

The Execrable Sum of Villainies

John Wesley's Anti-Slavery Rhetoric

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION	1
WESLEY'S LIFE UP TO 1735.....	1
WESLEY COMES TO AMERICA	3
<i>The Georgia Colony.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>John Wesley's First Encounter with Slavery.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Assessment Back in England.....</i>	<i>7</i>
WESLEY'S <i>THOUGHTS ON SLAVERY</i>.....	8
<i>Slavery is Pervasively Corrupting.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Slavery is Contrary to Natural Law.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Slavery is Contrary to Divine Law.....</i>	<i>11</i>
ADAPTING WESLEY'S RHETORIC TO A MODERN SOCIAL ILL	12
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	15

Introduction

The Wesleyan revival is recognized by historians as one of the most significant developments in the 18th century. It likely spared England from experiencing the horrors of a revolution similar to what occurred in France in the late 1700's. At the forefront of the Wesleyan revival was John Wesley himself. Wesley's untiring devotion to the Gospel of Christ often prompted him to speak prophetically to the great social sins of his time. At the top of the list was slavery, which he forcefully and publicly opposed over the entire course of his ministry. Less than half a century after Wesley's death, slavery was abolished in England (largely due to his influence). What was it about Wesley's position on slavery that had such an impact on his culture? And could his rhetoric be adapted to speak to modern social ills in America?

Biographical Information

Wesley's Life Up to 1735

John Wesley, born in 1703 in Epworth, England, was one of nineteen children belonging to Samuel and Susanna Wesley.¹ England was in a state of general spiritual malaise at the time of Wesley's birth—rationalistic deism exerted considerable influence over the minds and hearts of the upper classes.² As a result, most were suspicious of the notion that a personal God looked upon His creation with intimate care and concern. The populace was largely uninterested in church, and the minority of faithful who did attend

¹ R. G. Tuttle, Jr., "John Wesley," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1266.S

² Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1981), 382.

suffered “long homilies filled with moral platitudes.”³ An abundance of inexpensive alcohol contributed to a downward spiral of morals; the result was a vice-ridden culture that reveled in gambling and crude sports such as cock-fighting.⁴ Such was the milieu of the first half of the 18th century in England.⁵

Wesley’s family, however was remarkably pious during such a dark time. His father was a minister in the Anglican church, and his mother worked tirelessly to instill in Wesley “a sense of vital piety leading to a wholehearted devotion to God.”⁶ Wesley was no doubt formed to a large degree by the religious influence of his parents, but a tragic event early in his life also left a deep imprint. In 1709, the Wesley home burned to the ground, and a young John narrowly escaped being burned to death—in the years to come he would refer to himself as “a brand plucked from burning” because of his brush with a fiery grave.⁷ In all likelihood, it was this childhood experience that contributed to a nagging fear of death that would plague Wesley for many years to come.⁸

He received his education at Charterhouse, a London institution for boys, and later at Christ Church, Oxford. It was there that he received his B.A. and M.A. degrees (in 1724 and 1727, respectively).⁹ Wesley was a serious student, but until 1725 he was undecided about where to focus his life’s work.¹⁰ His mother’s influence, combined with careful readings of devotional classics such as Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Tuttle, 1266.

⁷ Cairns, 382.

⁸ Tuttle, 1266.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

prompted Wesley “to make religion the ‘business of his life.’”¹¹ He was ordained deacon that same year.¹² In 1726, he took a fellowship at Lincoln College as a scholar and tutor, served in his father’s curate beginning in 1727, and was eventually ordained priest in 1728.¹³

When Wesley returned to Oxford, he became the leader of a small group of students his younger brother Charles had organized.¹⁴ This group, called the “Holy Club,” soon gained its members a reputation as “Methodists” for their strict regimen of Bible study, prayer, fasting, and acts of charity.¹⁵ The Holy Club was committed to “a vital realization of social need”—they often cared for the poor (using significant portions of John Wesley’s stipend from Oxford) and made regular visits to prisons.¹⁶ One can detect Wesley’s concern for the social impact of the Gospel in nascent form during his Holy Club days. Surprisingly, despite the group’s outward pursuit of holiness, Wesley would later confess that “he did not at that time understand justification by faith.”¹⁷ He was actually operating under a works-oriented understanding of salvation.

Wesley Comes to America

The Georgia Colony

General James Oglethorpe was granted a Royal Charter in 1732 to establish the new colony of Georgia (named after George II).¹⁸ Oglethorpe’s vision for the colony was

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Warren Thomas Smith, *John Wesley & Slavery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 33.

¹⁴ Tuttle, 1266.

¹⁵ Cairns, 382-383.

¹⁶ Smith, 33.

¹⁷ Tuttle, 1266.

¹⁸ Smith, 36.

to create a place of respite for those who were in debtor's prison in England.¹⁹ As such, the idea of freedom was integral to the fabric of the new colony. Take, for example, the following excerpt from its charter:

All and every person . . . who shall at any time hereafter inhabit or reside within our said province, shall be and are hereby declared to be free, and shall not be subject to or bound to obey any laws, orders, statutes, or constitutions which have been heretofore made, ordered and enacted. . . . All and every the persons which shall happen to be born within the said province, and every of their children and posterity, shall have and enjoy all liberties, franchises and immunities of free denizations [*sic*] and natural born subjects.²⁰

King George actually augmented the charter, forbidding the enslavement of “Negroes” (primarily on economic grounds, since debtors could not afford slaves—but it was forbidden nevertheless).²¹ As a haven of freedom for those who had fallen on hard times, the Georgia colony was also to be free of slaves.

The Georgia colony was also designed to be a base of operations for the evangelization of Indian tribes; but since slavery thrived in the neighboring colony of South Carolina, a concern for preaching the Gospel to the slaves was in view as well.²² This interested John Wesley, who felt that preaching the Gospel to the “heathens” (Indians) in the New World would be a vital component of his personal pursuit of holiness and the salvation of his soul.²³ After corresponding with Oglethorpe and making

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 38.

²³ Ibid.

the proper arrangements, Wesley and his brother Charles boarded a ship and set sea for Georgia on October 14, 1735.²⁴

It was while Wesley was en route to America that he had an important encounter with a group of Moravians who were onboard. Their ship ran into foul weather, and was overtaken by a series of terrible storms. As the storms raged on, Wesley's longstanding fear of death tormented him; but the Moravians kept calm, singing hymns in praise of God as they waited for the weather to break.²⁵ Their brave and faith-filled conduct left a deep impression upon Wesley—hungering for the peace and confidence in God the Moravians exemplified, Wesley began to gravitate toward Moravian tradition and spirituality.²⁶

This was a seminal event in Wesley's faith-pilgrimage, and in future years it would shape his own walk with God in crucial ways. Upon his return to England in 1738, he met Moravian Peter Böhler, who "exhorted him to trust Christ alone for salvation."²⁷ Then, while attending a Moravian meeting in London, Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" during a reading of Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Romans.²⁸ Wesley acted upon Böhler's advice and put his faith in the finished work of Christ alone for salvation from sin.²⁹ Apparently, "nothing in Wesley was left untouched by his newfound faith"—after a brief visit to the Moravian settlement of Herrnhut in

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 39.

²⁶ Tuttle, 1266.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cairns, 383.

²⁹ Ibid.

Germany, he returned to England fervently preaching salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.³⁰

John Wesley's First Encounter with Slavery

John and Charles arrived in the New World in early February, 1736.³¹ Five months thereafter, they took a trip to Charleston, South Carolina; it was during this trip that the Wesleys initially encountered the horrors of slavery firsthand.³² Charles' journal recounts some of the brutal, dehumanizing treatment of the slaves—the Wesleys had either witnessed such treatment themselves or heard about it through others (in some instances, directly from the slave owners).³³ One slave owner described how he would punish slaves by “nailing them up by the ears,” followed by a severe whipping and then having scalding water thrown over them.³⁴ Another eye-witness described to Charles how a female slave had been whipped to the brink of death and, at the first signs of recovery, was whipped again “with equal rigour.”³⁵ Her torture concluded with hot wax poured over her skin.³⁶ This damnable, unspeakable torment was inflicted upon her all because she had over-filled a cup of tea.³⁷

John did not enjoy much success in reaching out to the Indians, but he eagerly took advantage of every opportunity to speak directly with black slaves.³⁸ After a conversation with a female slave named Nanny, Wesley was struck by how she was

³⁰ Tuttle, 1266.

³¹ Smith, 39.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 41.

³⁴ Ibid., 42.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

treated as a beast of burden with no soul and no capacity to reason. Nanny had been to church many times to carry her mistress's children.³⁹ Wesley asked if she had learned anything at church, or if her master had ever taught her anything about Christianity. The answer was no, exposing her owners' failure to recognize her humanity as well as their lack of concern for her spiritual well-being.⁴⁰ Wesley discussed Christianity at length with Nanny, and she hung on his every word.⁴¹

Assessment Back in England

After two "disastrous" years of working with the Indians in Georgia, Wesley returned to England in December, 1737.⁴² Looking back on his experience, he asked, "But what have I learned myself in the meantime?"⁴³ His experience in the Georgia colony, albeit unsuccessful, would be a formative one. His journey across the Atlantic put him in contact with the Moravians, who exerted considerable (if not vital) spiritual influence over Wesley's life. His time in the New World also gave him an important firsthand glimpse of the slave trade, which he would later denounce as "the execrable sum of all villainies [*sic*]."⁴⁴ There can be little doubt that Wesley's time in the Georgia colony played a definitive role in shaping both his view of and his rhetoric concerning slavery.

³⁸ Tuttle, 1266.

³⁹ Smith, 42.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁴² Tuttle, 1266.

⁴³ Smith, 52.

⁴⁴ Percy Livingstone Parker, ed., *The Heart of John Wesley's Journal* (New Canaan, Connecticut: Keats Publishing, 1979), 370.

Wesley's Thoughts on Slavery

Wesley wrote often about slavery in his journal and his letters, but his most important writing on the subject is his *Thoughts on Slavery*, first published in England in 1774 (nearly 30 years after his trip to the Georgia colony).⁴⁵ Wesley's tome was not merely an impassioned diatribe against slavery—in his fervent devotion to the Gospel, he wanted to attack this social ill “root and branch.”⁴⁶ *Thoughts on Slavery* was well-reasoned and thoroughly researched, representing the best of the scholarly method of the 18th century.⁴⁷ Its logic and structure can be reduced to three main points.

Slavery is Pervasively Corrupting

Wesley begins by exploring the origins of the slave trade. In the wake of the eclipse of the Roman Empire, Christianity spread throughout Europe; as a result, slavery had largely fallen out of favor by the mid-fourteenth century.⁴⁸ It was almost extinct until the simultaneous “discovery of America, and of the western and eastern coasts of Africa, gave occasion to the revival of it.”⁴⁹

Wesley then proceeds to paint a pre-slavery portrait of the peoples of the African coasts, who were to become the primary resource of the “execrable villainy.” He lauds their temperance: As “strict Mohometans,” they refrained from drinking “anything stronger than water.”⁵⁰ From all accounts of those who had dealt with the coastal African peoples, they were “sensible, courteous, and the fairest traders,” rarely “troubled with

⁴⁵ Smith, 98.

⁴⁶ Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, vol. II, trans. Denis Inman (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 112.

⁴⁷ Smith, 90.

⁴⁸ John Wesley, “Thoughts on Slavery,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed., vol. XI (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 60.

war,” generally “civil, kind, and obliging to strangers, . . . abounding in good manners toward one another.”⁵¹

With the advent of the slave trade, fraud became the *modus operandi* of Christian Europe. Ship captains who were visiting the African coasts would frequently invite “Negroes to come on board” and then carry them away by force.⁵² When deceit of this sort did not work, slave traders resorted to forcible seizure.⁵³ An even more “compendious way of procuring slaves,” in Wesley’s mind, was to prevail “upon [the Africans] to make war upon each other, and to sell their prisoners.”⁵⁴ Still worse, the Europeans would use their “goods or brandy” to incite the rulers on the African coasts to plunder and sell their own subjects into slavery.⁵⁵

Given Wesley’s idyllic portrayal of the African peoples before the renewal of the slave trade, this points up the *pervasively corrupting influence* of slavery. Peoples who were once civil and neighborly began to fight against and sell one another into slavery, clamoring for European goods. The slave traders themselves abandoned the tenets of Christianity in favor of deceit and theft. Wesley sarcastically remarks, “Thus the Christians preach the Gospel to the Heathens!”⁵⁶ Slavery’s nature is to debauch both the slave owner and the enslaved.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁵¹ Ibid., 63.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 67.

Slavery is Contrary to Natural Law

“Even setting Revelation aside,” writes Wesley, “it cannot be, that either war, or contract, can give any man such a property in another as he has in his sheep and oxen.”⁵⁷ Human beings are distinct from animals, and therefore cannot be owned as such; for Wesley, this rule is ironclad and independent of circumstances. Furthermore, Wesley argues that liberty is the birthright “of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature.”⁵⁸

Given that man is free by nature, slave traders, buyers, and owners alike are “men-stealers,” since they deprive their slaves of the freedom that is inherently theirs.⁵⁹ To drive his point home, Wesley relates the following story:

“Master,” said a slave at Liverpool to the merchant that owned him, “what, if some of my countrymen were to come here, and take away my mistress, and Master Tommy, and Master Billy, and carry them into our country, and make them slaves, how would you like it?” His answer was worthy of a man: “I will never buy a slave more while I live.”

This slave owner saw that he had violated every principle “of justice, mercy, and truth.”⁶⁰ He himself had broken the very principles he expected others to abide by in their dealings with him.

With the breaking of these same principles (which slavery does by nature) comes an awful racism:

⁵⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 72.

Here also the slave-holder fixes his foot . . . [and] the strength of his cause. “. . . It is necessary we should procure slaves; and when we have procured them, it is necessary to use them with severity, considering their stupidity, stubbornness, and wickedness.”⁶¹

Slavery may be initiated by greed, but since it ignores common sense laws of equity and justice, *prejudice* of the worst kind is its inevitable corollary. Indeed, as Wesley has demonstrated, racism becomes the very justification of slavery in the minds of its practitioners. This too flies in the face of the natural human freedom to which Wesley appeals.

Slavery is Contrary to Divine Law

Finally, and most importantly, Wesley grounds his stance against slavery in the One from whom natural and common sense laws ultimately flow. The God who “has mingled of one blood all the nations upon the earth” is a just God.⁶² If He is just, then “there must be a state of retribution.”⁶³ It is love, Wesley writes, that constrains him to point this out to those practitioners of slavery who teeter dangerously on the brink of an outbreak of God’s wrath, and the loss of their own souls.⁶⁴ God’s love for both enslaved and enslaver is the basis of Wesley’s eloquent and agonized appeal for repentance:

What is your heart made of? Do you never feel another’s pain? When you saw the flowing eyes [of the slaves], the heaving breasts, or the bleeding sides and tortured limbs of your fellow-creatures, was [*sic*] you a stone, or a brute? . . . Did not one tear drop from your eye, one sigh escape

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 76.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 77.

your breast? . . . [If so], know it is a call from the God of love.⁶⁵

Wesley closes with an emotional prayer, commending the slaves, “these outcasts of men who are trodden down as dung upon the earth,” to the God of love, who is “loving to every man.”⁶⁶ Thus, the institution of slavery, in Wesley’s mind, is contrary to the attributes of love, mercy, and justice inherent in the nature of God Himself.

Adapting Wesley’s Rhetoric to a Modern Social Ill

Much like the England of Wesley’s time, America has fallen under a spiritual malaise. Much like England in the early to middle 18th century, America has its own troubles with a vice-ridden culture. Slavery has been abolished, but any number of sinful social ills have arisen to take its place of prominence (e.g., a multi-billion dollar pornography industry, racism, family break-up, a host of sexual sins, etc.). However, this author can think of few social ills that transcend abortion in terms of its destructiveness, both to those who are victimized by it and to those who practice it. Sectors of the church have denounced it loudly and fervently, but how would Wesley have spoken to the issue? Surely his concern for the social dimension of the Gospel’s impact would have prompted him to respond in no less a fervent manner than he did to the problem of slavery.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 79.

Using his anti-slavery rubric as a framework, one might speak out against abortion

in the following manner:

1. *Abortion is pervasively corrupting.* Our culture's view of the value of human life has been cheapened over the last half of the 20th century. Not only do doctors now make a living by destroying gestating babies, but some young women who find themselves pregnant have resorted to carrying their babies to term and then tossing them in a toilet or a dumpster. Some in the scholarly community have published what they view as rational justification for such behavior.
2. *Abortion is contrary to natural law.* The same freedom, which was inherent to the slave's humanity, is inherent to a gestating baby's humanity. In much the same way that slave owners adopted racism (black slaves were subhuman and therefore deserving of their treatment) to justify enslaving others, modern society has sought to redefine (or eliminate) a gestating baby's humanity. It is rare to see someone who is pro-choice respond to the question, "Would it have been okay if your mother had aborted you, simply because you were viewed as an inconvenience?" This takes common sense laws of equity and justice and applies them on a personal level. They may respond, "I wasn't fully human then, so it wouldn't have mattered," but nevertheless the truth remains that they would not now exist (and they now must grapple with that fact). Like the slave whose freedom was stolen from them, aborted babies are undeniably robbed of their future lives without any say in the matter.
3. *Abortion is contrary to divine law.* The just and loving God is also the author of life. One might well ask an abortion doctor (after the fashion of Wesley), "What is your heart made of? When you saw the parade of desperate mothers, coldly divesting their wombs of developing babies they viewed as cancers to be removed, did not one tear drop from your eye? Did not one sigh escape your breast? If so, know it is the call from the God of love." When an abortion occurs, a life is incontrovertibly snuffed out. This is murder, which the just and loving God expressly forbids.

Wesley’s tireless advocacy of the slave eventually bore fruit—slavery was abolished in England nearly 40 years after his death.⁶⁷ Likewise, Christians in America must not shy away from speaking out against the social ills of the modern era. The proclamation of what is good and the denouncement of what is clearly “execrable villainy” will have a much better chance of changing opinions if it follows Wesley’s well-reasoned, impassioned, and loving pattern.

⁶⁷ Smith, 119.

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