

## “You have nothing to do but save souls”:

### John Wesley on Evangelism and the Pursuit of Justice

by David N. Field

John Wesley’s instruction to his preachers that they had “nothing to do but save souls”<sup>i</sup> is an odd place to begin a discussion on Wesley’s understanding of the pursuit of justice.

It seems to support the view that the mission of the Church is primarily to proclaim the gospel of personal salvation. Methodists who emphasise social engagement and the pursuit of justice tend to start with Wesley’s commitment to the wellbeing of the poor, his opposition to the slave trade<sup>ii</sup>, and his advocacy of economic justice. However, the genius of John Wesley’s theology is that it offers an alternative in which the proclamation of personal salvation and the pursuit of justice are dynamically and inseparably related to each other. It is Wesley’s concept of “saving souls” rightly understood that provides the context in which they are related to each other.

### Salvation in Wesleyan Perspective

The starting point for understanding a Wesleyan perspective on salvation is that God, who is love, created human beings in God’s own moral image of love. When Wesley wished to describe love for our fellow human beings, he referred to the Golden Rule of “doing unto others as you would have them do to yourself”, which is expressed in the triad of “justice, mercy and truth”.

God’s intention for humanity, he said, was devastated by sin; instead of loving God and their fellow human beings, human beings turned away from God and centred their lives on themselves, resulting in the abuse, misuse, exploitation, and even destruction, of other human beings. Salvation is the process by which God restores the image of God in human beings by drawing them into a relationship with God by the Spirit, enabling and empowering them to live lives characterised by justice, mercy and truth. It begins before we are even conscious of it through what Wesley referred to as “preventing grace”.

Wesley was using the word “preventing” in the eighteenth-century sense of “that which goes before”. His phrase is now more commonly referred to as “prevenient grace”. For Wesley, prevenient grace is active in all people so that we find in all people a moral mixture of that which reflects God’s intention and that which is contrary to it. Prevenient grace is the beginning of the process of salvation and is directed toward drawing people to repentance and new birth. Yet this is only one stage in the process of salvation. Salvation is the restoration of the image of God in the human person. Souls that are saved are ones that are transformed into the moral image of God – that is, they are permeated by divine love.

## A Life Permeated by Divine Love

Divine love ought to shape all dimensions of Christian lives so that they are centred on God and passionately directed toward the comprehensive wellbeing of others – concretely through a lifestyle characterised by justice, mercy and truth.

Justice is treating people as creatures with dignity and value because they are “made in the image of God, bought by his Son, and designed for his kingdom”.<sup>iii</sup> Mercy goes beyond justice and responds to human beings in their need and misery out of a deep empathy, and seeks to relieve their needs and transform their situation. Truth rejects all forms of deception and is expressed in honesty, reliability and faithfulness.

Justice, mercy and truth should characterise our personal relationships, our business practices and our social engagement. The pursuit of justice, mercy and truth for the poor, the suffering, the sick and the imprisoned was a characteristic of early Methodism. An important example is Wesley’s involvement in the struggle against the slave trade.<sup>iv</sup>

## Evangelism and the Pursuit of Justice – Putting it Together

We can summarise the dynamic relationship between evangelism and social justice in relation to two interrelated themes.

Firstly, a person who has experienced a new birth and is being transformed by the Holy Spirit will live a life characterised by justice, mercy and truth. However, active engagement in the pursuit of justice, mercy and truth is a means of grace, a way through which God transforms us into the divine image.

Second, evangelism leads to the pursuit of justice, mercy and truth – for this is the fruit of conversion. Evangelism that does not lead to this is defective for it is not nurturing people in transformation. The greatest hinderance to evangelism is that the personal and communal life of Christians is not characterised by justice, mercy and truth; this undermines the truth claims of the gospel. Where the lives of Christians demonstrate justice, mercy and truth they verify the truth claims of the gospel and this becomes a means of evangelism.

Evangelism and the pursuit justice, mercy and truth are integrally related to each other. It is this integral relationship that is the genius of a Methodist approach to evangelism and social transformation.

*David N. Field is the Ecumenical staff officer for Faith and Order and Theological Dialogue for the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, and an Academic Associate of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa. A fuller exploration of the themes above can be read in David’s article [‘Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church: John Wesley’s insights in contemporary context’](#), published in *Holiness: The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge*, Volume I (2015) Issue 2 (Holiness & Mission): pp. 177–198. It is reproduced here with permission of the author.*

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<sup>i</sup> “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley and Others.” In *Works of Wesley* vol.10:854

<sup>ii</sup> James Montgomery, a younger contemporary of Wesley, was another campaigner against slavery. His views are reflected in the hymn [Hail to the Lord's anointed](#) (StF 228).

<sup>iii</sup> *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* 1 Peter 2:17

<sup>iv</sup> John Wesley's *Thoughts Upon Slavery* is available in various printed forms and online e.g. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/wesley/wesley.html>. Also see David N. Field 'John Wesley as a public theologian: the case of *Thoughts Upon Slavery*', *Scriptura* vol.114; and David N. Field 'Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy: theological allusions in John Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery*', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* vol.47 no 1 (2021)