



The Socio-Political Function of Grace in Wesleyan Theology and Praxis

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Abstract

One of the key theological themes in Wesleyan studies is the concept of grace. The doctrine of grace is foundational to John Wesley's soteriology and socio-political theology. Divine grace comes to play in the creation, and redemption of humankind. God's gracious dealing with sinful humanity produces in the believer the love for God and for other human beings. Consequently, the renewal of the believer does not only affect the believer's inner being but also informs the believer's relationship with other humans and with the environment. In the contemporary world where many Christians privatize their faith and virtually make no impact in the public arena, an exploration of the socio-political role of grace in John Wesley's theology and praxis provides a model which could be followed in making Christianity meaningful and relevant in everyday life. This article used a literature-based research approach to examine how Wesley's experience of divine grace informed his theological views about the fall of humanity, restoration of sinful humanity, and holiness. The paper also examines Wesley's efforts in dealing with such socio-political issues as poverty, slavery and oppression. The main thesis of the paper is that, for the Christian gospel to have both spiritual and socio-political ramifications, Christians must participate actively in the socio-political activities of their societies. The paper, therefore, aims at discouraging the dichotomization between private and social life.

Keywords: *Grace; Fallen Humanity; Love; Wesley; Soteriology*

Introduction

John Wesley was born on June 17 1703 to Rev. Samuel Wesley and Mrs. Susanna Wesley at the Epworth Rectory, England (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013; Boafo, 2014). His religious foundations began at the rectory where his immediate family, especially his mother, facilitated his character formation. At age six he was rescued from fire that burnt the Rectory and consequently forced him and his siblings to live with neighbors. Wesley attended Oxford University in 1720, a time when the institution was characterized by marginal teaching, lack of interest in research, and self-indulgent living (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013; Boafo, 2014). He lived a normal student life, attending lectures, sitting at coffee-houses, reading newspapers,

swimming, riding, and playing tennis. Nonetheless, Wesley took his academics seriously and passed his exams very well. He obtained his bachelor's degree in 1724 and remained in the university to pursue his master's degree which he obtained in 1727. In the same year, Wesley left Oxford to help his father in Wroot, a nearby parish to Epworth (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013; Boafo, 2014). He was ordained in 1728 and was elected fellow of Lincoln College the same year. Methodism began in 1729 after Wesley had returned to Oxford. The famous "Holy Club" was formed; and its members, included John and Charles Wesley (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013; Boafo, 2014). The group was nicknamed "Methodists," because of their methodical habits.

Though Wesley was actively involved in Christian ministry, it was his encounter with some Germans (specifically Moravian missionaries) on his way to Georgia in 1735 that marked the beginning of his search for real spiritual experience (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013). John and Charles Wesley, together with Benjamin Ingham and Charles Delamotte, left London on October 14 1735 for Georgia (America) to propagate the gospel upon the invitation of Colonel Oglethorpe (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013). On their way, they encountered some Moravian missionaries who demonstrated a formidable faith in the face of a deadly storm. The Moravians demonstrated the virtues of humility and meekness by willingly offering themselves to do certain chores that were considered too menial by the English. Wesley's experience with them made him realize his lack of faith and this encouraged him to search for the faith which the Moravians had (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013).

On his return to London on February 1 1738, Wesley decided to abandon his preaching ministry and search for the spiritual experience which he now yearned earnestly for (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013). Later, he encountered another Moravian, Peter Bohler, who encouraged him to keep on preaching until he received the faith he desired. Eventually, Wesley got converted on May 24 1738 at a society in Aldersgate-street where someone was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. Wesley journalled that he felt a strange warmth in his heart and had the assurance that his sins had been forgiven (cf. Aboagye-Mensah, 2013). Immediately after his spiritual experience, he became very much aware of the transforming power of the gospel in human lives and society.

Wesley's conversion experience became a foundation for his theological discourses and ministerial practice. The place of God's grace in the salvation of humankind is a very important subject to Wesley. Prior to Aldersgate, he considered good works (being religious, and not being as bad as other people) as a means to salvation; after his religious experience, he came to terms with the fact that good works are the result of salvation (Aboagye-Mensah, 2013). God gracious saves the sinner and makes the redeemed person an agent of societal transformation. Wesley's concept of grace permeates his theology and praxis (as the paper attempts to demonstrate later).

The Socio-Economic and Religious Contexts of Wesley's Ministry

Wesley's theological formulations did not arise out of a vacuum. To help the reader to appreciate Wesley's theology and praxis, this section examines the background that informed Wesley's theology and ministry. Wesley (cited in Sigsworth, 1982) described the socio-economic situation of his 16th-century as follows: "Our nation stands on the brink of destruction. And why are we thus, but because the cry of wickedness is gone up to heaven? Because we have so exceedingly, abundantly, beyond measure, corrupted our ways before the Lord." Wesley lived in a society with pronounced class distinctions and low moral standards evident in the exploitation of the poor, tax evasion, and accumulation of material wealth through evil means.

The end of the 17th century witnessed more than fifty percent of the English population living below the poverty line (Sigsworth, 1982). Earlier (in the 16th century), the Elizabethan Poor Law had been established to provide financial assistance for the aged, the sick, and the poor, to create employment

opportunities for the unemployed able-bodied and to discourage begging and casual almsgiving (Heitzenrater, 2002). The Poor Law was initially meant for the rural agricultural community and citizens whose annual income was less than 30 pounds. But soon after its implementation, most laborers of the day—including husbandmen, manufacturers (spinners weavers, dyers, shearers), small craftsmen (tinsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors), and manual laborers—fell within this poverty economic bracket and were, therefore, included in the relief program. Consequently, the term “poor” became associated with laborers whose income was only sufficient for their existential needs, and so did not have any savings, land or investment (Heitzenrater, 2002). Eventually, two definitions for “poverty” emerged. The wealthy defined “poverty” in terms of employment status, income level and one’s contribution to national development while the masses defined “poverty” in terms of hunger, vulnerability, and inability to afford health care. A sharp social divide emerged between the poor and the rich such that the relief program, instead of providing assistance to the poor, ended up conceptualizing and classifying poverty (Heitzenrater, 2002). By the 18th century, stigmatization against the poor had made some of them prefer self-help to benefiting from the relief program.

As the economic instability continued, the rich-poor divide became pronounced. Peasant farmers and freeholders mortgaged their land for loans from the rich, and hence became vulnerable and objects of further socio-economic exploitation and abuses by the rich. As a result of poverty, war, migration, famine, unemployment, and urbanization, many people became homeless and the poor continued to suffer as socio-economic structures failed to address their challenges.

In those days, gambling was practiced throughout England as means of making money. The demand for food was high, resulting in food shortages and spikes in prices of foodstuffs (Sigsworth, 1982). The food shortage and high cost of living led to frequent riots. The wealthy bought and hoarded oats to feed their horses which were used for transport. About half of the nation’s wheat went into the breweries to produce liquor. Consequently, while food was expensive, gin was relatively cheap and available. Gin shops spread out throughout the country (with an estimated 17,000 shops in London alone), making it possible for people to get drunk with the little money they had (Sigsworth, 1982). Sexual promiscuity, excessively violent sports, and obscene entertainment in theaters were other moral issues (Sigsworth 1982). Economic hardship resulted in rampant incidence of highway robbery and smuggling in the country’s ports. Mortality rate increased due to lack of healthcare facilities and the use of unsanitary means of treatment. Moreover, education was only available to the upper classes, thereby creating a very high illiteracy rate.

Having outlined the background of Wesley’s ministry, the paper proceeds to consider the theological foundations of his socio-political theology. The issues considered include Wesley’s perspective on anthropology, hamartiology and soteriology.

Wesleyan Anthropology and Hamartiology

Anthropology is the branch of theology concerned with the study of humankind. Wesleyan anthropology falls under three key themes: humanity as God’s gracious creation, humanity as fallen creature and humanity as nascently restored.

Humanity as God’s Gracious Creation

Wesley’s concept of humankind is based on the biblical account of creation, especially as given in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis. The doctrine of *imago Dei* is central to Wesleyan theology. He opines that every human being is God’s creation, dependent upon God and endowed with human faculties (Boafo, 2014). According to Wesley, God’s love moved him to create humankind in his own image as the apex of his six-day labor. God created humankind in his own image to equip

humankind to fulfill a certain task and thus “fulfill their true destiny” (Runyon, 1998, p.13-14). The divine image in humankind enables humans to mirror God to other creatures. Wesley describes the divine image as a mirror, “not only to mirror God in their own lives but to reflect the grace which they received into the world, and thus to mediate the life of God to the rest of creation” (Runyon, 1998, p.13).

Wesley contends for a three-fold definition to the *imago Dei*; namely, the natural image, the political image, and the moral image. The natural image denotes the faculties that define a human being—that is, understanding (or reason), will (or volition), freedom (or liberty) and affections—and make humans capable of relating with God (Boafo, 2014). The political image has to do with leadership and management qualities by which humans govern themselves and other creation, serving as benevolent stewardships of creation (Mpere-Gyekye & Brodie, 2019). The moral image includes virtues and character of holiness, love and righteousness. Wesley also notes that true humanity requires proper relationship with God, with other humans, with lower animals and with oneself (Boafo, 2014). To sum up, Wesleyan anthropology states that human beings were created as bearers of God’s image with the responsibility of taking care of the rest of God’s creation.

Fallen Humanity

The second theme, fallen humanity, deals with how sin entered the human world through Adam’s disobedience of God’s command not to eat the forbidden fruit and the effect that this act had on the universe (Gen. 3:1-21). Wesley refers to the moral aspect of humankind as the context that made it possible for sin to enter the human world. That is, “the moral image is the expression of God’s relation to humanity, a relation that can be corrupted and twisted through the destructive effects of sin” (Kim, 2006, p.47). Wesley maintains that as sin severed the human-divine relationship, human faculties became inevitably incapacitated and morally deprived. Human understanding of God became blur, the human will was seized by wrong tempers, pride, and the conscience became devoid of virtues.

Consequently, humankind became a self-centered/egoistic being involved in exploitation of available resources for selfish gains; the unjust are found always exploiting the poor and denying them of justice (Boafo, 2014; Marquardt, 1992). Human beings became ungrateful and godless beings who love the world and despise God, and thirst for revenge instead of thirsting for righteousness (Boafo, 2014; Marquardt, 1992). Thus, like the Reformers, Wesley subscribes to the concept of total depravity of humankind, meaning the fall affected all human faculties and rendered them incapable of pursuing godliness. This means the fallen human cannot, in and of themselves, do anything to choose, seek, please, love or glorify God and/or merit the salvation he offers. For Wesley, the natural/fallen human has free will, but this free will is exercised in the area of committing sin (Boafo, 2014). He describes the natural human as being asleep because their spiritual senses are not awakened to discern good or evil. Only the natural senses are awake and so the activities of the natural human are based on natural desires. For Wesley, the fall completely eroded the human moral likeness to God.

Nonetheless, Wesley, informed by Eastern theological thoughts, opines that the fall did not completely erase the totality of the divine image in humankind; there is a remnant of God’s image in fallen humanity (Boafo, 2014). The natural human still has understanding, affection, a degree of freedom, and self-governing power. The unredeemed also have creative and social capabilities to relate to others; they have conscience to distinguish between what is morally good and morally evil, and some desire to please God (Boafo, 2014). The remnant of the *imago Dei* in fallen humanity accounts for the natural desire for good and to turn away from evil, even among the heathen who did not have a moral law. However, since they are not in communion with God, such actions are corrupt and not done according to God’s will and purpose (Boafo, 2014).

According to Wesley, fallen humanity could not naturally do any good works on their own. The deeds performed by the natural or unjustified person are unholy and sinful themselves and hence, cannot commend them before God to merit salvation (Boafo, 2014; cf. Mpere-Gyekye & Brodie, 2019). The reason is that since works derive their quality from the nature of the doer, the corrupt nature of the unjustified makes their deeds evil. Therefore, it is not that the doer is made evil because of evil works, but that the works are evil because the one performing them is evil in the sight of God (Marquardt, 1992). Before God any morality, justice, mercy, or truth that might exist outside of the Christian faith is soteriologically worthless (Wesley cited in Marquardt, 1992). Moreover, the natural person is unable to love as God wills because their will and affection are corrupted and they are ignorant of divine things (Marquardt, 1992).

Wesley compares sin with a sickness that affects every aspect of human life by making the human will and passion totally depraved (Boafo, 2014; Mpere-Gyekye & Brodie, 2019). Given this understanding, Wesley considers righteousness not only in the sense of imputation but also in the sense of curing the sin disease. The damage caused by the fall is irreparable without God's gracious intervention because the fallen/natural person is helpless and needs divine grace to assist them toward the road to salvation. The totally depraved state is not the final state of humankind; God's provision through salvation is available to deal with consequences of sin. Among other things, salvation restores the political image of humanity (Mpere-Gyekye & Brodie, 2019). The Wesleyan perspective on salvation is described in three divine acts of grace, namely; preventive grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace. Each of these aspects of grace are considered below.

Prevenient Grace

Based on the helplessness of the natural person, Wesley argues that every aspect of the process of restoring humanity is dependent on God's grace, though with human appropriation (Boafo, 2014; Mpere-Gyekye & Brodie, 2019). The process begins with what he refers to as "Prevenient grace", grace that prevents (comes before) and makes possible human response to God's invitation for salvation (Boafo, 2014; Mpere-Gyekye & Brodie, 2019). It is the work of the Holy Spirit that lives in the hearts of people from their conception to conversion. Prevenient grace is that grace which God universally bestows to enlighten the conscience and make any knowledge of God possible. This aspect of God's grace is what enables the fallen person to do good works before justification. The 1745 Conference of the Methodist Movement used the account of Cornelius' conversion to illustrate this point: "The works of Cornelius before he was justified were not 'splendid sins,' nor were they achieved without the grace of Christ" (Marquardt, 1992, p.92). In the case of Cornelius, he had a bit of Christian virtue in him before his justification. He performed "good" works before he was justified. Yet, such "good" works could not commend him before God. Thus, the only way by which one's work may be considered good is to be, first of all, justified. Without being saved no work can be considered "good" in the strict sense of the word.

Prevenient grace offers a partial restoration of the polluted human faculties. The partial restoration enables the natural person to first come to acknowledge divine things and then, to discern what is good from what is evil (Boafo, 2014). Thus, the prevenient grace awakens the conscience of the natural person to be sensitive to morally good and evil deeds. It makes one conscious of the need for salvation, and enables them to respond to God's grace without God overpowering or coercing them. This initial divine restorative activity is universally available, yet resistible. God's grace is, therefore, resistible according to Wesleyan theology as opposed to the irresistible nature of grace in Calvinism (Boafo, 2014). This fact applies to Wesley's socio-political ethics where he states that God's graciously invites all people, regardless of race, social status, economic class, or gender to accept his salvation. Based on preventive grace, Wesley rules out any dichotomy between what is secular and what is religious forms of achieving God's purpose. Finally, the doctrine of preventive grace makes the renewal of humanity and the necessity to work non-negotiable presuppositions in Wesleyan soteriology (Boafo, 2014). That is, for

Wesley, the renewal of humanity must necessarily produce good deeds. Therefore, the foundation of societal transformation is the renewal of the people in the society. Given the value that Wesley places on the renewal of humanity, the next section examines the concept of renewing grace.

Renewing Grace

According to Wesley, prevenient grace brings repentance and with additional grace, it leads to justification and sanctification (Boafo, 2014). Thus, salvation involves two phases, namely, justification—that is, the pardon of the believer’s sins, and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to him/her— and sanctification—that is, the new birth which involves the Holy Spirit launching the process of imparted righteousness. The grace that effects justification is justifying grace and that involved in sanctification is renewing/sanctifying grace. The justification of a person is evidenced in inner holiness in one’s relationship with God and outward holiness in one’s relationship with other humans and with the environment. The inner and outward holiness constitute God’s act of sanctifying the believer. Sanctification is the renewal of human fallen nature from the time a person is justified till death. It is God’s gracious act made possible through renewal/sanctifying grace which a person receives through faith in Jesus Christ, whose blood of atonement cleanses one from all sin, and whose Spirit empowers the believer to live a renewed life. The renewal through renewing grace brings is both personal and social. Thus, for Wesley salvation not only restores the divine-human relationship but also establishes the right human-human and human-environment relationships. The next section considers this issue.

The Renewal of the Individual (Personal Holiness)

Wesley’s teaching about holiness must be interpreted in the context of the moral decline of the 17th-century British society. The Holy Club was formed at Oxford as a renewal group to restore Christian spirituality and holiness to the society. The early Methodists identified true Christianity with practical holy living. For Wesley, holiness of life was, “the aim of his life, the organizing center of his thought, the spring of all action, his one abiding project” (Jennings, 1990, p.140). Wesley’s social ethics has two key aims; namely, renewal of the individual and the renewal of the society corresponding (respectively) to personal holiness and social holiness. Personal holiness/sanctification involves “total commitment to God, singleness of intention, centering one’s life completely on God”, includes “believing in, trusting, worshipping, initiating, and obeying God” and consists of “constant reliance on God’s grace and using the gifts God gives to become what he intends us to be” (Yrigoyen, 1996, p.25). From the Wesleyan perspective, salvation is first an individual affair and then a communal affair when saved individuals are considered together as one body. Thus, a change in a society must start with a change in the individual citizens.

Wesley preached the law to make people aware of their lostness in sin before preaching the gospel to invite them to God’s love. It is important to balance these two dimensions of the gospel—sin and God’s wrath upon the sinner on the one hand, and God’s love on the other hand—whenever one preaches. Wesley’s teachings about personal transformation caused many people to abandon their evil ways to follow Christ. He describes the impact of his ministry on the individual in these words: “The drunkard commenced sober and moderate; the whoremonger abstained from adultery and fornication; the unjust from oppression and wrong. He that had been accustomed to curse and swear from many years, now swore no more” (Marquardt, 1992, p.120). In addition, his ministry turned the lazy into an industrious person, the miser learned to give to the poor, and the evil doer stopped doing evil (Marquardt, 1992). Thus, consequent to his preaching, people became receptive to the gospel and reconciled with God so that they were not more alienated from him. Clearly, his ministry was enough to deal with alcoholism, prostitution, fornication, adultery, oppression, exploitation, and idolatry that prevailed in his society. In short, Wesley’s preaching ministry yielded positive work ethics, material ethics and a holistic transformation of his audience.

Wesley's doctrine of sanctification encouraged people to pursue a new ethic that springs up from one's love for God and for neighbor (Marquardt, 1992). This new ethic was an ethic of responsibility and solidarity that "viewed social obligations and involvements primarily from the perspective of individuals, their destiny, and their tasks, although from the very first it struggled against the alternative of 'change and transformation of the individual or creation of new social conditions, diaconal compassion, loving activity, and caritas, or engagement for social justice'" (Marquardt, 1992, p.121). The new ethic emphasized love for neighbor based on the love of God, stewardship and human responsibility, sharing of resources with others, interdependence, and interconnectedness. With this in mind, people's actions were informed by the effect of these actions on the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the other people in the community. The neighborly love served as an effective antidote to the evils of Wesley's society, and reduced human miseries and vices. The spiritual awakening that followed Wesley's preaching and the effects of such awakening on the society firmly established that transformation of the individual is bound to affect the society positively. The next section examines the social dimension of Wesley's soteriology.

The Renewal of Society (Social Holiness)

From Wesley's soteriological perspective, no one who is truly transformed inwardly will fail to affect the society positively. The following quote by Outler (cited in Bofo, 2014, p.82) about Wesley's evangelistic ministry alludes to the social dimension of Christian transformative encounter with Christ: "Evangelism must issue in social effects or else its fruits will fade and wither. Christian proclamation must take on visible form and the Christian community must be committed to social reform, or else it will stultify the Lord's Prayer that God's righteous will shall be done on earth." Wesley's evangelistic campaigns yielded the formation of societies and bands which not only fellowshiped together, sharing their resources but also influenced the wider Christian community and the society. As people turned from their evil deeds, they affected their societies positively.

As noted earlier, social holiness has to do with the believer's relationship with other human beings and with the environment. Social holiness promotes justice, equity, and fairness within the social structures and government institutions. Wesley describes social holiness with the triad of "justice, mercy and truth." Acts such as "envy, hasty judgment, pride, anger, injustice, greed, quarreling, intemperance, and neglecting other people's need" suppress social holiness but such acts as "patience, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, justice, self-denial, sacrifice, and desiring the best for [one's] neighbors" promote it (Yrigoyen, 1996, p.25). To conclude, the renewal of the individual yields changes in personal attitudes and behavior patterns while social transformation improves social relations, and yields better socio-political and economic structures.

The Love Factor

Wesley's political actions are based on love for God and for neighbor. This love is rooted in God's gracious dealings with humankind. Considering the religion of love as the religion established by Christ, Wesley made "love" a key theme in his theological discourses. Every deed that is considered as good must be rooted in love. No deed can be good apart from love. Good deeds that are done before one receives the love of God in their hearts have but only provisional and relative value (Marquardt, 1992). Citing 1 Corinthians 13, Wesley maintains that the outward piety, works of penitence and good deeds that one may be enabled to do through the prevenient grace do not profit the doer because they are not done out of love for God and neighbor (Marquardt, 1992, 103). Thus, Wesley makes a distinction between outward piety which has provisional value and good deeds that come after one is renewed inwardly by the grace of God, and it is done out of love. One may conclude that an act can be described as good only when it is prompted and shaped by love.

Before his conversion, Wesley demonstrated legalistic piety; his conversion experience led him to acknowledge that true piety is motivated by one love for God and neighbor rather than duty to obey the law (Marquardt, 1992). One's experience of God's unlimited love is conditioned on faith, which serves as "the sense organ for the love of God" (Marquardt, 1992, p.104). Thus, faith and love work hand in hand and so cannot be separated. The believer, having experienced God's unlimited love toward him/her, is encouraged to act out of love. The believer's gratitude toward God for graciously justifying him/her through love is manifested in their unselfish goodness toward all people. Wesley maintains that one's relationship with God on the basis of love must produce an infinite love for all humanity, even those who hate the believer. Therefore, love must transcend national, racial, religious, social and ethnic barriers. Just as God's love is indivisible and directed toward all people, so the believer's love should have no bounds. To sum up, God's love toward the believer radically affects the believer's attitude in such a way that the believer's new life of love permeates the totality of their affections, will and intellect, informing their interpersonal relationships, influencing their priorities in life and ethical decisions, and conforming their worldview to Christ's.

So far the paper has considered key foundations of Wesley's soteriology. In the following section, the paper examines some socio-political activities that Wesley undertook based on his love for God and humanity which was rooted in God's gracious act toward him.

Wesley's Political Actions Informed by the Concept of Grace

This section considers how grace informed Wesley's actions in the socio-political arena. Issues considered include Wesley's solidarity with the poor and his fight against oppression.

Solidarity with the Poor

Wesley solidarized with the poor throughout his ministry, considering works among the poor as a necessary response to the grace and love he had received from God (Bhagwan, 2013). He visited the sick and the underprivileged and encouraged his colleagues to do same. His concern for the poor, like his passion for holiness, preceded his conversion experience. In his days at Oxford, there was a time that a poor girl sought financial assistance from him but he could not help because he had bought pictures for his rooms and had virtually nothing to offer. Tyerman (cited in Boafo, 2014) reports that Wesley sold some of his pictures to assist the girl; the Holy Club had already supported financially. While lecturing at Oxford, Wesley wrote to his father about the provision his group was making for the needy: "The poor at the Castle have still the gospel preached to them, and some of their temporal wants supplied, our little fund rather increasing than diminishing" (Boafo, 2014, p.92). Wesley, rather than being an arm-chair social reformer, visited various societies to have first-hand information about the circumstances of the needy. His solidarity with the poor could best be described as life with the poor rather than simply service for the poor. The Methodists showed no contempt in helping the poor.

Wesley encouraged the Methodists to carry their relief items to the poor and not distribute them by proxy. He argued that the word "visit" literally means "to look upon" and this can only be achieved when the visitor is present with the host (Boafo, 2014, p.93). Therefore, to send relief items to the poor without being physically present is not visiting at all. He considered the act of distributing relief items as opportunity to share the gospel with the needy. He insisted that the poor must be at the center of the gospel and that Christian discipleship requires one to identify with the poor.

Wesley encouraged his people to consider the poor as equal in status to any other person because they are God's image bearers regardless of their circumstance (Boafo, 2014). He therefore cautioned his people to refrain from charitable deeds that end up mocking the poor. Charitable deeds must not only promote temporal happiness but must help the beneficiary to focus on heavenly treasures, and to acquire

and maintain the hope of eternal glory. Again, charity must be based on the principle of mutual respect and esteem. Wesley encouraged his people to encourage and comfort to the poor, and not speak to them harshly (Boafo, 2014). This is rooted in the equality of human beings and the need for upholding human dignity.

The Methodist class system introduced a sociological small group that dealt with the social needs of the poor by promoting fellowship. The poor were facing social exclusion and were, consequently psychologically burdened. Most of them were abandoned by family members and so lacked fellowship which every human desires. One can imagine how devastating this social exclusion would be in Africa where people's existence is inextricably interwoven with the existence of others. The class system addressed the social needs of the marginalized by establishing a new sense of family and common kingship for everyone, especially the poor as everybody was treated equally in the class system. The class tickets that were issued to the members gave members (including the poor) a sense of belonging, hence addressing their psychological needs. The ticket had the code of conduct for Methodists written on it which eventually raised the self-esteem of the poor and earned them respect from others by serving a symbol of their commitment to God and his course. The class meetings and the bands became "the family, the small-scale, face-to-face, communal association caring for the needs of its members" (Boafo, 2014, p.95). Wesley's solidarity with the marginalized challenged class distinctions that characterized the English society of his day. He taught the populace that religion must start from the poor, despised, marginalized, vulnerable, oppressed and voiceless. In conclusion, Wesley's ministry to the poor dealt with their social, economic, health, psychological needs.

Wesley, Slavery and Human Rights

Slave trade between Africa and Europe started between late 15th century and early 16th century when Portuguese merchant visited West Africa and transported blacks to America. In the mid-16th century, England joined the slave trade and soon became the highest contributor to the American slave market. English national interest in slave trade grew higher as royal privileges, parliamentary laws, international agreements and most importantly, the England's acquisition of the *Asiento* contract to supply Spain's American colonies with four thousand and eight hundred (4,800) slaves every year favored the country's participation in the trade (Marquardt, 1992). The national and international benefits that England had from the trade made it difficult to accept any proposal for its abolition.

In the 18th century, slavery was arguably the practice with the gravest injustice and inhumanity and the most difficult to deal with. The English economy dependent so much on the services of laborers who were mainly transported from Africa. Wesley witnessed how every shipload from Africa had Africans brutalized and robbed of their fundamental human rights (Marquardt, 1992). Slave masters oppressed their kidnapped victim, treated them as sub-human and being denied basic human dignity. Both the slave and their offspring became the property of the slave owner. The evil multiplied as the ruling authority, slave merchants, slave owners and the general public turned a blind eye to the brutalities associated with slavery (Marquardt, 1992). The turning of a blind eye to the cruelties associated with the slave trade was obviously due to the benefits that the ruling class obtained from the trade. Thus, slavery was a "deep-rooted evil, not because there were many slaves in England, although thousands were auctioned and put to work on estates there, but because huge sums were being made by snatching Africans from their homes and shipping them" (Cameron, 1961, p.52). Wesley approach to slavery was first to humanize it and then later abolish it.

At the time that Wesley started working in Georgia-America in 1736 there were no black slaves in the colony because the administration of that colony had abolished it (Marquardt 1992). However, his visit to California and the literature he read about the slave trade gave him detailed insight into its associated evils. His initial reactions included "a form of mild protest against certain wretched conditions,

approval of colony administration's refusal to admit slaves, and a pastoral concern for individual blacks" (Marquardt, 1992, p.71). He spoke individually with black slaves he met in South California and assured them of God's love for them and taught them key foundations of the Christian life. Wesley later added literacy to his care for the blacks. His evangelistic activities and pastoral care made no distinction between whites and blacks, free and slave; he won people from both categories to Christ. Converted slaves were baptized and given the Lord's Supper together with converted whites. Slaves and their owners attended the same class meeting and participated equally in worship services, thereby emancipating blacks in the religious and ecclesiastical spheres. This practice gave the blacks and slaves a sense of belonging within God's household.

Based on his own experiences, observation, and lessons learnt from travel narratives about the geography, culture, religion, economy and political structures of Africans, he condemned slavery as inherently unjust and immoral. He refuted widespread prejudices about African people, their way of life, and character, arguing that pre-colonial Africa was a society of justice, peace, prosperity, equity and reverence for God (Marquardt, 1992; Field, 2015). In response to the widespread belief (at that time) that Africans were not authentic human beings, Wesley argued that a person's worth does not consist in color or race but in the individual soul created by God to live in an eternal relationship with its Maker (Marquardt, 1992). Thus, for Wesley, one's relationship with God determines the person's worth. He argued for the equality of all humanity, stating that both blacks and whites possess this soul.

Wesley considered slavery as contradictory to the freedom God has given humanity to be exercised within his sovereign will. He questioned legitimacy of having commercial gain, capital profits and economic progress through inhumane trade. He wrote: "Better no trade, than trade procured by villainy. It is far better to have no wealth than to gain wealth at the expense of virtue. Better is honest poverty, than all the riches bought by tears, and sweat, and blood, of our fellow-creatures" (Wesley cited in Marquardt, 1992, p.74). Therefore, for Wesley, one's commercial activities should not in any way dehumanize another person. Gaining from such means is unacceptable to God.

Wesley's argument against slavery-related injustices derives from the concepts of natural law and natural liberty. He defines liberty in religious and civil terms. Religious liberty means that freedom to belong to any religious tradition and to worship God as guided by one's conscience (Barry, 2003). He pointed out that this liberty is God-given and should not be taken from anyone (Barry, 2003). Civil liberty has to do with the freedom to enjoy life and fortunes, and to use one's own property legally according to one's own desire without any interferences (Boafo, 2014). He argued that just as the English enjoyed their fundamental freedoms without any encroachment by the King so should they allow the blacks in England and the colonies to enjoy these natural freedoms. He stated: "It is impossible that it should ever be necessary for any reasonable creature to violate all the laws of justice, mercy and truth. No circumstances can make it necessary for a man to burst in sunder all the ties of humanity" (Wesley, 2007, p.72). The first Methodist conference in the United States in 1780 declared its stance against slavery as it contradicts God's laws, natural law, human laws, and militates the progress of the society (Marquardt, 1992). This was the first time in human history that an anti-slavery movement was introduced in church and society.

Lessons for Contemporary Christians

Wesley's socio-political theology and praxis (outlined above) has lessons for contemporary Christians. First of all, Christianity is a public religion. Wesley demonstrated that one's personal transformation must lead to the transformation of the society. In other words, Christian holiness must have a social effect. In the era of privatization of the Christian faith by many professing Christians, there is the need to emphasize the social dimension of the Christian faith. This will serve as an antidote to the dichotomization between what is "secular" and what is "religious." There are many Christians who make no attempt to confront the public sphere with their faith because of the assumption that Christianity is the

religion of the heart. The fact is that the transformation of the heart that comes by grace must affect the entire body such that the believer is equipped and motivated to change the society. Contemporary Christians are, therefore, urged to confront the socio-political sphere with their faith.

Secondly, salvation is based on grace, not on works (Eph. 2:8-9). Wesley identifies prevenient grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace as the three-fold grace involved in salvation. Salvation is, therefore, totally God's activity without human contribution to it. It is based only on the atoning sacrifice; no deeds are required for salvation. Yet, one has to express faith in Christ before receiving this gift. Since salvation is a gracious gift from God, the saved must not consider themselves as worthy of their salvation. The saved did not merit salvation; they received it by grace. They should not look down upon the unsaved but strive to win them for Christ. Again, since good works do not commend the sinner before God, the church must guard against work-based salvation theology. There are a lot of street evangelists in various African societies whose messages put "works" between the sinner and Christ. They teach holiness to those who are unable to live a virtuous life and ultimately make sinners further alienated from Christ. Churches that demand Sabbath observance and the abstinence from particular foods, among other things, as requirements for salvation fall are to note that these things are not the basis of salvation.

Thirdly, the church should be sensitive to the needs of her members. Like, the class system that provided socio-economic security for the early Methodists, the contemporary church must also provide solutions to the problems facing believers. Christians must exercise mercy and love for others in tangible ways; that is, they must feed the hungry, comfort the mourning, and visit the sick. The economic challenges of members can be addressed through sharing of resources, human resource development, and provision of health care and education facilities to members, among others. Church welfare schemes must be geared toward reducing the plight of the poor. Granted this understanding, there is the need to abolish the No-Contribution-No-Chop welfare principle that is found in many of today's churches. This system involves regular contributions by registered members of the welfare system. The amount paid is the same regardless of one's socio-economic status. One is exempted from the welfare benefit if he/she is not a contributor to the schemes, hence the name No-Contribution-No-Chop.¹ Based on Wesley's theology, the wealthy are expected to use their wealth to cater for the needs of the needy. Therefore, while it is important that everyone capable of contributing to the scheme does so, it is more Christian to let members contribute according to their strength. Again, those who genuinely lack the means of contributing to the scheme should be exempted from the compulsory contribution policy. In short, church welfare policies should aim at gathering resources to address the needs of the needy.

Finally, the church (as an institution) must use her prophetic voice to address public concerns. The church is a prophetic institution and must speak with a prophetic tone, a tone that rebukes sinners and calls them to repentance, no matter the person involved (Kudadjie & Aboagye-Mensah, 1992, p.41). The prophetic roles of the church relates to her response to socio-political, economic and religious issues. Socio-economic injustice, diseases, poor sanitation, lack of social amenities, exploitation, oppression, marginalization, poverty, and gender imbalance are some of the key issues common in many African societies which the church can address using her prophetic voice. There are a number of people who have no one to speak on their behalf. The church must speak for the voiceless and the marginalized and speak against societal structures that promote socio-economic injustice and inequality. Whenever the government does something wrong the church must be bold to voice it out. In doing, this however, the church must be fair and not biased.

¹ The word "chop" which means to cut is used in the Ghanaian parlance to mean "eat."

Conclusion

The paper has highlighted how Wesley's religious experience motivated his engagement with issues of public concern. Wesley's public engagement with his faith was informed by his experience of God's gracious mercies by which he justifies the ungodly who expresses faith in Christ. Generally speaking, the manifestation of divine grace in one's life produces (in the believer) the love for God and for neighbor. The former comes to play in one's vertical relationship with God and the latter informs one's relationship with other humans and with the environment. The paper has shown that anyone who has experienced God's renewing grace must work toward the renewal of the society, dealing with such issues as injustice, exploitation, oppression, and discrimination, among others. The paper ended with lessons for contemporary Christians. It was noted that work-based salvation theology has no place in Wesley's view. Salvation is totally based on God's grace. The privatization of one's faith was found to be unsound and so Christians were encouraged to confront the public arena with the faith they profess. Christians were also encouraged to address the welfare needs of others and speak for the voiceless. Wesley's model presented in the paper may be developed further and promoted to make the Christianity more relevant in the socio-political affairs of the human society.

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