"THAT THEY MAY BE FREE INDEED":
LIBERTY IN THE EARLY METHODIST
THOUGHT OF JOHN WESLEY AND FRANCIS ASBURY

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Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith
Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled
again with the yoke of bondage.

—Galatians 5:1

No single issue fired the political imagination of revolutionary America
as did the concept of liberty, and no one dilemma troubled its conscience
like the reality of slavery. Indeed, as the former colonies took their first steps
into nationhood, Americans began to struggle deeply with the meanings and
implications of their newly won freedom, along with the related and ever
lurking problem of slavery in a nation founded on the ideals of liberty.

Such were the political and intellectual dilemmas to which Methodism's founder John Wesley and his chief lieutenant in America, Francis
Asbury, sought meaningful solutions as they cultivated the newly formed
Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Indeed, the responses of Wesley
and Asbury to the complex questions of liberty in the young republic were
profoundly shaped by Methodism's triple emphasis on free will, revivalism,
and Christian Perfection. However, despite approaching those problems
with almost identical premises, they ultimately arrived at dramatically dis-
tinct conclusions concerning the morality of the American Revolution, the
definition and extent of political liberty, and the appropriate Christian stance
on slavery. Those controversies not only illustrate the role of religion as a
social force in the Anglo-American community of the 18th century, but also
the process of Americanization that all institutions transplanted to the New
World underwent.

By the time Francis Asbury imported Methodism to America in 1771,
the Wesleyan system of divinity had developed three defining characteris-
tics. First, in contrast to the rigorous English Calvinism of the previous cen-
tury, Methodist doctrine stressed the role of free will in salvation. Taking his
cue from the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), Wesley con-
tended that each human being possessed the moral agency to accept or reject
Christ's offer of redemption. Eschewing predestination, Wesley presented a
God who existed outside time itself, who viewed the world "from creation
to consummation" in one eternal instant, and thus while knowing the out-
come of all things was bound to foreordain nothing.\textsuperscript{1} To argue otherwise would simply "present God as worse than the devil, more false, more cruel, more unjust."\textsuperscript{2}

Methodism's second major tenet was that of revivalism. Since early in his career, Wesley had come under considerable criticism for his willingness to depart from traditional religious venues to bring the Methodist message directly to the masses. Wesley's style of evangelism disregarded long standing social barriers and affirmed the spiritual value of the individual. Consequently, what historian Harry S. Stout observed concerning revivalism during the First Great Awakening in America applied just as well to the later Wesleyan revivals in England and the United States.

The revivalists sought to transcend both the rational manner of polite Liberal preaching and the plain style of orthodox preaching in order to speak directly to the people-at-large. . . . Their technique of mass address to a voluntary audience forced a dialogue between speaker and hearer that disregarded social position and local setting.\textsuperscript{3}

Thus, even the external forms of Methodism sent a message concerning the power of religion to circumvent, and even upset, existing social configurations.

Finally, Christian Perfection was perhaps Methodism's most unique doctrine. Wesley contended that Christianity at its fullest involved a constant and ever-increasing replacement of the sinful, human nature with the Spirit of God. Consequently, Methodism urged new believers past the mere act of salvation and on to a second work of grace which totally eradicated all traces of sin within the hearts of believers. Wesley believed that the cornerstone of that state of perfect holiness lay in the believers arriving at, through the grace of God, a condition of complete love for God and humanity in their spiritual lives. No room for sin remained in a heart completely consecrated to God.

Of course, Wesley recognized that all individuals, no matter how Spirit-filled, were subject to human error and frailty. However, that was not to be taken as evidence that the person lacked entire sanctification. Indeed, it only served to reinforce Wesley's contention that nobody could achieve spiritual sufficiency outside the mediation of Christ. The only true standard of perfection was always to be the total dominion of love within the spirit of the Christian.

Thus, socially speaking, the body of Wesley's thought implied a religious internalism which heavily influenced the positions that early Methodists would take both on the American Revolution and slavery. It was


\textsuperscript{2}V. H. H. Green, \textit{John Wesley} (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1964), 112.

within the individual that grace and faith combined to receive salvation, and
within the individual that God's grace wrought the work of sanctification.
Consequently, the first priority of Methodism was access to and the salva-
tion of individual souls. And as the highest prize in Methodist religious life,
the soul of each individual took on a new dignity and value.

That individualism often served to encourage an attitude of limited
social accommodation among Methodists. Society need not be reformed to
save the soul of one man or woman. In fact, if social agitation served to
inhibit the Methodist ministry to people on the personal level, then such
activity must be regarded as self-defeating. Since the individual was con-
sidered the absolute standard of success within the Wesleyan movement,
Methodist ministers often settled for less than ideal social conditions in
which to work. A society need not be perfect, as long as it allowed the
Methodist mission to continue. The value of any social system was mea-
sured relative to the freedom of its people to explore that inner, spiritual life.
However, once many men and women had been converted and experienced
the perfecting power of the Holy Spirit, then they would undoubtedly begin
to go about the transformation of society and enact reforms consistent with
the supreme value of the individual. But meaningful spiritual change must
always move from the inside out.

Having thus examined the common theology of Wesley and Asbury, it
remains to be seen how events in America provoked different reactions in
the two men which, in turn, produced strikingly different social tones in
British and American Methodism. Initially, Wesley did not disapprove the
grievances of the American colonists. During the 1760s, at the height of the
Stamp Act crisis, Wesley wrote that "I do not defend the measures which
have been taken with regard to America: I doubt whether any man can
defend them, either on the foot of law, equity, or prudence." 4

However, by the eve of the Revolution in 1775, Wesley adopted a much
more strident view concerning the rights of the British empire and the
Americans' misguided theories of liberty. Fundamental to Wesley's political
worldview was his belief concerning the source of political power. Unlike
many Enlightenment thinkers, Wesley could never accept the idea of politi-
cal power flowing up from the people. Instead, the Methodist founder
argued that all lawful authority in a nation flowed down from God, through
the government, to the people. Wesley winced at what he felt was the overt
hypocrisy of the American leaders who so loudly clamored for rule by the
people, but in the same breath denied a political voice to women, minors,
and individuals without sufficient property or income to qualify for the fran-

4 Allan Raymond, "'I Fear God and Honor the King': John Wesley and the American
Revolution," Church History 45 (September 1976): 317. For an excellent intellectual biography
of Wesley, see Henry D. Rack, Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism
chise. Thus, Wesley asserted that “the very men who are most positive, that the people are the source of power, being brought into an inextricable difficulty, by that single question, ‘Who are the people?’ reduced to a necessity of either giving up the point, or owning, that, by the people, they mean scarce a tenth part of them.”

Although Wesley adamantly upheld the ultimate right of king and Parliament to govern, it is important to understand that Wesley did not seek to deny the existence of individual rights. However, individuals must not extrapolate those personal rights into abstract theoretical constructs. Instead, the exercise of one’s rights was a matter immediate and practical. In his *Calm Address to Our American Colonies* (1775), Wesley asked the American leaders:

> After all the vehement cry for liberty, what more liberty can you have? What more religious liberty can you desire, than that which you enjoy already? May not every one among you worship God according to his own conscience? What civil liberty can you desire, which you are not already possessed of? Do you not sit without restraint, every man under his own vine? Do you not, every one, high or low, enjoy the fruit of your labors? This is real, rational liberty. . . .

Thus, if one enjoyed religious toleration, exercised a degree of personal autonomy, and was protected in the use of their property, then that individual lived in a state of liberty. To speculate about what the government might do with power it theoretically held, in Wesley’s opinion, bordered on the ridiculous. And for the colonists to call themselves slaves because they were subject to a higher political power that exercised its prerogative to tax was an outright absurdity. Here Wesley employed a religious metaphor:

> “To be guided by one’s own will, is freedom; to be guided by the will of another, is slavery.” This is the very quintessence of republicanism; but it is a little too bare-faced: For, if this is true, how free are all the devils in hell? seeing they are all guided by their own will: And what slaves are all the angels in heaven? since they are all guided by the will of another!

Ultimately, Wesley believed that the American Revolution was about independence, not liberty. Since the colonists already enjoyed a large amount of freedom in practice (the only sense that really mattered), then their rebellion must finally be about escaping the rightful authority of the British government. All of the talk about liberty and slavery was merely semantics. As Wesley put it:

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5Wesley was no supporter of an extended franchise either. Rather, he made this point in order to expose the hypocrisy of those Americans who contended for popular sovereignty. John Wesley, *Some Observations Upon Liberty Occasioned by a Late Tract* (London: R. Hawes, 1776), 14–17.


Nay, if all who are not independent are slaves, then there is no free nation in Europe. Then all in every nation are slaves, except the supreme powers. All in France, for instance, except the King; All in Holland, except the Senate; yea, and these too: King and Senate both are slaves, if (as you say) they are dependent upon the people. So, if the people depend on their Governors, and their Governors on them, they are all slaves together.

Instead, Wesley contended:

Ten times over, in different words, you "profess yourselves to be contending for liberty." But it is a vain, empty profession: unless you mean by that threadbare word, a liberty from obeying your rightful Sovereign, and from keeping the fundamental laws of your country. And this undoubtedly it is, which the confederated Colonies are now contending for.

Ultimately, what the colonists contended was an assertion of their natural right to self government and just representation, Wesley saw as a perverse attempt to throw off the rightful government of king and Parliament, an endeavor which no conscientious Christian could support.

In contrast to Wesley, Francis Asbury's opinions concerning the ideology of the American Revolution were far more ambiguous. On the surface, Asbury sought to be as apolitical as possible, and openly expressed his regret concerning Wesley's strong political stance. On March 19, 1776 Asbury recorded the following entry in his journal:

I also received an affectionate letter from Mr. Wesley, and am truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America. My desire is to live in love and peace with all men; to do them no harm, but all the good I can. However, it discovers Mr. Wesley's conscientious attachment to the government under which he lived. Had he been a subject of America, no doubt but he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause. But some inconsiderate persons have taken occasion to censure the Methodists in America, on account of Mr. Wesley's political sentiments.

Thus, Asbury's first priority remained the success of the Methodist movement. Wesley's Tory stance inhibited American Methodism by tying it to political dissent. If politics encumbered the preaching of the gospel, then political activity must be abandoned. Again, as Asbury remarked:

We have constant rumors about the disagreeable war which is now spreading through the country; but all these things I still commit to God. Matters of greater perpetuity call for the exertion of my mental powers.
However, once the smoke from the Revolution cleared, Asbury began to verbalize a degree of patriotic sentiment. In a 1789 letter to President George Washington, Asbury (along with joint superintendent Thomas Coke), declared that:

We are conscious from the signal proofs you have already given, that you are a friend of mankind; and under this established idea, place as full a confidence to your wisdom and integrity, for the preservation of those civil and religious liberties which have been transmitted to us by the providence of GOD, and the glorious revolution, as we believe, ought to be reposed in man. 12

Washington, it seems, also held the Methodists in high regard, and seemed to be fully persuaded of their loyalty. The first president responded:

It always affords me satisfaction when I find a concurrence of sentiment and practice between all conscientious men, in acknowledgement of homage to the great Governor of the universe, and professions of support to a just civil government. 13

Indeed, Asbury's own actions indicated that the Revolution's ideology had influenced his worldview. As Asbury shaped the direction of American Methodism during and after the war, republican ideology often permeated his policies. Take, for example, his ordination as superintendent by Thomas Coke at the Christmas Conference of 1784. Throughout his life, Wesley supported a strong hierarchy as a fundamental pillar of the church. Just as through the monarch, God's authority also flowed down through the ecclesiastical pyramid. Wesley fully expected those at the bottom to respect and obey those above them. Such was the case when Coke arrived in the United States with instructions from Wesley appointing Asbury co-superintendent of the American church. Indeed, Wesley considered such an appointment absolute and closed to discussion. However, Asbury understood and conformed to the distinct character and political ideology of the American church. Instead of asserting his right to govern by virtue of Wesley's decree, Asbury subjected himself to a vote of confirmation by the preachers at the conference. As Asbury put it:

I was shocked when first informed of the intention of these my brethren in coming to this country. . . . My answer then was, if the preachers unanimously choose me, I shall not act in the capacity I have hitherto done by Mr. Wesley's appointment. 14

Thus, Asbury's election by the conference would confer a special authority and popular mandate upon him and his office that could not be passed down to him by Wesley. Consequently, Asbury from that time forward would be far less beholden to Wesley in the administration of the American church. 15

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12 Asbury, Journals 3:70.
13 Asbury, Journals 3:72.
14 Asbury, Journals 1:471.
Indeed, during the 1780s American Methodism became increasingly hostile to the authoritarian directives handed down by Wesley. At the 1784 conference, a majority of the delegates passed a resolution which committed the American church to obey Wesley’s orders concerning church government as long as the Methodist founder lived. However, when Wesley used that power in 1787 to appoint Richard Whatcoat as a joint superintendent in America with Asbury, the American church rebelled. Not only was Whatcoat rejected, but the conference rescinded their earlier pledge of obedience to Wesley, leaving the Methodist founder with no official role in the American church. In exasperation, Wesley wrote:

I was a little surprised when I received some letters from Mr. Asbury affirming that no person in Europe knew how to direct those in America. Soon after he flatly refused to receive Mr. Whatcoat in the character I sent him. He told George Shadford: Mr. Wesley and I are like Caesar and Pompey: he will bear no equal, and I will bear no superior.” And accordingly he quietly sat by until his friends voted my name out of the American minutes. This completed the matter and showed that he had no connexion with me.16

Thus, the development of the American Methodism paralleled that of the United States itself. Foreign authority was eliminated in favor of home government accountable to the general population through the voting process.

The chasm that separated the thought of Wesley and Asbury concerning the American Revolution appears once again when considering the topic of slavery. Despite Wesley’s conventional Tory definition of liberty in regard to the political relations between Britain and her colonies, his vision of liberty vis-à-vis the question of slavery brings the applications of his holiness theology into much sharper relief. Wesley’s earliest impressions of slavery formed when he and Charles served as missionaries in Georgia during the 1730s. In his journal, Charles recorded the reactions of both brothers when he recorded the horrors of America’s “peculiar institution.”

I had observed much, and heard more, of the cruelty of masters towards their negroes; but now I received an authentic account of some horrid instances thereof.

It were endless to recount all the shocking instances of diabolical cruelty which these men (as they call themselves) daily practice upon their fellow-creatures; and that on the most trivial occasions. I shall only mention one more . . . . He [the slaveowner] whipped a she-slave so long, that she fell down at his feet for dead. When, by the help of a physician, she was so far recovered as to show signs of life, he repeated the whipping with equal rigour, and concluded with dropping hot sealing-wax upon her flesh. Her crime was overfilling a tea-cup.17

Even worse, those acts of inhumanity were not merely the wanton cruelties of perverse individual slaveholders. Slavery corrupted a society right down to its governmental foundations:

16Asbury, Journals 3:75; Godbold, 8–10.
These horrid cruelties are the less to be wondered at, because the government itself, in effect, countenances and allows them to kill their slaves, by the ridiculous penalty appointed for it, of about seven pounds sterling, half of which is usually saved by the criminal’s informing against himself. This I look upon as no other than a public act to indemnify murder.18

Thus, when the Wesleys returned to England and began to lay the foundations for the Methodist movement, they brought back with them a deep abhorrence of slavery. Indeed, during the course of his ministry, John Wesley was unrelenting in his opposition to and condemnation of slavery. In *Thoughts on Slavery* (1774), Wesley articulated his abolitionist sentiments on principles based upon a merger of his Methodist religious principles with the natural rights philosophy prevalent during the eighteenth century. On the most fundamental level, John Wesley saw the practice of slavery as a perversion of humanity’s God-given natural rights to freedom and dignity. “Rebellion,” contended Wesley, could only be seen as slaves “asserting their native Liberty, which they have as much right to as the air they breathe.”19

As always, for Wesley the front line of moral combat remained the heart and spirit of the individual. Thus, responsibility for slavery and its evils must fall first and foremost with those personally involved in the selling and owning of slaves. In the following passage, Wesley bluntly stated the moral guilt incurred in holding slaves:

> What wonder, if they should cut your throat? And if they did, whom could you thank for it but yourself? You first acted the villain in making them slaves, (whether you stole them or bought them.) You kept them stupid and wicked, by cutting them off from all opportunities of improving either in Knowledge or Virtue: And now you assign their want of Wisdom and Goodness as the reason for using them worse than brute beasts?20

Not only did slavery corrupt the spirit of the master with cruelty and inhumanity, it also prevented the spiritual and intellectual development of those enslaved individuals.

Wesley conceived that the guilt of slavery extended far past the individual slaveholder to the government itself. In his *Thoughts on Slavery*, Wesley reflected upon the cruel treatment of Africans who attempted to escape from their state of bondage, and remarked:

> One Gentleman, when I was abroad, thought fit to roast his slave alive! But if the most natural act of “running away” from intolerable tyranny, deserved such relentless severity, what punishment have these Lawmakers to expect hereafter, on account of their own enormous offenses.21

18Smith, 42.
20Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 143.
By showing such barbarity in their treatment of their fellow human beings, slave traders and slaveholders testified to their darkened spiritual condition. "O burst thou all their chains in sunder," prayed Wesley, "more especially the chains of their sins: Thou, Saviour of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed!" Wesley's religion was one that began in the heart, but it could not turn away from such an abject social evil. Ultimately, perfected Christians must turn to face the world around them, undertaking external changes that corresponded to the powerful, divinely wrought change in their own hearts.

For Francis Asbury, however, the issue was never that simple. Like Wesley, Asbury held a strong distaste for slavery when he arrived in America in 1771. However, it did not take long before Asbury recognized that the American Methodists did not share his English abhorrence of human bondage. Asbury reflected that "Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, in the highest flights of rapturous piety, still maintain and defend it [slavery]." However, aided by the ardently anti-slavery Thomas Coke, Asbury and the Christmas Conference of 1784 passed a series of strong anti-slavery measures. "We view it contrary to the Golden Law of God . . . and the unalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the Revolution, to hold in the deepest debasement . . . so many souls that are capable of the image of God," argued the conference, and the young church resolved "to extirpate this Abomination from among us."

However, the 1784 resolution encountered stiff opposition. In fact, it was so unpopular that less than one year later, it was suspended by a subsequent conference. In the words of Coke, "we thought it prudent to suspend the minute concerning slavery, on account of the great opposition that had been given it, our work being in too infantile a state to push things to extremity." Even more disturbing than the political opposition from slaveholders was their strategy of keeping slaves away from Methodist meetings in order to halt the spread of abolitionist ideals. As Asbury explained in an 1809 journal entry:

We are defrauded of great numbers by the pains that are taken to keep the blacks from us; their masters are afraid of the influence of our principles. Would not an amelioration in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practical good to the poor Africans, than any attempt at their emancipation? The state of society, unhappily, does not admit of this: besides, the blacks are deprived of the means of instruction; who will take the pains to lead them into the way of salvation, and watch over them that they may not stray, but the Methodists? Well; now their masters will not let them come to hear us.

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22Wesley, Thoughts Upon Slavery, 148.
23Asbury, Journals 2:151.
25Rudolph, 180.
What is the personal liberty of the African which he may abuse, to the salvation of his soul; how may it be compared?26

American Methodism faced a crucial choice: maintain its opposition to slavery or continue its successful evangelistic excursions into the South. In choosing to retain the favor of the South, Asbury rationalized his decision by resorting back to Wesley's old principle of internalism. True religion resided in the heart of the individual, not the social institutions of a nation. Thus, Asbury was willing to sacrifice Methodist abolitionism in order to have continued access to the souls of the South. Unlike Wesley, however, Asbury did not perceive a seamless flow of Christian love outward from the heart of the individual. To Wesley, the heart truly filled by the Spirit went on to treat its brothers and sisters with the love of Christ and as creatures fashioned in the image of God. With such an outlook, slavery was utterly incompatible with the Christian experience. On the other hand, Asbury felt slavery and Christianity might coexist, albeit uneasily. Although the most enlightened and Spirit-filled believers might eventually come to see the social implications of their faith, for spiritual infants the demands of Christianity were primarily internal. Basic faith and love marked the early stages of belief, and Asbury learned not to expect those characteristics to come along with any kind of greater Christian social vision. Thus, in evangelizing the young republic, especially in the South, pragmatism was the order of the day, and a degree of blindness to the moral paradox of Christianity and slavery became an almost indispensable ministerial tool.

Theologically speaking, John Wesley and Francis Asbury shared almost identical values, and labored tirelessly to spread their message to the far corners of Britain and America. Both men embraced an Arminian, free will doctrine which allowed the individual to be an active participant in the act of redemption. Wesley and Asbury each adopted a form of revivalism which transcended the traditional methods and venues of the church in order to reach people of all walks of life, proclaiming to them the message that God had empowered them to play an active role in their own spiritual destinies. And most importantly, both ministers embraced Wesley's vision of Christian perfection, a state of grace in which sin was completely eliminated within a person and instead replaced by a perfect, steadfast love for God and humankind.

Such Wesleyan doctrines served to reorient religion back into the inner depths of the human heart. Because of that internalism, the social and political manifestations of early Methodism were much more inconsistent and diverse than its theological hallmarks. John Wesley believed that Christian experience had real and definite social ramifications, but those must always be judged on the practical level. Thus, Wesley had little patience with the

26 Asbury, Journals 2:591.
theoretical constructs of the American Revolution, since he felt on the practical level, the colonies enjoyed as much liberty as was possible under any human government. To Wesley, the Anglo-American community’s most blatant denial of liberty could be found in the institution of American slavery. Here the abridgment of liberty and the gross violations of the Christian spirit were far more than the musings of a few disgruntled political theorists. Instead, cruel depredations were handed out by masters to their slaves on a daily basis, in complete violation of the teachings of Christ. Thus, Wesley was unafraid to make slavery a litmus test for the sincerity of all Christians in general, but especially for Methodists. To practice slavery was to declare oneself a stranger to God and completely devoid of the spiritual gifts granted to the sanctified believer.

In contrast, Francis Asbury was never inclined to embrace strong socio-political positions like his English mentor. Asbury made a concerted effort to keep silent concerning the American Revolution, although the church polity he later advocated seemed heavily influenced by the principles of American republicanism. Asbury’s mission field was the hearts of his listeners, and he went to his grave unwilling to place social and political barriers on the road to salvation. Thus, he built an American Methodist church that accommodated slavery, although he and many prominent church leaders opposed it personally. The consequences of seeing abolitionism as the necessary corollary to the Christian experience would have been too damaging to the success of Methodist missionary work in the South.

Ultimately, both Wesley and Asbury struggled deeply with that fundamental tension within early Methodism—the extent to which Christianity could be translated into social justice and human freedom this side of the eternal. Although the two men arrived at quite different conclusions, both men, along with the countless multitudes whom they influenced, would doubtlessly have sung the following Charles Wesley hymn with a sense of expectation and, perhaps, a feeling of unworthiness at their own inability to fully realize the implications of the gospel they so often preached.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin, and nature’s night.
Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray;
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.”