JAMES M. LAWSON, JR., CALLED BY KING
“THE GREATEST TEACHER OF NONVIOLENCE IN AMERICA”

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Whether in his early role training non-violent protesters in the civil rights movement, his fateful invitation of Martin Luther King, Jr. to Memphis as pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in April of 1968, or his ongoing fight to end violence and promote justice in the twenty-first century, United Methodist minister Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr., has embodied Methodist ideals. The influence of his studies of Gandhi’s *Satyagraha*,¹ a method of nonviolent resistance while he served as a Methodist missionary in India, is frequently described by authors and by Lawson himself,² and the mutual influence between him and fellow Boston University graduate “Martin King,” as Lawson still calls him, are well-known. Less investigated have been the ways in which the robust belief and social holiness demonstrated by John Wesley influenced and continue to be evident in the life and ministry of this prophetic activist.

Like few before him, John Wesley exhibited and imbued Methodists with an understanding of belief worthy of Augustine’s distinction of the Christian faith as “believing *into* Christ.”³ This active and living, relational understanding of belief is not merely assent to God’s existence, the divinity of Christ, and the contents of the Christian faith, not merely trusting that God’s promises are true; but full-bodied placing of one’s entire person into the hands of

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¹ In Gandhi’s own words, “Satyagraha is literally holding on to Truth and it means, therefore, Truth-force . . . . It excludes the use of violence because man [sic] is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish.” Bharatan Kumarappa, translator/ed. *Satyagraha (Non-Violent Resistance)*, 1st ed. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1951), 3. First coined terminologically and organized by Gandhi in 1907 to expose the government’s mistreatment of Indians in South Africa, the method involves non-violence in many forms, including non-cooperation, fasting, and civil disobedience. It evolved throughout Gandhi’s lifetime, and according to Kumarappa, beyond (vi). Gandhi distinguishes the method from “passive resistance” which would possibly use violent force if necessary, as “vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on oneself” (6). This aspect captivates Lawson, who sees in absorbing the suffering oneself a confluence with Christ’s suffering. Further nuances of Lawson’s particular view and application of *Satyagraha* appear both in primary sources cited in Dennis C. Dickerson’s article “James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Methodist History* 52.3 (April, 2014) and in Lawson’s interview for the PBS documentary *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Non-Violence,* the transcript archive for which is cited in the next footnote.


³ Augustine, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini In Iohannis Evangelium tractatus CXXIV.* Willems, Radbodus, eds. (Turnholti: Brepols, 1954), 29.6 (author’s translation).
God. It enables one by believing “to love, to cherish, to go into Christ and to be incorporated into his members.” This love and incorporation are implicit in the kind of community at the heart of both Wesley’s and Lawson’s movements. Such belief into God results in the believer’s bold surrender to God’s will, and even to earthly authorities when necessary, in order to suffer for and with others out of love for neighbor as oneself. By first examining the explicit Wesleyan influences that Lawson has acknowledged in his early life, then identifying common elements of the works of Wesley and Lawson, and finally considering their shared longevity in ministry, this paper reveals that Wesley’s theological motive of, in Geordan Hammond’s words, “renewing the Church by reviving the practices of the primitive church,” is borne out in Lawson’s determination to renew a nation by reviving the New Testament practice of “Following the Non-violent Jesus.”

Wesleyan Influences on Lawson’s Early Life

Three distinct theological concepts that Lawson considers quintessentially Methodist emerge from his own description of his faith foundation and vocational discernment growing up in a Methodist parsonage: sanctification, stewardship, and providence. The contrast between Lawson’s pistol-carrying Methodist minister father and his Jamaican-American mother, who opened his mind to Christ’s teachings on non-violence, recalls the contrasting parental influences that the Wesley boys had in Revolution-supporter Samuel and Nonjuring-sympathizer Susannah. From father James, Sr. and from mother Philane, young “Jimmy” learned, just as John and Charles had from their parents, that faith and political commitment go hand in hand.

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4 Augustine, 29.6.
6 The title of Lawson’s most recent sermon, see footnote 36 below.
8 Hammond, 16.
While Methodists did not invent the key doctrine of sanctification, John Wesley of the strangely warmed heart is credited with distinguishing it from justification and linking it with assurance. Lawson can still pinpoint an Aldersgate experience of his own when, at the age of ten, he boasted to his mother of his having disciplined a younger white boy for a racist comment with a firm slap, only to have his mother surprise him with a response worthy of Wesley’s first two General Rules for the United Societies. Lawson would later describe to biographer David Halberstam the moment Philane asked young Jimmy where the harm and good had been in the situation, telling him how much God and his family loved him, as “what John Wesley would have called a sanctification experience, a moment when his life seemed to stand still and then change forever.”

This definition of sanctification emphasizes an inbreaking of grace to break free from sin—in this case the sin of violence—that frees the human agent for bold surrender to transformation by God. One of Methodism’s gifts is the understanding of sanctification, accompanied by assurance, as a lifelong process of growth in holiness by grace. Thus young Lawson, by surrendering the hand that slaps to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit for extension instead in fellowship, had embarked upon a process of transformation.

As the time came for Lawson to consider college, another Methodist concept guided him. John Wesley had founded his understanding of stewardship upon the teaching that God had “entrusted us with our souls, our bodies, our goods, and whatever other talents we have received.” Acknowledging a need to use his life for “some larger purpose,” Lawson was determined to select the college that would allow him to be the best steward of his gifts and talents. At Methodist-related Baldwin-Wallace College, Lawson would further nurture the seeds his mother had planted in him and grow in both
purpose and pacifism. Moved by the passion he had been witnessing in congregations as his father preached, and convinced that such powerfully shared emotion was an instrument for moral transformation beyond church walls, Lawson the active Methodist Youth had already become a social activist. The Baldwin-Wallace student body was driven by their religious beliefs to seek justice, in a setting where the local chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) was welcome to recruit members like Lawson.12

Confirming young Lawson’s good stewardship, the speaker that FOR sent to campus, executive secretary A. J. Muste, helped him to see his religious and political commitments as equally rooted in the teachings of Jesus.13 Lawson later summarized for Halberstam Muste’s message of personal and national humility in terms appropriate to personal and social holiness: “You will love the Lord, you will work actively for Him [sic], and thereby because His belief is love and His life is love, you will end up seeking a concept of greater social justice and a more just (and peaceful) country and planet.”14 This synopsis of religion in action echoes well Wesley’s exposition of the faith that is “filled with the energy of love”—a love of all humankind “without exception,” even of enemy—in his sermon “The Catholic Spirit.”15 More than any of Wesley’s more obvious sermons on faith,16 “The Catholic Spirit” is the appropriate source from which to consider the faith working in love that would come to characterize Lawson’s interdenominational, interracial movement for greater social justice.

Pursuing peace despite differences of “worship and opinion” among Christians, Wesley in “The Catholic Spirit” examines the question and offer of Jehonadab to Jehu in 2 Kings 10:15, “Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart? . . . If it is, give me your hand.” For Wesley, the first part of the question has to do with love of God and is crucial to love of neighbor.

12 Halberstam, 37. Far more than the mere “group of activists, primarily with Protestant religious affiliations, who wanted to use the force of Christian love in all relationships . . .” that Halberstam describes (17), The Fellowship of Reconciliation has a rich history as a transformational pacifist organization from its beginning. Founded in 1914 in England following an ecumenical conference in Switzerland that had sought to prevent the outbreak of World War I, its incorporation in the United States followed a year later. From its origin in a conversation and pledge at a German train station between an English Quaker and German Lutheran who were disappointed to have to depart the Swiss conference as their countries were now at war, it has developed into “an interfaith and international movement with branches and affiliated groups in over 50 countries and on every continent. Today the membership of FOR includes Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Indigenous religious practitioners, Bahá’í, and people of other faith traditions, as well as those with no formal religious affiliation” (http://forusa.org/about/history).
13 Halberstam, 38.
14 Halberstam, 38.
16 From the canonical sermons alone, “Salvation by Faith,” “Justification by Faith,” “The Circumcision of the Heart,” and “The Marks of the New Birth,” are examples that come to mind, not to mention the two sermons titled simply “On Faith” on two different passages of Hebrews, which Wesley preached near the end of his life.
He moves deftly from propositional belief-that, “Do you believe (God’s) being [sic] and his perfections? . . . Do you believe that he now ‘maintains all things by the word of his power?’”\(^{17}\)—to something akin to belief-into: “Does he dwell in you and you in him?,” even to tones of bold surrender: “. . . have you ‘submitted yourself unto the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Christ Jesus?’”\(^{18}\) and finally offers a precursor of Lawson’s understanding of the beginning of Muste’s message: “Is God the centre of your soul, the sum of all your desires?”\(^{18}\) To this question, young Lawson seemed increasingly ready to answer in the affirmative, exercising bold surrender in stewardship of his gifts and himself—on campus, on trial, and even on the verge of being assaulted in prison.\(^{19}\)

A further question in Wesley’s sermon, “Are you employed in doing, ‘not your own will, but the will of him [sic] who sent you . . . ?’” brings us to the interaction of God’s agency and human agency and the third theological concept Lawson claims as a Methodist influence, providence.\(^{20}\) Lawson’s will, once he emerged from over a year in an American prison and a three-year Missionary tour in India, was bent on a five-year plan of graduate study at Oberlin and Yale, then serving God as part of the movement for civil rights in the American South.\(^{21}\) Meeting Martin Luther King, Jr., when King spoke at Oberlin led Lawson to submit the timetable of his will to God’s will, and he soon accepted an assignment as southern field secretary with the FOR.\(^{22}\)

Bound not for Atlanta and Gammon Theological Seminary as he had first hoped, but for Nashville and Vanderbilt, Lawson would soon come to see why God provided this opportunity. John Wesley had wrestled with his own concerns about the virtues he lacked en route to (and after his return from) the American South.\(^{23}\) So, too, Lawson worried on his way to the American South about his own strong pride and independence in the face of legal segregation of a kind that he had not experienced in Ohio, leading him to question whether he was worthy of the call he was answering.\(^{24}\) Upon reflection, however, he became confident that he “was doing nothing less than God’s work,” in teaching students an activism that would be reviving the “protest” in their Protestant religious backgrounds.\(^{25}\)

He could soon identify the remarkable way in which God seemed to have assembled in Nashville a core group of young visionary black ministers and bright, eager college students. It “was providential,” he tells Halberstam, “a Methodist word which meant that God was working in people and through them to bring them together at a certain time so that certain things could

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\(^{17}\) Wesley, “Catholic,” I.12.


\(^{19}\) Halberstam, 41-47.


\(^{21}\) Halberstamm, 15-16; Dreier, 348.

\(^{22}\) Halberstam, 17.

\(^{23}\) Hammond, 48.

\(^{24}\) Halberstam, 25.

\(^{25}\) Halberstam, 28.
happen which (God) had wished for.”

Facing the students’ initial doubts about his gently-voiced insistence on the power of nonviolent love required his confidence in this providence. Those skeptical about the effectiveness of his approach gradually experienced transformation of their angry, frustrated desire for violent action into camaraderie and courage to transform an unjust society as Lawson appealed to the Wesleyan sources that God had provided him.

In addition to Jesus and Gandhi, his particular understanding of whom Lawson has attributed to Methodist Missionary E. Stanley Jones, Lawson taught the nonviolent example of John Wesley. Lawson modeled the demonstrators’ ideal non-violent response to mob violence on Wesley’s own response to the mobs that had frequently found him: look the mob leader in the eye and show such love as to convert the leader into an advocate.

Obvious parallels to another God-given Wesleyan source already mentioned here, the General Rules of the United Societies, are evident in the rules of conduct for the downtown lunch counter sit-ins that Lawson’s students would stage in late February, 1960: “Don’t strike back or curse if abused...”—do no harm—“Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times...”—do good—“Report all serious incidents to your leader in a timely and friendly manner. Remember love and nonviolence”—attend upon all the ordinances, or practices, of God, expanded in this case to include respect for authority, intercession, and always love. These rules reveal not only relational belief-into Christ and his way of nonviolence, but also trust in fellow demonstrators and strength of relationship with peers and leaders in the movement. These elements are vital to Wesley’s and Lawson’s shared focus on the kingdom of God or beloved community. In their writings, both Wesley and Lawson defend ecumenical efforts to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, which requires moral transformation of church and society.

**Similarities in the Works of Lawson and Wesley**

In his most widely published speech, given at the founding conference of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee at Shaw University in April of 1960, Lawson proclaims that “The Christian favors the breaking down of racial barriers because the redeemed community of which he is already a citizen recognizes no barriers dividing humanity. The kingdom of

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26 Halberstam, 51.
27 Halberstam, 60.
29 Halberstam, 61, 78.
30 Halberstam, 78.
31 Clayborne Carson, “In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s,” Acls Humanities E-Book, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=acls;c=acls;rgn=full%20text;idno=heb00590.0001.001;didno=heb00590.0001.001;view=image;seq=35;node=heb00590.0001.001%3A5;page=root;size=100, accessed October 1, 2015, 22.
God, as in heaven so on earth, is the distant goal of the Christian.” 32 He proceeds to make clear over and against contemporary critics that this kingdom requires far more than integration alone, which itself is too slow in coming. Lawson insists that, while progress has been made, there is still vital work to be done. That work constantly occupies him and members of the sit-in movement, who “are trying to raise what we call the ‘moral issue,’” he says, “and to convict the American conscience of remaining sin where neighbor love should be.” 33 While “the Negro church and minister” fail to act as “God’s agents to redeem society,” the young people of the sit-in movement embrace God’s promise that “if radically Christian methods are adopted the rate of change can be vastly increased . . . . The ‘word’ from the lunch counter stool demands a sharp re-assessment of our organized evil and a radical Christian obedience to transform that evil.” 34

This emphasis on radical moral transformation that brings about the in-breaking of the kingdom of God is a focus common to Lawson and Wesley. Most of Wesley’s canonical sermons reflect his frustration with the church of his time. Convinced that renewal could be found in a return to the “primitive Christianity” of the New Testament and early church, Wesley, by the time he preached “The Catholic Spirit,” had received as thanks for this focus, his ministry and livelihood threatened in Georgia by accusations of his being a Roman Catholic, an enthusiast, and a divisive clergyman. 35 So it is not without awareness of how deep divisions among Christians impact not just worship, but life together, that he challenges his enemy to treat him not with the hateful rhetoric and actions of the times but rather with “a very tender affection,” 36 even asking the enemy “to provoke (him) to love and to good works,” 37 that they may treat one another as “joint partakers now of the present kingdom of God, and fellow heirs of his eternal kingdom.” 38

While Wesley’s advocacy for the poor and oppressed did not involve lunch counters, 39 his words to fellow Christians who would be enemies call for a radical Christian love in action that would be amplified as Lawson built community among his fellow Christian sit-in demonstrators and envisioned the spread of that sense of community. In order to understand the extent of this similarity of love amid differences, it is important to perceive the

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35 Hammond, 159ff.
38 Wesley, “Catholic,” III.5.
39 Hammond does investigate interesting allegations about Wesley’s over-providing his followers from the public storehouse in an effort to allow working class poor to remain “indolent” enough to participate in meetings and worship during his Georgia sojourn—see Hammond Chapter 5.
term “kingdom of God” in Wesley as interchangeable with Lawson’s term “beloved community,” for the latter is ubiquitous in Lawson’s speeches, sermons and the literature of the non-violent movement he has taught and guided. Looking back on fifty-five years, Lawson said recently:

> It is not enough to be on the frontline yourself as a major vehicle of the kingdom of God in our world for truth and justice, but we must also help to make that so for our whole society, for Los Angeles, for our state and for our nation . . . . That can be done. Many people do not want to translate their faith into a socio-political, philosophical understanding of how we are to live with one another. In the movement of the ‘50s and ‘60s, I called this “The Beloved Community” that we must help to emerge, another word for the Kingdom of God.

It is possible that Lawson’s unique ability to adapt satyagraha to include this theological vision of the kingdom of God on earth as the “beloved community of nonviolent action” is what prompted King to assign the title “the greatest teacher of non-violence in America” to Lawson, even though Lawson had not been the first person to instruct King on Gandhian techniques.

Within that kingdom, Wesley and Lawson share a preference for instructing the workers on the ground, rather than contributing to formal theory. Both seek to transform the consciences of specific individuals or small groups in the interest of transforming a nation. Wesley wrote his most direct challenge for moral transformation in his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, not to the general public, nor to Members of Parliament, but to slave ship captains, merchants, and plantation owners. Similarly, Lawson and the students of Nashville did not storm the doors of City Hall but instead went to the downtown lunch counters, where the everyday injustices were being inflicted by store managers and counter attendants and were felt most severely by women and children doing their shopping. Of course, affecting the bottom line of business might arouse not just conscience but anger, as Wesley less deliberately did in Georgia, by allegedly using his public store procurement to provide for the poor. Both Wesley and Lawson seem to have counted the cost and understood the extent to which this emphasis on non-violent love could make them the object of violent hatred.

Wesley is famously remembered as being banished from Georgia and the colonies for the Sophia Hopkey Williamson debacle, but less so for the

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41 Halberstam, 19. The first had been the national field director for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Glenn Smiley.

42 Halberstam, 91.


44 Halberstam, 91.

45 Hammond, 167. Likely an exaggeration, but possibly a sign Wesley advocated “a primitive community of goods.”
trouble he made by trying, as his German colleagues in Georgia recorded, “to take on the cause of those who suffer in this colony against all those who do violence and injustice against them.” More legendary is the resistance he encountered in England from mobs and even his own brother as he preached in the great outdoors to the least of these.

The hateful reactions to Lawson’s just actions began with academic injustices he suffered at Baldwin-Wallace during his conscientious objector trial and continued with his expulsion from Vanderbilt amid sit-ins. Such hatred even followed him, albeit in subtler forms, to his pastorate in Memphis, where he advocated for better conditions and wages for local garbage workers. Said their union leader Jerry Wurff, “What Lawson never understood was the degree to which he was hated in Memphis. They feared [him] for the most interesting of all reasons—he was a totally moral man, and totally moral men you can’t manipulate and you can’t buy and you can’t hustle.”

Yet both Wesley and Lawson escaped the harm of the haters so effectively as to be able to continue—well into their eighties—encouraging the beloved community not to be deterred by the hatred of others.

While They Have Breath: Shared Longevity

The stewardship of God-given gifts that Lawson has explicitly identified as a Wesleyan influence in his youth is evident in both Wesley’s and Lawson’s ability to keep preaching faith while they have breath. This stewardship is not only of their robust belief, making sure their hearts are right with God and fellow human beings, nor of their physical health, making sure they can still preach with vigor, but of material resources as well. The consistent focus on the kingdom of God, for Wesley, or the beloved community, for Lawson, consistently has involved challenging the greed that is at the heart of violence. Both continue throughout their lives to strike at materialism.

To his opponents who object to abolition, on the basis that “the furnishing us with slaves is necessary, for the trade, and wealth, and glory of our nation,” the elderly Wesley replies, in Thoughts Upon Slavery, that the first of their mistakes was failing to recognize that

Wealth is not necessary to the glory of any nation; but wisdom, virtue, justice, mercy, generosity, public spirit, love of our country. These are necessary to the real glory of a nation; but abundance of wealth is not. . . . [T]he glory of England was full as high, in Queen Elizabeth’s time as it is now: Although our riches and trade were then as much smaller, as our virtue was greater.

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46 Hammond, 178-179.
48 Dreier, 350.
49 While the famous example leaps to mind of the threat of wealth making Methodists a “dead sect” in the elderly Wesley’s “Thoughts Upon Methodism,” even in Georgia, Wesley viewed the primitive church as having loved poverty and strove to do so himself. See Hammond, 49ff.
50 Wesley, Thoughts Upon Slavery, IV.7.
Lawson continues to express suspicion of any effort that associates the American Dream with material gain. His anti-war speeches continue to press for action that highlights economic injustice. Speaking on behalf of immigrant worker rights, he has declared that “No human being in the sight of God is illegal . . . . No human being in the sight of God is undocumented.”

On September 22, 2015, two months before the presentation of this paper to the Wesley Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion meeting, James M. Lawson, Jr., celebrated his eighty-seventh birthday. In October of 2015, he kicked off the National Week of Non-violence with a sermon, “Following the Non-violent Jesus” at Holman United Methodist Church, in Los Angeles, California, where he served as pastor from 1974 to 1999 and where he remains Pastor Emeritus. On December 4, 2015, Holman United Methodist Church presented the inaugural James M. Lawson, Jr. Humanitarian Award to Marian Wright Edelman. Acknowledging his advanced age and undiminished zeal, as Wesley frequently did in his many letters to abolitionists in 1787-1791, Lawson advises and encourages listeners interested in “Following the Non-violent Jesus” today:

I do not think the struggle has gotten easier. My personal struggle is harder than ever. I think that the struggle of our people for truth and justice is harder than ever. I think that the struggle of the church to be the church is as arduous and demanding as any previous generation or century.

He is clear about the commitment that is required in following Jesus along the non-violent way:

I do want to make a confession, that from my earliest age, as I sensed that I had to be a pastor of a congregation in the Methodist tradition, I recognized that the work of justice, the work of healing, the work of lifting people, the work of not tolerating the presence of the poor, the work of causing our nation to inch a little bit more towards the great ambition of all are created equal and all are endowed by God—I considered that synonymous with the gospel of Jesus that I had been reading, . . . and still read, from the age of four—that’s some 83 years ago! I am convinced that the church must be not a taillight, as Martin King said, but a headlight, pointing a way through confusion. I contend that the gospel of Jesus . . . is a gospel for the whole world, for the whole person, and that we are called as never before to live it and to be it.

The world has, from the 1960s lunch counters of Nashville to the streets of Los Angeles today, a witness of what this living and being entails in the “totally moral man” and thoroughly Methodist minister, James M. Lawson, Jr.

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51 Halberstam, 711.
54 Lawson, “Following the Non-violent Jesus,” 1:04-1:22.