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JOHN WESLEY AND SLAVERY: MYTH AND REALITY

by

Irv Brendlinger

Beyond question, slavery is one of the greatest atrocities of civilization. Perhaps it holds reign as the singular greatest social injustice in all of human history. When we think of human atrocities, our minds go to the Holocaust, with its six to seven million Jewish victims plus others that have received less notice, gypsies and homosexuals. We also think of the ethnic cleansing of more recent years with figures approaching 1.4 million victims.¹ How does African slavery compare? Not only is slavery directly responsible for some 20 million deaths (to say nothing of the living deaths of those who “survived”), but its after-effects are difficult to calculate (or grasp) either in numbers or influence.

We sometimes lose sight of the direct correlation between American colonial slavery and the American civil war. When we see the anguish of Abraham Lincoln over the probable disintegration of the Union, we must not forget the inseparable cause of secession. Some two hundred years before, when no one saw this land as anything but colonies, it is doubtful that anyone would have predicted slavery’s power to divide a nation. Few recognized it as a moral problem. The camel’s nose in the tent was invis-

¹The largest figures relate to deaths resulting from individual dictator regimes such as Stalin (7 million) and Mao (30–50 million). However, the issue of slavery transcends individual countries or leaders, and covered more than a century. It is unique in that it was based not on war or ethnic cleansing, but on purely financial motives.

ble. In Lincoln's time it not only divided the nation, but was directly responsible for 600,000 deaths in the civil war.²

It doesn't stop there. One hundred years after that war, the country was finally forced to address the civil rights of the descendants of slavery. Into the 21st century, that problem has by no means been solved. Despite legal attempts to restrain their influences, discrimination and prejudice continue to emerge and flourish. Add the facts together: 20 million African and American slave deaths, plus the casualties of the civil war, plus the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, plus the civil rights struggles of the last century and a half. It is not oversimplifying to lay all of this at the feet of one cause, slavery. Like a gruesome cancer, it spread its lethal malignancy to every facet of the American organism. And its effects are still with us. All this is what comes to mind when the word "slavery" is uttered.

This is the slavery that John Wesley was aware of in Georgia and Carolina. It is the slavery he wrote against when he was sixty-nine years old. While not the only evil, it definitely was the paramount social/moral evil of Wesley's century. That is not myth. But, as with any major figure or world event, there is both reality and myth. Wesley's intersecting with slavery invites us to discern the difference between myth and reality regarding several issues:

1. Was Wesley opposed to the institution of slavery? Or is that merely myth, because he only opposed the horrors of the slave trade? The reason for this question is that many eighteenth-century persons were greatly opposed to the slave trade, but had no moral difficulty with the institution of slavery.
2. If he opposed slavery, was it the abuses that troubled him, or did he reject the philosophical underpinnings of the institution itself?
3. What is truth and what is myth about Wesley's contemporaries, such as his friend John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace*, and known as the "converted slave trader?"
4. Is it myth or reality that Wesley's position was supported by Coke and Asbury on the American scene?
5. And finally, was Wesley's influence on the ending of slavery truly significant, or is that myth?

²*Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*, Part 3, American Experience, broadcast 7 January, 2004, PBS.

A close look at Wesley and slavery should bring clearer understanding to these issues.

A Close Look At Wesley

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century the media began to expose the public to the horrors of the slave trade. People became aware of stomach-turning details. The trade involved what was termed the “triangular trade route.” The first leg involved the voyage from England to Africa with goods to barter with Africans for African slaves, often prisoners of tribal war or victims of slave raids. The second leg brought the slaves from Africa to the West Indies or American colonies and was known as the “Middle Passage,” the middle leg of the triangle. In America the slaves were unloaded and products such as sugar, cotton, and tobacco were loaded for the final leg of the triangle, back to England. Since this was a “business” for profit, what was a captain to do if food or water became scarce? What if disease broke out among the cargo? Sick slaves would infect others. They would not bring a decent price or they may not even be saleable when they reached America. It became common practice, good business sense, to cast such fiscal liability overboard. Sailors reported that the Atlantic, from Africa to America became heavily shark infested because of the availability of human flesh. The harbors of the West Indies had the same reputation for the same reason.

One particular incident occurred in 1781 and exposed the public to these realities. A ship called the *Zong* encountered problems on the high seas. The captain’s calculated solution was to jettison some 132 slaves and then recover the loss from the insurers. Back in England it would be a financial matter between the ship’s owners and the insurance company. However, at the time of the incident, one of the slaves managed to cling to a trailing rope and, under cover of darkness, pulled himself back into the ship. Undetected, he hid in the hold and completed the journey, not just the Middle Passage, but all the way to England, where he told his story. Suddenly there as a different perspective on the incident and the insurers were not willing to simply cover the losses. As the legal battle proceeded, a greater consequence ensued. Newspapers broadcast the outrageous atrocity that had been committed. The awareness dawned: such treatment was not uncommon in this business.

As the public and individuals in policy-making positions responded to such horrors, two foci emerged: the slave trade and slavery. Parliament

began to address the matter of England's involvement in the slave trade. For some the issue was not the wrongness of slavery. They did not believe it was wrong. The slave trade was the problem. If it were ended, atrocities against Africans would be ended, or at least mollified for two reasons. First, the barbarous procurement of slaves, and the inhuman transporting across the Middle Passage would stop a major source of suffering. Secondly, without an ongoing supply of fresh slaves, slave owners would be forced to treat their slaves better in order to maintain their labor force. Kind treatment would make economic sense. Slavery could be humane.

For others the issue was slavery itself. They acknowledged the slave trade as a horrific evil, but they also rejected the practice of slavery, no matter how "humane" it could be. On principle, philosophical or theological, the very institution of slavery could not be justified. To end slavery would also end the slave trade.

Wesley knew about slavery. He would have been aware of the *Zong* incident, but he had also directly encountered slaves and slavery years earlier in America. Would he have opposed the slave trade in order to make slavery gentler? Would he have seen slavery as acceptable under biblical guidelines, if slaves were treated properly, especially if they were evangelized? Fortunately, we can go to Wesley himself to find his answers. His *Journal*, sermons, tracts and commentary on Scripture give a clear picture.

Nowhere in the corpus of Wesley's writings is there a statement in support of slavery. While he does not attack slavery head on until he is sixty-nine years old, he has numerous interactions with the topic throughout his life and not once does he speak favorably about it. When he does confront slavery, he leaves no doubt about his position. He gives no evidence that his position has changed and he continues to work to end slavery until his death, nineteen years later. What is remarkable is that, at the age of sixty-nine when most of his peers were either inactive or dead, Wesley exerts extensive energy in the cause. Something had ignited him. It was not a new conviction that slavery was wrong, but probably a new awareness that he could do something about it. He felt he *must* do something about it.

Regarding his actual position, Wesley vehemently opposed the slave trade. Some of his harshest epithets are used in referring to those involved in the trade. He calls them "men-butchers."³ He is fully aware of how the

³Wesley, *Works* (Jackson edition), Vol. IV (Journal), 95-6 (April 14, 1777).

trade is carried on and prays "that we may never more steal and sell our brethren like beasts: never murder them by thousands and tens of thousands!"⁴ He deduces that the slave trade is the greatest reproach in England's history.⁵ To those involved in it, he appeals,

Are you a man? Then you should have a human heart. . . . Do you never feel another's pain? Have you no sympathy . . . no sense of human woe, no pity for the miserable? When you saw the flowing eyes, the heaving breasts, or the bleeding sides and tortured limbs of your fellow-creatures, was [were] you a stone, or a brute? . . . Whatever you lose, lose not your soul: Nothing can countervail that loss. Immediately quit the horrid trade: At all events, be an honest man.⁶

He is no less clear or emphatic about the institution of slavery. Rather than seeing the slave trade as the problem, without which slavery could become mild and acceptable, he saw slavery as the driver of the trade. To all who owned slaves he wrote: "You are the spring that puts all the rest in motion. . . ."⁷ Slavery itself was incontrovertibly wrong. Regardless of harsh or mild conditions, the very foundations of creation and human nature, the law of nature, contradicted slavery: "Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air: and no human law can deprive him of that right."⁸ In looking at the entire issue of slavery and the slave trade, he said, "I strike at the root of this complicated villany: I absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of natural justice."⁹

Nothing could justify enslaving others, not economic necessity, the need for a strong labor force, or seeing Africans as sub-human or inheriting slaves.¹⁰ Nothing. He appealed to any who owned slaves:

⁴Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 145, "A Serious Address to the People of England With Regard to the State of the Nation" 1788.

⁵"Never was anything such a reproach to England since it was a nation, as the having any hand in this execrable traffic." Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 145.

⁶Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 77, "Thoughts Upon Slavery."

⁷Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 78, "Thoughts Upon Slavery."

⁸*Ibid.*, 79.

⁹*Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰Wesley's strong opposition to the pragmatic argument for slavery can be found in "Thoughts Upon Slavery," 72. The full range of his argument against slavery, including his view of the idea of racial inferiority, is found in my forthcoming book, *Social Justice Through the Eyes of Wesley*, chapter 3.

O, whatever it costs, put a stop to its [slavery's] cry before it is too late: Instantly, at any price, were it the half of your goods, deliver thyself from blood-guiltiness! Thy hands, thy bed, thy furniture, thy house, thy lands are at present stained with blood. Surely it is enough; accumulate no more guilt; spill no more the blood of the innocent! Do not hire another to shed blood; do not pay him for doing it! Whether you are a Christian or no, show yourself a man! Be not more savage than a lion or a bear! . . . Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature.¹¹

The **myth**: Wesley was like most Christians of his culture. If the slave trade and abusive slavery could be ended, gentle, Christian, biblical slavery could be justified.

The **reality**: Wesley was unequivocally opposed to slavery. All slavery.

The **myth**: Africans are at least in need of the light of the gospel, and at most were created to be a servile class in the “chain of being.”

The **reality**: Africans, like all persons, are in need of the light of the gospel, but that requires the sending of missionaries, not enslaving, which demonstrates the opposite of the gospel of love. Africans are fully human and not inferior to Europeans. As such, they deserve full liberty. Immediately.

Wesley's Contemporaries

One reason such myths attach themselves to Wesley is that they do apply to some of his contemporaries. Several of these are worth looking at because of their close proximity to Wesley, particularly James Ramsay, John Newton and George Whitefield.

James Ramsay. James Ramsay served six years in the Royal Navy as a surgeon in the West Indies and then became a minister there for the next nineteen years, until 1781. He knew about slavery and the trade from firsthand experience; he had seen and treated the “collateral damage.” He is significant because of his writing about slavery and because he was a key influence in recruiting William Wilberforce to the anti-slavery cause.¹² With his tracts appearing about ten years after Wesley's

¹¹Ibid., 78–79.

¹²For a good study of Ramsay, see Folarin Shyllon, *James Ramsay, The Unknown Abolitionist*, Edinburgh, Canongate Publishing, 1977, especially 2-3, 89 and 125.

Thoughts Upon Slavery, it is informative to compare their viewpoints. While Ramsay, understandably, makes a strong case for better treatment of slaves, he also makes a case against slavery. However, he is not as consistent or clear as one might hope on opposing the actual institution of slavery. In this he is in step with eighteenth-century culture. He holds that it would be better to continue slavery for a time than to free slaves if they are not adequately prepared for emancipation. "To make a slave free, who cannot earn an honest living, would be inhuman and impolitic. It is letting loose on society a thief in despair."¹³ He proposed a "new shape" of slavery which involved voluntary submission to temporary slavery. Slaves would be brought from Africa, work, and eventually purchase their freedom. In the process they would become civilized and a boon to society.¹⁴

In terms of the anti-slavery cause, it seems that Ramsey would have added more weight had he been clearer in his opposition, especially in light of his years of exposure to slavery. He read Wesley's 1774 tract *after* writing his tract and commented that, had he read Wesley before writing, he would have "written in a more warm and decisive manner."¹⁵

Myth: Ramsay was a single-minded abolitionist, opposed to slavery in principle.

Reality: James Ramsay was completely opposed to the slave trade because of the horrors he had seen. While he believed that slavery was wrong in principle, he also believed that moderate and temporary slavery could serve to civilize and evangelize Africans. It could serve as the means to eventual freedom.

In this context, we must remember Wesley's clear statement: "Instantly, at any price . . . deliver thyself from blood-guiltiness! . . . Give liberty to every child of man, to every . . . partaker of human nature."¹⁶

John Newton. John Newton is a fascinating character, partly because of his complete honesty and partly because of how he is so mis-

¹³See Ramsay's *Essay on the Conversion and Treatment of African Slaves*, 1784, 283.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 291-293.

¹⁵Folarin Shyllon, *James Ramsay, The Unknown Abolitionist* 89, quoting a letter from Captain J. S. Smith, 21n., British Library, Add MMS 21254, fol. 14.

¹⁶Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 79.

understood, or misrepresented. He is significant to this study for several reasons. He was in touch with Wesley when he was trying to enter the ministry. He was influential in Wilberforce's life at a critical juncture, when young Wilberforce was considering leaving Parliament because of his new-found Christian faith. Newton also wrote for the anti-slavery cause and gave evidence to the House of Commons in 1789 and 1790. His wonderful hymn, *Amazing Grace*, has inspired many and has encouraged interest in his life and ministry. But what is myth and what is reality about John Newton? Note the following statements:

- John Newton was a slave trader, the captain of a slave ship.
- After becoming a Christian he gave up his involvement in the slave trade.
- His conversion caused him to actively attack the evils of slavery and the slave trade.
- He wrote a tract condemning slavery.

Only *one* of those statements is true.

John Newton did become the captain of a slave ship. He led three slaving voyages as captain. Newton was converted in his mid twenties. Conversion and his hope to marry his childhood sweetheart inspired him to seek "respectable" employment. He found it in the slave trade. He was offered command of a slave ship, but decided instead to serve as First Mate. Following that voyage he served as captain on three slaving voyages. All of this was done as a conscientious Christian, with no twinge of conscience, Middle Passage and all. In fact, he considered his new career "the appointment Providence had marked out" for him.¹⁷ Each of his slave voyage journals begins with the words, ". . . voyage intended (by God's permission) . . . to Africa."¹⁸ When he finally left the slave trade it was for reasons totally unrelated to his faith and conscience. Two days before his fourth voyage, he was suddenly taken ill (probably a minor stroke) and resigned command on the eve of departure. Converted slave ship captain? Yes, and in that order.

¹⁷John Newton, *Letters, Sermons, and a Review of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. I, 95, "Authentic Narrative," and *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, Vol. V, 486, "Letters to a Wife," Aug. 18, 1754.

¹⁸John Newton, *The Journal of a Slaver Trader 1750-1754*, eds. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London, 1962), 3, 66 and 87.

If this seems confusing, it was to Newton as well. Many years later his journal reflects confusion and anguish at how he could have been involved in the slave trade as a Christian without any sense of doing wrong. But this was years later. At the time, he felt no conflict and is completely honest about that.¹⁹ It was not for some thirty-four years that he actually wrote for the antislavery cause. In 1788 he wrote *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. But what must be considered is that although he wrote against the slave trade, it was in response to others' encouragement,²⁰ not a driving force within him. Another significant factor is that while the tract is very clear in condemning the slave trade, it does not address the institution of slavery. It could be reasoned that the purpose of the tract was related to the focus of Parliament, ending the slave trade, not slavery. While that is true, there is nothing in all of Newton's writing that speaks against the institution of slavery.

¹⁹I take issue with those who explain this anomalous behavior by seeing Newton as an insensitive man. His letters to his wife are deeply sensitive, as are the hymns he wrote, some, reputedly on board the slave ship (probably, *How Sweet The Name of Jesus Sounds To The Believer's Ear*). It seems best to accept this as an anomaly and acknowledge Newton's own response of confusion and anguish that he genuinely did not feel what he was doing was wrong. Newton's journal reflects his honesty and authenticity and offers no defense. When he published his *Letters to a Wife*, he attached a footnote regarding slavery: "The reader may perhaps wonder, *as I now do myself*, that, knowing the state of the vile traffic to be as I have here described, and abounding with enormities which I have not mentioned, I did not, at the time, start with horror at my own employment as an agent in promoting it. Custom, example, and interest had blinded my eyes. I did it ignorantly: for, I am sure, had I thought of the slave trade then, as I have thought of it since, no considerations would have induced me to continue in it. Though my religious views were not very clear, my conscience was very tender, and I durst not have displeased God by acting against the light of my mind. Indeed, a slave ship, while on the coast, is exposed to such innumerable and continual dangers that I was often then, and still am, astonished that any one, much more so many, should leave the coast in safety. I was then favoured with an uncommon degree of dependence upon the providence of God, which supported me; but this confidence must have failed in a moment, and I would have been overwhelmed with distress and terror if I had known, or even suspected that I was acting wrong." *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, Vol. V ("Letters to a Wife") 406-7, n.

²⁰Wilberforce was one who encouraged Newton to write. His unique perspective from being involved in the slave trade was thought to be substantive in persuading people. The two years following publication of his tract (1788) he gave evidence on the slave trade in the House of Commons.

Myth: John Newton was a slave trader who, after his conversion left the slave trade and fought against slavery.²¹

Reality: John Newton was a Christian captain of a slave ship, who left the trade for reasons of health. Many years later he opposed the slave trade. We have no record that he *ever* opposed the evils of slavery.

By contrast, John Wesley observed but was never personally involved in slavery or the trade. Even without Newton's direct involvement, Wesley preached and wrote against both the slave trade and slavery.²²

George Whitefield. The third contemporary of Wesley that we consider is his friend, colleague and sometime antagonist, George Whitefield. They both regarded themselves as "Methodists," evangelists and theologians. Although they had some theological conflict, they considered themselves co-workers in building God's Kingdom. Their work in the Georgia colony exposed them to American slavery. In contrast to Ramsay and Newton, there seems to be little or no myth related to Whitefield's relationship to slavery. His views do, however, clarify the uniqueness and significance of Wesley.

We receive a helpful description of Whitefield's response to slavery from Anthony Benezet. Benezet was the Philadelphia Quaker whose tract reached Wesley in 1772 and was a major factor in his joining the anti-slavery cause. Although Wesley never met Benezet, Benezet was a close friend of George Whitefield and indicates that they had discussions about slavery. In 1774, four years after Whitefield's death, Benezet wrote two

²¹This myth has been kept alive by inaccurate statements that refer to Newton as the "converted slave trader," with no clarification that his conversion occurred before he became captain of a slave ship. Fortunately, *Christian History*, Issue 81, Winter, 2004 does not make this inaccurate generalization (pp. 19–21). Unfortunately, the accompanying Christian History Society Newsletter, (Winter, 2004, 4) does continue the overgeneralization that Newton opposed the institution of slavery: "Many years later, he would denounce slavery in his *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*." In fact, Newton denounced only the slave trade, not slavery in that tract. *Christian History* (28) and Newsletter (4) indicate that it was an epileptic seizure that prevented his fourth slaving voyage, rather than a minor stroke as I suggest.

²²Wesley appealed to all who were involved to end their involvement immediately. One wonders what Newton would have thought and done had he, as a sensitive new Christian, been exposed to the ideas in Wesley's tract. Wesley's tract did not appear for another twenty years and it was fourteen years after Wesley's tract that Newton finally wrote against the slave trade.

letters to Selena, Countess of Huntingdon, Whitefield's patroness. In those letters we learn of Whitefield's views, and Benezet's response.²³

Early on, 1739, Whitefield was opposed to slavery and expressed that opposition in a published letter to the inhabitants of Virginia, Maryland, and both Carolinas. However, the next twelve years in Georgia changed his position. He struggled to make ends meet at the orphanage, Bethesda. He believed the 640 acres on which the orphanage was located should be able to support it, but the hot climate made that an overwhelming task. He eventually began to think that white persons were not capable of intense labor in such heat, but black persons were. Further, having slaves whom he could treat lovingly would add the other providential benefit, evangelization of these slaves. After the Georgia prohibition of slavery was rescinded, Whitefield and Bethesda owned some fifty slaves.

In 1751 Whitefield wrote a letter to Wesley. It clearly documents his views: if Georgia permits slavery, it may be (in God's plan) for the slaves' evangelization; Abraham of the Old Testament had slaves; the New Testament refers to servants who probably were slaves; slavery may not be so disagreeable to those who have never known liberty; hot countries cannot be cultivated without Negroes; and if some are successfully converted, this "swallows up all temporal inconveniences whatsoever."²⁴

It would be difficult to find more contrasting views of slavery than those of Wesley and Whitefield. Wesley actually counters Whitefield's argument that slaves are needed because Europeans cannot work in the heat. He cites his own labor in Georgia and states experientially that they can and he did work under such conditions.²⁵ He goes further by stating

²³For a more detailed study of Whitefield and Benezet's letters to Selena, see my "Wesley, Whitefield, A Philadelphia Quaker, and Slavery," in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Fall, 2001.

²⁴Benezet to Selena, 1774, two letters in Haverford Collection, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

²⁵Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 73, "Thoughts Upon Slavery." "For white men, even Englishmen are well able to labour in hot climates; provided they are temperate both in meat and drink, and they inure themselves to it by degrees. I speak no more than I know by experience. It appears from the thermometer that the summer heat in Georgia is frequently equal to that in Barbadoes, yea, to that under the line. And yet I and my family (eight in number) did employ all our spare time there, in felling of trees and clearing of ground, as hard labour as any Negro be employed in. The German family, likewise, forty in number, were employed in all manner of labour. And this was so far from impairing our health that we all continued perfectly well, while the idle ones round about us were swept away as with a pestilence. It is not true, therefore, that white men are not able to labour, even in hot climates, full as well as black."

that even if the climate and labor requirements necessitated a slave labor force, that does not justify it. It would be far better to have no labor accomplished than to enslave the innocent.²⁶

In this case there is no myth, only clear reality. Wesley opposed slavery and rejected all justifications for it. Whitefield justified slavery for economic and evangelization purposes. Wesley appealed to all who owned slaves to liberate them. Whitefield moved so far away from opposing slavery that he became a slave owner.²⁷

The contrast between Wesley and Whitefield is not necessarily surprising since they clearly had different opinions on several issues. Their views on slavery are also separated by years. Whitefield's letter was written twenty-one years before Wesley began his anti-slavery battle. Whitefield died four years before Wesley's tract appeared. While it is interesting to imagine a conversation between them on the topic, we have no evidence that they ever had one, or that Whitefield was fully aware of Wesley's position. However, this is not the case with two other contemporaries of Wesley, his specific deputies to America.

Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury

Two men in particular felt great loyalty to Wesley and the responsibility to carry on his work. Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury saw themselves in line with his theology and his social application of the gospel. Specifically, they both opposed slavery. In 1779, five years after Wesley's tract was published, Asbury's journal reflects strong enough opposition to slavery that he believed "if the Methodists [did] not . . . emancipate their slaves, God [would] depart from them." Asbury wrote a letter, promoting

²⁶Wesley, *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷It is interesting to note Benezet's response to Whitefield's position, especially because they were friends, but so different in their views. In his letter to Lady Huntingdon, Benezet describes both his relationship to Whitefield and how he believed Whitefield moved from opposition to support of slavery: "I have more than once conversed on this interesting subject with my esteemed friend George Whitefield decess'd. [. . .] after residing in Georgia & being habituated to the sight & use of Slaves, his judgment became so much influenced as to paliate, & in some measure, defend the use of Slaves. . . ." In other places Benezet explains that this is the same process by which many move from opposition to support of slavery. See especially his Epistle of 1754, paragraph 6, and *Short Account*, p. 4.

emancipation, to be read in the Societies, and he believed that one reason God kept him in America was to help bring about the end of slavery.²⁸

Thomas Coke, who would support ministry to slaves in the West Indies, was in league with Asbury in opposing American slavery. At the Christmas Conference in Baltimore, the organizational meeting for American Methodism in 1784, both Coke and Asbury pushed the agenda of complete emancipation. This was reflected in the Discipline. The response of the Methodist people was clear. "Coke and Asbury were threatened and slave owners would no longer allow ministers access to their slaves."²⁹ While concern for their safety would have been an issue, Coke and Asbury were probably even more concerned about having continued ministry to the slaves. According to Vickers:

It was a difficult and soul searching time for the Methodist leaders; they were convinced that slavery was wrong, but even more committed to evangelism. It appears that Asbury's fear of God departing from Methodists was forgotten or at least suspended. Coke explains, "We thought it prudent to suspend the minute concerning slavery for one year, on account of the great opposition that has been given it, especially in the new circuits, our work being in too infantile a state to push things to extremity. . . . But we agreed to present to the Assembly of Maryland, through our friends, a petition for a general emancipation, signed by as many electors as we can procure."

The leaders of American Methodism also found a way to retain access to slaves and not offend slave owners, perhaps saving their own lives. It was by modifying their message. Coke relates, "I bore a public testimony against slavery, and have found out a method of delivering it without much offence, or at least without causing a tumult: and that is, by first addressing the negroes in a very pathetic manner on the duty of servants to masters; and then the whites will receive quietly what I have to say to them." They also found ways to more effectively touch their black hearers. It appears that

²⁸In *From Wesley to Asbury* (Durham, North Carolina, 1976), 121-122, Frank Baker notes that some of Asbury's statements on slavery, including the above quote, were in Asbury's original journal, but have been deleted from the later edition. These are related to entries for Feb. 23, March 27, and April 23, 1779.

²⁹Brendlinger, *Social Justice Through the Eyes of Wesley*, 55. Frank Baker deals with the Christmas Conference in *From Wesley to Asbury*, 151-152.

Asbury took a preaching companion with him on his ministry tours, one "Black Harry."³⁰

The hard truth of this scenario is that Wesley's American apostles shared his conviction about slavery, but were in a situation that forced what they considered a pragmatic choice. Should they hold unbendingly to the conviction and possibly lose the means to extend Methodism? Or should they hold their conviction, but acquiesce on enforcing the rules among Methodists? At first it seemed a difficult call, but Coke's words indicate that he believed he had found a workable balance. In reality, this move separated Methodism from the ranks of those who univocally opposed slavery and refused to tolerate its practice among its members.

The question remains, what would Wesley have done had he been in the position of Coke and Asbury? Since there is no extant correspondence between them on the topic, the best we can do is speculate from other situations and writings of Wesley. Wesley's authoritarian style of leadership, his refusal to soften his message even when being physically attacked, and his rejection of acquiescing on a moral principle for pragmatic reasons (what he termed "necessity") indicate that he would not have chosen the path that Asbury and Coke took. Two years before his death, five years after the Christmas Conference, he addressed the matter of discipline among Methodists. In his sermon "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," he states clearly that it is a sin to retain members who do not live up to the biblical standard. In effect, the leaders participate in their sin and it reduces the Spirit's influence on the entire community. If this meant smaller numbers, it must still be done: "Who will meet me on this ground? Join me on this, or not at all."³¹ Such statements were made in regard to issues that Wesley considered far smaller moral issues (use of money and dress) than the "sum of all villanies." In 1775 Wesley pointed out the hypocrisy of colonists who called for freedom from England's tyranny while maintaining the practice of slavery: "one is screaming Murder! Slavery! the other silently bleeds and dies!"³² Would he be less direct

³⁰Brendlinger, *Social Justice Through the Eyes of Wesley*, forthcoming (Joshua Press), with first quotation from John Vickers, *Thomas Coke, Apostle to Methodism*, London, Epworth Press, 1969, 98, citing Coke's *Journal*, American Edition, 397ff., and second quotation, Vickers, 96.

³¹Wesley, *Works*, Vol. VII, 287. Sermon, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity."

³²Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 81, "A Calm Address to our American Colonies."

with Methodists who preached freedom in Christ while holding others in bondage?

The myth is that the early American Methodist leaders were not strongly opposed to slavery. The reality is that they deeply opposed it, but chose to muffle their message to maintain unity and promote growth. A second reality is that Wesley would have probably opted for a harder line against slavery, and one factor of the eventual split of 1843 would have been fully addressed half a century earlier. His strength in formative years may have caused the conflict to be addressed in the church's infancy, rather than when it was larger and entrenched, on the eve of the Civil War. There was continuity between Wesley's position and those of Coke and Asbury, but I hold that there was discontinuity between their actions and what he would have done.

Wesley and the Ending of British Slavery

Finally, we turn to the question of Wesley's actual influence on the eventual ending of British slavery. How significant was his influence? In order to answer this question, we consider three areas, his direct influence on individuals, his indirect influence on individuals, and the extent to which he effected a change in public attitudes, what I term the "climate" of England. Due to the scope of this paper, I shall only briefly mention the first two categories, and then move on to the climate issue.

Among the first generation of Wesley's followers were Coke and Asbury. Although their later position weakened, their earlier position clearly reflected Wesley's influence. Thomas Rankin was one of the first preachers Wesley sent to America (1773) and was the first Methodist recorded to preach against slavery (1775). He also addressed the Continental Congress, pointing out the hypocrisy of Americans holding slaves in bondage while crying out for liberty for themselves. This was the theme Wesley developed in his *Calm Address to our American Colonies* in 1775. In England, Samuel Bradburn had been almost like a son to Wesley. As a Methodist preacher he adopted Wesley's message and style. In what appears to be either a conscious or an unconscious tribute to Wesley, the year after Wesley's death Bradburn wrote his own tract against slavery. He also protested slavery on the personal level by not using West Indian products, supporting the Manchester boycott.³³

³³See Bradburn's *An Address to the People Called Methodists; Concerning the Wickedness of Encouraging Slavery*, London, 1792, 19 (included in an appendix in my *Social Justice Through the Eyes of Wesley*).

Other individuals formed an interactive network that directly affected the development of the legal process to end the slave trade and slavery in Britain. These were also influenced by Wesley: John Newton, Henry Venn, and William Wilberforce. After Newton left the slave trade, he served as a tide surveyor and then responded to a call to the ministry. Initially he was not encouraged by the Church of England. Wesley tried to help at this time and even encouraged Newton to serve as a Methodist itinerant preacher.³⁴ Methodists, particularly Whitefield, nurtured Newton's evangelicalism and he corresponded with Wesley on theological matters. As will be seen below, Newton's evangelicalism made him a desirable counselor during Wilberforce's spiritual quest. Newton's evangelicalism was at least nurtured by Methodism and even Wesley.

Henry Venn was the preacher of the Clapham Sect, the small group of committed Christians, including Wilberforce, who repeatedly and tirelessly put social issues, particularly the slave trade, before Parliament. Wilberforce would have heard Venn's sermons and interacted personally with him about the Christian responsibility to change society. The Clapham sect was a major influence in the antislavery victories. What is of interest to us is that Venn felt a spiritual kinship with Wesley, had been helped by Wesley's preaching and writing, and asked Wesley for a personal commission as he entered a new pastorate. That parish was Clapham, the "heart" of the evangelical group, the "Clapham Sect" that influenced Parliament to end the slave trade.³⁵

Wilberforce had numerous lines of connection with Methodism and Wesley. From the age of nine he lived for three years with an aunt who was a Methodist and admired Whitefield. Wilberforce professed conversion at age twelve. Eventually Wilberforce inherited this "Methodist home," and it was there that the life-changing conversation with William Pitt occurred (to take up the slavery cause in Parliament). The teenage faith of Wilberforce lapsed, but at age twenty-six he again embraced evangelical Christianity. At this time he heard sermons by Henry Venn (1785) and sought the advice of John Newton because he was concerned that it may be incompatible to be a politician and a Christian. Newton advised him both about his spiritual quest and encouraged him to remain in politics. It is interesting to note that Newton had been a friend of

³⁴Wesley, *Works*, Vol. II, 531 (Journal, March 13, 1760).

³⁵John Telford, *A Sect That Moved the World*, London, n.d., 19. Venn's request occurred on 21 March, 1754.

Wilberforce's aunt and uncle for many years³⁶ and that Newton and Wilberforce had been in contact for some eight years (since 1777). For the present argument it must be remembered that both Venn and Newton had been greatly influenced by the evangelical revival, of which Wesley was an integral part. Wilberforce himself felt not only sympathy for, but was a part of this movement. In 1786 he wrote in his journal, "Expect to hear myself now universally given out to be a Methodist: may God grant it may be said with truth."³⁷ Within the next three years Wilberforce paid a visit to Wesley, now eighty-six years old. Wesley journaled, "Mr. W. called upon me and we had an agreeable and useful conversation. What a blessing it is to Mr. P[jitt] to have such a friend as this!"³⁸

Wilberforce was a key factor in the fight against slavery and his life was touched both indirectly and directly by Wesley. Not only was Wesley crucial to the movement that convinced Wilberforce to enter the cause, but Wesley himself interacted with Wilberforce. Deeply concerned about slavery, Wesley had become aware of the role political figures could play in abolishing this evil. To that end, he desired to encourage Wilberforce and the last letter he wrote, only days before his death, speaks eloquently to this:

Dear Sir, Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villany, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.³⁹

³⁶Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London, Hamish Hamilton, Ltd., 1974), 32–53. Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810*, (London, Macmillan Press, LTD., 1975), 251 n., mentions that Wilberforce had been in contact with Newton since 1777.

³⁷Furneaux, 41 n., citing Wilberforce's journal, June 12, 1786.

³⁸Wesley, *Works*, Vol. IV, 445–6 (Journal, Feb. 24, 1789). Wilberforce's respect for the Wesleys can be seen in his providing an annuity for Sarah Wesley, the widow of Charles.

³⁹Wesley, *Letters*, (Telford), Vol. VIII, 264–265 (February 24, 1791).

Having been spiritually nurtured by Methodists and hoping to live up to the epithet "Methodist," Wilberforce must have been deeply encouraged by a letter from the revered founder. Especially was this the case because that founder was also unequivocally and publicly committed to the cause which had become Wilberforce's life work.

Beyond such individuals, Wesley's influence also touched the broader population. With the spread of Methodism and the evangelical revival came social developments, including education, the spread of democratic principles, the popularization of Arminianism, and increased awareness of Christian social responsibility.⁴⁰ These developments would create a climate that would encourage the populace to support reform by means such as boycott and petitions and by electing politicians who embraced values in harmony with Christian principles. How such changes in society relate to specific influences and social reform can be illustrated by particular developments. One case in point is the 1807 Parliamentary election. It was extremely close, with Wilberforce in danger of losing his Parliamentary seat in York. Aware of the danger, the common folk rallied in support of Wilberforce; Methodists comprised a substantial part of the voters and probably saved Wilberforce.⁴¹ Had Wilberforce lost, the absence of his voice in Commons in the crucial year of 1807 (abolishing of the slave trade) and the subsequent battle for emancipation would have been dramatic.

Sixteen years earlier Wilberforce himself had appealed directly to Wesley's influence. In 1791 he was trying to secure signatures for petitions against the slave trade. At the first Conference following Wesley's death he supplied Methodist ministers with Parliamentary "Evidence." Some 352,407 signatures were obtained. Significantly, 65 percent were from Methodists, with the remaining 35 percent from the rest of the non-conforming groups combined! Wilberforce was aware of Wesley's influence and knew how to utilize it. Interestingly, it was the first time public opinion was used to influence the House of Commons on slavery.⁴²

⁴⁰For a fuller development of these areas, see my *Social Justice Through The Eyes of Wesley*, chapter 6, especially 146 ff.

⁴¹See Furneaux, pp. 268-271 and Stuart Andrews, *Methodism and Society* (London, Longmans, 1970), 52. Andrews holds that without the Methodists Wilberforce probably would have lost (Eyes, 145).

⁴²Richard Butterworth, *Wesley Studies by Various Writers*, 190 (London, Charles H. Kelly, n.d. [probably 1903 or 1904]) cites these numbers. E. M. Hunt holds that this kind of public response reflects religious conviction, not political or economic considerations because these people had nothing to gain. See Hunt's *The North of England Agitation for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1780-1800*, ii, 156, 107 (unpublished M.A. thesis, Manchester, 1959).

Probably the most graphic demonstration of Wesley's influence on slavery relates to the battle *after* the 1807 fight to end the slave trade. In 1833 Parliament successfully waged war against slavery itself. How fitting that Wesley's influence should come into focus here, in what he called "the root of this complicated villany."⁴³ It is also interesting that a number of factors coalesced in the same period. In the last third of the eighteenth century the new, literate public began to emerge as a political force. It would begin to influence Parliamentary struggles. Previously, little or no influence came from the outside. And it was in these years that Wesley's followers grew to be a significant portion of the population. Several events show the crescendoing effect.

In 1788 Wesley published the *Resolutions* of the Manchester Antislavery meeting and encouraged readers to petition Parliament. The petition campaign of 1791-92 was very successful.⁴⁴ In 1814 the populace successfully brought pressure on Parliament. While France had agreed to end their slave trade in five years, they were not moving toward that end and England's Viscount Castlereagh seemed ready to ignore France's lack of action. English abolitionists launched a petition campaign, securing three quarters of a million signatures in slightly more than a month. Castlereagh responded and pressured France. For the next twelve years Methodists "became the main driving force in the campaign for amelioration and emancipation."⁴⁵ As the final surge for emancipation developed from 1830, Methodists not only became involved, but saw their involvement (especially regarding petitions) as an expression of their faith.⁴⁶ Clearly, they had caught Wesley's vision of the inseparability of theology and life, of the Christian's responsibility to the downtrodden. So responsive and infectious were Methodists to a West Indian atrocity that someone observed, they "have not only caught fire themselves, but have succeeded in igniting the whole country."⁴⁷

⁴³Wesley, *Works*, Vol. XI, 70, "Thoughts Upon Slavery."

⁴⁴Wesley, *The Arminian Magazine*, May, 1788, Vol. XI, 208-9. See Robert William Fogel, *The Rise and Fall of American Slavery, Without Consent of Contract Norton*, 1989), 212.

⁴⁵Robert William Fogel, *The Rise and Fall of American Slavery, Without Consent of Contract Norton*, 1989), 217, quotation from 225.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 225-226.

⁴⁷Zachary Macaulay to Brougham, 13 May, 1833, quoted in Roger Anstey, "The Pattern of British Abolitionism," citing the Brougham MSS, 10544. Anstey's essay is in *Antislavery, Religion and Reform*, ed., Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher, Archon Books, 1980, 28.

By early 1833 one in seven adults were calling for emancipation of all English slaves. With most of these coming from dissenting churches, Methodists were a major factor. This evangelical influence had earlier even brought about the pressure for Parliamentary candidates to commit to support the abolition of slavery. As a result, some two hundred candidates pledged to support emancipation.⁴⁸ According to anti-slavery writer Robert Fogel, the voting behaviour of members of Parliament, especially those who were members of dissenting churches, was influenced by religion, and they tended to support emancipation. However, this group of MPs was too small to sway the outcome on major issues. Therefore, the more complex factor involved broader political issues and the government's concern to secure a large part of the voters. Methodists were the largest part of dissenters and were known to be united in support of emancipation. As a political move the Grey government strategized that, by supporting emancipation, they would win the support of Methodists and other dissenters. They needed this Methodist and dissenting support for other issues which they considered more important than emancipation.⁴⁹ For this political reason, the government took decisive action; the Emancipation Act was passed and was signed by the King on 28 August, 1833, becoming operative on 1 August, 1834.⁵⁰ Thus, it appears that emancipation was passed in order to secure Methodist and other dissenting support for the government.

The deeper and more subtle issue related to Wesley is that Methodists were in agreement on emancipation; more than 95% of Wesleyan Methodists signed petitions in the 1832–33 petition drive.⁵¹ Wesley's followers had grown sufficiently to be considered important enough to be courted by the government. His influence had worked to change society, even in ways he may not have predicted.

Conclusion

Was Wesley the single most important factor in ending British slavery? The answer is probably "no." Such a statement would fall in the

⁴⁸Fogel, 227. Fogel, 230 indicates that dissenters comprised 21% of the electorate by 1832 and Methodists were the largest segment of this group.

⁴⁹Fogel, 229–230.

⁵⁰Ibid., 228.

⁵¹During the 1832–3 petition drive Wesleyan and other Methodists supplied more than 79% of the nearly 300,000 signatures (236,592 of the total 297,672). Baptists supplied 11.64 % and Congregationalists 8.87%. See Seymour Drescher, "Two Variants of Anti-Slavery From Slavery to Freedom, NYU Press, 1999, 40.

realm of myth. Was Wesley a very significant factor in the abolition of British slavery? The reality is a clear "yes." He and his movement directly influenced those in political leadership, such as William Wilberforce. He and the movement also influenced many of those who would be in Parliament a generation later when the issue was decided. And more broadly, the masses of English, the "common folk" who signed petitions and elected members of Parliament were greatly influenced by Methodism, which had become the largest dissenting group in England.

The contrast is seen in America where Methodist leadership were not as consistently opposed to slavery and the cross-section of American lay Methodists were not of one mind on slavery. Also, American Methodist leadership did not have the level of influence in government that their English counterpart had. The result was that America would postpone addressing slavery for more than a generation after Britain and then mainly because of the threat of secession. Wesley's influence in Britain was much stronger and resulted in earlier, more decisive action. His influence does become apparent in his American followers in the 1840s when American Methodism split predominantly over slavery; Wesley's personal position was cited as the official stance of both Wesleyan and Free Methodists.

Application for the 21st Century

Words and ideas can change the world; they have and they still can. John Wesley's words and ideas changed his world. His principles of justice, love, and social action can influence our ideas and words. It behooves his followers to determine the present "sum of all villainies," to seek out the malignancies that infiltrate human society, and to address them with the same commitment with which Wesley attacked slavery. At the age of sixty-nine, Wesley believed he *must* do something. So must we. Once again, realities will overpower myths. Once again, there is the possibility that the world can be changed.



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