



Wilberforce, Nightingale and King Jr: The Wesleyan Tradition as a Basis for Social Justice and Ethical Living

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Abstract: This article probes the Wesleyan tradition's contribution to ethical living and social justice in contemporary discussions. It provides a brief overview of the Wesleyan tradition, connects it to personal faith and social duty, emphasizes the Holy Spirit's role in transforming people and groups, as well as the importance of communal holiness. Through critical analysis and theological reflections, this article demonstrates that key principles in the Wesleyan tradition can inform broader Christian engagement in ethical living and social activism in various contexts, with reference to the lives and examples of William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King Jr, and Florence Nightingale. Accordingly, it is demonstrated that Christians today can work towards a just, diverse, equitable, and inclusive society through an application of the key principles of the Wesleyan tradition.

Keywords: *Christian Activism • Communal Holiness • Ethical Living • Social Justice • Wesleyan Tradition*

Introduction

The emergence of the Wesleyan tradition in the 18th century marked a theological watershed that would alter Christian spirituality up to the present. Despite John Wesley's religious upbringing, education, and vocation as an Anglican priest, he came to feel a personal spiritual deficit. This sense of emptiness caused him to search for the deeper meaning of personal faith in Jesus. He subsequently developed a theology oriented around the notion that faith in Jesus and an embrace of the spirit makes salvation achievable, and that promoting social justice (defined in this essay as actions and inactions that generally aim at fairness, equity, and equal opportunities for all stakeholders) and ethical living is a sacred responsibility of all believers.¹

Describing personal holiness as "Christian perfection," Wesley considered it critical for a believer's spiritual growth.² For him, Christian perfection was a lifetime process toward Christlikeness. This process required self-examination, contrition, and dependence on the Holy Spirit's transformative power. This emphasis on personal holiness has significant implications for ethical living, as it encourages believers to constantly seek to align their actions with their beliefs in all their encounters.

¹ John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 27-32, 37-42; Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 45-55, 101-112.

² John Wesley, "Christian Perfection," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, ed. Albert Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 103.

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The Wesleyan tradition also emphasizes the importance of social responsibility.³ Believing that all believers have the responsibility to improve their communities, Wesley participated in various forms of Christian activism such as the campaign for reform in prisons and the abolition of slavery. Wesley's notion of social justice has become a marked feature of Wesleyan tradition, influencing various Wesleyans and non-Wesleyans alike. Today, the Wesleyan tradition remains relevant for ethical living and social justice activism. Its emphasis on personal faith and social duty provides a framework for all Christians to practically engage in promoting justice and ethical living in their communities.⁴ Also, the attention given to communal holiness inspires believers towards ethical living and contributes to a more just and equitable society. With its strong foundation in shared human values, compassionate social outreach towards marginalized sub-groups, advocacy for positive social regard for all, inclusivity, inter-group dialogue, and expansive spiritual drive towards vulnerable populations, communal holiness can provide a strong social platform for fostering and maintaining social justice inside and outside the Christian religious community.

Whilst studies have been offered on the contribution of a Wesleyan ethical framework within the Methodist tradition, more attention to its influence beyond is warranted.⁵ It is precisely this that this article intends to shed light on, combining theological reflection and critical analysis to illustrate the significance of Wesleyan tradition in social discourses of the 19th and 20th centuries. Here, I shall explore the case studies of social reformers ostensibly outside of the Wesleyan fold, namely William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King Jr. King is repeated and Florence Nightingale. In doing so this article builds on previous studies that trace a line between the Wesleyan tradition and ethical living and social justice more broadly.⁶

This article offers a brief overview of the Wesleyan tradition, noting its key principles—God's love, personal faith, communal holiness, and social duty, before moving to examine the connection between the Wesleyan tradition and social justice reforms. I then discuss the relevance of theological reflection and critical analysis in evaluating the contributions of the Wesleyan tradition to ethical living and social justice activism of the case studies described above. Finally, the article discusses criticisms offered against Wesleyan interactions with social justice activism and suggests some potential means of navigating them.

By employing critical analysis and theological reflection, this article seeks to demonstrate that critical insights from the Wesleyan tradition can serve as a framework for ethical living and social justice activism in various present-day contexts. As shall be seen, an examination of this can better equip Christian believers to engage in meaningful and effective ways to create a better society. By living out the key principles of the Wesleyan tradition, Christians can become powerful agents for driving positive changes in their communities, working towards a more just, diverse, equitable, and inclusive society.

The Wesleyan Tradition – ‘Communal Holiness’ to Social Justice

The Wesleyan tradition within Protestant Christianity finds its roots in the ministry of the 18th-century evangelical reformer brothers, John and Charles Wesley. This theological tradition is characterized by several key principles that shape its beliefs and practices, creating a distinctive framework for understanding and living out the Christian faith. God's love is central and foundational to the Wesleyan tradition. Wesleyans view God's love as the cornerstone of Christian theology, permeating and informing all aspects of faith and practice.⁷ It is through God's love that believers are inspired and drawn toward salvation, experiencing the transformative power of God's grace:

“Let all your thoughts, words, and works, tend to his glory. Set your heart firm on him, and on other things only as they are in and from him. Let your soul be filled with so entire a love of him, that you may love nothing but for his sake. Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to his glory in all your actions.”⁸

³ Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” 262.

⁴ Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” 29, 30.

⁵ Darryl W. Stephens, *Methodist Morals: Social Principles and the Public Church's Witness* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2016).

⁶ Stephens, “Methodists Morals.”

⁷ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. VI, ed. Thomas Jackson (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 509.

⁸ John Wesley, “The Circumcision of the Heart,” Sermon 17, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, II:10, retrieved from WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed 5th October 2023).

God's love actively absolves individuals of their sins, converts their hearts, and empowers them to live out their faith in the world. Equally, through the notion of justification by faith Wesleyans affirm that salvation is a gift from God, received through faith rather than through works or human merit.⁹ Seeking to disregard prejudice, legalism, and self-righteousness, faith is seen as God's gift to humanity:

"[...] by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification. So that, for the sake of his well-beloved Son, of what he hath done and suffered for us, God now vouchsafes, on one only condition, (which himself also enables us to perform,) both to remit the punishment due to our sins, to reinstate us in his favour, and to restore our dead souls to spiritual life, as the earnest of life eternal."¹⁰

Faith enables believers to reconcile with God and empowers them to experience God's transformative grace and mercies, giving them hope in salvation.

Integral also to the Wesleyan theological tradition is the concept of sanctification, understood as a lifelong process of becoming more holy and increasingly conformed to the image of Christ.¹¹ Wesley saw it as an extension of justification:

"This is 'sanctification;' which is, indeed, in some degree, the immediate fruit of justification, but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature. The one implies what God does for us through his Son; the other, what he works in us by his Spirit."¹²

Wesleyans recognize that sanctification is not a one-time event but an ongoing journey of transformation. It requires the active cooperation of human will alongside the enabling grace of God. Sanctification involves progressive steps starting with the renewal of the believer's heart, mind and actions, ultimately, ideally, ending in a transformed life that embodies Jesus' character and teachings.¹³ Grace is essential for spiritual growth and sanctification. This can take many forms, from engaging with scripture, prayer and worship to fellowship within the Christian community and engaging with the 'ministry of the word': "Whatsoever good is in man, or is done by man, God is the author and doer of it. Thus is his grace free in all; that is, no way depending on any power or merit in man, but on God alone, who freely gave us his own Son, and "with him freely giveth us all things."¹⁴ Through these practices, believers encounter the presence of God, receive divine guidance and empowerment, and experience spiritual growth.¹⁵ Grace thus serves as pathways for nurturing and deepening one's relationship with God, fostering spiritual transformation, and equipping believers for effective service in the world.

Beyond these, the Wesleyan tradition extends its understanding of holiness beyond individual piety to include what we might regard as forms of social justice today.¹⁶ Acts of social justice are seen as a natural outflow of genuine holiness and a working commitment to the creation and maintenance of a more just and equitable world. Holiness connects believers' internal states to all aspects of their external behaviours.¹⁷ It encompasses personal transformation through the work of the Holy Spirit, which inspires believers to actively demonstrate love, service, and sacrifice in their encounters with God and other human beings.

The nature of holiness in the Wesleyan tradition is characterized by a deep commitment to loving God and others.¹⁸ This love is not simply a sentiment or emotion, but it is demonstrated in a life of selflessness, compassion,

⁹ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. VI, 509; Kevin M. Watson, "John Wesley's Sermon 'Justification by Faith': A Brief Summary," posted on May 19, 2020, Accessed from <https://kevinmwatson.com/2020/05/19/john-wesleys-sermon-justification-by-faith-a-brief-summary/>; John Wesley, *John Wesley's Sermons 5-8 of 44 (in Today's English): Justification by Faith, the Righteousness of Faith, the Way to the Kingdom and the First-Fruits of the Spirit*, trans. James Hargreaves (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

¹⁰ John Wesley, "Justification by Faith," Sermon 5, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, I:8, retrieved from WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed 5th October 2023).

¹¹ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. VI, 5-6.

¹² Wesley, "Justification by Faith," Sermon 5, I:1.

¹³ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. VIII, 329.

¹⁴ John Wesley, "Free Grace," Sermon 128, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, I:3, retrieved from WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed 5th October 2023).

¹⁵ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. VI, 5-6.

¹⁶ John Wesley, *The Nature of Holiness* (Bloomington: Bethany House, 1988), 14, 193.

¹⁷ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. VI, 44.

¹⁸ John Wesley, "The Way of the Kingdom," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 4, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 223, 224.

and service. It includes not only inward devotion and personal piety but also outward expressions of goodness and kindness toward others. Wesley believed that a holy life is the life of love and that loving God with all our being was the essence of holiness.¹⁹ Far from being an individual pursuit, holiness is best cultivated in a community with others:

“The royal law of heaven and earth [...] implies that we love our brother also.”²⁰

Christianity, as Wesley saw it, requires believers to live in fellowship with other believers, continually encouraging and supporting one another in their spiritual journey:

“For he hath commanded us, not only to love our neighbor, that is, all men, as ourselves—to desire and pursue their happiness as sincerely and steadily as our own—but also to love many of his creatures in the strictest sense; to delight in them, to enjoy them: Only in such a manner and measure as we know and feel, not to indispose but to prepare us for the enjoyment of Him.”²¹

Communal living offers believers the opportunity to care for others and model genuine selflessness, faith, and dedication to the creation and maintenance of a just and equitable community. Faith, in this tradition, is not solely a personal matter but also calls for active engagement in addressing societal issues and promoting social holiness. As a concept, social holiness emerged from Wesley’s strong integration of personal piety and transformative social engagement (he used the term “communal holiness”). The Christian is expected to extend and incorporate the beneficence of personal purity and moral uprightness into all engagement with others in the community. In line with this emphasis on communal holiness, the Wesleyan tradition calls believers to personal piety and personal roles in establishing a just society.²² Social holiness translates God’s love and mercy into compassionate acts that uplift other humans. It includes promoting equality, opposing injustice and oppression, and advocating for the marginalized and vulnerable.

Moreover, the Wesleyan tradition emphasizes the kingdom of God as a present reality that is growing and expanding until its full realization at the end of time. The kingdom of God is understood to encompass spiritual issues as well as ordinary aspects of life, such as efforts towards justice in society and ethical living. Wesley described the Kingdom of God as God’s reign in believers’ hearts, transforming their lives and empowering them to bring about change in society through ethical living and social action: “This holiness and happiness, joined in one, are sometimes styled, in the inspired writings, “the kingdom of God,” (as by our Lord in the text,) and sometimes, “the kingdom of heaven.” It is termed “the kingdom of God,” because it is the immediate fruit of Gods reigning in the soul. So soon as ever he takes unto himself his mighty power, and sets up his throne in our hearts, they are instantly filled with this “righteousness, and peace, and joy in the holy Ghost.” It is called “the kingdom of heaven” because it is (in a degree) heaven opened in the soul.”²³ His sermons highlighted the this-worldly aspects of the kingdom of God, emphasizing its relevance to the here and now.²⁴ For Wesley, the kingdom of God was not just a spiritual reality but encompassed all aspects of life. He believed that the kingdom of God was the foundation for justice and ethical living. The kingdom of God stresses the divine values and principles of justice, peace, love, and compassion. Christians who are part of this kingdom have a duty to live out these values and principles and work towards establishing a just and equitable society. The concept of the kingdom of God, in Wesleyan conceptions, is inseparable from the call to ethical living and social justice.

Accordingly, the Wesleyan tradition places great emphasis on communal living and social duty, rooted in the belief that salvation is not solely an individual experience but a communal one. Wesley believed that the Christian faith was not solely about personal salvation and individual piety, but it also involved promoting social justice and

¹⁹ Wesley, “The Way of the Kingdom,” 219.

²⁰ John Wesley, “The Circumcision of the Heart,” Sermon 17, I:11-12.

²¹ John Wesley, “On Love,” Sermon 139, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, II, retrieved from WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed 5th October 2023).

²² Wesley, “The Way of the Kingdom,” 220.

²³ John Wesley, “The Way of the Kingdom,” Sermon 7, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, I:12, retrieved from WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed 5th October 2023).

²⁴ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. VI, 509.

working for the common good. In this, the community of believers is a vital part of the spiritual journey and plays an important role in promoting social holiness. In his famed sermon “The Character of a Methodist,” Wesley outlined the importance of social duty in the Christian’s life, reiterating the sacred obligation of loving neighbors as oneself and actively promoting societal growth.²⁵

Characterizations of the kingdom of God as one of justice and peace form the premise for a call towards ethical living and social justice. This call enjoins believers to renounce and eliminate poverty, inequality, and oppression from society, working towards the realization of God’s kingdom on earth. As an example, Wesley himself pursued the resolution of social issues such as slavery, poverty, education, and healthcare, actively engaging in efforts to bring about positive change in society.²⁶ He discouraged the consumption of alcoholic beverages, a serious social issue in his time, and made the gospel accessible to the general public through his outdoor evangelistic campaigns and widely distributed literature. Moreover, through his leadership, early Methodists established financial support schemes such as loan funds, credit unions, and other mutual aid associations to assist members encountering financial hardships. Today, scholars such as Joerg Rieger and Kathryn Tanner continue to apply the Wesleyan notions of the kingdom of God in contemporary social justice discourses including debates on racial and environmental justice, as well as economic parity.²⁷ This demonstrates the ongoing relevance of the concept of the kingdom of God in the Wesleyan tradition and its close connection to the call for ethical living and social justice.

In theological reflection, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral serves as a framework for understanding and interpreting scripture. Developed by John Wesley, it incorporates four sources: scripture itself, tradition, reason, and Christian experience. This comprehensive approach allows for a balanced understanding of theology and faith, integrating biblical teachings, the wisdom of the Christian tradition, rational reflection, and personal encounter with God. The Wesleyan tradition’s dynamism and diversity defy simplistic categorization, but its core themes, such as the love of God, justification by faith, sanctification, means of grace, and social holiness, provide a foundation for understanding its theological perspectives and contributions. With a commitment to transformative love, holiness, and engagement with the world, the Wesleyan tradition continues to shape and impact individuals and groups within and without it.

The principles of the Wesleyan tradition inspire ethical living in several ways. First, it challenges believers to examine their lives and to identify areas where they may not be living up to their Christian calling. This self-examination induces penitence, giving way to a renewed dedication to live as God’s will determines. “Christian life requires self-knowledge” that fosters “accountable discipleship, self-examination, and repentance within a community of forgiveness and love.”²⁸ Second, it empowers believers to live lives of integrity. This means that they seek to align their actions with their beliefs, avoiding hypocrisy and inconsistency. Believers who are dedicated to holiness do not have any doubleness in their lives. The believer eventually -

“takes on the holy nature of God to be equipped to serve his God as well as serve others. Holiness is eternal Christ-like character of integrity and justice that the believer can partake of [...] [holiness] continually molds [sic] his holy character to endure all things [...] Holiness will fan, sweep, and cleanse the temple of the believer’s spirit, soul, and body [...] [leading] believer into paths of righteousness that develops a holy character of integrity, justice, and honesty that establishes a believer in his eternal faith work with God.”²⁹

Personal conducts, thoughts, and feelings are the same whether in private or in public. Honesty and openness characterize an individuals dealings.

²⁵ Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” 26-48.

²⁶ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984).

²⁷ See Joerg Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville: Wesley’s Foundry Books, 2018) and Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*, 13th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022).

²⁸ Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 131.

²⁹ Lynn Russell, *The Human Sacrifice* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005), 97.

Third, it encourages believers to be of service to others. Love for God and other humans engenders sensitivity toward other human needs in their contexts and compels them to look for practical ways of resolving these human needs. God's love "makes the purpose of life and humankind theocentric. The orientation of the human mind towards God, to love God, makes the human theocentric. Through finding God's image in the other persons, society becomes theocentric. Then God abides in everyone and everywhere. This enables the spiritualization and transfiguration of the world."³⁰ The more consciously we recognize social injustices the more inspired we become to act as change agents. This may involve volunteering in the community, donating to charity, or simply being a listening ear to someone who is struggling. Lastly, the Wesleyan tradition requires believers to be agents of social change. This may involve advocating for policy changes, supporting social justice organizations, or simply speaking out against injustice when it is witnessed. When Christians apply these principles to daily living, they create supportive communities made up of "a living faith, an expectant hope, a humble love for God and one's neighbor."³¹ It is this that this paper now turns to.

The Wesleyan Tradition and Social Justice

The Wesleyan tradition has a rich history of championing social justice causes, demonstrating a profound commitment to making a positive impact in the world.³² John Wesley stood as a passionate advocate for social justice, fearlessly raising his voice against the injustices of his time. Wesley actively spoke out against prevalent injustices such as slavery, poverty, and various forms of oppression. He described slave traders as "man stealers—the worst of all thieves, in comparison of whom highwaymen and house breakers are innocent! What then are most traders in negroes, procurers of servants for America, and all who list soldiers by lies, tricks, or enticements."³³ Wesley's opposition to slavery saw him regularly writing to advance the cause of abolitionism. His *Letters/sermons, A Calm Address to Our American Colonies* (1775), and especially *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774), influenced the beginning of anti-slavery associations in Great Britain.³⁴ Through his writings, Wesley effectively communicated the moral imperative of abolishing slavery, inspiring others to join the cause and contributing significantly to the advancement of abolitionism. But his critics adduce subtle instances of racism in his writings and speeches to denigrate his total efforts against slavery. Olaudah Equiano, an African writer and abolitionist, calls out Wesley's description of Africans in condescending undertones, revealing subtle racial bias.³⁵ For example, Equiano hints of Wesley's subtle paternalistic view of Africans that often described them as lost and requiring healing.³⁶ However, Wesley's claim that slavery was incompatible with any "degree of either justice or mercy" demonstrated his overall disposition towards slavery and racial discrimination.³⁷ He also went beyond words by establishing educational institutions, hospitals, and other initiatives aimed at uplifting the marginalized and providing them with opportunities for a better life. Karen D. Scheib for example states "Wesley opened a medical clinic and established dispensaries to provide simple, affordable medicines. He wrote and distributed a small tract entitled *Primitiv Physick* that helped laypersons care for their own illnesses without the help of physicians."³⁸

Studies have explored the relationship between a Wesleyan call toward ethical living and social justice and the Methodist communities embodying them. For example, Richard P. Heitzenrater's "The Poor and the People Called Methodist" discusses the Wesleyan commitment to social justice from its beginnings in the 18th century.³⁹

³⁰ S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 109.

³¹ Knight III, 139.

³² Sider, *The Wesleyan Imperative: A Theological Argument for Social Justice*, 11.

³³ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1853), 539.

³⁴ Irv A. Brendlinger, *Social Justice Through the Eyes of Wesley: John Wesley's Theological Challenge to Slavery* (Ontario: Joshua Press, 2006). David N. Field, *Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy: Theological Allusions in John Wesley's Thoughts upon Slavery*, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 47, no. 1 (2021), 1-20.

³⁵ Alan Richardson & Debbie Lee, *Early Black British Writing: Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, and Others* (United Kingdom: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

³⁶ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, vol. 1 (*Chapel Hill*: University of North Carolina, 2001).

³⁷ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. by Thomas Jackson, vol. 11 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 70-72.

³⁸ Karen D. Scheib, "Christian Commitment to Public Well-Being: John Wesley's "Sensible Regimen" and *Primitive Physick*," in *Religion as a Social Determinant of Public Health*, ed. Ellen L. Idler (New York: Oxford Academic, 2014), 113.

³⁹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, "The Poor and the People Called Methodist," in *The Poor and the People Called Methodists 1729–1999*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Kingswood, 2002), 15-38.

His examination of the Wesleyan emphasis on works of mercy, such as providing assistance to the poor, advocating for social justice, and establishing institutions to address poverty demonstrates a firm foundation for Wesleyan social engagement and historical efforts at social justice. He acknowledges how Wesley's care for the poor and marginalized grew into a national program in Great Britain: "By the eighteenth century the whole system had become a social program of national welfare."⁴⁰ Equally, Ronald J. Sider explores the strong commitment of the Wesleyan tradition to social justice in highlighting the theological foundations of Wesleyanism, such as prevenient grace and entire sanctification, which offer direct application to work in social justice.⁴¹ He writes, "we could do so much better by returning to the example of Jesus! We must reclaim a full-orbed biblical understanding of the total mission of the church if we are to seize the astounding opportunities for both evangelism and social transformation offered at this moment in history [...] I long for the day when every village, town, and city has congregations of Christians so in love with Jesus Christ that they lead scores of people to accept him as personal Savior and Lord every year—and so sensitive to the cry of the poor and oppressed that they work vigorously for justice, peace, and freedom."⁴²

Theodore W. Jennings Jr. draws on John Wesley's perspective on economic matters within the Wesleyan tradition, claiming that Wesley emphasized economic justice and the well-being of the poor whilst advocating for responsible use of wealth, fair wages, and generosity in ways that challenged prevailing economic ideologies.⁴³ David N. Field also explores the relationship between Wesleyanism and social justice. Field argues that Wesley's theology of holiness, rooted in love for others, leads to a commitment to social justice.⁴⁴ He emphasizes the importance of works of mercy, advocacy, and addressing unjust social structures.⁴⁵ Focusing on John Wesley's opposition to slavery, Iva A. Brendlinger argues that Wesley's theology of prevenient grace, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection formed the foundation of his anti-slavery stance and that Wesley's belief in the inherent worth of all individuals, the Christian call to combat injustice, and the pursuit of peace and reconciliation is relevant in addressing contemporary social injustice.⁴⁶ More recently, Joerg Rieger has collaborated with other scholars like José Carlos de Souza, Helmut Renders, and Paulo Ayres Mattos to apply John Wesley's theological thoughts to social justice, social engagement, and ethics.⁴⁷ For them, grace understood as "what Christ can do in the lives of human beings and their communities" is a crucial basis for present-day social justice advocacy.⁴⁸

These examples demonstrate the tangible impact of the Wesleyan tradition in the realm of social justice. By aligning their core beliefs with action, Wesleyans actively seek to work towards creating a more just and equitable world. Belief in the perpetual link between love for God and love for other humans, coupled with the conviction that every individual possesses inherent worth and dignity, propels Wesleyans to work towards social reforms. At its foundation stands Jesus' example and vision of a just society built upon principles of love and compassion.

The Wesleyan tradition's understanding of Christian holiness further emphasizes the importance of pursuing justice for all. It recognizes that personal piety and the pursuit of justice are intricately intertwined. These principles enjoin all followers of the Wesleyan tradition to actively work towards creating a more equitable and just world for all individuals. Their faith prompts them to actively engage in efforts to alleviate social injustices such as poverty, homelessness, and environmental concerns to create enduring systemic change.

In the face of pervasive injustice, the Wesleyan tradition offers invaluable insights and resources to the broader Church community. It inspires and compels the Church to advocate for the marginalized, amplifying their voices and working towards a more just society. Today, Wesleyans continue to be actively involved in

⁴⁰ Heitzenrater, 2002, 19.

⁴¹ Ronald J. Sider, *The Wesleyan Imperative: A Theological Argument for Social Justice* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 13.

⁴² Ronald J. Sider, *Evangelism and Social Action: Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* (London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 15-16.

⁴³ Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

⁴⁴ David N. Field, "Holiness, Social Justice and the Mission of the Church: John Wesley's Insights in Contemporary Context," *Holiness Studies Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015): 178.

⁴⁵ Field, "Holiness, Social Justice and the Mission of the Church: John Wesley's Insights in Contemporary Context," 197.

⁴⁶ Brendlinger, *Social Justice through the Eyes of Wesley: John Wesley's Theological Challenge to Slavery*, 127.

⁴⁷ Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology*.

⁴⁸ Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology*, p. 39.

social justice work. They passionately advocate for policies that promote justice, dedicating their time and resources to assist those in need, striving to change societal attitudes and perceptions. By grounding their social justice efforts in theological principles, the Wesleyan tradition demonstrates a faithful and impactful model that contributes to the Church's overarching mission of embodying God's love and pursuing justice for all. It strongly inspires the Church to advocate for the marginalized, amplify the voices of the voiceless, whilst working towards dismantling systems of oppression. It is this broader influence I will now turn to, examining the influence of the Wesleyan tradition in the works of William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King Junior, and Florence Nightingale. These persons, though not members of the Methodist church, were inspired to work for justice, equality, and social transformation in their various life contexts, with the influence of Wesleyan teaching tangible within them.

The Wesleyan Tradition and non-Wesleyan Social Reformers

The strong focus on social justice and the creation of a more equitable and just society within the Wesleyan tradition have instrumentally inspired many throughout time to work for social change and renewal. Although the individuals described below had different theological viewpoints and came from various non-Wesleyan backgrounds, that the Wesleyan tradition's pragmatic elements fuelled their commitment to social reforms in various contexts is, I argue, demonstrable. An emphasis on God's love, justification by faith, sanctification, means of grace, and social holiness not only provide a shared theological foundation but motivated these notable social reformers to work for social justice. Additionally, the belief in the kingdom of God as a present reality and the call to ethical living and social justice established a working context for them to address social issues such as slavery, poverty, inequality, oppression, and discrimination. As shall be explored, William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King Jr., and Florence Nightingale represent non-Wesleyan social reformers who were motivated by Wesleyan traditional core values about a just, diverse, equitable, and inclusive community.

William Wilberforce

William Wilberforce, an evangelical Anglican Christian and key member of the Clapham Sect, an influential evangelical Christian group in the Clapham area of London during the 18th and early 19th centuries, was driven by his deep faith and belief in a duty to help others.⁴⁹ His involvement in the Sect fostered his zeal for social reforms. The Sect's disciplined activism provided a framework for channelling his Christian conviction into social activism. He accepted the view that Christian believers had a mandate to resolve the evils of society and to work for the general good of all.⁵⁰ Wilberforce's 1797 book *A Practical View* became a manifesto of this philosophy, criticizing what he saw as the lukewarm Christianity of the day.

Hannah Spooner, Wilberforce's aunt, significantly connected him to the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. As a devoted Methodist herself and advocate for social justice causes, Spooner's spiritual guidance and example left an indelible mark on her nephew's character and values. David Hempton notes, Spooner "played a key role in Wilberforce's religious development."⁵¹ Wilberforce embraced the Methodist ethos of applying spiritual convictions to reforming societal ills like slavery and poverty through her mentorship. In his own words, Wilberforce acknowledged the "remarkable" legacy of his aunt," stating: "I am indebted to the early instructions and example of my excellent aunt."⁵² Elsewhere, he acknowledges that his aunt's Wesleyan spiritual guidance inspired him to join the abolitionist movement. "It was through her that I imbibed those principles and feelings that, from an early period of my life, led me to join the uncompromising enemies of every species of oppression."⁵³ Her influence instilled

⁴⁹ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 70.

⁵⁰ Michael Murray Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2002), 136–137, 144; Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Pringle: Pringle, 2007), 336.

⁵¹ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 150.

⁵² William Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. 1, ed. Robert Isaac Wilberforce (London: J. Murray, 1838), 15.

⁵³ John Wolfe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism* (Westmont: IVP Academic, 2007), 166.

in Wilberforce the mindset that true Christianity demanded actively working to uplift the oppressed and transform unjust systems.

Through Hannah Wilberforce's influence and the echoes of Wesleyan theology within the Clapham Sect, William Wilberforce embraced some Evangelical Anglican and Wesleyan principles that fuelled his passion for social justice.⁵⁴ The Clapham Sect was primarily an Evangelical Anglican group with significant connections with Methodist principles interested in social reforms in 18th and 19th century England). William Wilberforce, Henry Thornton, and Zachary Macaulay were some of the members of this Sect with significant Methodist connections. Thornton's financial support to religious missions, including Methodist missions, and Macaulay's activities such as writing material for evangelical and Methodist-sponsored abolition movements aligned them to Wesleyan teachings and social reform concepts.⁵⁵ Wilberforce was surrounded by a framework that prioritized personal piety and active engagement in social reform. This convergence of influences played a crucial role in Wilberforce's transformation into a prominent figure in the fight against slavery, pointing towards the interconnectedness of Wesleyanism and social justice within his life and the wider context of the Clapham Sect.

Further, William Wilberforce's close friendship with John Wesley himself, and other Methodists significantly influenced his religious beliefs and dedication to social reform.⁵⁶ Meeting Wesley in 1771, Wilberforce found in him a mentor who shaped his understanding of personal holiness and the importance of social improvement.⁵⁷ Wesley's emphasis on living a holy life and actively working to better society resonated with Wilberforce, who believed that Christianity should be used to uplift the impoverished and marginalized. Wilberforce's sentiments about the connection between personal piety and social reforms are reflected in his "A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade" in 1788. Arguing that genuine Christian faith contradicts the institution of slavery, he thought the evils of Christian slavery were more abhorring than what he saw as the pernicious influence of African 'Paganism':

"But what an idea does it convey of the abhorred system, which, with coadjutors abler than myself, I have been so long endeavouring to abolish; that, just as in Africa, it has forced Christianity to acknowledge the superior power of Mahometanism, in rooting out the nature superstitions, and in instructing and civilizing the inhabitants – so in our possessions in the western hemisphere, it combines the profession of the Christian faith with a description of slavery, in many respects more bitter in its sufferings, than that which the very darkness of Paganism itself could scarcely tolerate."⁵⁸

Driven by his convictions, Wilberforce tirelessly championed the abolition of slavery.⁵⁹ Though his initial anti-slavery bill was defeated in Parliament in 1787, he continued his advocacy until the bill was passed in 1807. This bill outlawed slavery throughout the British Empire, although oppressive systems of indentured labour and 'apprenticeship' would remain for decades after. Wilberforce's relationship with Wesleyanism and a drive towards social justice is tangible in his actions, and indeed Wesley's relationship with Wilberforce appears to have been one of great significance. In his final correspondence with Wilberforce in 1791, Wesley urged him to continue his fight against slavery; "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."⁶⁰

Drawing on this Wesleyan foundation Wilberforce authored influential books and pamphlets addressing social and religious issues. Works such as *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Europe* Thoughts on the

⁵⁴ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010).

⁵⁶ Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. 1, 15, 24-5, 136-137.

⁵⁷ Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 11-12, 152-153; Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect*, 149-152, 203-204.

⁵⁸ William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of York shire* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1807), 293.

⁵⁹ Through his influence, key Methodists like Thomas Clarkson strongly opposed slavery in the British Empire [see David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 92-117].

⁶⁰ John Wesley, "Letter to William Wilberforce," (February 24, 1791), in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, vol. 8, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 265.

African Slave Trade and A Letter on the Inefficacy of the Slave and “A Letter on the Inefficacy of the Slave Trade” reflected his Wesleyan spiritual roots and contributed to the dissemination of the message of social justice inherent in Wesleyanism. He believed that Christians had a duty to “promote the temporal and spiritual good of all men” and that slavery violates “the most sacred rights of human nature,” making it the cruelest “oppressive system.”⁶¹ His affinity and practical closeness to the Wesleyan tradition has been variously described. American historian, Donald G. Matthews, mentions him as “one of the most important allies of American Methodists in the fight against slavery” while Irish historian of Evangelicalism David Hempton, describes him as “one of the most prominent examples of the Methodist commitment to social reform.”⁶² Wilberforce’s unwavering commitment to abolition exemplifies the strong connection between his work and the Wesleyan tradition that informed his spiritual milieu, cementing his legacy as a champion of social justice.

Martin Luther King Junior

Despite being raised in a strong Baptist community in Atlanta, Georgia, Martin Luther King Jr. was deeply immersed in the teachings and practices of the Wesleyan tradition.⁶³ King was influenced by Wesley’s teachings on social justice and he often quoted Wesley in his speeches and writings, with frequent allusions to the timeless: “Lord, let me not live to be useless.”⁶⁴ Also, his frequent use of Charles Wesley’s hymns like “And Are We Yet Alive” at mass meetings during the Montgomery Bus Boycott demonstrated further engagement with the Wesleyan tradition.⁶⁵ He also kept close associations with devout Wesleyans such as Richard Allen, Peter Cartwright, and Howard Thurman.⁶⁶ Thurman was King’s mentor and he shaped King’s notion of social change and renewal, specifically, with regard to nonviolence and love.⁶⁷ King remarks in his autobiography, “Dr. Thurman [...] influenced me more than any other teacher or book ever did. From him I gained my basic philosophical and ethical orientation from a philosophical and spiritual perspective [...] his insistence that love is the most powerful force available to the human spirit was a philosophic foundation upon which I built my life.”⁶⁸

In particular, an emphasis on personal holiness and social reform resonated with King’s convictions. He was particularly drawn to two key Wesleyan principles that became foundational to his work. Firstly, the principle of the priesthood of all believers. This principle highlighted ways by which all Christians had unrestricted access to God and were obligated to enhance justice and peace in society. King frequently spoke about this principle, recognizing the power it bestowed upon ordinary individuals to effect meaningful change in society:

“The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers means that every Christian has a priest’s calling to serve God and neighbor. This conferred unbelievable dignity and responsibility upon laymen [...] Here was a role for the layman that gave him spiritual authority and ethical responsibility.”⁶⁹

Secondly, the Wesleyan principle of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace asserts that God’s grace is always available to humanity, even before individuals seek it. King found hope and inspiration in this idea. In an oft-cited quote he put it that “the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace teaches that God’s love is always available to us, even before we ask for it. This doctrine gives us hope, even in the face of great challenges.”⁷⁰ This theological

⁶¹ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Europe, Contrasted with Real Christianity*, 3rd ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1797), 222; William Wilberforce, *Thoughts and Details on the Slave Trade*, with a Preface by Thomas Clarkson (London: J. Hatchard, 1807), 58, 41; William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Inefficacy of the Slave Trade to Improve the Condition of the Africans in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard, 1807), 1.

⁶² Donald G. Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 152; David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 152.

⁶³ Martin Luther King Jr., *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 12.

⁶⁴ Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York City: Warner Books, 2001), 337.

⁶⁵ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 143.

⁶⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., ed., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 11-14; King Jr., *The Radical King*, 12.

⁶⁷ King Jr., *The Radical King*, 13.

⁶⁸ Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 27.

⁶⁹ King Jr., *Strength to Love*, 48-49. See also David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 2004), 112.

⁷⁰ King Jr., *Strength to Love*, 14.

concept of divine love preceding human actions resonated deeply with King's philosophy of achieving racial justice through agape love and nonviolent resistance, even against overwhelming opposition.

Additionally, the Wesleyan tradition's emphasis on social reform resonated deeply with King. Wesley himself advocated for Christians to combat poverty, slavery, and other forms of injustice. King saw the church as having a crucial role in leading the fight for social justice, aligning with Wesley's vision. In his book *Strength to Love*, King wrote, "the Wesleyans have always been concerned about the social implications of the gospel. They have insisted that the gospel is not just a message of personal salvation, but also a message of social redemption."⁷¹

The influence of the Wesleyan tradition extended to King's commitment to nonviolence.⁷² Wesley firmly believed that violence was never justified, teaching his followers to turn the other cheek,⁷³ something echoed through King's statements: "Christ showed us the way, and John Wesley followed - the way of the cross, the way of nonviolent suffering"⁷⁴ and "I renounce all outward wars and strife [...] I utterly deny and abhor the desire for blood."⁷⁵ These principles underlined King's nonviolent protests against segregation and discrimination, spearheading significant social reforms like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and his fearless protests against the Vietnamese war. King's tragic death in 1968 became a rallying cry that furthered the causes he had championed during his life through increased awareness, continued protest movements, and legislative changes inspired by his work. Though he could no longer personally advocate, his assassination sparked a renewed commitment to realizing the vision of racial equality and human rights for which he sacrificed his life.

Florence Nightingale

Pioneering English nurse and health practitioner Florence Nightingale was raised in a liberal Unitarian household, embracing through this teachings of reason, individual conscience, and the belief in one God. Her close association with the works and individuals who shared the Wesleyan tradition enhanced her faith. For example, William Wilberforce's social reforms struck her as an illustration of how God wanted believers to change the world.⁷⁶ Her familiarity with the Wesleyan tradition is shown in her regular references to John Wesley's teachings.⁷⁷ Lynn McDonald points out that the Christian values including principles of accountability and lifelong learning that underpinned Nightingale's commitment to personal and professional responsibilities were reminiscent of Wesleyan ideals.⁷⁸

Additionally, Nightingale was in contact with influential Anglican Priest Charles Simeon, who associated openly with Methodist priests and thinkers, as well as Mary Carpenter, the daughter of Dr. Lant Carpenter, a Unitarian minister and social reformer who embraced Methodist principles. Mary was a prominent English education reformer, known for her alleviation of children in poverty and advocacy for the marginalized. Her pioneering social reforms greatly impacted Nightingale's own social reforms.⁷⁹ Integrating faith into her career, she considered the nursing profession as a calling for caring for the sick and the dying through selfless acts of loving-kindness. A striking parallel can be seen here between aspects of the Wesleyan tradition and her social reforms. Nightingale's dedication to

⁷¹ King Jr., *Strength to Love*, 12.

⁷² Thurman introduced King to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence. [See **Howard Thurman**, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 203-204].

⁷³ John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," Sermon 4, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 19-22; John Wesley, "The Nature of True Holiness," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 237-239; John Wesley, "Thoughts on Slavery," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 185-192; John Wesley, "Letter to a Clergyman on the Subject of War," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 458-464.

⁷⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York City: Harper & Row, 1958), 88.

⁷⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?" Address delivered at the 11th Annual SCLC Convention, August 16, 1967, 49.

⁷⁶ Florence Nightingale & Anita Kessler, *Notes on Nursing: What It Is, and What It Is Not* (New York, NY: A & D Books, 2007), 3.

⁷⁷ Nightingale & Kessler, *Notes on Nursing*, 4.

⁷⁸ Lynn McDonald, *Florence Nightingale: The Nightingale School* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009).

⁷⁹ Cecil Woodham Smith, *Florence Nightingale: 1820-1910* (Ohio: Franklin Classics, 2018), 51; Nightingale & Kessler, *Notes on Nursing*, 5.

improving the lives of those in poverty, healing the sick, professionalizing the nursing profession, and providing better care to the sick at the hospitals resonates with Wesleyan concepts of social actions, equality of all persons, care, and love.⁸⁰ Her influential book, *Notes on Nursing*, reflected her belief in the power of nature and the role of nurses in facilitating the healing process.

Despite facing challenges such as opposition to female leadership, conservative religious criticism of her science-based ideals, and tension with the existing religious, charitable, and national institutions, Nightingale remained steadfast in her faith and commitment to social justice.⁸¹ Inspired by the Wesleyan tradition, she championed the causes of social reform, advocating for the poor and marginalized. She was deeply influenced by the Methodist minister, Dr. William Nicholson Bates, who emphasized the Wesleyan principles of social activism and caring for the poor. In her autobiography, Nightingale wrote of being “guided by him into the Practical Way of salvation through work of mercy for others.”⁸² Nightingale actively worked to improve the lives of those in need, dedicating herself to causes that were not always seen as respectable by some Unitarians—her pragmatic model addressed the health concerns of society’s vulnerable populations including the homeless, the sick, and marginalized or disfavoured individuals and groups. She put these Wesleyan ideals into practice by serving as a pioneer of modern nursing during the Crimean War, demanding sanitary hospital conditions to reduce preventable deaths.⁸³

Nightingale’s fight for social justice extended beyond her efforts in hospitals during the Crimean War. She established schools and training programs for nurses, aiming for equal educational opportunities for women. Her advocacy for public health measures, sanitation, and hygiene demonstrated her belief in the government’s responsibility to protect citizens’ well-being. Additionally, Nightingale spoke out against poverty, discrimination, and the plight of women and children, striving to improve their education and healthcare.⁸⁴ Today, her dedication to caring for the sick, poor, and marginalized is iconic in the nursing profession. Her selflessness remains a testament to how Christian values can empower individuals to challenge inequalities and uphold the principles of freedom, justice, and human rights.

In the life and works of Wilberforce, King, and Nightingale, the influence of Wesleyan tradition imbedded in social justice and ethical living is discernable. These social activists shared a Wesleyan theological tilt that highlighted faith’s role in salvation, and believers’ sacred obligations to create a just, diverse, equal, and inclusive society. Their work shows how the principles of the Wesleyan tradition can inspire believers to become agents of positive change in their communities. Through personal faith and communal holiness, these activists, working in different social contexts, created organizations and started movements that continue to significantly impact the well-being of many people. These case studies demonstrate the ways in which the Wesleyan tradition can inspire ethical living and social justice activism in different contexts beyond those in the communion. By focusing on personal faith and communal holiness, believers can become powerful agents of positive change in their communities.⁸⁵ There are equally however challenges to the efficacy of Wesleyan social action, which I will turn to now.

Critiques and Challenges to the Wesleyan Tradition

Beyond this history of social activism and speaking truth to power, the Wesleyan tradition has in the modern era been challenged in its efficacy and its equality - for emphasizing Christian moral perfection over humanity’s sinfulness and fallibility. A general opposition to the Wesleyan tradition is that it can create an unrealistic standard that leads to legalism and self-righteousness.⁸⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, an influential 20th-century theologian, for example, cautions

⁸⁰ Smith, *Florence Nightingale*, 50, 53; Nightingale & Kessler, *Notes on Nursing*, 1, 2.

⁸¹ Gillian Gill, *Nightingales: The Extraordinary Upbringing and Curious Life of Miss Florence Nightingale* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004); Mark Bostridge, *Florence Nightingale: The Making of an Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

⁸² Florence Nightingale, *Suggestions for Thought to the Searchers after Truth Among the Artisans of England*, vol. 3 (London: George Woodfall and Son, 1860), 268-269.

⁸³ Edward T. Cook, *The Life of Florence Nightingale*, vol. 1. (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 46-49; Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale: 1820-1910* (London: Constable, 1950, 91-109, 188-201.

⁸⁴ Cook, *The Life of Florence Nightingale*, 46-49; Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale*, 91-109, 188-201.

⁸⁵ Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd edition, vol. 4, Sermons (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 325.

⁸⁶ Andrew Walls, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as a Model of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids:

against moral perfectionists' theories such as those contained in the Wesleyan tradition arguing that such theories could be "dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done."⁸⁷

Also, such emphasis can marginalize those who do not fit into the Wesleyan criteria of an ideal Christian. Walter Rauschenbusch, a theologian and prominent figure in the Social Gospel movement, sees the Wesleyan concept of the kingdom of God as being too individualistic and focused on personal salvation rather than collective societal transformation.⁸⁸ The view is also offered that the Wesleyan focus on individual salvation and holiness can make individuals ignore societal structures and institutions that marginalize people and communities. In extreme situations, it can encourage apathy towards issues of the common good. While including personal holiness, the kingdom of God also impacts the transformation of society's stereotyping, unjust, unequal, and exclusive structures, institutions, and systems.⁸⁹

Again, critics consider the Wesleyan theological emphasis on human responsibility and the potential of losing one's salvation as undermining the concept of God's sovereignty and authority over all things.⁹⁰ This criticism renews the age-long friction between divine sovereignty and human free will. In particular, the intersection of free will and human responsibility can lead to a works-based approach to salvation that maligns the essence of God's grace in humanity's salvation. Such an approach, it might be argued, is likely to turn believers into rule-following individuals, instead of grace-depending believers. However, the belief that human free will and its role in accepting or rejecting God's offer of salvation is crucially integrated into God's redemptive plan in the first place is used as a defence against this criticism. In Wesleyanism, divine sovereignty perfectly operates with the human will. Accordingly, free will reflects God's sovereignty and authority over all creation. By emphasizing both human responsibility and God's sovereignty, Wesleyans seek to maintain a balanced approach that honours the complexity and mystery of God's nature.

Further, churches in the Wesleyan tradition have been largely silent on issues of gender and sexual diversity and inclusivity.⁹¹ Critics such as Val Moorman, a founder of RMN, a Reconciling Ministries community for LGBTQ+ Methodists, argues that the traditional Wesleyan view on these issues can be exclusive and intolerant, failing to recognize the diversity of human experiences and identities. In connection with this criticism, some argue that the Wesleyan tradition tends to describe specific Christian denominations as the primary expression of the kingdom of God. This exclusive focus can lead to an insular and sectarian approach to the Christian faith, leading to the exclusion of those outside of the church or specific denominations.

Moreover, the Wesleyan tradition has been accused of prioritizing spiritual experience over intellectual inquiry and engagement with broader cultural issues and theological perspectives.⁹² The less significant space intellectualism occupies in Wesleyan tradition can, as Amos Young describes, create skewed perspectives on Christian engagement in teething societal concerns.⁹³

There is merit in the critique of the strong emphasis on moral perfection within the Wesleyan tradition. It is imperative to prioritize grace and understanding over judgment and exclusion in our interactions and interpretations of faith. Similarly, striking a balance between personal responsibility and reliance on divine grace is essential.

Eerdmans, 1988), 83; Harold Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1980), 172; Albert C. Outler, "John Wesley's Concept of Perfection," in John Wesley: Representative Works, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 408.

⁸⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p. 277.

⁸⁸ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 81; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); 373; Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 104.

⁸⁹ Heather Ann Ackley, "A Constructive Wesleyan Theological Proposal: Redemption and Sanctification of Human Gender and Sexuality," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 59, no. 1 & 2 (2004): 191.

⁹⁰ Walls, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as a Model of Christian Theology*, 83; Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 176; Outler, "John Wesley's Concept of Perfection," 413.

⁹¹ Ackley, "A Constructive Wesleyan Theological Proposal," 191.

⁹² Amos Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Korean Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 137; Gerald R. McDermott, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 104.

⁹³ Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology*, 137.

Moreover, while spiritual experiences hold significance, intellectual inquiry is equally crucial for effectively addressing complex and practical cultural and social issues. Thus, while the Wesleyan tradition's emphasis on personal holiness and salvation has great value, there is doubtless validity in the criticisms surrounding its potential for legalism and exclusion. Embracing grace, pursuing societal transformation, promoting inclusivity, and engaging in intellectual inquiry are vital components for ensuring a vibrant and relevant expression of faith.

It is my view, however, that the Wesleyan tradition can address these concerns through a theological reflection on how its emphasis on personal holiness and social justice can be integrated and balanced to propel systemic transformation and corporate action to remedy inequality and societal exclusivism. In a practical sense, those in the Wesleyan tradition can incorporate a more inclusive and diverse understanding of human experiences and identities, while remaining faithful to its theological principles. Also, emphasis on a more inclusive and diverse vision of God's kingdom, focusing on collective action and social transformation, can be advocated for. An emphasis on the communal nature of the Christian faith and the promotion of a more complex understanding of the kingdom of God can make the Wesleyan tradition a positive framework for reducing or eliminating social exclusivism to build a just, diverse, equal, and inclusive society.

The Wesleyan tradition can use its rich theological heritage to sustain its relevance and responsiveness to contemporary issues on ethical living and social justice by engaging in ongoing theological reflection and dialogue with other theological traditions and social movements. The experiences of marginalized communities and the poor could be addressed in these reflective discourses. For example, the Wesleyan tradition can draw on its rich tradition of social activism, including both Wesleyan and non-Wesleyan social reformers, to inspire and inform contemporary efforts for social justice and ethical living. Further, those in the Wesleyan tradition can address the challenge of reconciling divine sovereignty and human free will by emphasizing the cooperation between God and humans in the process of salvation. God provides the gift of salvation to humanity. Through faith and obedience, humans affirmatively respond to him. Thus there is a place in Wesleyan tradition where God's sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation find a balance.

While the Wesleyan tradition has been subject to criticism and challenges, it still offers a strong foundation for ethical living and social justice in the present.⁹⁴ By emphasizing a holistic approach to Christian discipleship that values personal piety and collective action, it can address the systemic issues that contribute to social injustice and inequality. Not only this, as has been demonstrated, in standing as proud advocates for these values Wesleyan communities can also influence those beyond its congregations. In this, it can offer a potent well of inspiration to be drawn on, as Wilberforce, Nightingale and King all testify, in moments of great societal change and social shift.

The Wesleyan tradition can also promote social inclusion by establishing and promoting a just, equal, and diverse framework for addressing societal needs. In engaging in constructive dialogue with other theological perspectives challenges to Wesleyan ideas, such as reconciling divine sovereignty and human free will, can be addressed. When these challenges are properly addressed, those in the Wesleyan tradition can adapt to changing social and cultural contexts and continue to offer a valuable framework for contemporary Christian social engagement, without compromising its commitment to personal holiness and social justice.

Conclusion

The article has explored ways by which the Wesleyan tradition has been and can still be utilised to promote social justice and ethical living in varying contexts. For Wilberforce, King and Nightingale, as has been demonstrated, Wesley's emphasis on holiness, love, and justice can provide a rich theological framework for addressing pertinent contemporary issues around ethical living and social justice. It is my view that the Wesleyan tradition continues to be of much relevance to contemporary discussions around social justice and ethical living and offers a unique contribution to theological ethical discourses. Moving forward the Wesleyan tradition has the potential to inspire

⁹⁴ Tennent thinks Wesleyan emphasis on the grace of God and the transformative role of the Holy Spirit in individual holiness has been misunderstood by most critics [Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 303, 304].

and inform Christian social engagement in ways that can promote positive social transformation and greater ethical consciousness.

Whilst criticism has been levelled at Wesleyan responses to contemporary issues on social justice and ethical living, it is my belief that further theological reflection and engagement on the intersection of Wesleyan tradition, ethical living, and social justice can address these relevant concerns. Such reflection and praxis should involve engagement with diverse voices and experiences, as well as a commitment to concrete action for positive social transformation.

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