

**JOHN WESLEY AMONG THE COLONIES:  
WESLEYAN THEOLOGY IN THE FACE OF THE AMERICAN  
REVOLUTION**

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“For I am a High Churchman, the son of a High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of passive obedience and non-resistance.”

John Wesley<sup>1</sup>

“It is your part to be peacemakers; to be loving and tender to all; but to addict yourselves to no party.”

John Wesley to Thomas Rankin, March 1, 1775<sup>2</sup>

When in April 1775 the “shot heard ‘round the world” began the military struggle for independence from British authority by American colonists, the Methodist movement was already an established presence on the colonial landscape. Centered around religious societies founded in each of the colonies, the movement’s British and native American preachers made rounds through the circuits, preaching Wesley’s methods and sermons while the Holy Spirit inspired the hearts of the people in a great evangelical revival. Through growth and increased acculturation in America, the movement was torn by a declared loyalty to the Established Church of her colonial parent, and the search for civil and religious liberty. What Wesley named, in reference to English rule, “the greatest civil and religious liberty that the condition of human life allows,”<sup>3</sup> was not the perceived reality on the ground in the colonies. How then did the American Methodist colonists negotiate the fine line that Wesley established between a genuine search for holiness and loyalty to civil authority? In face of the colonies’ taking arms against their

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *Letters of John Wesley; a selection of important and new letters with introductions and biographical notes* (London, New York [etc.]: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915): 6: 156, 161.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, Letters to Mr. Thomas Rankin (1775), *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed: complete and unabridged (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1986), 12: 325. A letter between Charles Wesley and Thomas Rankin, mailed this same date, March 1, 1775, is published alongside John’s letter stating, “As to public affairs, I wish you to be like minded with me. I am of neither side, and yet of both; on the side of New England and of Old. Private Christians are excused, exempted, privileged, to take no part in civil troubles. We love all and pray for all, with a sincere and impartial love. Faults there may be on both sides; but such as neither you nor I can remedy; therefore, let us, and all our children, give ourselves unto prayer, and to stand still and see the salvation of God.”

<sup>3</sup> Wesley, “Observations on Liberty,” *Works* 11: 118.

government, how did American Methodist leaders choose between their faith convictions and the problem of civil tyranny and oppression? This essay will explore these questions in light of John Wesley's theological position concerning war and violence. Like many doctrinal stances that he took as both pastor and theologian, Wesley never fully systematized his theology, rather he defined his position at different points in time based upon his lived experience.

Although Wesley abhorred the reality of war, he refused to take a direct stance against all forms of violence. As an English citizen he balanced his loyalty to the crown, an institution he believed had been given power by God, with his understanding of the consequences of human sin. This essay will explore, in three parts, Wesley's understanding on war and violence, Wesley's personal reaction to the colonial uprising read through his *Calm Address to our American Colonies*, and finally, the reaction of colonial Methodist preachers to Wesley's theological arguments for and against the uprising. While certainly not a comprehensive exploration of the colonial Christian perspective on war, this essay will explore the journals and historical memoirs of two prominent Methodist preachers, Jesse Lee and Freeborn Garrettson, in light of Wesley's instructions to the colonists. As Jesse Lee's memoir *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America* shows, these two colonial preachers resisted Wesley's loyalty to the crown by showing "a firm and fixed determination to contend for their *rights and liberty*,"<sup>4</sup> yet strengthened his call for Christian perfection by refusing to fight or kill in the name of God or country. Wesley, like Christian leaders from the apostles through the present age, sought to integrate the complex biblical perspective on violence with the intricate circumstances of political and social history. However, neither Wesley nor his contemporaries, even as they saw their fundamental task to "apply the Word of God to the times and tides of history,"<sup>5</sup> succeeded in convincing the Methodist movement to corporately take the risk of rejecting war, to be holy, as Christ is holy.<sup>6</sup>

### The Natural Consequence of Human Sin in the Search for Christian Holiness

Because John Wesley never wrote a comprehensive treatise on the subject of war, his perspective on the subject must be gleaned from his journals, letters, and published tracts. Documents on Wesley's understanding of sanctification and perfect love abound, yet it is not easy to reconcile Wesley's theological position on perfect love, even to enemies, with his justification

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<sup>4</sup> Jesse Lee, *A short history of the Methodists in the United States of America, beginning in 1766 and continued till 1809: to which is prefixed a brief account of their rise in England in the year 1729* (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810), 54.

<sup>5</sup> Leon O. Hynson, "War, the State, and the Christian Citizen in Wesley's Thought" *Religion in Life* Vol. XLV No. 2 (Summer, 1976): 204.

<sup>6</sup> This reference is to Matthew 5:48 "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This verse forms the basis of Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection.

of the use of violence under certain circumstances.<sup>7</sup> As early as 1744, history recorded Wesley taking a stance justifying Christian participation in war,<sup>8</sup> yet he was always careful to qualify that justification by noting the evil inherent in people and nations engaging in such struggles. In the journey towards perfect love, the Christian must always be aware of his position both as a citizen of a nation and citizen of the Kingdom of God.

In 1756, Wesley published a 300-page treatise entitled *The Doctrine of Original Sin*. In this document he cites pride as the source of human conflict. For Wesley, the worst manifestation of original sin is in war, wherein man's greed, pride, and ambition prove the disorder of human values that incline humanity towards violence. Nations, because they are comprised of fallen individuals, are equally susceptible to the forces of sin. It is the "collective avarice of all the individuals within a society"<sup>9</sup> that provides the basis for war. Wesley succinctly states that war is "demonstrative proof of the overflowing ungodliness in every nation under heaven."<sup>10</sup> No good emerges from war, according to Wesley, especially not the advancement of the gospel message. In a letter to Thomas Rankin in America in 1775 Wesley wrote: "In all the other judgments of God the inhabitants of the earth learn righteousness. When a land is visited with famine or plague or earthquake, the people commonly see and acknowledge the hand of God. But wherever war breaks out, God is forgotten, if He be not set in open defiance."<sup>11</sup> Wesley continued to state that war is judgment upon all involved parties. He nevertheless does acknowledge several circumstances in which nations might be justified in exercising violence against another nation. Wesley defended what is commonly known as *jus ad bellum*, or the conditions for a just war, when he stated that a man has the right to kill his enemy in the case of "absolute necessity for self-defense."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Wesley permitted nations to defend themselves against other nations in cases of foreign aggression or cases of internal rebellion. Thus, for Wesley, Christians as citizens of nations were justified in participating in defensive acts of violence, not "to acquire dominion or empire, or to gratify resentment. . . . [b]ut solely to gain reparation for injury," and nothing more.<sup>13</sup> Wesley limited the use of violence to acts of self-defense in light of Christ's demand that his followers love their enemies.

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<sup>7</sup> Wesley, Sermon XXIII, "Sermon on the Mount Discourse III, *Works*, 5: 278-294 is an excellent example of the conflicted nature of Wesley's theology.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Turley, "John Wesley and War" *Methodist History* 29 (January 1991): 106. Turley cites the *Minutes of the First Conference* (1744) which demand that Wesley take a theological and political stance on the issue of violence. Wesley is asked, "Is it lawful to bear arms?" Wesley responded: "We incline to think it is: 1. Because there is no command against it in the New Testament; 2. Because Cornelius, a soldier, is commended there."

<sup>9</sup> Turley, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Part I, *Works*, 9: 283.

<sup>11</sup> Wesley, Letters to Mr. Thomas Rankin (1775), *Works*, 12: 326-327.

<sup>12</sup> Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Slavery" (1774), *Works*, 11: 71.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley, "Observations on Liberty" (1776), *Works*, 11: 115.

The line between Christian perfection and loyalty is blurred at this point. Wesley did, in fact, believe that Christians, aided by grace, should demonstrate love and mercy even to those who oppress and persecute them. True to his understanding of the perfection of the will in love, Wesley maintained that true holiness arises out of selfless love for God and neighbor, even “yea, the enemies of God.”<sup>14</sup> The journey towards Christian perfection is therefore intrinsic to one’s social ethic. However, Wesley’s social ethic required that the Christian citizen abandon “all self interest in order to better serve the society.”<sup>15</sup> Wesley’s understanding of perfect love within societies included loyalty to legitimate political authority, for such authority, in Wesley’s understanding, was instituted by God. There is no piety, therefore, without loyalty. Although this seems a contradiction to the modern mind, in Wesley’s mind there is no contradiction between an ethic of love that demonstrates obedience to both God and country. The call to take up arms in defense of King and country is a natural outgrowth of one’s loyalty to God.

In Wesley’s eighteenth century world, the line between Church and State is blurred beyond distinction. The Act of Supremacy guaranteed that the King was the unqualified head of the Church and therefore a minister of God. Wesley related his political views to his metaphysical understanding of the power of God. In his 1772 document *Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power*, Wesley clearly demonstrated this position in his explanation that all powers of State are from God, not the people. That governments are in existence and have the ability to exercise authority is solely by God’s grace. Therefore, for Wesley, the duty of the state was to preserve basic human rights; for “the general welfare is its indispensable justification.”<sup>16</sup> Because the state guaranteed their protection, individuals should be passive to all legitimate authority. This point is best exemplified by the quote cited at the opening of this essay dealing with the Wesleyan virtues of non-resistance and passive obedience. For Wesley, love of one’s country and love of the Church are inseparable. In his *Word to a Freeholder* (1746), he makes this point clear by instructing the letter’s recipient to “mark that man who talks of loving the Church, and does not love the King. If he does not love the King, he cannot love God. And if he does not love God, he cannot love the Church.”<sup>17</sup> Wesley’s 1750 declaration that he “fear[s] God and honour[s]

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<sup>14</sup> Wesley, “Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *Works*, 11: 372.

<sup>15</sup> Turley 105. Turley makes this statement based upon Wesley’s “Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland” (1762), *Works*, 9: 175. In this he states that all works must be done for “the love of God and all mankind; declaring them to be of no avail if they do not spring from this love as well as terminate and centre therein.”

<sup>16</sup> Turley, 103.

<sup>17</sup> Wesley, “A Word to a Freeholder,” *Works*, 11: 197. Wesley finishes this appeal by stating “Act you as an honest man, a loyal subject, a true Englishman, a lover of the Church; in one word, a Christian!” This shows how clearly Wesley links love of God to loyalty to the instituted powers of the monarchy.

the King,<sup>18</sup> was the primary starting point for his justification of Christian participation in war.

Like all powers inherited by man from God, the power of the sword is reserved for God alone. Wesley stated in his 1776 *Observations on Liberty*, “No man, therefore, can give the power of the sword, any such power as gives a right to take away life: Wherever it is, it must descend from God alone, the sole disposer of life and death.”<sup>19</sup> No government alone possesses this right, so governments waging war do so only as a trust from God for the welfare of the people. Wesley saw wars of aggression and subjugation as abhorrent uses of God-given power, yet wars of self-defense and against internal rebellion were legitimate. Even in his sermon on Matthew 26:52, “All they that take the sword,” Wesley overlooked Jesus’ universal application “shall die by the sword” when he qualified the verse by first inserting “without God’s giving it to them; without sufficient authority.”<sup>20</sup> When Wesley received reports of unjust conduct by soldiers in war, he promptly responded with condemnation against those who injured non-combatants, used means of torture, or applied more force than necessary for the maintenance and restoration of society’s well-being.<sup>21</sup> Wesley supported England’s wars throughout his lifetime to the extent they fulfilled the requirements which modern scholars name *jus in bello*, or just conduct in war. Christians were equally just participants in these wars in so far as loyalty to their King, the head of the Church, demanded.

Wesley questioned the loyalty of those Christians, the Quakers for example, who refused to fight based upon Christian conviction, seeing this as disloyalty.<sup>22</sup> His main concern was not the moral legitimacy of fighting and killing, but rather the establishment of a free and peaceful Christian society in which loyalty to country was seen as loyalty to God. For Wesley this meant remaining focused on the source of all power, God, as God manifested authority in the political structures of the world.

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<sup>18</sup> Allan Raymond, “‘I fear God and honour the King’: John Wesley and the American Revolution” *Church History* 45.03(1976): 316.

<sup>19</sup> Wesley, “Observations on Liberty,” *Works*, 11: 104.

<sup>20</sup> David Cubie, “Early Methodism: A Paradigm for Non-Violence” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 37 (Spring 2002): 88-89. Cubie quotes from Wesley, “Matt. 26:52, *Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, n.d.; rpt. Naperville, IL, Alec R. Allenson, Inc.).

<sup>21</sup> Turley, 108-109. Wesley laments the cruelty of war in his *Concise History* stating, “How guilty so ever an enemy may be, it is the duty of brave soldiers to remember that he is only to fight an opposer and not a suppliant. . . .”

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, Letter to a Person Lately Joined with the Quakers (1747-1748), *Works*, 9: 187. Here Wesley writes in response to the Quaker statement: “‘It is not lawful for Christians to swear before a Magistrate, nor to fight in any case.’ Whatever becomes of the latter proposition, the former is no part of Christianity; for Christ himself answered upon oath before a Magistrate. Yea, he would not answer till he was put to his oath; till the High Priest said unto him, ‘I adjure thee by the living God.’”

## The Problem with Republican Government

The uprising in the American colonies posed a problem for Wesley. At a time when the Methodist movement was trying to maintain and earn governmental support for the Methodist movement, the position that Wesley took concerning the rebellion of the colonies was a decisive moment in the history of Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic. Throughout the Revolution, Wesley maintained a strong Royalist position, supporting the British cause against the rebellion of American colonists. Yet as the war developed, it became clear that he despised the reality of his brethren rising against one another. Although Wesley's views on the war took some time to reach the American Methodist preachers, he urged the withdrawal of the English preachers to prevent them from taking sides in the uprising which he feared would spread to England as well. He wrote to Charles in 1775, "If a blow is struck, I give *America* for lost, and perhaps *England* too."<sup>23</sup> The first of Wesley's many Revolutionary War tracts, *A Calm Address to our American Colonies* (1775),<sup>24</sup> shows Wesley's respect for the existing social order in spite of his resignation that the problem in the colonies had become irreconcilable except by force of arms.<sup>25</sup>

If Wesley supported the use of force by the British army against the colonists, it was not because he believed in the means of war to resolve conflict. Indeed, in a 1776 document to Wesley's fellow British citizens occasioned by the war was signed by Wesley, "A Lover of Peace."<sup>26</sup> Wesley interpreted the American uprising as an attempt to usurp the power which God had invested in the monarchy. He rejected the American plea for independence and democratic rule based solely upon this metaphysical understanding. In response to the colonists' demands for liberty, he responded:

there is most liberty of all, civil and religious, under a limited monarchy; there is usually less under aristocracy, and least of all under a democracy. What sentences then are these: "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

<sup>23</sup> Wesley, Letters to Charles Wesley, *Letters*, 6: 319. Wesley finishes this paragraph, stating that "Our part is to continue instant in prayer."

<sup>24</sup> This document was written as a response to and in support of Samuel Johnson's pamphlet *Taxation No Tyranny*. Wesley lifts the majority of his *Calm Address* directly from this source.

<sup>25</sup> This is best shown in Wesley's 1775 letter to the Earl of Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the colonies, wherein Wesley states, "But waiving this, waiving all considerations of right and wrong, I ask, Is it common sense to use force toward the Americans? A letter now before me says, 'Four hundred of the Regulars, Forty of the Militia were killed in the last skirmish.' What a disproportion! And this is the first essay of raw men against regular troops! You see, my Lord, whatever has been affirmed, these men [Americans] will not be frightened. And it seems they will not be conquered so easily as we first imagined. They will probably dispute every inch of ground, and, if they die, die sword in hand" (Wesley, *Letters*, 6: 156-157).

<sup>26</sup> The full title of this tract is *A Seasonable Address to the More Serious Part of the Inhabitants of Great Britain, Respecting the Unhappy Contest Between Us and Our American Brethren: With an Occasional Word Interspersed to Those of A Different Complexion. By a Lover of Peace* (Wesley, *Works*, 1: 119).

it is a little too barefaced; 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!<sup>27</sup>

Because all governments owe their existence and ability to exercise authority to God's grace, when the citizens of the colonies began demanding independence from British rule, Wesley saw this as a sinful attempt to undermine the God-given authority of the monarchy. Like the "devils in hell," Wesley believed that democratic rule has the potential to devolve into anarchy. Additionally, because Wesley was in search of the society that best enabled the Christian's quest for holiness he believed that "governments that did not concentrate their God-given power in the hand of a few would lack the moral force to counter immorality in society."<sup>28</sup>

The condemnation that Wesley's *Calm Address* offered against the American colonists greatly affected the Methodist movement. Wesley rejected the colonists' demand for representation on the same grounds which he rejected the practice of slavery among the members of Methodist societies. Wesley opened his *Calm Address* with the proposal that the government for which the colonists fought was not truly for the "whole body of the people." He questioned the rights of slaves, women, and children, none of whom would have been represented in the proposed government of the independent colonies. In the political and ecclesiastical world of the eighteenth century, Wesley could imagine no other State whose citizens might possess any greater civil and religious freedom than did the subjects under the English monarchy at that time. Because the American demand for independence did not propose to improve upon the conditions for women, children, and slaves, Wesley could not understand it as anything other than the unreasonable and sinful use of violence to attain power.

When Wesley's *Calm Address* reached American shores, reactions varied among the preachers of the Methodist societies. All but Francis Asbury of the English preachers followed Wesley's directive to return to England in support of the monarchy. Wesley refused to allow his preachers to take up arms either for or against their King and their Parliament. Within the colonial societies, however, Wesley's *Calm Address* did not receive a favorable reception. Asbury reacted on behalf of the colonists, stating: "It discovers Mr. Wesley's conscientious attachment to the government under which he lived. Had he been a subject of America, no doubt he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause."<sup>29</sup>

Wesley called upon fellow English preacher John Fletcher to write a series of responsive letters to the American colonists, specifically the Methodist societies of America. The movement's founder hoped to enable the colonists to see that the war for independence, although opposed for reasons

<sup>27</sup> Wesley, "Observations on Liberty" (1776), *Works*, 11: 105.

<sup>28</sup> Turley, 102-103.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond, 324.

of loyalty rather than violence, would have deleterious effects upon the future of American Christianity. Fletcher's *Vindication of Mr. Wesley's "Calm Address to our American Colonies,"* which eventually circulated among the colonial societies, asserted in its introduction that "the American controversy is closely connected with Christianity in general, and with Protestantism in particular; and that of consequence, it [is] of a religious, as well as of a civil nature."<sup>30</sup>

Wesley mourned the deaths of American brethren in the war in equal measure to the loss of life of English soldiers.<sup>31</sup> He was grieved by the unnecessary loss of civilian life which occurred on American shores. Yet, while the horrors of war did not dampen his Tory support for the English cause, they forced him to reassert the sinful nature of war as a human disorder. In the case of the American Revolution he blamed the violence on American colonists. Fletcher's *Vindication*, although generally more militant towards the colonists than Wesley, described what he understood to be a Christian position towards the colonial rebellion, "We cannot hold up the hands of our soldiers by prayer, without committing sin: nor can they fight with Christian courage, which is inseparable from a good conscience, if they suspect that they are sent to rob good men of their properties, liberties, and lives."<sup>32</sup> Fletcher intentionally imitated the colonists demand for independence of property, liberty, and life to show how this war was problematic for the health and unity of the Methodist movement. Like the Wesley brothers' letters to Thomas Rankin in America at the outbreak of the War, there were indeed faults on both sides, yet from this perspective, the proper response of the American colonists was not rebellion but prayer.<sup>33</sup>

### Wesleyan Theology in America: Piety in Conflict with Loyalty

Within the American Methodist societies, Wesley's fine line between piety and loyalty became an insurmountable chasm. Unlike the English preachers who returned home to England at Wesley's request that they remain neutral throughout the conflict, the preachers and leaders native to the American continent did not have such liberty. Both their citizenship as Americans and as Christians demanded loyalty to causes greater than many preachers were prepared to face. As the tide of war swept through the colonies,

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<sup>30</sup> John Fletcher, *A vindication of the Rev. Mr. Wesley's "Calm address to our American colonies" in some letters to Mr. Caleb Evans.* (Dublin: W. Whitestone, 1776), iii.

<sup>31</sup> Sermon given at Bethnal Green Church as a charity sermon for widows and orphans of soldiers killed in the colonies. In this sermon, never published but recorded in Wesley's journal, he enunciates the horrors of war, "in every town, men who were once of a calm, mild, friendly temper were now mad with party zeal, foaming with rage against their quiet neighbors, ready to tear our one another's throats, and to plunge their swords into each other's bowels" (Raymond, 324, quotes this from L. Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, MA.*, 3 vols. [New York, 1872], 3: 193).

<sup>32</sup> Fletcher, *Vindication*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> See footnote 2 for the entire quote.

the position of the Methodist societies became indistinguishable from the civil opinion of the masses. Because of the staunch Tory position taken by Wesley's *Calm Address* from the earliest days of the conflict, persecution of Methodists was widespread against those who did not immediately declare loyalty and bear arms for the cause of the American Revolution. English preachers such as Rankin and Richard Rodda did nothing to help the cause of American Methodists against persecution by speaking freely against the American cause.<sup>34</sup> As Jesse Lee's historical memoir pronounced, "If a person was disposed to persecute a Methodist preacher it was only necessary to call him a Tory and then they might treat him as cruelly as they pleased."<sup>35</sup> During this period, Asbury was forced into temporary retirement. Despite his loyalty to the English, he remained determined to risk his life in America for his American brethren, believing that "Methodist preachers had a great deal of work to do under God in America."<sup>36</sup> Asbury's loyalty was first to his Church, second to his country.

The suffering endured by Methodist preachers at the expense of Wesley's Tory position was great. Lee's memoir evidences many cases of native ministers who suffered at the hands of their fellow country-men. As more Methodists joined the struggle for independence, fighting and dying for the cause, attention to their spiritual father's theology was interpreted in the light of the colonists' experience of injustice. Certain preachers, however, refused to sign oaths of loyalty to either side, and sought to understand the demands their Christian faith placed on their ability to endure in a society at war. Freeborn Garrettson and Jesse Lee are examples of these preachers who clearly sympathized with the American colonial situation, yet still refused to fight on theological grounds.

Both Garrettson and Lee were beaten and faced violent episodes for their refusal to take arms in the name of their country. Garrettson declared that he was loyal to the American cause yet refused to sign the oath of allegiance that was required of all citizens. He believed that "it was so worded as to bind him to take up arms when called upon—and he felt no disposition to bear 'carnal weapons.'"<sup>37</sup> On this point, Garrettson refused to budge, making himself the object of both verbal and physical attacks. He endured these trials for the sake of the gospel declaring "I am not afraid to trust him [God] with body and soul."<sup>38</sup> Whether in prison or standing trial, Garrettson declared that "this is but trifling if I can win souls to Jesus."<sup>39</sup> Garrettson did not allow the war to impede the progress of the gospel message across the land, and continued to preach in Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina between 1775 and 1784.

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<sup>34</sup> Ezra Tipple, *Freeborn Garrettson* (London: R. Culley, 1910), 49.

<sup>35</sup> Tipple, 50.

<sup>36</sup> Tipple, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Tipple, 48.

<sup>38</sup> Tipple, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Tipple, 53.

Throughout the war, Garrettson's preaching on Christian perfection intensified. His journals, beginning in 1777, record that he "believed such a thing to be attainable in this life; [he] therefore, both in *public and private*, contended for it."<sup>40</sup> Although Garrettson seldom mentioned the war in his journals, he recorded that the gathering of souls won for Christ throughout this period was a sign of his faithfulness to God's will. He wrote:

I have often thought that the consolations afforded me were an ample compensation for all the difficulties and trials I met with, in wandering up and down in an ill-natured world. And I often reflect and bewail my backwardness, when I first entered so unwillingly as a labourer into my Lord's vineyard. But now, thanks to his dear name, I go willingly, and desire cheerfully to obey all his commandments, and do all the little good I can to promote his honour and glory.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, unlike Wesley, Garrettson could not reconcile the biblical demand for perfection with his government's demand to take arms against his brethren under any circumstance. Garrettson did not remain outside the realm of civil engagement as Wesley advised Rankin at the beginning of the war, rather, he actively engaged the cause by standing first for loyalty to the commandment of Christian perfection in the face of violence.

The Reverend Jesse Lee was faced with a similar question of loyalty when, in 1780, he was drafted into the colonial army. As a Christian, he took a firm stand against the means of war, yet determined to support his fellowmen, he accepted the call. He wrote, "I weighed the matter over and over again, but my mind was settled; as a Christian and as a preacher of the gospel I could not fight. I could not reconcile it to myself to bear arms, or to kill one of my fellow creatures; however, I determined to go, and to trust in the Lord."<sup>42</sup> Following the commandment not to kill extended to Lee's ability even to carry a weapon of war. When offered a gun by a commanding officer, he refused and was delivered to the guard, imprisoned, and beaten. Lee refused to compromise his understanding of the biblical injunction to love one's enemies and showed "the presence and power of a conscience enlightened by the word, and strengthened by the grace of God."<sup>43</sup> Lee's resistance proved faithful as his witness to non-violence began to win over soldiers to the gospel message. Lee understood these converts as reward for his faithfulness and reported that they made him ever "more willing to suffer for the sake of religion."<sup>44</sup> Even when he saw a defenseless crowd attacked by soldiers, he refused to bear the arms of war, agreeing only to use a switch

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<sup>40</sup> Nathan Bangs, *The life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson: compiled from his printed and manuscript journals, and other authentic documents* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1832), 67, italics mine.

<sup>41</sup> Bangs, 69.

<sup>42</sup> Minton Thrift, *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee. With extracts from his journals* (New York: N. Bangs and T. Mason, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1823), 26.

<sup>43</sup> Leroy M. Lee, *The life and times of the Rev. Jesse Lee*. (Richmond, VA: John Early, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1848), 89.

<sup>44</sup> Lee, *Life and Times*, 90.

by which he could drive back the enemy from the innocent.<sup>45</sup> Lee's biographer dramatically described the scene: "In obedience to duty, his own breast was bare to the foes of his country; but his own blood should soak the soil where he stood, before he would raise his arm in mortal strife against any one who wore the form in which the Redeemer of sinners had tabernacled among men."<sup>46</sup> Lee's journals record his inability to rejoice at the news of American victory hearing of the deaths of soldiers and civilians. He, rather, thanked God for the lesson of Christ's life, knowing that the "battle is not to the strong."<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion: Methodist Societies and the Call of Perfection

Throughout the war, the work of the American circuit riders was greatly hindered. The preachers faced not only persecution on their rounds, but communities of faith could no longer gather together in safety. Preachers could not reach the societies, nor could the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. The few remaining clergy of the Established Church were unable to win the loyalty of the people once the war began. The clergy were suspicious of the introduction of Methodism into their parishes altogether and, Lee wrote, even "if they had been willing to administer the sacraments to the infant societies, a large majority of the Methodists would have been unwilling to receive them at their hands."<sup>48</sup> The independence from England won by the colonies at the end of the war made the break between the Established Church in America and the Church of England inevitable. Almost simultaneously, the Christmas Conference of 1784 marked the American Methodists' own declaration of independence from the authority of the Church of England.

In the face of war, the Methodist societies in America ultimately rejected Wesley's theology by rebelling against the God-given power of the King. Although a few Methodist circuit riders in the colonies throughout the war refused to bear arms as they bore the name of Christ, in the face of widespread persecution, the members of the Methodist movement willingly joined the struggle for independence. Jesse Lee's *Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America* recorded that throughout the war the Methodists "stood fast as one body, and waxed stronger and stronger in the Lord."<sup>49</sup> American Methodist preachers such as Garrettson and Lee read and understood the position that Wesley took in his *Calm Address* yet refused to allow the question of loyalty to the God-given powers of government override the

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<sup>45</sup>Thrift, *Memoir of Rev. Jesse Lee*, 32. Lee's journal records this incident, "We marched again sometime before day, and the roads were thronged with people, men, women and children, with their property, flying from the face of the enemy. The colonel rode up and said to me, 'Well, Lee! Don't you think you could fight now?' I told him I could fight with switches, but I could not kill a man."

<sup>46</sup> Thrift, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Thrift, 94.

<sup>48</sup> Thrift, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Lee, *A Short History*, 72.

question of Christian perfection. The witness of these two pastors did not allow American colonists at war to remain blind to the evil inherent in this manifestation of sin. The persecution that these preachers willingly endured for the sake of the gospel both invigorated and inspired the growth of the movement in the post-war period.

Like Wesley, the corporate response of the American Methodist societies to the War emerged from lived experience. When placed in the situation of choosing between loyalty to one's country, which in their case was loyalty *against* the crown, and loyalty to God, they no more saw a problem following their country to war than did Wesley in supporting his own. Because the Church at this time was so heavily linked to the structures of government, Christians justified government's exercising of violent means of power against another. The American colonists understood that the powers of government were to be used to protect the health and welfare of its people and believed that they were justified in demanding representation from the English rule which they felt had become oppressive. As Christians rose against Christians in war, on both sides, the call of loyalty drowned out the call to holiness and love by the gospel. Jesus' words to his followers to love their enemies and to refuse the power of the sword were largely overlooked in this period where loyalty to ruling authorities was defended not only by the King but the head of the Methodist movement himself, John Wesley. As a movement, Methodists the problems and tensions of political and social conflict. Although certain individuals were able, at the time of the American Revolution, to stand firm in their loyalty to the call of Christian perfection in the face of war, it was the overwhelming power of sinful ambition which prohibited the Church from gathering together in peace around the Lord's table rather than scarcity of clergy. The Church was unable, as it continues to be today, to stand above the forces of war, to engage the power of Christian holiness, perfected in love of one's enemies even unto death.