Reformation and Perfection:  
the Social Gospel of Bishop Peck

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Methodism and the Social Gospel

In Methodism the relationship between social reformation and perfection has been of enduring interest. From the earliest years of Wesley's ministry among the people called Methodists there existed the consciousness of a special mission which was delineated thus: "To reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land." The significance of the idea of reform in church and nation, the definition of "scriptural holiness," and the connection between social reform and perfection, are problems demanding analysis.

In the theology of John Wesley, we clearly recognize the linkage between Christian perfection and social reform in his concept of Christian love. The people called Methodists were educated in a social gospel through the sermons and notes of Wesley as successive generations of Methodist preachers passed on the heritage. The ideas of social salvation and transformation were present in early Methodism, both implicitly and explicitly.

This dynamic message spilled over into nineteenth century America, informing and shaping the anti-slavery crusade and other struggles for human rights. The concern for social reform was surely broader than Methodism as the work of Finney, Theodore Weld, and Oberlin suggest. Even here one recognizes a profound wrestling with the question of reform and perfection.

It is particularly instructive to observe the widespread yearnings for social change, progress, and perfection in the middle years of the

3. See Donald W. Dayton, Discovering An Evangelical Heritage (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), for an important study of anti-slavery forces and efforts toward female equality and commitments to the poor, which are illustrations of the union of reform and perfection. Timothy L. Smith's Revivalism and Social Reform (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957) is the older, thoroughly documented explication of this position.
century. The quest for a Christian America was pressed by many persons, as current studies are demonstrating.

In the context of American Methodism in the post-bellum years, the concepts of reform and perfection took on a somewhat altered significance as the intellectual and social climate of the era was influenced by a complex set of new ideas. These new concepts were grounded in and spawned by emerging social philosophies which were optimistic, romantic and idealistic. They were given impetus in a reflective liberal interpretation of the significance of the victory for human freedom and dignity which the Civil War had bought at the price of infinite misery. Even that holocaust of blood could be romanticized as men could both lament the cost of the conflict and yet glory in the magnanimity of those who had given themselves for a cause worthy of the angels.

The evidence that familiar ideas such as reform and perfection were reinterpreted in light of new ideas in natural science, psychology, and sociology, has been adequately delineated. Methodism was certainly shaped by these ideas. The distinctive Methodist contribution to social reform and perfection was brought to and shared in the religious movement which became known as the Social Gospel.

At issue in the discussion of American Methodism’s contribution to the Social Gospel are several important questions. What is the relationship between personal and social salvation? What bridge unites individual and social perfection? The task of tracing the intellectual catalysts which advanced the transvaluation of the concept of sanctification in American Methodism needs to be accomplished. For example, did evolutionary views of man and society contribute to this

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5. For example, see my "Slavery, Civil Disobedience, and Gilbert Haven," A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review (Fall, 1975), 202-21, an abridged sermon of Haven preached on the occasion of Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency in 1860, with an introduction.


reinterpretation? What about the sense of manifest destiny? What did the Civil War contribute to this extension of the concepts? Or, millenialism?

It is the essential thesis of this paper that a study of the thought of Jesse T. Peck, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1872-1883, and a zealous spokesman for a number of social causes within Methodism, provides us with important clues toward answering some of these complex questions. Peck's writings and work provide a major case study in the linkage of early and later Methodist concepts of social reformation. Analysis of Peck's two major literary works and some secondary writings gives evidence of a deep interest in the relationship between reformation and perfection. Our study gives evidence of a significant shift of emphasis in Peck's interpretation of the relationship between the concepts. Less evident are the catalysts which brought about the transvaluation, although there are some suggestive inferences to be drawn from Peck's works. In making meaningful our effort, we must understand the way in which Peck used the concepts of reform and perfection.

Bishop Peck's thought becomes an expansion and a modification of the Wesleyan union of personal and social sanctification. His interpretation represents a movement toward the Social Gospel accompanied by a strenuous fidelity to the "social gospel" espoused by his religious heritage. Without that Wesleyan backdrop, firmly grounded in Scripture, the Social Gospel in the Methodist context lacks consistency and durability. On the negative side, Peck's ideas are a partial distortion of the Wesleyan "social gospel" by their synthesis of theological and cultural perspectives.


11. He took a prominent role among the anti-slavery forces of the Methodist General Conference of 1844. His liberalism was imperfect, being marred by his approval of racial segregation in the church. He argues that it seemed to be God's providence that white churches have white pastors, and black churches, black pastors. See Zion's Herald (Feb. 20, 1879), cited by William B. Gravely, Gilbert Haven: Methodist Abolitionist (New York: Abingdon Press, 1973), 246-47. Peck also was president of Dickinson College, a founder of Syracuse University and chairman of the Methodist Ecumenical Conference in London in the year 1881. He was elected bishop in 1872, carried into office on the flood tide of the holiness revival in the church after the Civil War. So suggests Timothy L. Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 134, 233. Peck is conspicuously absent from the discussions in the four-volume Methodism and Society (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960-62).

Gospel was a form of millenial thought; the potential perfectibility of human nature; the moral demand that the churches gain control over social forces and evils; and, that moral force be directed against these evils.13

The writings of Peck antedate those of Rauschenbusch by nearly forty years. Analysis of his writings gives strong support to the claim that he anticipated the "essentials" of the Social Gospel in each instance. His insistent concern with reform and perfection was joined to a view of the powerful movement of history toward the eschaton. Certainly his understanding of human perfectibility was shaped in the context of a Methodist theology, but in his analysis of national life Peck linked perfection with reform and shaped a social philosophy in which perfection and reform are applied to society as well as to individuals. In other words, he asserts that society or the nation is being regenerated, perfected, reformed. Social sanctification continues in the life of the nation and presages millenial glory.14

Perfection and Reform

In Jesse Peck's writings there is subtle but significant change in the expression of the distinctive Methodist task. Wesley emphasized reform and holiness in conjunction: "To reform the nation, ... and to spread scriptural holiness. ..." Peck's writings stress a causal relationship between perfection and reformation. He makes the claim that "the perfection of Christian character is the central idea of the gospel." Holiness is the center of the "remedial system," God's work of redemption. And what about reform? Bishop Peck first discusses reform in connection with an appeal to history, or more specifically, to the role of holy men and churches in God's plan.

"What is the law of religious development and power as an agent of reform? Or, in other words, regarding Christianity as the one grand agent, ordained by the Almighty to reform the world, in what proportion has it been successful?" (C/C, 22)

The answer of Peck is that wherever a Christian approximates the standard of Christian perfection, there will be a life of power which will be personally and socially reforming. Whenever the church experiences

Christian simplicity it becomes, like the early church, "decisive in the reformation of individual character and public manners." Of the Protestant reformers, Peck claimed that "just in proportion to their purity they became actual and successful reformers." (CIC, 24-26)

However, we must ask here what Peck really means by reformation? Is the word simply synonymous with salvation and, ultimately, Christian perfection? Or does he mean the amelioration and improvement of society? The answer to these questions in the Central Idea seems to turn upon Peck's processive view of the Christian scheme of redemption. Peck is concerned that the church shall check corruption and challenge evil institutions. All Christian men may do something to make the world better (CIC, 184). But the perfected, pure church will possess the power to carry out the mission of reform to its ultimate end. "We are meant for the world's 'leaven', and ought, long ere this, to have permeated the moral mass," Peck announced. The church has accomplished much, but with more of the spirit of holiness, it might have altered the social system. The church

has gone so far and achieved so much, because she had so much of the power of 'righteousness and true holiness'. She has gone no further and done no more because she has had no more. With a little more of the moral force of true goodness, she might have moved many of her number forward to full salvation ... She has wanted ... power to infuse herself as an invisible, celestial animus into the civil and social systems of the world and guide them in a career of greatness and blessing which is denied them because of their fearful impurities. (CIC, 190-91).

It appears evident that Peck sees the possibility of gradual reform, partial change, as the task of the church. Yet, beyond this, he envisions the purified, empowered church so permeating society that social reform shall not be partial but complete. Society may be perfected, it will be perfected by the power of the holy church. When the church is adorned with holiness, "The sins of the nations will call out in shame for some place of concealment. ... Sweet and gracious attractions will draw all men to her, and she shall hail a world returning to the arms of maternal love." (CIC, 186. See 18, 38, 40, 183-92, 336-37, 345-46, 389). Reformation, in Peck's logic, points toward perfection not only for individuals and the church, but also for the world.15 That perfection includes healing of the souls of men and human societies and even the earth. Peck's work concludes with the verse which the ancient prophet

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15. However, Peck is not a universalist. See CIC, 31f. Much of the triumphalist rhetoric of writers during this period includes an implicit universalism, but these persons disavow this idea. Such prominent Methodists of this era as Gilbert Haven, Randolph Foster of Drew Seminary, Daniel Steele of Boston University, and others include this in their writings. Foster, Christian Purity or the Heritage of Faith (New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1869); Haven, National Sermons. (Boston: Lee and Shepherd, 1869); Steele, A Substitute for Holiness or Antinomianism Revived, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The Christian Witness Co., 1887), and The Gospel of the Comforter (Chicago: The Christian Witness Co., 1917).
spoke. The process of perfection will encompass the earth for "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Habakkuk 2:14).

Bishop Peck has linked the doctrine of Christian perfection and social sanctification through a concept of process/progress. It is a process which leads to millenial perfection and glory. Peck does not declare it to be inevitable but his rhetoric takes on the note of certainty. This may be the link which the historian seeks, the bridge from personal to social perfection. The concept of a society being reformed and perfected is united with the church being reformed and perfected. As the church goes, so goes the society of man. Social sanctification is realized as the church is empowered and sanctified.

Bishop Peck has extended the doctrine of perfection from individual to church to society. Sanctification is applicable and pertinent to individuals and societies. But what makes this extension possible? What are the catalysts which in Peck's analysis help bring about this application of sanctification to the social context. An explicit theoretical linkage is discoverable, and several concepts are implicit in his thinking, which are more readily perceived in his History but are also visible in Central Idea.

The first concept in Peck's extension of personal to social sanctification may be found in his amplification of the biblical idea of the Christian church as the world's light. Always concerned about the individual Christian's responsibility, he gives special attention to the corporate church as light to the world. His writings abound with comments like this:

The mission and work of the church demand purity of heart and life. . . . This mission is a mission of light. To a fearful extent even yet, "darkness covers the earth and gross darkness the people". . . . The rays of divine light must penetrate this moral gloom, and through the church . . . . God shines upon the world. To illuminate the dark places, and dark hearts of earth, is her first grand commission. In her collective character God speaks to her . . . : "Let your light so shine before men. . . ."

And there is light for the world in holiness . . . . With its own strength and intensity, it will reveal with fearful distinctness, the evils which were before unknown, show the obstructions to the march of the Redeemers kingdom. . . .

. . . Let no one be deceived. The world is dark at this moment, because the church is impure. (CIC, 183-86, 345 ff; emphasis mine).

The light illumines and purifies, challenges and condemns. It cuts across injustice in social systems and institutions and calls for truth and light (CIC, 185, 336, 345: History, 694, 573, 562, 323). Peck recurrently equates holiness and light in his analysis. A holy church will shine as a light over the world. He sometimes becomes triumphalist:

And we have seen, also, that American Christianity was growing to power under at least two new conditions: first, that it was master here, and not subordinate,
—umpire, and not convict; that, instead of asking leave of the civil power to exist, it would decide rather what else but itself should exist here. Slowly . . . Christian right, Christian justice . . . claimed the right to denounce and put down every iniquity known to man . . . . Simple and more simple every day became the great truth, that . . . only the pure in heart were blessed; and the great Reformation (re-formation) of souls and society which followed the plain . . . publication of divine truth, proved that the tabernacle of God was with men . . . . (History, 323)

Peck concludes that this power of the Gospel was so significant in the life of the American nation that

Private and public men would be imperceptibly controlled by its holy teachings, sin would be denounced as a reproach to any people, and . . . this humble, quiet spirit would silently permeate all public bodies, and powerfully control all public functionaries. All this became historical in America. (History, 323-24).

Closely allied to this concept of the church as light is the concern for evangelism. Evangelism is a means by which this light is made instrumental in society.

A second point of interest is the way Jesse Peck combines the doctrines of divine sovereignty and providence with the nationalistic doctrine of manifest destiny. He interprets the rise and fall of kingdoms as the rhythm of God’s sovereign purposes. His philosophy is teleological. The decline of these powers points toward “the consummation of all special purposes,—the subordination of all anti-Christian civil powers to the righteous rule of God’s Messiah” (History, 15). In this confidence of God’s sovereign guidance, he is able to declare “that a purpose to advance the human race beyond all its precedents in intelligence, goodness, and power, formed this Great Republic.” Thus assured, he testified that he had entered “with all his powers of mind and heart, into the spirit of the late war, on the freedom side, and waited, with perfect composure and without a doubt, for the final result.” (History, viii; emphasis mine). The idea of America as a chosen nation with a special calling and destiny is evident here.

Thirdly, and very closely related to the preceding constellation of ideas, is the focus upon progress in Peck’s view of American society. We note immediately the congeniality of the doctrine of progress with the Wesleyan belief in process in the life of sanctification. That Peck ties the two together is apparent in his History, (26, 323, 445).

Just as in individuals, so in nations. So far as the regeneration of human nature advances, so far the nation rises in character and moral power . . . . Virtue begins to reveal its strength under the cross, and piety unfolds its power in the exercise of true faith,—“faith that works by love and purifies the heart.”

Let it be remarked . . . that the growing greatness of the American nation is, so far as it has advanced, the progressive development of the new manhood. This is seen in . . . the social elevation which makes vice disgraceful, and installs virtue and piety as the dominant forces of reason; and in the grand uprising of a whole people, courting
martyrdom (in the Civil War) to honor and secure a great principle. (*History*, 479-82; ch. 8 "Development of Manhood and Humanity").

Peck concludes the lengthy manuscript of seven hundred pages with the firm conviction that America is "The Representative of Progress" because of the genial, vitalizing power of Christianity. "Our missionaries of religion, with the most scrupulous obedience to all governments in which they are found, will be perpetual representatives of progress in the true American spirit" (*History*, 710). Bishop Peck has wedded Christian perfection and process with a secular doctrine of progress.16 In his union of the ideas of personal and social reform and perfection, perhaps the primary ingredient is the way Peck interprets the nation's victory over slavery. This triumph assumes a saving significance in Peck's mythologizing and romanticizing of the awesome conflict. American society is a participant in God's saving act in much the same way as Israel in the Exodus. Emphasizing the way freedom has tarried and has been delayed by injustice, Peck points out the "present mixed state as to individual and public regeneration..." His vision is that the people shall long "after the Spirit of Christ for the soul of the nation" (*History*, 351-53; emphasis mine).

The race is coming to feel the imperative demand for a divine regeneration of society, the grand model of which is found in every true Christian in whose heart, purposes, motives, and acts, old things have passed away, and all things become new. (*History*, 510; emphasis mine).

Out of the holocaust of the Civil War, the nation learned that slavery was an "enormous individual and national crime" which could "go out only in blood." Here is the idea of atonement. The issue of the war was freedom, not national sovereignty. God's purposes for the nation were being evidenced most specifically in the land's spiritual enhancement. "Finally," declared Bishop Peck, "we had learned that God had determined to extend to the nation the regeneration which had long been recognized as the privilege of the individual only. So grandly rose truth in its new incarnation to enter upon its broader mightier mission to the world." (*History*, 679-80; emphasis mine).

His union of the themes of social reformation, perfection, progress, providence, manifest destiny, and millenialism are all telescoped in one section of his conclusion:

Let God be honored; let righteousness which exalteth a nation prevail everywhere; let the church become purer...as she looks out upon her future responsibilities; let

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16. Cf., *History*, 350, where the progress of liberty is emphasized. "Slowly...has true liberty developed itself even here...But we can now see, that upon the whole, the progress has been powerful and really grand." For this same note see my essay, "Slavery, Civil Disobedience, and Gilbert Haven," *The A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review*, LXXXVII (Fall, 1975), 202-21.
... the life of divine love permeate the nation, inspiring and exalting rulers, lifting up the poor and distressed. Let this loyal devotion to the right to God, prevail over our personal and national vices; let the regeneration of our humanity, under the redeeming agency of the Great Messiah, go on until purified by divine power and invigorated by divine inspirations. (History, 706-07)

The connection between personal and social perfection and social reform is stressed by Peck in his analysis of the end of slavery (Cf., History, 573). To reiterate, Bishop Peck has taken the concept of perfection beyond the personal and individual to the social and national. By fusing together certain contemporary doctrines with biblical faith, he has constructed a social gospel. There is little doubt in my thinking that Peck considered his analysis to be thoroughly biblical and faithful to the perceptions of Methodism. He has, however, created a "sacred history" by his union of secular and biblical themes.

His synthesis resulted in a social philosophy, significant enough in his era, but found wanting in the century ahead.

Jesse Truesdell Peck, like Wesley, was committed to the doctrines of social reform and perfection. Peck has developed a conceptual framework through which he could move from the individual to the social. Deeply committed to holiness or perfection as the Central Idea of Christianity, he was as profoundly dedicated to the reformation and perfection of the social order of his nation. Reform and perfection were thus equally the possibility of persons and societies. The doctrine of perfection contributes significantly and integrally to Peck's vision of social reformation and redemption.

Peck's concept of social sanctification is strongly tinged with a Wesleyan emphasis. Still, it is a clear conception of social reform and is of primary significance for understanding how Christian perfection becomes by extension and expansion a philosophy of social perfection. According to Peck, social institutions may be infused with a moral dynamic, or "animus," which will raise the moral level of society, reforming and driving toward the perfection of love.

Select Bibliography
In addition to the two volumes analyzed for this essay, the following sources are useful.
Peck, Jesse T., "Philosophy of Christian Perfection" Methodist

17. Cf., Peck, "The Demands of the Hour," New York Christian Advocate (May 30, 1878), 337, where Peck sees national reform as pointing toward "love perfect." In History, 479-80, he points to the perfection of man as the model for national development toward perfection.

18. Nelson R. Burr, A Critical Bibliography of Religion in American Life (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 60-61. Burr points up the idea, but does not support it by documentation: "A Christian-social philosophy inspired ... Peck's ... History ... which emphasizes ... the social pervasiveness of Christianity ... ."
——, "The Demands of the Hour —— God Arraigns This Nation" New York Christian Advocate (May 16, 1878), 305-06.
——, "The Demands of the Hour —— The Church Must Answer Before God" New York Christian Advocate (May 30, 1878), 337.
——, "Address to the Ecumenical Methodist Conference," New York Christian Advocate (October 13, 1881), 644. Peck was chairman of the conference. Here Peck challenges the church to resist war and "to spread scriptural holiness over all lands." (Emphasis mine).
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New York Christian Advocate (Nov. 3, 1881), 697, and (Feb. 23, 1882), 121.

NOTICE

For the first time in nine years the publishers of Methodist History have found it necessary to increase the subscription price of this official historical journal. As of October 1, 1977, the rates are:

$7.00, one year
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