley Brash *Methodism* (London: Methuen, 1928) p.160.
59. Wesley "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions", *Works* XI pp.53-59.
60. Leon O Hynson "War, the State and the Christian Citizen in Wesley's Thought" p.209
61. Elmer T Clark (ed) *Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury* 3 vols (Published Jointly, London: Epworth Press, and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958). Journal entry for March 19, 1776. quoted in Owen H Adelfer "British Evangelical Response to the American Revolution: The Wesleyans" *Fides Et Historia* VIII Spring 1976. p.28.

ORTHODOXY AND ORTHOPRAXIS

The Introduction briefly identified the dialectic social function served by the Methodist Church in both legitimating and challenging the status quo. Its South African history was shown to disclose a church that vacillates between providing theological support for those in authority and offering theological critique of the status quo. Chapter One discussed the relationship between the church's social function and its social location with reference to the context and ideology of John Wesley. It is here that the ambivalence in Wesley's social concern between support for Establishment politics and criticism of Establishment economics was noted. His theological antipathy to human participation in salvation, and his ideological commitment to the status quo, however, ultimately led him to legitimate the English political order. This led to the conclusion that while his thought contained the potential for challenging the status quo, a change of context was required to realise this within his social practice. The American Revolution presented Wesley with just such a changed context. Wesley will now be examined in relation to this new context so as to discover the effect it had upon his theology and practice.

Change is to be expected of Wesley. There are at least two reasons why this should be so. First of all, it has already been argued that context always interacts with theology. A changed context therefore must to some degree affect the theology operative within it. - which this chapter will show to

be the case with Wesley in relation to the passage of the Revolution. A second reason for a change within Wesley's ideas is to be found within his theological hermeneutic: his doctrine of Christian Perfection demanded change. Wesley, who described Christian Perfection as "the indispensable necessity of having 'the mind which was in Christ', and of 'walking as Christ also walked'",¹ at the time of the revolution believed perfection to involve salvation from sin and a subsequent growth in holiness as the "one purpose of religion".² Harald Lindström suggests that this can be described in terms of change: "With Wesley as with the mystics everything was directed towards a *change* which would qualify man for glorification."³

While two reasons have been posited for expecting change within Wesley, the question remains as to whether he did in fact alter his ideas as his context changed, or whether he remained rooted in his pre-revolutionary orthodoxy. Opinions on this vary from the observation of a Wesleyan 'shift' as his "theology matured across the years",⁴ to the description of Wesley as practicing a "politically regressive" orthodoxy in which he "rarely let pass any opportunity to impress upon his followers the doctrines of submission".⁵ While each position can be substantiated, neither position wholly describes his thought. This thesis chooses rather to agree with one observer's description of Wesleyan theology as "an intriguing synthesis of old and new, conservative and radical, tradition and innovation".⁶ It will be shown that although Wesley changed in many ways, his ambiguity never left him. John Wesley practiced both orthodoxy and orthopraxis. This will be substantiated by re-examining the two areas covered in the previous chapter - namely Wesley's Theology of Salvation and his understanding of Liberty - in relation to Wesleyan praxis as a result of the American

Revolution. As with the previous chapter, it is recognised that his understanding of the relationship between faith and works cannot be separated from his political practice, and so once again this debate begins within Wesley's doctrine of Salvation. Once his theory has been exposed, it can be examined in the light of its concrete political manifestation.

WESLEY AND SALVATION

Chapter One noted that the Wesleyan emphasis of the Protestant *sola fides* excluded human participation in the process of salvation. This lent support to Wesley's opposition to democratic government. Of interest now is the relationship between the revolutionary spirit encountered by the "mature" Wesley (after 1760), and his transition to a synthesis of his understandings of the Sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humanity.

Synthesis

Throughout his life Wesley struggled to hold together the relationship between faith and works. While in his early years he accepted Taylor's emphasis on the human participation in the process of salvation, his middle years saw the rejection of this in favour of faith in the justifying grace of God alone. It was at the time of the American Revolution that Wesley's understanding of salvation recovered a positive appreciation for human commitment to what he understood to be holy living.

While the great Protestant watchwords of *sola fides* and *sola Scriptura* were still central to Wesley's doctrine of justification, Outler discovers in the sermons of the "mature" Wesley an interpretation of *solus* as "primarily"

rather than the earlier Wesley's "solely" or "exclusively". He notes that for the mature Wesley "faith is the primary reality in Christian experience but not its totality".⁷ Wesley urged that it be a necessary means to a higher end: faith "is only the handmaid of love".⁸ The goal of the Christian life is holiness, "the fullness of faith", which means the consecration of the whole self to God and the neighbour in love. While Wesley continued to agree with the mystical understanding of striving for perfection through total communion with the mind of God, his later interpretation of prevenient grace led him to reject the mystical disregard for the historical significance of the incarnation. In arguing that human love is a response to the incarnational love of God, Wesley's doctrine of salvation moved from an other-worldly love to a love that is manifest within this world:

And by faith, taken in its more particular meaning for a confidence in a pardoning God, we establish his law in our own hearts in a still more effectual manner. For there is no motive which so powerfully inclines us to love God as the sense of the love of God in Christ. Nothing enables us like a piercing conviction of this to give our hearts to him who was given for us. And from this principle of grateful love to God arises love for our brother also. Neither can we avoid loving our neighbour if we truly believe the love wherewith God hath loved us. ⁹

His concept of holiness thus changed from an absorption with the mystical, to a striving for the realisation of the fruits of holiness within this world. In addition, Wesley held that the very aspiration to holy living is as truly a function of faith as justification itself, for the faith that justifies bears its fruits in the faith that works by love. This resonates with the theology of Dun Scotus and the nominalists, who proposed a deliberate self-limitation by God (*potentia ordinata*) in order to enable an obedient human response. They believed that God demonstrated sovereignty both in salvation, and in enabling human participation through choosing to

exercise *potentia ordinata*. It has been suggested that nominalism contributed to the brand of faith and good works characteristic of the mainstream Anglican tradition which was the formative ecclesiastical influence on Wesley's theology.¹⁰

Wesley is thus seen to have restored balance to *sola fides* by recovering some of the ideas of his earlier days. Richard Heitzenrater notes that Wesley was willing to admit that perhaps his middle views were wrong and that his Oxford days had merit. Here he points to a comment from John Wesley to his brother Charles in 1772: "I often cry out *Vitae me redde priori!* Let me be again an Oxford Methodist! I am often in doubt whether it would not be best for me to resume all my Oxford rules, great and small."¹¹ It would thus appear that Wesleyan biographers agree that after 1764 Wesley taught that "faith not properly nourished by its fruits might well prove to be illusory."¹² However, this does not mean that Wesley had come to terms with social salvation.

This "mature" Wesley continued to understand salvation in the individualistic terms noted in his *antithesis* period (page 24). Human participation in salvation remained confined to a striving for personal holiness, for while Wesley affirmed that "The Gospel of Christ knows...no holiness but social holiness",¹³ commentators agree that this must not be understood to be a holiness committed to changing the social order.¹⁴ Wesley's holiness was social only insofar as it "concerned an individual's *personal* life and *personal* relations, first with God and then with neighbours and friends and fellow Christians".¹⁵ It may thus be concluded that while this thesis accepts the suggestion of the Wesleyan transition

from *antithesis* to *synthesis*, this process remained incomplete within Wesley's thought and practice. While Wesley's theological hermeneutic changed to an affirmation of human participation within this life, he never explored its political potential, choosing instead to retain his individualistic understanding of the process of salvation. It is this that caused the inconsistency within his political praxis, as will be shown later.

Tuttle suggests a further development in Wesleyan theology. Not only did Wesley include an emphasis upon the fruits of faith in his doctrine of justification, but he reached the point where "simply to fear God and work righteousness revealed an acceptance by God and a degree of faith".¹⁶ This is in contrast to his earlier sermon on "the almost Christian". Whereas "the almost Christian" was not accepted by God, ("good it were for him had he never been born"¹⁷) the post-1764 Wesley was able to accept that even one who does not have the "faith of a child", but has instead "the faith of a servant" (comparable to that of "the almost Christian") is accepted by God and "'the wrath of God' no longer 'abideth on him'".¹⁸ Tuttle substantiates this by pointing to Wesley's handwritten marginal notes in his 1771 copy of the *Works*, where Wesley countered two previously held beliefs about himself: Where he had recorded on February 1, 1738 "not converted" he later wrote "I am not sure of this"; Further on opposite the statement "I am a child of wrath" he wrote "I believe not. I had even then the faith of a *servant*, though not that of a *son*".¹⁹ Thus in addition to accepting human participation within the process of salvation, Wesley was even willing to use human activity as the measure of the presence of faith in those who expressed themselves differently to him. Tuttle thus concludes:

Wesley, therefore, at long last concluded that many whom he previously thought lost had faith because they manifested the fruits which only faith (by any name) could produce.²⁰

This then begs the two obvious questions:

1. Why did Wesley's theology change?
2. How did this affect his political theology?

Answering these questions will provide the framework for the remainder of this chapter.

Context and Change

That Wesley's theology changed comes as no surprise, for it has already been noted that his hermeneutic of Christian perfection expects a process of theological maturation. When it comes to giving reasons for this change the answers advanced by Wesleyan commentators, which range from a mystical reawakening to theological and spiritual influences, ignore the effect of social context upon the life and thought of Wesley.

Outler supports a Wesleyan mystical reawakening through a renewed interest in the Ante-Nicene fathers.²¹ Tuttle follows suit:

When Wesley was confronted with this choice by Taylor, á Kempis, Law, and others, he never hesitated to take their lead...He was directed and sustained...by those whose piety had been won after years of conflict; and whose whole-hearted devotion to God had persisted through years of painful, yet rewarding experience.²²

Another line of enquiry has sought to link the change in the later Wesley with a particular theological influence of his time. Examples of this include Jean Orcibal, who links Wesleyan change with Continental

Spirituality,²³ and Robert Monk, who seeks to discover a Puritan influence on Wesley.²⁴ The third explanation for Wesley's change is exemplified in Howard Snyder, who attributes change in Wesleyan theology to spiritual renewal, suggesting that Methodism under Wesley is "one of the prime examples in history of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit".²⁵ What is lacking in all of these is an awareness of Wesley's historical setting. One searches in vain to discover an examination of the post 1764 change in Wesleyan theology in relation to his political context. Having earlier noted the correlation between context and theology, this thesis contends that Wesley's social location is clearly a contributory factor to his theological change.

The American unrest forced Wesley to enter the political arena. While his ideological bias was unquestionably Tory, his interaction with the revolutionaries had two consequences: First of all he had to deal with the ethics of Christian activity. Faced with Methodist people who claimed to be justified but disagreed with his political ideas, he was compelled to move beyond an exclusive focus on justification, to a consideration of the fruits evidenced in the lives of those who are justified. Wesley's exhortation to the American Methodists to "take heed of what you do. Do nothing hastily or rashly"²⁶ took him into the area of holy living. He thus pleaded for the fruits of justification to be seen:

Let us avoid unkind and bitter reflection on one another; seeing it can do no real service to the cause we would defend, but, in all probability, much harm...Ye salt of the earth, exert the seasoning, preserving quality which you are flavoured with.²⁷

Wesley's theological change to include the fruits of justification was thus a consequence of his need to address the fruits in the lives of the

justified who differed from him with regard to the American Revolution. The second consequence had to do with Wesley's acceptance of those he had previously thought lost to the faith. With the passing of time, Wesley was forced to accept that the American Methodists, although at political and theological odds with him, were nonetheless still faithful to God and in need of pastoral care. For this reason he risked his reputation in ordaining men for ministry amongst people with whom he disagreed. Thus is Tuttle's point substantiated - Wesley became "willing to recognise [faith's] presence in those who choose to express themselves differently".²⁸

But this does not necessarily make Wesleyan thought any less ambivalent, for the "mature" Wesley can be read in two ways. His doctrine of Salvation, when read in the light of his opposition to the English economic injustices, opens up revolutionary social implications. The teleological nature of his doctrine of perfection, taken in conjunction with the concept of social holiness, demands that the status quo be called into question. His is not a doctrine that accepts holiness as a goal while settling for what is possible within the limitations of society, (Niebuhr's ethic of the impossible possibility.²⁹) Its goal of perfection settles for nothing less, and in the process radically challenges every interim-ethic as being inadequate. This finds affinity with the Barthian ethic of the "positive possibility", and its understanding of God's grace that brings into question all human thought and action.³⁰ But it must be stressed once again, that this is a reading that Wesley himself would not have accepted, for he never understood salvation in social terms.

The dominant Wesleyan tradition understands the doctrine of Salvation in terms of personal salvation, and personal holiness. This reading does not understand holiness in terms of social order, but instead focuses on personal piety, and interpersonal relationships. It has already been shown above (pages 45 & 46) that this individualistic understanding of salvation prevented Wesley from developing a theology of holiness committed to social change. Nevertheless, while this is the generally accepted reading of Wesley, the former "alternative" reading of Wesley is also evident in Methodist history, and it is this that has contributed towards this church's character of ambiguity. This will now be demonstrated in examining Wesley's response to the American Revolution. While he maintained his twin themes of the sovereignty of God and the liberty of humanity throughout, the ambiguity discovered within his theological change of mind is reflected in his political practice.

WESLEY'S POLITICAL PRAXIS

Wesley's political practice in relation to the war in America clearly exemplifies the ongoing Methodist ambiguity in its sociological vacillation between obedience to God and obedience to the status quo.

What had begun as a cry for "the rights of Englishmen" and the redress of their grievances, became a war for American independence. Congress's loyalty to the Crown waned in the light of the bitterness caused by the bloodshed, and the resentment of the implacable attitude of King George. The intellectual influence of John Locke and Thomas Paine, the military leadership of George Washington (in comparison to the incompetence of the British generals), and the American sense of democracy, all combined to

provide the necessary impetus for revolt against the established order. The protest of the early 1760's culminated in the year 1776: Washington raised a distinctive American flag, Paine published his pamphlet *Common Sense* urging the option for independence, and on July 4 Congress published its Declaration of Independence to secure the "self evident truths" of the equal rights of all to Life, Liberty and Happiness. Thus began a six year struggle, with fighting in every colony between people who had formerly been countrymen but were now divided into Loyalists and Patriots, Englishmen and Americans. Wesley's response to this struggle can, like his theology of Salvation, be understood as a dialectic development beginning with his belief that English victory was the work of God ; to the English defeat in which Wesley blamed God's withdrawal of support for England; to Wesley finally resolving the problem by concluding that while God continued with the English, God had also liberated the Americans.

Victory

Wesley set out his understanding of the English Government's decision to wage war against America as follows:

The King and Parliament undertook this war,,,for this end - to make them lay down their arms, which they have taken up against their lawful Sovereign; to make them restore what they have illegally and violently taken from their fellow subjects; to make them repair the cruel wrongs they have done them, as far as the nature of the thing will admit, and to make them allow to all that civil and religious liberty whereof they have at present deprived them. These are the ends for which our Government has very unwillingly undertaken this war, after having tried all the methods they could devise to secure them without violence.³¹

Wesley's concern for liberty continued to be of paramount importance. Because he believed that the King was appointed to preserve human freedom,

he understood rebellion as a threat to that liberty. His desire to see the restoration of civil and religious liberty thus led him to support England's decision for war, and his subsequent campaign of preaching and writing emphasised that the one who supported the revolution not only rebelled against the Crown, but against God. "Let us follow after peace! Let us put away our sins! the real ground of all our calamities; which never will or can be thoroughly removed, till we fear God and honour the King!"³²

For Wesley the war had to do both with regaining freedom, and with affirming the sovereignty of God - which he believed was confirmed by the events subsequent to the general fast called by King George:

16. At length the King published a Proclamation for a General Fast in England, that we might "humble ourselves before God, and implore his blessing and assistance"...There is all reason to believe that God was well pleased with it. We now openly acknowledged him, and he openly acknowledged us. From this very time, the tide turned. The King's forces...made good their landing at the place proposed, and that without any loss at all...and everywhere drove the rebels before them like a flock of sheep.

17...Whatever they do they will not fight, I believe they cannot; for the hand of God is upon them.

18. Such is the present state of affairs in America...At first prosperity seemed to attend them in all their undertakings. But since we sought help from God, there has been a manifest blast upon them. Their armies are scattered; their forts and strongholds lost; their provinces taken one after another.³³

Wesley's thesis is thus proved: English victory was due to God's support. This is unfortunately all too often the hermeneutic of those who win battles - what may be termed a ruling class theological legitimization of success. This phenomenon is not only applicable to Wesley, but is found wherever religion has been used to justify the activities of the powerful.³⁴

Victory is taken to be a sign of God's reward for obedience, and conversely defeat as a sign of God's disapproval of sin. There is an alternative to this theology, which holds that theological justification of oppression by one group over another, victorious though it may be, is "a travesty of the Gospel...and a heresy".³⁵ This alternative hermeneutic points to the biblical revelation of God who is in solidarity with the poor - or alternatively with those who suffer defeat and oppression.³⁶

It is this that brings out the contradictions in Wesley's theology. The same John Wesley who worked amongst the poor and oppressed of England, and championed their cause against the wealthy and the powerful, legitimated the English political system. One example of this is found in Wesley's reaction to the decision by the French to enter the war.

France's acceptance of Benjamin Franklin's invitation to enter the war caused Wesley to write *A Compassionate Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland* ³⁷ to calm the fear and panic that stemmed from rumours of an immanent French invasion of the British Isles.³⁸ Wesley called on his readers to fear God "and you need fear nothing but him".³⁹ Despite this exhortation however, the British setbacks exposed Wesley's own fears of both the external threat of invasion by France, and the internal threat of revolution by the Catholics, whom he termed "intestine vipers, who are always ready to tear out their mother's bowels".⁴⁰ This was a consequence of Wesley's belief that English discontent with their "glorious liberty" arose from agitation of external origin.⁴¹ Hereafter Wesley's energies were diverted to an anti-Catholic crusade, which occupied more of his attention than the war in America. ⁴² Wesley's fear of internal revolt was linked to

his fear of invasion. For this reason he approved a plan to raise two hundred Methodist volunteers for the King's army, "ready to act in case of an invasion".⁴³ It was this desire to protect the status quo, motivated by a perspective that assumed the fundamental soundness of the system despite some sin, that prevented Wesley from developing a theology that took seriously the socio-political needs of the powerless, whether they were the English working class, or the American colonists.

Defeat

The longer the war continued the less Wesley defined his position regarding it. Instead, a growing disillusionment is seen in his thinking. On November 13, 1779 Wesley recorded in his *Journal*: "How has poor King George been betrayed on every side! But this is our comfort: there is one higher than they. And he will command all things to work together for good." In a letter to Thomas Taylor he acknowledged the "melancholy truths" of wasted money and lives in a "war that has been ill-conducted" by commanders who "both by land and sea love robbing and plundering far better than fighting".⁴⁴ This is again seen in a letter to his brother Charles where he abandoned his support for the ministry, wishing that the King would be his own Prime Minister, for "the nation would soon feel the difference".⁴⁵ The unavoidable fact was that England was losing the war. This raised the painful question of why England, blessed as it was by God, had not continued in its initial triumph. Wesley was compelled to theologially justify the change of fortunes. His theology could not have admitted to anything other than divine sanction for the war - for the rebellion was against both God and King. He could not have suggested that God was too weak to prevent English defeat, for this then denied God's sovereignty. For

the same reason he could not have blamed the ability of the Americans, for they were in rebellion against God and thus powerless. Wesley took the only other option open to him, which was to blame the people of England. He therefore accused them of ungodliness, which he described as "the undoubted characteristic of our nation".⁴⁶

6. Because of these sins is this evil come upon us. For whether you are aware of it or no, there is a God;...He is patient indeed, and suffers long; but he will at last repay the wicked to his face. He often does so in this world; especially when a whole nation is openly and insolently wicked.

7. There hath been, among them that feared God, a general expectation, for many years, that the time was coming when God would thus arise to be avenged on this sinful nation. At length the time is come. The patience of God, long provoked, gives place to justice. The windows of heaven begin to be opened, to rain down judgements on the earth.⁴⁷

Having noted the sin of the people, Wesley suggested confession before God to avert the whirlwind of destruction, and to ensure "sufficient help, against our enemies".⁴⁸ While purporting to blame the wickedness of the nation, Wesley had in fact blamed God: Because of God's dissatisfaction with England, God had allowed England to lose the war. It may thus be said that the American Revolution had not changed John Wesley's understanding of God's sovereignty. While it was right that God supported the efforts of the English to restore freedom to America, it was also God's sovereign right to withdraw support from the English because of their sinfulness. What Wesley was unable to do was to reflect on whether King George was right to engage in war in the first place. His social perspective effectively silenced the revolutionary potential within his theology, resulting instead in an acceptance of the political order of the status quo.

The question that remains to be answered, asks what happened to Wesley's theology after the establishment of an independent America. His support for the war was initially understood in terms of God's restoration of freedom, and Wesley's explanation of the English defeat looked to human disobedience of God's sovereignty. How did Wesley understand the new independence of America? The answer to this is illustrated in Wesley's decision to ordain ministers for America.

Liberty

It is in the issue of ordination that a synthesis in Wesley's political thought is discovered, as are new ambiguities. It will be shown that while he was theologically able to resolve his relationship with the new American political dispensation, his social perspective prevented him from dealing with the political consequences of his theological synthesis.

At the time of the 1783 treaty, the Methodist work in America was in desperate need of ordained ministers. All the Methodist preachers, with the single exception of Francis Asbury, had returned to England. Asbury recorded his unhappiness with Thomas Rankin who, as superintendent, had made this decision:

It appeared to me that his object was to sweep the continent of every preacher that Mr Wesley sent to it and of every respectable travelling preacher of Europe who had graduated among us, whether English or Irish. He told us that if we returned to our native country, we would be esteemed as such obedient, loyal subjects that we would obtain ordination in the grand Episcopal Church...and come back...with high respectability after the war.⁴⁹

This did not happen. The Church of England was not prepared to ordain men for Methodist work, despite Wesley's appeal to the Bishop of London in August 1780.⁵⁰ Thus it was, that in September 1784 the same John Wesley who urged loyalty to the Established Church, took the decision to ordain his own preachers. His *Journal* records this event as follows

1784 Wednesday September 1; Being now clear in my own mind, I took a step which I had long weighed in my mind, and appointed Mr Whatcoat and Mr Vasey to go and serve the desolate sheep in America,

Thursday September 2; I added to them three more; which, I verily believe, will be much to the glory of God.

Here the question may again be raised: was Wesley engaged in orthodoxy or orthopraxis? While many commentators suggest that in this instance Wesley departed from his orthodoxy,⁵¹ the point made in the first paragraph of the Introduction is repeated - that this conclusion does not do justice to the complexity of Wesleyan thought.

This is demonstrated in Wesley's letter *To Dr Coke, Mr Asbury, and our Brethren in North America*, written ten days after his ordination of Whatcoat, Vasey and the others.⁵² Wesley began by noting the independency of the American states: "The English Government has no authority over them, either civil or ecclesiastical". He then admitted to having believed in the equality of Bishops and Presbyters for many years, and thus the eligibility of presbyters to ordain. "But I have still refused, not only for peace' sake, but because I was determined as little as possible to violate the established order of the national Church to which I belonged". Wesley, the Tory, predictably had no wish to challenge the system. However when he discovered that American authority was structured differently to England,

he was able to hold together both his obedience to authority and his need for ordained ministers:

the case is widely different between England and North America, Here there are Bishops who have a legal jurisdiction; In America there are none, neither any parish Ministers. So that for some hundred miles together, there is none, either to baptise, or to administer the Lord's supper. Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end; and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order, and invade no man's right, by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest.⁵³

The key to understanding this shift in Wesley's position on ordination is found in the last sentence - *as I violate no order*. Until then he had not sought to provide preachers for the Methodist movement because of his reluctance to "violate the established order". Wesley's concern with obedience to order took precedence over the need of the Methodist people. His ordination of the American preachers was therefore in keeping with this tradition, for the situation in America allowed him the liberty to ordain without abrogating any laws. In the matter of ordination Wesley was affirming his lifelong obedience to authority - and while he continued to ordain men in each of the remaining years of his ministry, he never ordained anyone for work in violation of the established order.⁵⁴ Having said this, however, it must be acknowledged that while the ordination of ministers may not have been new to Wesley's understanding of authority, it was certainly a radically new practice. For this reason he faced sharp criticism from both the Church of England, and from his fellow Methodists. Even his own brother, Charles, is credited with a sardonic verse to this effect:-

How easy now are bishops made
At man or woman's whim
Wesley his hands on Coke hath laid
But who laid hands on him?⁵⁵

Thus Wesley's decision to ordain ministers was ambiguous: he remained both within his tradition, and departed from it; he practiced both orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

This letter also shows Wesley finding a solution to the dilemma of his relationship with the American political situation. Throughout the war he had believed that England was fighting to both restore its God-given authority, and regain American liberty, which he believed had been destroyed by lawlessness and violence. Now after the war, in explaining his motives for ordination Wesley contradicted this by acknowledging that liberty has in fact been preserved by the new American order:

As our American bretheren are now totally disentangled both from the State, and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again. They are now at full liberty, simply to follow the Scriptures and the primitive church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free.⁵⁶

Herein Wesley's dilemma of the authority of God within the conflict is resolved. It has already been noted that he blamed England's defeat on the withdrawal of God's favour from the sinful English (page 54). Now Wesley affirms the other side of the coin - that it was God who had given liberty to the Americans. He thus held together the authority of God over the actions of both the English and the Americans, and in this way was able to arrive at a synthesis in his theological relationship with the American Republic.

But, despite this, the ambiguity within Wesley's thought did not disappear. While Wesley's recognition of American liberty affirms the authority of God, it at the same time contradicted his earlier stated opposition to democratic government.⁵⁷ What he had rejected as contrary to God's authority and human freedom, he now called "full liberty". This does not necessarily mean that he had changed his political ideas. While he may have recognised the democratic government of America, Wesley was no democrat and never advocated the republican cause or philosophy. Although he is recognised for pioneering lay preaching in his Methodist societies on the basis of the doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers, he never allowed Methodists to choose their own leaders. The year before his death he wrote of his opposition to democracy within Methodism:

As long as I live, the people shall have no share in choosing either stewards or leaders among the Methodists. We have not, and never had, any such custom. We are no republicans, and never intend to be. It would be better for those who are so minded to go quietly away".⁵⁸

The issue of ordination illustrates Wesley's struggle, and ultimate failure, to hold together his doctrine of Salvation, and his political understanding of liberty. This ambiguity is a consequence of his inability to unpack the political implications of his theological acceptance of the place for human participation in the process of salvation. Wesley attempted to deal with corporate living on the basis of a privatised religious ethic: he employed a hermeneutic of personal liberty to deal with social liberty. It was simply not possible for him to develop a consistent political theology while holding to an individualistic understanding of salvation.

IN CONCLUSION

The Wesleyan ambiguity noted at the beginning of this chapter has been demonstrated. Change was to be expected of Wesley: his doctrine of Christian perfection made change mandatory. Thus the change to his understanding of salvation relative to faith and works is entirely consistent with his hermeneutic, and justifies the observation of a Wesleyan shift as his theology matured across the years.⁵⁹ At the same time, though, Wesley displayed ambiguity in his political theology. On the one hand he acknowledged the democratic order as providing freedom for the American people, while on the other, Wesley, who is acknowledged to have "rarely let pass any opportunity to impress upon his followers the doctrines of submission",⁶⁰ rejected democracy as foreign to the Methodist structures. On the one hand Wesley engaged in orthopraxis, while on the other he clung to orthodoxy. Another way of approaching this ambiguity lies in describing Wesley in terms of faith and practice: while he sustained a hermeneutic that supported change, John Wesley struggled to translate this from theory into practice, handicapped as he was by his ideological commitment to the status quo. Wesley was unable to see the implications of his theological development, and so ended up as one who like a strong and skilful rower, "looked one way and rowed another".⁶¹ It for this reason that this thesis suggests that Wesley bequeathed a foundation of ambiguity to Methodism that has prevented a consistent tradition from emerging. While the dominant tradition has been one of personal holiness and acceptance of the established order, there were followers of Wesley such as Alexander Kilham and Hugh Bourne, who operated from a different social perspective and were thus able to affirm social, economic, and political implications of Wesleyan theology that Wesley himself rejected out of hand.⁶² The

following chapter will seek to expand the limits placed upon Wesleyan theology by the dominant tradition, so as to enable these liberative dimensions of Wesleyan thought to emerge. It is this alternative memory that gives hope for a tradition within Wesleyan theology that can contribute towards the struggle for liberation within contemporary South Africa.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. Wesley "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" *Works* XI p.367
2. Albert C Outler *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press 1964) p.252; Robert Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press/Zondervan ,1978) p.338; Charles Villa-Vicencio "The Origins and Witness of Methodism" in *Denominationalism* W S Vorster (ed) (Pretoria: UNISA, 1982) p.81.
3. Harald Lindström *Wesley and Sanctification* (Stockholm 1946) p.129 quoted and italicised in Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p. 343.
4. Tuttle *ibid* p.331.
5. E.P.Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968) p.45.
6. Howard Snyder *The Radical Wesley* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980) p.3.
7. Outler *John Wesley* p.28.
8. Wesley "The Law Established by Faith: Discourse II" III:3 *Works* V p.462.
9. *ibid* III.3 p.465.
10. This is discussed more fully in Villa-Vicencio *Denominationalism* p.86.
11. Richard P Heitzenrater *The Elusive Mr Wesley* Vol One (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984) pp.32 & 198.

12. Heitzenrater *ibid* pp.32, 101, 198; Outler *John Wesley* p.28; Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.335. See also Jean Orcibal "The Theological Originality of John Wesley and Continental Spirituality" in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (transl) R J A Sharp. Vol 1 (eds) Rupert Davies & Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1965) pp.95ff.
13. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* vol 1 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1868) p.xxii, quoted in Runyon (ed) *Sanctification and Liberation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1981) p.42.
14. *ibid* p.42. Rupert Davies "Justification, Sanctification, and the Liberation of the Person" in Runyon (ed) *Sanctification and Liberation* p.80.
15. Davies "Justification, Sanctification, and the Liberation of the Person" p.78. See also José Míguez Bonino "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification from a Liberationist Perspective" in Runyon (ed) *Sanctification and Liberation* pp.57-58.
16. Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.335.
17. Wesley "The Almost Christian" *Works* V p.24, No 10.
18. Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.336. Compare Wesley's "The Almost Christian" with *Works* VII p.199
19. Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.336
20. *ibid* p.336.
21. Outler *John Wesley* p.31.
22. Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.344.
23. Orcibal - see note 12.

24. Robert Monk *John Wesley, His Puritan Heritage* (Nashville: Abingdon 1966).
25. Snyder *The Radical Wesley* p.125.
26. Wesley "A Seasonable Address...by a Lover of Peace" *Works XI* p.124.
27. *ibid* p.123.
28. Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.336.
29. Reinhold Niebuhr *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner, 1960) Ch 5 & 6.
30. Karl Barth *Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford Press, 1933).
31. Wesley "Some Observations on Liberty", *Works XI* p.111
32. Wesley "A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England", *ibid* p.88
33. *ibid* p.135.
34. For a discussion on civil religion see Robert Bellah *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), and R N Bellah & P. E. Hammond (eds) *Varieties of Civil Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).
35. While this is taken from the Charter of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa, it is the conclusion of the Christian Church worldwide. See J de Gruchy and C Villa-Vicencio (eds) *Apartheid is a Heresy* (Published jointly by Cape Town: David Philip, and Guildford: Lutterworth Press, 1983) The charter is recorded on p.161.
36. Gustavo Gutierrez *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973) p.300
37. Wesley *Works XI* pp. 149 - 154.

38. Wesley notes this as comparable "only to the alarm which spread through the nation in King William's time, that on that very night the Irish Papists were to cut the throats of all the Protestants in England": Wesley's *Journal* 4 March 1778.
39. Wesley "A Compassionate Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland" *Works* XI p.154.
40. *ibid* p.152
41. Other material relevant to this can be found in the following: Wesley to the printer of the *Public Advertiser* 12 January 1780; Wesley to the editors of the *Freeman's Journal* 23 March 1780 and 31 March 1780 in *Letters of the Rev John Wesley* (ed) J Telford (London: Epworth Press 1931);
42. Two years after the end of the war Wesley's antipathy to Catholics was still in evidence. In a letter to Mr John Stretton he warns: "If that deadly enemy of true religion, Popery, is breaking in upon you, there is indeed no time to be lost; for it is far easier to prevent the plague than to stop it". *Works* XIII p.137.
43. Wesley *Selected Letters of John Wesley* (ed) Frederick Gill (London: Epworth Press, 1956) III p.165.
44. Wesley "To Thomas Taylor" (April 12, 1782) *Selected Letters of John Wesley* VII p.121.
45. Wesley *Selected Letters of John Wesley Letters* VII p.173-4. John Richard Green notes that this is not true, for King George had established majority support in the Houses of Parliament that bypassed Lord North and his cabinet: "George was in fact the minister through the twelve years of its existence, from 1770 till the close of the American war; and the shame of the darkest hour of English history lies wholly at his door". *A Short History of the English People* (New York: A L Burt - no date) II 406-407.

46. Wesley "An Estimate of the Manners of the Present Times" *Works XI* p.162-3.
47. Wesley "Advice to an Englishman" *Works XI* p.184.
48. *ibid* p.184.
49. "To Joseph Benson" (1777) in *Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury* Elmar T Clark (ed) 3 vols. (Published jointly London: Epworth Press and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958) Vol 3 p.21-22. quoted in Owen H Adelfer "British Evangelical Response to the American Revolution: The Wesleyans" in *Fides et Historia VIII* (Spring 1976) p.27.
50. Wesley "To Dr Lowth, Bishop of London" *Selected Letters of John Wesley VII* p.30-31
51. W Bardsley Brash *Methodism* (London: Methuen & Co, 1928) p.133. Owen H Adelfer *op.cit.* p.31; Franklin Littell "The Discipline of Discipleship in the Free Church Tradition" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35 (April 1961) p.112.
52. Wesley *Works XIII* pp 251-2.
53. *ibid* p.252.
54. Brash *Methodism* pp.154-155. Brash records the list of other ordinations by Wesley as follows: 1785 - three for Scotland; 1786 - two for Scotland, one for Antigua, one for Newfoundland; 1787 - three for West Indies, one for Nova Scotia; 1788 - two for Scotland and six without any territorial restriction; 1789 - three also without limitation. Brash also notes that Wesley ordained men who were permitted to administer the Sacraments in Scotland, but who on crossing the border were "unpriested" by him. Those men of later years who were ordained without territorial restriction were appointed in areas where Methodists could not obtain the Sacraments: thus at no time was the parochial authority of the Church of England threatened.

55. Brash *Methodism* p.139.
56. Wesley *Works* XIII p.252.
57. Wesley *Works* XI p.105.
58. Wesley *Works* XII p.455.
59. Tuttle *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* p.331
60. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* p.45
61. Brash *Methodism* p.160. The same analogy is found in the much later publication of R.F. Wearmouth *Methodism and the Working Class Movements of England 1800-1850* (Clifton, NJ: Augustus M Kelley, 1960) p.196. and quoted by Villa-Vicencio in *Denominationalism* p.89.
62. Alexander Kilham broke away and formed the Methodist New Connexion in protest against the unwillingness of the Mother Society to introduce lay representation into the annual Conference. Hugh Bourne formed the Primitive Methodist Church when the Mother Society sought to restrict the parameters of the work in Staffordshire.

EXPANDING THE LIMITS

The ambiguity within the mature Wesley's theology and practice is obvious. While theologically allowing for change, his reluctance to translate this into political practice caused his vacillation between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, between support for the status quo and support for an alternative society. The implications of this are twofold: Firstly, this has given rise to the two readings of Wesley noted in Chapter Two. In much the same way that the German peasants understood the implications of Lutheran theology better than did Martin Luther himself, so many who heard John Wesley discovered social implications in his message that he would not have foreseen. The objection of the Dutchess of Buckingham to the political consequences of Methodism's spiritual egalitarianism is a telling example:

...their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their Superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and to do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth.¹

Secondly, this established the Methodist tradition of political ambiguity outlined in the Introduction. Methodists have invoked Wesley's sanction for different and often contradictory causes precisely because his theological ambivalence allows for the different readings that have been noted. It is now necessary to seek a more consistent Methodist political theology that

will enable a liberating Methodist tradition for the prevailing South African crisis.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

In order to discover a liberative tradition Wesleyan theology must first be set free from its ambivalence. It is not disputed that Methodism seeks to be obedient to its Christian calling, and neither seeks to be ambiguous, nor desires such a reputation. Why then, has this occurred? We propose to answer this question in relation first to Wesley, and then to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA).

Wesleyan Inadequacies

Wellman Warner, in a socio-economic analysis of Wesley and the early Methodist leaders, shows them to be conservative in perspective and ill-equipped to analyse or interpret their political or economic situation.² It was these two inadequacies that contributed to the ambiguity in Wesley, and thus to the subsequent Methodist movement.

Perspective: It has been shown that Wesley's perspective reflected an ideological commitment to the English established order, which made it difficult for him to translate his concern for the "humble poor" (of the Wesleyan hymns) into concrete political practice. While encouraging lay participation in preaching and in class meetings, he did not allow the laity authority within Methodism, as witnessed in his insistence that "the people shall have no share in choosing either stewards or leaders among the Methodists".³ One consequence of this was his co-option into the American social struggle on the side of the ruling classes, where, in seeking to

demonstrate the glorious freedom of the Americans, he unwittingly provided ideological justification for their continued oppression. It is this that led Thompson to conclude that instead of being a church of the poor, "orthodox Wesleyanism remained as it had commenced, a religion for the poor".⁴

Social analysis: The other inadequacy lay in Wesley's inability to see the structural nature of the socio-political issues he faced. Because Wesley had no means of social analysis, he allowed the status quo to condition his perspective - and thus his belief that it adequately contained, or was contained in, the divine order, and as long as men were politically free to become sanctified, further change hardly mattered.⁵ This lack of a cogent social analysis caused Wesley to presume that the English political system, while affected by individual sinners, was basically sound. All that was needed was the gradual rooting out of the sin. As Runyon notes:

Wesley assumed that the system was 'justified' - in its basic lineaments capable of being conformed to the will and purpose of God. What remained was 'sanctification', the practice of conformity to that will. Thus the appropriateness of the gradualist, meliorist approach.⁶

It is not that Wesley ignored social injustice. His recognition of the injustice of the American treatment by the English Parliament has been noted earlier in this thesis, as has his attempts to address the economic plight of the poor in his 1773 "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions".⁷ What Wesley lacked was an understanding of the structural causes of injustice. "When he attempts to find causes and remedies," says Miguez Bonino, "he remains totally within the premises of the mercantilist system and completely unaware of the structural causes of the crisis."⁸ But it would be ridiculous to blame Wesley for failing to be anything other

than a person of his time. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was only published in the late 1770's, and Hegel and Marx appeared in the next century. Wesley was not equipped to deal with the issues of ideological perspective and social structure. Much as he wanted to care for the weak, his lack of social analysis resulted in his legitimation of the values and practices of the powerful.

Myopic Methodism

At this point it is important to be reminded of the question posed in the Introduction: is there any value in taking time out from the struggle to be a Christian in South Africa to investigate the theology and practice of John Wesley? Do theological origins matter at all? This was answered in the suggestion of Mac Kay that "the memory of yesterday opens a highway to tomorrow". Johann Baptist Metz concurs with this in his reminder of the critical and liberating quality found in the narratives, or memories, of God's activity in the past, which then become moments of eschatological hope for the present.⁹ It has been the intention of this thesis to engage in historical inquiry only insofar as it is a basis for a contribution to the renewal of contemporary South African Methodism.

The history of ambiguity within the MCSA (demonstrated in the Introduction) discovers affinity with the Wesleyan history examined by this thesis. It is this that engenders the conclusion that the MCSA falls within the tradition established by Wesley - a tradition of ambiguity in thought and practice. It will now be shown that, like Wesley, the MCSA suffers from the inadequacies of perspective and social analysis. This does not mean that

the MCSA is unaware of these issues, but rather that it does not deal adequately with them.

Perspective: There is very little evidence to suggest that before 1948 the Methodist response to South Africa's social problems differed significantly from the ruling ideology of the time. It was largely taken for granted by Methodist leadership that the church should pray for and support the Crown, and annual addresses to this effect were sent by the Conference of the MCSA to England, and to the Governor General of the Union. Methodist social concern lay primarily in mission to the indigenous people, which, in the words of the 1929 Conference, was to produce "a Bantu citizenship in South Africa, good in character, economically efficient and contented...a blessing and not a menace in the land".¹⁰ In short, Methodist theological identity continued to be grounded in Nineteenth Century mission thought, and Methodist social ethics in British social and theological debate. Political oppression and racially discriminatory practices were left unchallenged by church leaders.¹¹

It was the ascendancy of the National Party that challenged the political perspectives of the MCSA. No longer could the church comfortably accept the status quo, for a new political phenomenon in the form of an officially legislated *apartheid* policy disturbed the conscience of the church. Because the MCSA found itself without a consistent political theology, its reaction was, at best, ambiguous. The ambivalent response of Methodism to the Bantu Education Act and the Mixed Marriages Act reveals a church which protested the Act without resisting its strictures. It took ten years of Nationalist hegemony before the MCSA formulated its response to the

ideology of *apartheid*. The following statement was debated and adopted by the 1958 Conference of the MCSA, and has been seminal to all its subsequent political theology:

The Conference declares its conviction that it is the will of God for the Methodist Church that it should be one and undivided, trusting to the leading of God to bring this ideal to ultimate fruition, and that this be the general basis of our missionary policy.¹²

The MCSA thus declared that it was not prepared to go the way of the racially divided Dutch Reformed Church, and affirmed instead a commitment to Methodist unity: "God is calling us to an increasing implementation of this policy in our Connexional, District, and local life and work".¹³ While at the time this was a bold rejection of the State's authority in obedience to Christ, the statement has since become a hinderance to this church's involvement in the struggle for social justice. Where the commitment to being "one and undivided" originally served as a challenge to the state, it steadily became both the chief object of Methodist existence, and a major reason for Methodist ambiguity. At present, whenever a call to social justice threatens to polarise Methodists, the church leaders find themselves trapped between conscience and congregation, and thus tempted to compromise on their principles in order to preserve unity.

Social Analysis: Like Wesley, South African Methodists have a sincere concern for the poor and the oppressed. But, also like Wesley, the MCSA suffers from a lack of social analysis. Beyond recognising that there are injustices in the country, the MCSA has little cogent analysis of its context, and even less commitment to taking social analysis seriously. An example of this is evident in the 1983 declaration of *apartheid* as a heresy.

While the 1983 rejection of *apartheid* as a heresy¹⁴ may initially seem to be the logical conclusion to the 1958 "one and undivided" declaration, on closer examination it is seen to be a retreat from a previous bold statement of faith. Whereas the 1958 declaration of Methodist unity was in its time a radical challenge to the status quo, the 1983 declaration was not. The former declaration was issued after careful consideration of the context within which it was being made, and its difficult consequences for the church. It admitted that the ascendancy of Dr Verwoerd to Prime Minister would intensify restrictive legislation in the enforcement of *apartheid* "without consideration of the values of human dignity and the right of justice for all."¹⁵ Nevertheless, the MCSA opted to confront the State in its "witness to the multi-racial character of Christ's Kingdom". This bold witness is not evident in the 1983 declaration, which was introduced to the floor of Conference without grassroots debate or consideration of its socio-political implications. Only after having declared the heresy, did the Conference refer the debate to various committees to consider its implications. It is our belief that this reflects a serious lack of commitment to social analysis, for if such a commitment were held it would be impossible to issue statements about society without considering both the causes of the problem, and the possible consequences of any response. While Wesley may be excused from social analysis on the grounds that he was unaware of the issues of ideological perspective and social structures, the MCSA has the advantage over Wesley of two hundred years of reflection by theologians and sociologists in the field of political ethics, and thus has no excuse at all. In addition, the preface to the declaration, in stating that "the Methodist Church of Southern Africa does not seek confrontation with the State", not only circumscribed any

analysis that the working committees could still have achieved, but also suggests that a prior, and probably unconscious, social perspective is operative within the declaration - the perspective of "one and undivided" mentioned above. When it came to rejecting the heresy of *apartheid* the intervening twenty-five years had shown the MCSA the internal division that arises from opposition to the State, and so confrontation was avoided in the interests of seeming unity. Thus what could have been a bold statement of faith has instead become a retreat from the struggle for God's freedom.

It therefore becomes obvious that theological consistency is a consequence of an awareness of the perspectives and social construction within which the theology operates. This thesis holds that in the South African context the only valid perspective for the theological enterprise is the biblical perspective of the poor. While this would also be the desire of the MCSA, this church has difficulty in discerning the nature of the South African society. An examination of the political statements of the MCSA shows that the social analysis of the MCSA sees *apartheid* to be the sin of South African society. It thus believes its primary social concern lies in the creation of social unity. In disagreeing with this analysis, it is suggested instead that the perspective of the poor understands oppression of the weak to be the social sin, and *apartheid* but one manifestation of this. It is with this in mind that a liberative Wesleyan theology for South Africa will now be proposed. Such a theology must deal with two issues: the relationship between theology and politics, and the Methodist response to political violence. The 1985 *Politics and Religion* statement noted in the Introduction, and various Methodist statements on political violence will be used as a basis for this discussion (See appendix).

READING WESLEY IN SOUTH AFRICA

It has been noted that Wesley's political theology was grounded in two themes: the sovereignty of God, and the protection of human freedoms. It is within the framework of these themes that an alternative Wesleyan tendency can be uncovered. This other memory is located in Wesley's shift in emphasis upon salvation by faith, to include the necessity of the manifestation of the fruits of faith. This is a liberative hermeneutical shift that moved Wesley from an a-historical, spiritualised faith, to a faith that is grounded in historical human actions. Wesley's new understanding began with the human response to the grace of God, and "from this principle of grateful love to God arises love for our brother also".¹⁶ Wesley's various "Addresses" and "Words" at the time of the American Revolution evidence his attempts to deal with the fruits of justified Christians *within* history. While many would disagree with Wesley's ethics, it is his historical grounding of theology that can act as a challenge to those Methodists who seek to divorce their faith from its historical fruits. Methodism thus has a tradition that locates its faith within its political activity.

Divine Authority

The centrality of the authority of God in Wesley's thought has two important political implications. Firstly, Wesleyan theology can act as a challenge to the powers that be to recognise their subordinate nature. No other authority can compete with God, for God is to "reign without a rival" in the hearts of his people. There is no doubting the sovereignty of God in Wesley's thought:

Let God have sole dominion over you; let him reign without a rival; Let him possess all your heart and rule alone, Let him be your one desire, your joy, your love; so that all that is within you may continually cry out "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth",¹⁷

This calls all human authority into question, and acts as a reminder that authority is a delegated gift that can be removed by God. Herein lies both hope to those who are oppressed by evil authorities, and a warning to those who seek to usurp God's authority. In the end, God will triumph over all evil "with everlasting destruction from his presence and from the glory of his power".¹⁸

Secondly, Wesley's understanding of God challenges authority to recognise its temporary nature in the light of the divine dissatisfaction with the status quo in the interests of Christian perfection. Human authority, because of its obligation to perfectly represent the image of God, must be constantly questioned. Authority is legitimate only insofar as it recognises God's sovereignty in its willingness to reflect God's image. When it no longer does this, it becomes illegitimate and is no longer binding upon the people, whose sole loyalty is to God.

The MCSA's understanding of authority is discovered in its statement *Politics and Religion* (see Appendix 2 on page 92). Here we discover a partial affirmation of the Wesleyan tradition. Firstly, Wesley's theology of authority is echoed in the injunction that all authority be obeyed "on the basis of Romans 13 that 'there is no authority except from God', and that where rulers are obedient to the law of God we are obliged to obey them". Secondly, the statement agrees with Wesley's point that because God is to

"reign without a rival" human authority is to be obeyed only insofar as it reflects the image of God:

We further reaffirm that it is incumbent upon us in all matters to obey God rather than man...It is clearly wrong to quote a part of Romans 13 in an attempt to suggest that all authority, irrespective of the nature of the rule of such authority, is "of God".¹⁹

Ironically it is at this point that a third point of agreement is discovered: both the MCSA's statement and Wesley's writings on political theology refrain from analysing the contemporary historical situation in relation to the Romans 13 passage. There is no attempt at asking the question whether the function of the political authority within society reflects the image of God or not. For the MCSA this means that the lack of a prior analysis of the context it seeks to address renders it unable to address the question of the legitimacy of the South African authorities. This is also evident in the "*apartheid* is a heresy" statement, and in the adoption of the *Call to Prayer for the End to Unjust Rule*. In each case a statement was adopted without examining its consequences.

If Wesley's doctrine of the sovereignty of God were taken seriously, the MCSA would move beyond affirming the supremacy of God's authority, to recognising the South African authorities for what they are - rivals to God. This is the only ground upon which *apartheid* can be declared a heresy, prayer for the removal of these authorities can take place, and obedience to God can be paramount in the life of Methodism.

Human Activity

A liberative tendency is discovered in Wesley's acceptance of faith in others on the basis of their fruits and not their professions of faith. Here

both his thought, and his action subsequent to this, poses an important challenge to those who seek theological unanimity at the expense of Christian action. After the American Revolution Wesley spent more time seeking the fruits of salvation, than in debating the understanding of salvation held by others. For this reason he rebuked those who "condemn all who do not speak just as you do", calling instead for a concern with the fruits of salvation.²⁰ This challenges those Methodists in a context of oppression who, while in agreement with the goals and methods of liberation movements, refuse to share their struggle for justice because of theological or ideological differences. The point was made on page 45 of this thesis that the Wesleyan tradition specifically affirms service of God as a higher priority than ideological unanimity. "If there were a difference of opinion," says Wesley, "where is our religion, if we cannot think and let think?"²¹ Methodist unity was not based upon thinking alike, but on acting together.

It has been shown that the MCSA statement on *Politics and Religion* was partly within Wesleyan tradition. However, the section of the statement that directly appeals to Methodist theological tradition is not in fact Wesleyan tradition at all, but is rather an appropriation of Wesley's words to serve a contradictory cause:

The Wesleyan tradition is clear; 'the distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort... We think and let think'. In this spirit we recognise that there are widely differing interpretations of the precise way in which the justice of God may be manifest in political or economic structures...[the Methodist Church] does not decree in an absolutist or in uncompromisingly prescriptive manner. It rather does so with tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect for all who seek to live responsibly before God but disagree with the mind of the Church at that particular time.²²

The prime objective of this section of the statement is to maintain Methodist unity. In essence it says that the Methodist Church accepts all shades of opinion, and does not expect its members to agree with or to support the actions of their church leaders. It is obviously hoped that by allowing Methodists to ignore calls by their church leaders, the church will not be polarised. This is clearly in contradiction to Wesley, who appealed for united action despite theoretical differences. We have seen that his appeal to "think and let think" was not so as to allow Methodists to passively ignore their leadership, but for corporate obedient action despite differences of opinion. The Wesleyan tradition has thus been distorted by the MCSA in the interests of unity. Where the MCSA's concern lies with unity, Wesleyan concern lay with obedience to God.

Political Violence

The alternative (political) reading of the mature Wesley's emphasis upon human participation in his Doctrine of Salvation, has been set out on page 48. Without repeating ourselves, we note that this opens up a tradition wherein humanity participates in the preservation of human liberty. Wesley did not call for a passive participation. His was an active obedience that sought at all times to ensure human freedom. His support of the English decision to wage war against America was because he believed that the American rebels needed to be persuaded to restore the civil and religious liberty that they had "illegally and violently taken from their fellow subjects".²³ Wesley was not in favour of war *per sé*, and acknowledged it to be a last resort, "very unwillingly undertaken" after all else had failed.

The Wesleyan principle was nevertheless established - that war could be used as a last resort against those who violate human liberty.

Before 1966 the MCSA had not expressed any opposition to this principle, and so supported the two World wars against Germany, providing both chaplains and prayers for victory. This changed in 1966 when the Annual Conference reacted to the decision of the liberation movements to turn to violence as a last resort in the struggle for social justice. The MCSA declared its opposition "to any attempt by sabotage, violence or murder to bring about changes in national policy as being contrary to the mind of Christ".²⁴ After rejecting the violence of liberation organisations, the statement then rejected the right of the state to suppress violence "by sub-Christian methods such as violence or hatred". Having supported the Wesleyan tradition with regard to violence for its first one hundred and fifty years in South Africa, the Methodist Church declared all violence to be contrary to the mind of Christ. We suggest that this is due more to concern for church unity in a context of divided opinion than for reasons of theological reassessment. This came to a head ten years later with the 1976 Soweto uprising, and the 1978 PCR grants to the liberation movements (discussed in the Introduction to this thesis). Methodist people were found to be on opposing sides. Some supported school boycotts while others did not; some supported the liberation movements, either actively or tacitly, while others supported military action against these movements. Again the MCSA faced internal division, and again, caught between conscience and context, the MCSA issued a statement rejecting all violence "whether those guilty be white or black, established governments or 'freedom fighters'".²⁵ Trapped by its desire for unity, the MCSA found it difficult to engage in

theological debate on the issue of violence within the South African context.

This difficulty is still evident ten years later. The 1987 Conference had referred a proposal that the Methodist Church become a peace church to Quarterly Meetings and Synods for discussion. This afforded the whole church an opportunity to discuss the issue of violence. The polarised context of the Methodist people was reflected in the range of responses to this document. Some supported the violence of the South African regime, others needed the option for the violence of self-defence against the State, and many wished to have nothing to do with violence at all. We suggest that the Methodist perspective of "one and undivided" shaped the responses of some synods to this debate: For example, one synod, having noted its unhappiness "that the proposal was presented in a form that was divisive in that it polarised people", is seen to affirm the Methodist obsession: "We cherish the unity God has given us which allows us to hold differing views at times without becoming divided".²⁶ Another synod plaintively concludes that the proposal "only created division and anger among our people".²⁷ Once again, concern for unity overrides the commitment to Wesleyan principles. Wesley's primary concern was to ensure human liberty, even if this meant the reluctant use of violence to achieve it. The primary concern of the MCSA for unity ignores the deprivation of human liberties in its refusal to debate the use of violence in the struggle for liberation.

Within a context of increased political violence, refusal to engage in debate on this issue is short-sighted. The observation of J G Davies provides a fitting warning:

Since revolution is indeed such a widespread contemporary phenomenon, Christians cannot simply ignore it. They may not like it, they may wish to repudiate it, but they cannot pursue their discipleship in the world and pretend that it does not exist. They have no real alternative but to seek to understand it and its relationship to the gospel and to define their own position vis-à-vis revolution in the light of this critical appraisal.²⁸

IN CONCLUSION

The Methodist Church has much to learn from Wesley. First of all, seeking unity at the expense of obedience to God is contrary to Wesley. In his opposition to the American Revolution he is seen to have placed Methodist unity at risk in affirming what he understood to be the political consequences of the Sovereignty of God. The refusal of the MCSA to confront the State subsequent to declaring its ideology a heresy is apostasy. It demonstrates a church that has forgotten the primacy of the sovereignty of God and allowed other powers to dictate its priorities. Secondly, while the concern of Wesley lay in the preservation of human freedom, the concern of the MCSA lies with unity. Its statement *Politics and Religion* does not engage the church in the struggle for liberation in South Africa, but is instead, an appeal for Methodist inactivity in the interests of unity. Finally, the approach of the MCSA to the use of violence by the liberation movements again demonstrates less concern with theological integrity than with Methodist unity. The attempt to declare the MCSA a peace church, and more importantly, the blanket condemnations of all violence, is not part of the Wesleyan tradition that supports the use of violence as a last resort in the cause of liberty.

The MCSA will have to abandon its desire to be "one and undivided" in favour of the two Wesleyan themes - the sovereignty of God, and the liberty of humanity. In rediscovering what it is to let God "reign without a rival", the MCSA will be compelled to discard its concern for Methodist unity. Obedience to God and Methodist unity are incompatible in a context of polarisation. The MCSA will have to discover that its decision to declare *apartheid* heretical places it in opposition to the State. If the ideology of the State is heretical, it is no longer an image of God and as such is illegitimate, and not binding upon Methodist people. This will mean that the MCSA will need to enable the removal of the heretical status quo, and establishment of God's authority in South Africa.

The MCSA will also need to take human liberty seriously. This demands social analysis so as to understand the nature of the oppression, and then, in keeping with Wesleyan theology, participation in the process of social restoration. In the words of Wesley, God's freedom is to be found in making the oppressors "restore what they have illegally and violently taken from their fellow subjects; to make them repair the cruel wrong they have done them, as far as the nature of the thing will admit, and to make them allow to all that civil and religious liberty whereof they have at present deprived them".²⁹ It may also mean that, after trying every peaceful means, the MCSA will need to consider the Wesleyan tradition that reluctantly supports the use of violence in the struggle for liberation, and revise its attitude towards the liberation movements. Wesleyan theology thus points to an active participation by Methodists in the South African struggle for liberation and the establishment of a new political order, even to the point of a reluctant support for violence for the sake of freedom.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. Quoted in E P Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968) p.46.
2. Wellman Warner *The Wesleyan Movement in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1930 & 1967.) p.254.
3. *Wesley Works* XII p.455.
4. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* p.41.
5. John Kent "Methodism and Social Change in Britain" in *Sanctification and Liberation* (ed) T Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) p.89.
6. T Runyon *Sanctification and Liberation* p.17.
7. See pages 19 & 20 and 25 & 26.
8. José Míguez Bonino "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification from a Liberationist Perspective" in *Sanctification and Liberation* p.59.
9. Johann Baptist Metz *Faith in History and Society* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980) Chapters 11 & 12.
10. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1929), quoted in James Cochrane *Servants of Power* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987) p.139; and Charles Villa-Vicencio *Trapped in Apartheid* (Published jointly Cape Town: David Philip and Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) p.75.
11. Villa-Vicencio *Trapped in Apartheid* p.75.
12. "Missionary Policy", *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1958) p.65.

13. "Address to the Members of the Church", *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1958) p.202.
14. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1983) p.258. (see Appendix).
15. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1958) p.200.
16. Wesley "The Law Established by Faith - Discourse II" III:3 *Works V* p.465.
17. Wesley "The Sermon on the Mount" Discourse IX, *Works V* p.387.
18. Wesley "The Sermon on the Mount" Discourse I *Works* p.248.
19. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1985) pp. 62-64.
20. Wesley "The Lord our Righteousness" *Works V* pp.245-6.
21. Wesley *Works V* pp.245-6.
22. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1985) pp. 62-64.
23. Wesley *Works XI* p.111
22. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1966) pp. 136-7.
23. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the MCSA* (1978) pp. 270-1.
24. Statement to the 1988 Annual Conference of the MCSA from the 1988 Northern Free State and Lesotho District Synod.
25. Statement to the 1988 Annual Conference of the MCSA from the 1988 South Eastern Transvaal and Swaziland District Synod.

26. J G Davies *Christians, Politics and Violent Revolution* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1976) p.88. Quoted by Paul Germond in "Liberation Theology: Theology in the Service of Justice" in *Theology and Violence* (ed) Charles Villavicencio (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1987) p.215.
27. Wesley *Works* XI p.111.

APPENDIX 1

THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Extract from: *Declaration of Christian Principles*

Minutes of the 1966 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Pages 136 - 137.

- d) The Conference...declares its opposition to any attempt by sabotage, violence or murder to bring about changes in national policy as being contrary to the mind of Christ but it declares its conviction that persons who, in good faith and conscience seek to produce such changes by constitutional means are not to be regarded as enemies of the nation's welfare. Preservation of our so-called 'traditional way of life' and the economic privilege of any one section of the population must not necessarily be equated with Christianity.
- e) The Conference believes that it is not sufficient to suppress sabotage or to oppress any other outcrop of Communism by sub-Christian methods such as violence or hatred, but that the conditions which breed Communism and provoke sabotage must be remedied; and especially that adequate constitutional means should be provided for all sections of the population to share in shaping the policies and legislation of the country.

Extract from: *World Council of Churches*

Minutes of 1978 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Pages 269 - 270.

Conference resolves to convey to the World Council of Churches and member Churches of the South African Council of Churches and to member Conferences of the World Methodist Council:-

1. Its dismay at the indications of political partisanship in the allocation of grants by the World Council of Churches from the funds of its Programme to Combat Racism. These allegedly humanitarian grants appear to go not to those who need them most but to those adhering to a particular political wing.
2. Its conviction that the struggle in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and in South West Africa/Namibia is no longer between white and black, but is between those who desire a liberated non-racial community but hope to gain it by consultation and reconciliation, and groups which seek their ends by the power of the gun.
6. Its condemnation of injustice, brutality, cruelty and atrocities no matter by whom they are committed, whether those guilty be white or black, established governments or "freedom fighters".
7. Its determination to continue and intensify its own efforts to promote justice, non-racialism and power-sharing within the structures of the Methodist Church and in the areas in which it works, acknowledging

that it has to contend with social and administrative procedures which are indefensible on Christian principles.

Conference further resolves:-

- 1(a) To convey to the WCC its strong request that the Programme to Combat Racism discontinue unconditional grants to bodies involved in violent conflict in Southern Africa.

- (b) That the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, while continuing to make no financial contribution to the World Council of Churches, should retain its membership and participate wherever possible in the Assemblies, Committees and Councils of the WCC, because this provides a unique opportunity for consultation with other Churches.

APPENDIX 2

THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA AND SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS

Church and State Confrontation

Minutes of the 1983 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Page 258.

Conference affirms that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa does not seek confrontation with the State, but is committed by its understanding of the Gospel to work non-violently for the change so desperately needed in South African society.

Apartheid

Minutes of the 1983 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Page 258.

Conference affirms that Apartheid is a negation of:

1. the dignity with which God has endowed man in creating him in His own image.
2. the work of Jesus Christ through His coming into the world to live, die and rise for mankind, thus freeing it from bondage for fullness of life.

3. the reconciliation effected by Christ between man and God, and man and man.

Apartheid is not simply a socio-political policy, but a sinful contradiction of the Gospel which cannot be justified on biblical or theological grounds and is, therefore, an ideology which the Methodist Church rejects as heresy. Conference having declared apartheid to be a heresy, requests the Department:-

1. To provide means whereby our people may be taught the reasons for this declaration.
2. To develop and implement strategies which will make our members aware of our unity as a family of God irrespective of racial differences.

Conference refers to the Justice and Reconciliation Committee a study of the implications of the resolution on apartheid as a heresy as it relates to the holding of office within the Church, and directs that the results be submitted to the 1984 Synods for discussion in both Pastoral and Representative Sessions and report to Conference.

Politics and Religion

Minutes of the 1985 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Pages 62 - 64.

Conference resolves as an interim measure, the following Guidelines in relation to matters of a political matter:

It is our belief that the lordship of Christ extends to all of life, including the political, social and economic areas of our existence.

In this regard, we reaffirm on the basis of Romans 13 that "there is no authority except from God", and that where rulers are obedient to the law of God we are obliged to obey them. We further reaffirm that it is incumbent upon us in all matters to obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). It is clearly as wrong to quote a part of Romans 13 in an attempt to suggest that all authority, irrespective of the nature of the rule of such authority, is "of God", as it is to quote Revelations 13, in isolation from all other Scripture, to suggest that all government authority is the incarnation of evil as symbolised by the beast.

Where it is the considered and prayerful conviction of the courts of our church or its leaders that the government of the day is acting contrary to the declared purpose of God, they are constrained to minister to both the government and to the people of this land by declaring what in their informed and considered opinion is hurtful and sinful about a particular policy or practice.

In so doing, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, in keeping with its theological tradition, needs to act cautiously and humbly but also resolutely and in obedience to Scripture and its understanding of the will of God in this situation. The Wesleyan tradition is clear: "The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort... We think and let think". In this spirit, we recognise that there are widely differing interpretations of the precise way in which the justice of God may be manifest in political or economic structures. Yet precisely because of the Incarnation the Church is to guard against making pronouncements which are merely of an ethereal and abstract nature, remote from the stubborn concreteness of life. It is therefore obliged from time to time to express its mind on specific political and economic matters. It does not decree in an absolutist or in uncompromisingly prescriptive manner. It rather does so with tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect for all who seek to live responsibly before God but disagree with the mind of the Church at that particular time.

Methodists, in common with Christians throughout the ages and in all parts of the world, hold to certain essential and non-negotiable beliefs concerning human existence under God. Where and when the situation requires it, Methodists are obliged before God to affirm and strive for the ideals of human dignity, justice and equity. Conference has in recent times felt itself compelled under the Gospel to make such affirmations and in the light thereof to condemn certain practices and laws of this land in the strongest possible way. In so doing, we acknowledge that these are our interpretations of the will of God which are offered as a responsible contribution toward the welfare of our society. We need to continue to

search our minds and be open to further persuasion, but we dare not neglect our responsibility in proclaiming to political, together with other, implications of the gospel in society today.

Each Methodist is called upon to appreciate the spirit in which such resolutions are made, to note their content and background, and to understand why our Church has felt obliged to express itself on a particular issue at a particular time.

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