



John Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery* and Wesleyan Pro-LGBTQ Social Ethics

Scott Shaffer

Abstract: This article explores how John Wesley's theological arguments in *Thoughts upon Slavery* can be used as a pattern for developing a Wesleyan pro-LGBTQ social ethic. After exploring Wesley's experiential and practical approach to social ethics in general and Wesley's theological approach to slavery in particular, the article provides a detailed analysis of Wesley's theological arguments in *Thoughts upon Slavery*. The article then demonstrates how similar theological approaches and arguments can be used as the basis of a pro-LGBTQ social ethic, focusing on pro-LGBTQ apologetics, Wesleyan queer theology, and pro-LGBTQ arguments in The United Methodist Church.

Keywords: John Wesley • Slavery • Social Ethics • LGBTQ • Queer Theology • Methodist

Introduction

John Wesley experienced multiple conversions throughout his lifetime. The most famous of these conversions occurred on May 24, 1738 when Wesley experienced an assurance of salvation while attending a Moravian society on Aldersgate Street in London. But this was not the only conversion that Wesley underwent throughout his life. Richard Heitzenrater argues that "although Wesley did not easily admit to changes, he was always open to new truths and was at times constrained to rethink many of his own positions on crucial issues as situations changed and his own perceptions matured."¹ Lyon Hynson argues that Wesley's experience of assurance of salvation also coincided with a change in his social ethic.² Hynson writes that "it is Wesley's ethical conversion that occurs in 1738. From a man who sought to do good in order to win God, he becomes one whom God has won, one whose faith becomes active in love."³ This ethical conversion, Hynson argues, explains Wesley's significant increase in social ministry following his Aldersgate experience.⁴

But the connection between Wesley's assurance of faith and his increase in social ministry following Aldersgate was not simply chronological or coincidental, it was causal. The soteriology underlying Wesley's Aldersgate conversion is deeply connected to his theological approach to social issues. When someone is converted to faith in Christ, for Wesley, their entire life is changed, including their social ethics. As Theodore Jennings argues,

¹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 261.

² Leon O. Hynson, *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley's Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Francis Asbury Press, 1984), 35.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 36.

Rev. Scott A. Shaffer is a Doctor of Ministry student at Wesley Theological Seminary and Wesley House Cambridge; a graduate of Eastern University and Duke Divinity School; an Elder in The United Methodist Church; and the Executive Director of North Hills Community Outreach in Pittsburgh, PA.

“While Wesley did emphasize personal conversion, this was always inseparably linked to a real transformation in the form of one’s life.”⁵ Although Wesley’s social ethic on some issues transformed immediately after Aldersgate, other ethical positions took more time to develop, including his opposition to slavery. Manfred Marquardt writes that “Wesley’s consciousness of slavery, in terms of his desire to first humanize and later abolish it, emerged relatively later than his concerns for other contemporary social problems such as widespread poverty and lack of education.”⁶

Because Wesley changed his mind on ethical issues, and because his soteriology emphasizes the necessity of changed behavior in response to an experience of faith, it is natural that Wesley would seek to change other people’s minds on the issue of slavery. This has led generations of Wesleyan Christians to draw upon Wesley’s theological arguments in *Thoughts upon Slavery* as a model for applying Wesleyan theology to other social issues. Marquardt argues that we must “discover how [Wesley’s] way of practicing and reflecting on Christian ethics could help in finding solutions for pressing contemporary social problems.”⁷ And Warren Thomas Smith gives a specific example, saying that “one of the urgent world-wide concerns of thoughtful people is racism, linked with oppression of the poor and the powerless. It is indeed interesting that the eighteenth century might give fresh insight into this enormous, complex problem.”⁸

While the connection between the social ethics of slavery and racism may be more obvious, Wesley’s theological approach in *Thoughts upon Slavery* can be equally relevant for developing a pro-LGBTQ Wesleyan social ethic. Just as Wesley experienced theological development on the issue of slavery, so have many Wesleyan Christians today, including the author of this paper, changed their social ethic on LGBTQ inclusion. Many books have been written narrating these ethical conversion stories, including *Changing our Mind*⁹ by David P. Gushee and *Holy Love*¹⁰ by Wesleyan scholar Steve Harper. Many of the apologetic strategies and theological approaches in these pro-LGBTQ texts are in alignment with Wesley’s approach to social ethics. As Keegan Osinski argues, there is “ample resonance between John Wesley’s ethos [...] and the possibilities revealed to us by queer experience and thought.”¹¹ Similar to Wesley’s approach in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, many pro-LGBTQ arguments begin by acknowledging the suffering caused by anti-LGBTQ policies. Then, after drawing connections between this human experience and a theology of grace and love, both Wesley and pro-LGBTQ theologians identify principles for transformed action and systemic change. Just as Wesley sought to persuade others of his ethical positions following his own ethical conversion, so might Wesleyan Christians today seek to persuade others of the importance of LGBTQ inclusion in pursuit of individual and social holiness.

This paper will seek to answer the question: How can Wesley’s argument in *Thoughts upon Slavery* be used as an effective model for developing a Wesleyan social ethic in response to anti-LGBTQ policies in the church and in the world today? The approach will be to first analyze Wesley’s apologetic strategies and theological arguments in *Thoughts upon Slavery* in the context of Wesley’s overall social ethic; next to reflect on connections between Wesley’s ethical conversion and the author’s own personal experience of ethical conversion on LGBTQ inclusion; then to explore how Wesley’s social ethic can inform contemporary Wesleyan approaches to pro-LGBTQ apologetics, queer theology, and LGBTQ arguments in The United Methodist Church; and finally to conclude with an exhortation for all Wesleyan Christians to grow in holiness by adopting a pro-LGBTQ social ethic.

John Wesley’s Social Ethic in *Thoughts upon Slavery*

John Wesley’s argument in *Thoughts upon Slavery* is best understood within the context of his overall approach to social ethics. As Smith argues, “*Thoughts upon Slavery* is John Wesley answering a major social ill. Using

⁵ Theodore W. Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 17.

⁶ Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 70-71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ Warren Thomas Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 11.

⁹ David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind: Definitive 3rd Edition of the Landmark Call for Inclusion of LGBTQ Christians with Response to Critics*, 3rd edition (Canton, Michigan: Read the Spirit Books, 2017).

¹⁰ Steve Harper, *Holy Love: A Biblical Theology for Human Sexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

¹¹ Keegan Osinski, *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021), 6.

the best methods of eighteenth-century scholarship, plus logic and common sense, he makes his case and adds to it the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹² This juxtaposition of human experience and theological reflection is one of the hallmarks of Wesley’s social ethics. Jennings explains that Wesley’s starting point for social ethics, and theology in general, is to begin with real human experience of some practical issue. Jennings writes that “Wesley does not start off with a theory of actual or ideal economic relations, which is then applied to the problem of unemployment. Rather he begins with the concrete reality of his hearers and readers.”¹³ This theological approach was both practical, originating with Wesley’s ministry experience with marginalized persons, and theological, as Wesley argued for the importance of human experience as a source for theological reflection.

Because Wesley draws upon human experience as a key source of his social ethics, practical application becomes not only the origin but also the telos of his social ethics. Jennings argues that “Wesley had in view the transformation of all life on the basis of the Gospel.”¹⁴ This means that Wesley believed the Gospel could transform both the situation of those who were suffering and the lives of those perpetuating and benefitting from social ills. Jennings writes, “Thus every aspect of Methodism was subjected to the criterion, How will this benefit the poor? Solidarity with the poor was not to be a side issue, but the test of every dimension of activity.”¹⁵ Wesley’s practical approach to social ethics includes not only his response to poverty, but his response to numerous issues such as education, alcohol, war, and slavery. This emphasis on experience as an origin for theology, and action as the telos of theology, becomes the connecting point between Wesley’s own life experience, his social ethics, and the organizing strategies of the Methodist movement. As one whose life has been transformed through an experience of God’s grace, Wesley seeks for others to experience transformation, not only of their thinking, but also of their actions.

Wesleyan Social Ethics and Slavery

Among the social issues to which Wesley applied his practical, experiential social ethics, was the issue of slavery. Jennings explains that “[Wesley’s] identification with the poor...enables him to see the ghastly character of the slave trade and vigorously to oppose the policies of colonialism.”¹⁶ Wesley first observed the practice of slavery in Charleston, South Carolina in 1736, Jennings explains, but at this stage his reflections focused on the cruel treatment of particular slaves by particular masters, rather than a total rejection of the practice of slavery.¹⁷ It would not be until 1772, when Wesley read an anti-slavery pamphlet by the Quaker Anthony Benezet, that Wesley’s anti-slavery social ethic began to fully develop.¹⁸ Wesley would find in Benezet’s argument many similarities both to his theological approach, beginning with enslaved people’s experience of cruelty and suffering, and in his theological themes, emphasizing every individual’s right to liberty as ones created in the image of God. Leon Hynson explains that “Wesley’s essay borrows extensively from a tract written by the American Quaker Anthony Benezet [...] It contains a significant appeal for human values and brotherhood. Significant principles enunciate the appeal to human freedom.”¹⁹ But Wesley doesn’t simply copy Benezet’s argument when crafting his own argument in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, rather he reframes the arguments of Benezet and others in terms of his own theological convictions. As Smith argues, “It must be kept in mind, when reading *Thoughts upon Slavery*, that John Wesley was revealing his social philosophy to the world.”²⁰ Wesley’s knack for connecting practical theological issues to people’s real lives led not only to the growth of the Methodist movement, but also to the depth of the Methodist impact on the abolitionist movement in England and in America. Smith reports that “in America, one author later claimed ‘[Wesley’s *Thoughts upon Slavery*] probably exerted a greater influence upon the public conscience than

¹² Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery*, 90.

¹³ Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 15-16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵ M. Douglas Meeks, ed., ‘Wesley and the Poor: An Agenda for Wesleyans’ in *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Oxford Institute on Methodist Theological Studies, Nashville, Tenn: Kingswood Books, 1995), 22.

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 82.

¹⁸ Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery*, 78.

¹⁹ Hynson, *To Reform the Nation*, 143.

²⁰ Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery*, 100.

any book ever written, not excepting *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for the reception of which it prepared the way."²¹ Having established the significance of *Thoughts upon Slavery* within the context of Wesley's social ethics, we now turn to analyzing the argument itself and its connection to Wesley's larger theological ethics.

Wesley's Arguments in *Thoughts upon Slavery*

What makes *Thoughts upon Slavery* a unique Wesley text to analyze theologically is that, on the surface, Wesley appears to be making a secular rather than a religious argument. Wesley writes, "I would not inquire, whether these things can be defended, on the principles of even Heathen honesty; whether they can be reconciled (setting the Bible out of the question) with any degree of either justice or mercy."²² Although Wesley is setting aside his common practice of using Bible prooftexts as the basis of his argument, he is nonetheless making a deeply theological argument, while seeking to make a public appeal beyond his usual Methodist audience – an approach paralleled by many Wesleyan pro-LGBTQ authors, who draw upon both secular and religious sources, arguing for change in both the church and the world. David N. Field argues that "despite Wesley's use of non-religious language, there are significant allusions to theological themes within the text. More importantly, these allusions relate directly to key themes in Wesley's core theological commitments."²³ Four of the key theological themes that appear in *Thoughts upon Slavery* are the image of God, love, justice, and holiness, which are in turn connected to four of Wesley's apologetic strategies of humanization, convicting sin, appeal to natural law, and a call to practical action.

The first apologetic strategy that Wesley employs in *Thoughts upon Slavery* is to humanize the experience of enslaved people through vivid depictions of their life experience, both before and after enslavement, as a means of illustrating that enslaved people are made in the image of God. Even while defining the term "slavery" at the very beginning of the text, Wesley seeks to humanize enslaved people, arguing that slavery "allows the master to alienate the slave, in the same manner as his cows and horses."²⁴ While stylistically academic and legal, this definition reaches a crescendo in humanizing enslaved people by comparing the treatment of enslaved people with the treatment of animals. Wesley proceeds in Section I of *Thoughts upon Slavery* to recount the history of slavery, indicating a historical trend of progress away from the practice of slavery, which has subsequently been reversed by the practice of American slavery. Echoes of this argument from progress can be heard in those arguing for pro-LGBTQ policies in The United Methodist Church who point out that the church was more LGBTQ inclusive before anti-LGBTQ policies were added to the *Book of Discipline* in 1972.

In Section II, Wesley begins by recounting the virtues of African cultures prior to the influence of the slave trade. After sharing several examples of African virtues, borrowed from Anthony Benezet's *Historical Account of Guinea*,²⁵ Wesley concludes this section by arguing, "where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of Europe, a nation generally practicing the justice, mercy, and truth, which are found among these poor Africans?"²⁶ This argument connects several key Wesleyan theological themes. As Field argues, according to Wesley, "human beings are created in the moral image of God and they are, therefore, created to live lives of justice, mercy and truth."²⁷ Therefore by lifting up African cultures as examples of justice, mercy, and truth – Wesley was identifying enslaved people with the image of Christ. Richard Heitzenrater further demonstrates that virtues are foundational for Wesleyan soteriology, saying "Virtue, for Wesley, was the wellspring of the holy life."²⁸ While the average public reader of *Thoughts upon Slavery* may not have picked up on these allusions, those familiar with Wesley's preaching

²¹ Ibid.

²² John Wesley, 'Thoughts upon Slavery' in The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A. M (New York : J. Emory and B. Waugh, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, J. Collard, printer, 1831), <http://archive.org/details/worksofreverendj06wesl>. 286.

²³ 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 (June 2, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/8466>, 2-3.

²⁴ John Wesley, 'Thoughts upon Slavery', 278-279.

²⁵ Smith, *John Wesley and Slavery*, 92.

²⁶ Wesley, 'Thoughts upon Slavery', 282.

²⁷ Field, 'Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy', 10.

²⁸ Richard P. Heitzenrater, 'The Imitatio Christi and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley's Ministry with the Poor,' in *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Oxford Institute on Methodist Theological Studies, Nashville, Tenn: Kingswood Books, 1995), 56.

and writing would have immediately recognized Wesley's affirmation of enslaved Africans' virtues as an affirmation of God's grace at work in their lives, as children of God, made in God's image. Similar arguments are employed today to argue that LGBTQ persons, made in God's image, and demonstrating Christian virtues, should be qualified for ordination in The United Methodist Church.

Wesley then turns in Section III to describing the cruelty of American slavery, revealing it to be the epitome of Christian hypocrisy, and contrary to the call to love our neighbor as God has loved us. After describing the violent practices involved in capturing slaves in Africa, Wesley writes, "such is the manner wherein the negroes are procured! Thus the Christians preach the Gospel to the Heathens!"²⁹ Those familiar with Wesley's social ethic would recognize here a reversal of his call to proclaim good news to the poor in both words and actions, as supposedly Christian slave traders proclaimed an anti-Gospel through their vicious words and cruel actions. Likewise, many pro-LGBTQ arguments emphasize the physical, psychological, and spiritual harm caused by anti-LGBTQ policies, including an increased risk of death by suicide and violent crime, and the spiritual and psychological harm of being excluded from full participation in religious congregations.³⁰ Later in this section, Wesley asks "did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures in the visible world should live such a life as this? Are these thy glorious work, Parent of good?"³¹ Field explains that "In a number of [Wesley's] writings he describes God as the 'Parent of good' [...] the same description he uses in *Thoughts upon Slavery* to contrast God's intention for humanity and the cruelty experienced by enslaved people."³² In addition to making an emotional appeal to the love of parents for children, and comparing this to God's love for enslaved people, Wesley is also upholding a theology of sanctification, in which Christians reflect in their love of neighbor the same parental love that they have been shown by God. In demonstrating that the very opposite of this parental love is being expressed in the slave trade, Wesley seeks to convict those participating in and benefitting from the slave trade of their sins. Wesleyan pro-LGBTQ arguments in turn draw upon Wesley to emphasize that advocating for pro-LGBTQ policies is an expression of God's love.

In Section IV, Wesley focuses on the questions of law, juxtaposing discussions of slavery's legality with his own theological arguments based in natural law. Wesley writes in this section, "but can law, human law, change the nature of things? Can it turn darkness into light, or evil into good? By no means. Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still."³³ Wesley's strategy in this section is to neutralize pro-slavery appeals to legality by appealing to a higher moral law, just as Wesleyan Christians today might rebut anti-LGBTQ appeals to natural law regarding sexual practices by appealing to the higher law of justice and love. Hynson summarizes Wesley on this point, saying "every person without respect to race is entitled to the guarantees of the law [...] The slave trade and the slavery institution was regarded as perfectly legal and acceptable. However, the black person, 'without the law,' lived under the superior law of the Creator. God's law preempts and judges each expression of human law."³⁴ This understanding of natural law is the foundation for Wesley's understanding of justice. As M. Andrew Gale argues, "Wesley was outspoken in his lifetime against the injustice of slavery and did not oppose it on a purely economic foundation, but on the foundation of human dignity and the natural rights and freedom and liberty for all people."³⁵ Connected to Wesley's argument that enslaved people are created in the image of God, Wesley now specifically emphasizes the dimension of justice, arguing that all humans created in God's image are entitled to freedom. Those arguing for pro-LGBTQ policies in the church can draw upon Wesley's approach, arguing that LGBTQ Christians are equally entitled to the benefits of marriage and ordination.

But Wesley expands the notion of justice to apply not only to enslaved people's right to freedom, but also to advocate for those involved in the slave trade to experience sanctification by enacting justice. Field argues that for Wesley, "human beings are created in the moral image of God and they are, therefore, created to live lives of

²⁹ Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, 284.

³⁰ Michelle M. Johns, 'Trends in Violence Victimization and Suicide Risk by Sexual Identity Among High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2015–2019,' *MMWR Supplements* 69 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su6901a3>.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

³² Field, 'Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy', 7–8.

³³ Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, 286.

³⁴ Hynson, *To Reform the Nation*, 143.

³⁵ M. A. Gale, "Justice, Mercy, Truth,' A Theological Concept in Wesley's Sermons,' *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 51, no. 2 (2016): 109–24.

justice, mercy and truth.”³⁶ Part of what it means to live a life of justice, for Wesley, is to reject the necessity, and affirm the moral hazards of wealth. Wesley writes in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, “wealth is not necessary to the glory of any nation; but wisdom, virtue, justice, mercy, generosity, public spirit, love of our country. These are necessary to the real glory of a nation; but abundance of wealth is not.”³⁷ Those reading Wesley’s argument who were familiar with his sermons and writings on the topic of money and wealth would have recognized here a deeper connection to Wesley’s overall social ethic, as Wesley emphasizes not only the way in which wealth harms the poor, but also the moral harm of wealth to the rich – similar to pro-LGBTQ arguments that point out the harm that anti-LGBTQ policies are doing to the church’s work and witness in the world. Jennings summarizes Wesley’s position, saying “but what is the harm in wealth? How does it imperil the life of faith? Wesley tries to make the answer as concrete as possible by examining the way wealth distorts the ‘tempers’ that are the root of holiness.”³⁸ In *Thoughts upon Slavery*, Wesley appeals first to the justice of God, saying, “Is there a God? You know there is. Is he a just God?”³⁹ Wesley then identifies the virtues and tempers that the slave traders are lacking, saying, “have you no sympathy, no sense of human wo[sic], no pity for the miserable?”⁴⁰ Ultimately Wesley is seeking to appeal to those benefitting directly or indirectly from slavery, just as Wesleyan pro-LGBTQ arguments appeal to those benefitting from patriarchal norms reinforced by anti-LGBTQ policies, arguing that their own salvation depends on whether they choose to respond to God’s love by enacting justice for their fellow humans.

The final theological argument that Wesley makes in *Thoughts upon Slavery* is an appeal to holiness, by encouraging action to end injustice. Wesley tells the story of a slave trader who said, “I will never buy a slave more while I live,” and implores, “O let this resolution be yours!”⁴¹ Wesley proceeds to call those involved in the slave trade to recognize their complicity in the evil of the slave trade. Wesley even addresses those who have obtained a slave by inheritance, saying, “if, therefore, you have any regard to justice (to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God) render unto all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature.”⁴² Those familiar with Wesley’s theology will see that Wesley’s appeal to take action for justice is ultimately grounded in his understanding of salvation. Jennings argues that “Wesley will have nothing to do with the sort of grace that saves us without changing us.”⁴³ Although some anti-LGBTQ arguments appeal to change in order to support forced celibacy and conversion therapy, a Wesleyan approach emphasizes instead the need for those oppressing LGBTQ Christians to be transformed in the process of salvation. As Randy Maddox argues, taking action on behalf of the poor and the oppressed was ultimately a part of the process of sanctification for believers.⁴⁴ But it is here at the end of the argument that Wesley’s call to action falls short. Rather than calling into question the entire economic system dependent upon slavery, Wesley’s call to action stops with those directly involved in slavery – similar to pro-LGBT arguments that appeal to welcoming all people, without advocating for the reversal of anti-LGBTQ policies. Marquardt evaluates Wesley on this point saying, “his position’s weakness appears in his addressing his suggestions for eliminating slavery to those who were chiefly responsible: the slave ship captains, the slave traders, and the slaveholders.”⁴⁵ But following the publication of *Thoughts upon Slavery*, Wesley did proceed to publicly advocate for Parliament to abolish slavery, and supported the efforts of other abolitionists to bring systemic change.⁴⁶ Wesley concludes *Thoughts upon Slavery* with a prayerful call to action - “arise, and help these that have no helper [...] Make even those that lead them away captive to pity them [...] thou Savior of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed!”. In a culmination of his social ethic, Wesley calls for both enslaved people and those participating in the sin of slavery to experience sanctification, to become holy, and to reflect the image of God, by participating in God’s liberation, justice and mercy – a call that is being followed to this day by those advocating for pro-LGBTQ policies in the church and in the world

³⁶ Field, ‘Imaging the God of Justice and Mercy’, 9.

³⁷ Wesley, ‘*Thoughts upon Slavery*’, 288.

³⁸ Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 33.

³⁹ Wesley, ‘*Thoughts upon Slavery*’, 291.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 292.

⁴³ Jennings, ‘Wesley and the Poor: An Agenda for Wesleyans’, 29.

⁴⁴ Randy L. Maddox, ‘Visit the Poor’: John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers,’ in *The Poor and the People Called Methodists, 1729-1999*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2002), 59.

⁴⁵ Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics*, 74.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

Personal Experience

My interest in writing this paper, as well as my understanding of its pertinence, is intimately shaped by my own personal experience. Like John Wesley, I have experienced theological development on major social issues throughout my life and ministry. Growing up in a theologically conservative United Methodist congregation, I was taught anti-LGBTQ interpretations of scripture, and observed anti-LGBTQ ministry practices as an openly gay member of my youth group was encouraged by adult leaders to pursue either sexual orientation conversion therapy or lifelong celibacy. In addition to observing anti-LGBTQ harm caused by the church, I also experienced anti-LGBTQ harm in school, as one of my classmates and friends who was bullied for his sexual orientation died by suicide. Eventually, I could not reconcile the harm that my friend was experiencing with the Gospel of love and justice that my pastor and youth leaders were proclaiming, leading me to seek an alternate social ethic that would be truly good news for my LGBTQ friends.

Just as the seeds of anti-slavery ethics were planted in John Wesley through his experiences in the American Colonies, so were the seeds of pro-LGBTQ ethics planted in me through these experiences. Part of my own journey of salvation, much like Wesley's, has involved allowing the Holy Spirit to change my mind on important social issues. During college and seminary, my biblical and theological training gave me tools for reinterpreting the anti-LGBTQ theology of my upbringing. In the way that Wesley's encounter with the practice of slavery in Georgia propelled his own ethical conversion, several personal experiences with people engaged in healthy same-gender relationships deepened my understanding of God's love being expressed and sanctification being experienced through same-gender marriages. Whereas Wesley argued in *Thoughts upon Slavery* that the goodness of many African cultures exceeded that of supposedly Christian European cultures, I noticed that many same-gender marriages were more healthy, equitable, and spiritually vibrant than many heterosexual marriages. In seminary, I began to uphold explicitly pro-LGBTQ arguments, paralleling Wesley's turning point in 1772 upon reading Anthony Benezet, in which he was no longer silent about his evolving views on slavery. After performing marriages for several individuals who had been previously divorced—a practice condemned by Jesus but permitted and commonplace in the UMC—it became clear to me that I was called to help all people experience liberation, freedom, grace, love, discipleship, holiness, and sanctification through the covenant of marriage, including those in same-gender relationships.

In making this ethical conversion, I was following the pattern of John Wesley in proclaiming good news to poor, sharing a gospel with LGBTQ persons that enables them to live into the image of God through expressions of holy love. When one of my most gifted and capable seminary colleagues terminated her candidacy for ordination in The United Methodist Church following the reaffirmation of anti-LGBTQ policies at the 2012 General Conference, I grieved that the church was not only harming its LGBTQ members, but also harming itself in refusing to receive the gifts of LGBTQ clergy who were called and equipped for ordained ministry. It is these experiences that have brought me to where I am today and leave me in no doubt that just as Wesley emphasized the need for those benefitting from the slave trade to grow in holiness through conviction of their sin, so must Wesleyan Christians experience growth in holiness by rejecting anti-LGBTQ policies and practices. This paper serves as my invitation for those who are vocally or silently upholding anti-LGBTQ policies to repent of the harm their social ethic is causing, and to receive the gifts that God is offering through our LGBTQ siblings in Christ.

Wesleyan Social Ethics and Pro LGBTQ Arguments

John Wesley did not specifically advocate for pro-LGBTQ ethical positions in any of his recorded writings, and there are several instances in which both his comments and his silence uphold the anti-LGBTQ positions of the religious and social landscape of his time. But this doesn't mean that Wesley's social ethic in general, and his arguments in *Thoughts upon Slavery* in particular, cannot be used as a pattern for contemporary Wesleyan pro-LGBTQ arguments. As Osinski argues, "I am under no illusions that John Wesley himself had any liberatory sense of sexuality or premonitions of gender-bent holiness, but as an heir to his legacy, a fish in the stream of his tradition,

I have the privilege of using what I have been given in his words to think with the current and in tandem with all the resources that have come after him to address the present in an adequate and relevant manner.⁴⁷ Just as Wesleyan social ethics have been applied to contemporary issues such as racism and women's ordination, so can Wesley's theological ethics be applied to arguments for LGBTQ inclusion in the church and in the world. Jane Ellen Nickell argues that "both advocates and opponents of the ordination of gay and lesbian persons root their arguments more clearly in religion than in the case of race or sex."⁴⁸ While acknowledging the differences both in the scope and nature of the problems, and in the theological ethics involved, there are many fruitful connections to be made between Wesley's approach to slavery and the approach of pro-LGBTQ apologetics, queer theology, and pro-LGBTQ arguments in The United Methodist Church. This section will seek to identify some of those fruitful connections, focusing on the four theological issues (the image of God, love, justice, and holiness) and the four apologetic strategies (humanization, convicting sin, appeal to natural law, and a call to practical action) identified in Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery*.

Just as Wesley begins his argument in *Thoughts upon Slavery* with his definition of "slavery," it would be helpful here to define the term LGBTQ as it relates to the scope of this paper. The term LGBTQ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons. The sources in this section sometimes use the terms LGBTQ, GLBTQ, LGBTQIA+, queer, gays and lesbians, homosexuals, or other terms. The use of LGBTQ in this paper is intended to be broadly inclusive of these various terms and identities, while recognizing that the experiences and situations of people within each identity group vary, and that theological ethics and church policies are related to these separate but interconnected identities in complex ways. Nonetheless, the patterns of Wesleyan theological reflection advocated here are specifically intended to make this complex and nuanced theological reflection possible.

Pro-LGBTQ Apologetics

In recent years, many Wesleyan and non-Wesleyan authors have written books in opposition to anti-LGBTQ policies in the church and the world. Many of these books include a mix of personal narrative, historical and sociological research, and biblical and theological reflection. This section will focus on four of these texts, identifying similarities and differences between their apologetic approach and that of John Wesley in *Thoughts upon Slavery*.

In the book *God and the Gay Christian*,⁴⁹ author Matthew Vines begins by sharing his own painful experiences as an LGBTQ Christian. Vines writes, "my Presbyterian church, in particular, was filled with kindhearted, caring Christians. But when it came to homosexuality, their views were set. If you were in a gay relationship, you were living in sin. Period."⁵⁰ Vines proceeds to narrate his experience of rejection by his parents and family, and the physical and psychological pain caused by this rejection. Vines concludes, "the church's condemnation of same-sex relationships seemed to be harmful to the long-term well-being of most gay people."⁵¹ Vines' approach here mirrors Wesley's approach to humanizing the suffering of enslaved people. Vines acknowledges this connection between the issues of slavery and homosexuality, stating that "in the nineteenth century, experience played a key role in compelling Christians to rethink another traditional—and supposedly biblical—belief. This time, the issue was slavery [...] Christian abolitionists persuaded believers to take another look. They appealed to conscience *based on the destructive consequences of slavery*."⁵² Vines proceeds to make arguments based on natural law and the image of God, just as Wesley does in *Thoughts upon Slavery*. Whereas Wesley argues for the natural goodness and virtues of enslaved people, Vines argues that same-sex attraction is given by God, and a natural expression of God's love. Arguing against forced-celibacy for LGBTQ Christians, Vines says that "given that we are created by a God who is Father, Son, and

⁴⁷ Osinski, *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church*, 7.

⁴⁸ Jane Ellen Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved: Methodists Debate Race, Gender, and Homosexuality* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 93.

⁴⁹ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2015).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

Holy Spirit—relational to the core—such a consequence seems at odds with God's nature."⁵³ Later in a chapter about the image of God, Vines argues that "if the church were to bless committed same-sex unions for gay Christians, we would advance God's sanctifying purposes for their lives. Until then, we are distorting the image of God, not only in the lives of gay Christians, but in the church as a whole."⁵⁴ Here Vines is making a deeply Wesleyan point, as he argues that LGBTQ inclusion will lead not only to ending suffering of LGBTQ Christians, but will also help the entire church, including those currently upholding anti-LGBTQ policies, to grow in holiness and better reflect the image of God.

Wesleyan scholar Steve Harper also begins his pro-LGBTQ argument in the book *Holy Love* with a personal narrative, describing his own conversion with regards to LGBTQ social ethics. Harper connects his ethical conversation to Wesleyan theology, stating that "John Wesley made experience part of his theological interpretation, by adding to the already existing Anglican trilateral of scripture, tradition, and reason."⁵⁵ Grounded in Wesley's argument for experience as a source of theology, Harper proceeds to narrate his own experience of changing his mind on LGBTQ social ethics.⁵⁶ Similar to Wesley's growth over time on the issue of slavery, Harper's position was affected by his direct experience of the suffering caused by anti-LGBT policies, and developed over time from a silent opposition, reflecting the inward work of God's grace, to a more vocal advocacy for social change, fully expressing God's love through social holiness. Harper then argues for LGBTQ inclusion from the starting point of God's love demonstrated in creation, following Wesley's similar arguments in *Thoughts upon Slavery*.⁵⁷ Harper argues for the importance of God's love for Wesleyan theology and its relationship to the belief that all human beings are made in the image of God, before concluding that "to allege that an LGBTQ identity is a distortion of God's creation is one of the key misinterpretations that lead LGBTQ people to believe they are somehow less than fully human."⁵⁸ After mirroring Wesley's arguments based on humanization, conviction of sin, and natural law, Harper concludes with a call to action, arguing that "we must live in relationship with LGBTQ people [...] live as lifelong learners with regards to sexuality [...] live as nonviolent resisters to those who spread misinformation...and live as promoters of access for LGBTQ people into all the church's sacraments, means of grace, and ministries."⁵⁹ Beginning from the source of his own experience, and culminating in the telos of practical action, Harper ultimately makes a deeply Wesleyan argument for LGBTQ inclusion in the church.

Wesleyan Queer Theology

Whereas pro-LGBTQ apologetics tend to use both biblical and theological arguments, the approach of queer theology is like Wesley's approach in *Thoughts upon Slavery* in that it often draws upon secular arguments, utilising secular queer theory to argue for a pro-LGBTQ social ethic. Recognizing the intersections between racism and homophobia, the book *Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer: The Church and the Famine of Grace* by Jarel Robinson-Brown makes a distinctly Wesleyan argument based on queer theology.⁶⁰ Robinson-Brown argues that "Grace, if it is to be truly amazing for us and in our lives, must take the love of God made known in Jesus seriously. In doing so, it offers us no half-truths or empty promises, but rather the complete fullness of life Jesus offers: freedom, liberty and peace to the LGBTQ+ Christian."⁶¹ After arguing, following Wesley's lead, for liberty in the lives of all people rooted in God's love, Robinson-Brown then details Wesley's understanding of Grace as a foundation for queer theology. Robinson-Brown writes that "God in Christ works with us as we seek to live like Jesus. The issue comes when 'living like Jesus' is translated as 'no longer being Black or LGBTQ+'. Part of the reason early Methodists were so fundamental in the abolition of the slave trade, and one of the reasons Methodism on so many social justice issues has been a forerunner in equality, is perhaps because of the emphasis the Methodist movement places on the grace

⁵³ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 162.

⁵⁵ Harper, *Holy Love*, 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2-9.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 50-53.

⁶⁰ Jarel Robinson-Brown, *Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer: The Church and the Famine of Grace* (London: SCM Press, 2021).

⁶¹ Ibid., 30.

of God in Christ.”⁶² Robinson-Brown proceeds to use this theology of grace as the basis of forming a theology that is explicitly Black- and queer-affirming.

Keegan Osinski likewise draws upon queer theory to make a distinctly Wesleyan pro-LGBTQ argument in the book *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church*.⁶³ Osinski argues that “Where the Wesleyan tradition unfortunately lacks any robust queer interpretation, queer theory as a discipline...provides abundant tools for application across fields.”⁶⁴ While employing Wesley’s methodology of drawing upon secular arguments, Osinski, uses these secular arguments ultimately to uphold a Wesleyan social ethic. Osinski writes, “the Wesleyan tradition is a place now where it is again time for more new interpretations of holiness...The new reading of holiness presented in this book is one that includes queerness.”⁶⁵ Osinski proceeds to provide a queer interpretation of ten of Wesley’s sermons. In reflecting on Wesley’s sermon, “The New Birth” Osinski details Wesley’s understanding of the image of God, and argues that “being born anew by the Spirit of God into queer holiness/queerness would mean growing into our fullest selves, who God created us to be, properly reflecting the image of God in us, that is, perfect love.”⁶⁶ Thus Osinski’s pro-LGBTQ argument and Wesley’s argument against slavery both emphasize reclaiming the image of God in the oppressed. In the conclusion to the book, Osinski recognizes that Wesley was not a systematic theologian, and likewise Wesleyan queer theology is based in life experience. Osinski concludes that “Ultimately, to read Wesley queerly is to read *with Wesley against Wesley*.”⁶⁷ Because Osinski’s approach draws upon the spirit, the theology, and the approach of Wesley’s *Thoughts upon Slavery*, this could be an anti-Wesley reading that Wesley could get behind.

Pro-LGBTQ Arguments in The United Methodist Church

Just as Wesley’s arguments in *Thoughts upon Slavery* found their application in the work of abolitionists replacing unjust laws with just ones, Wesleyan pro-LGBTQ arguments must embody faith working through love taking the form of policy changes in The United Methodist Church. In the book *We Shall Not Be Moved*, Jane Ellen Nickell narrates the history of arguments for and against LGBTQ inclusion in The United Methodist Church.⁶⁸ Nickell begins by showing how UMC discussions were motivated by increased awareness of LGBTQ identity, as well as LGBTQ suffering, stating for example that “the gay rights movement sparked by the Stonewall incident in 1969 affected many institutions, including the UMC.”⁶⁹ Nickell explains that a statement on homosexuality proposed by the Social Principles Study Commission to the 1972 General Conference “was intended to guide the church in pastoral care of this newly visible minority.”⁷⁰ Like Wesley’s arguments for humanization, many of the earliest pro-LGBTQ arguments in the UMC focused on increasing visibility and awareness of the suffering experienced by LGBTQ persons. Like Wesley’s anti-slavery arguments, pro-LGBTQ arguments also focused on the issue of natural law, countering anti-LGBTQ arguments that homosexuality was unnatural.⁷¹ Mirroring Wesley’s argument in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, others argued for inclusion based on compassion and justice, including “Katherine Wilcox, who claimed that gays and lesbians are ‘Children of God’ who have ‘a right to be a part of the reconciling fellowship of the Christian church.’”⁷² Others followed Wesley’s lead in calling out the hypocrisy of proclaiming an anti-gospel through their actions, such as “James Lawson who referred to the church’s focus on this specific issue as a ‘grotesque misunderstanding of the gospel’ and urged the church to listen ‘to the spirit of Christ and His concern for all humankind.’”⁷³ Another pro-LGBTQ argument was made by Adam Hamilton and Mike Slaughter, who “wrote that a significant minority in the UMC read the relevant scriptural passages as they read passages

⁶² Ibid., 33.

⁶³ Osinski, *Queering Wesley, Queering The Church*.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 129.

⁶⁸ Nickell, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 100.

⁷³ Ibid., 107.

about 'polygamy, concubinage, slavery, and the role of women in the church.'⁷⁴ Although Wesley claims to set scripture aside in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, he in fact quotes scripture in the text, and makes theological arguments similar to Hamilton and Slaughter's which are based on a reversal of popular biblical interpretations. Nickell concludes by recognizing the distinct dynamics of anti-slavery arguments, saying that "whites, and particularly slave owners, enjoyed clear social and economic benefits" that enslaved people could not receive, whereas an LGBTQ person experiencing oppression may be able to conceal their identity and continue experiencing at least some degree of social privilege.⁷⁵ Following the pattern of Wesley's social ethic, Nickell shows that advocating for same-gender weddings and ordination of LGBTQ persons in the UMC ultimately liberates both the oppressed and the oppressors.

Multiple other scholars have advocated for pro-LGBTQ policies in the UMC in ways that mirror Wesley's argument in *Thoughts upon Slavery*. In the book *Together at the Table: Diversity Without Division in The United Methodist Church*, Bishop Karen P. Oliveto shares, in good Wesleyan fashion, from her own experience of exclusion and inclusion in the UMC. Oliveto directly quotes Wesley's *Thoughts upon Slavery*, saying that "Even though John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spoke out against the evils of slavery [...] this commitment by Methodists eroded."⁷⁶ Oliveto proceeds to draw upon Wesleyan theology in making pro-LGBTQ arguments, framing her own coming-out experience as "Coming Out and Into God's Grace."⁷⁷ Rather than seeing God's grace on the side of the oppressors, just as some in Wesley's day argued for slavery as an act of grace toward enslaved people, Oliveto sees God's grace clearly advocating for liberation of the oppressed and oppressors. Taking a historical and sociological approach in the book *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*,⁷⁸ Amanda Udis-Kessler starts by recounting the history of anti-LGBTQ policies in the UMC and other mainline protestant denominations. After building upon history, as Wesley does in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, Udis-Kessler continues to mirror Wesley's approach in narrating LGBTQ experiences of exclusion. Using qualitative research methods, Udis-Kessler shares vivid personal stories obtained through first hand interviews with LGBTQ Christians, arguing that "taking LGBT experience seriously in building an analysis of homophobia and heterosexism thus challenges LGBT devaluation."⁷⁹ Barry E. Bryant takes yet another approach in the chapter "The Methodist Chimera: The Quadrilateral and 'Execrable Villainies'" showing that Wesley viewed both slavery and poverty as "execrable villainies" that must be opposed and reformed by the church.⁸⁰ Bryant connects this with Wesley's call for Methodists to reform the nation and the church, saying "however, it has often been said that we are now that Church that Wesley sought to reform."⁸¹ Coming full circle toward Wesley's call to action, Bryant and others arguing for LGBTQ inclusive policies in the UMC demonstrate that a Wesleyan social ethic demands that our theology is put into action, advocating for justice so that LGBTQ persons and those benefitting from LGBTQ exclusion both have the opportunity to experience God's sanctifying grace.

Conclusion

Like diverse threads woven into a cohesive fabric, the arguments and perspectives explored in this paper can be intertwined to explain *who, what, where, when, why, and how* Wesleyan Christians might develop a pro-LGBTQ social ethic. We began, drawing upon the historical scholarship of Heitzenrater, Hynson, Jennings, Marquardt, Smith, and Meeks, by exploring *what* Wesley had experienced, namely, a conversion not only in his personal faith and theological views, but also in his social ethics on the issue of slavery. Next, we explored *how* Wesley crafted his argument in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, drawing upon the commentary of these Wesleyan historians as well as the theological analysis of Field, Gale, and Maddox, highlighting Wesley's emphasis on the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁶ Karen P. Oliveto, *Together at the Table: Diversity without Division in The United Methodist Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 18.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁸ Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*, New Approaches in Sociology (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 103.

⁸⁰ General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church and Barry E. Bryant, eds., 'The Methodist Chimera: The Quadrilateral and 'Execrable Villainies,' in *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness* (Nashville: GBHEM, 2018).

⁸¹ Ibid., 82.

image of God, love, justice, and holiness as the rationale for opposing slavery. And in the pivot of this paper's argument, we explored the author's personal *why* for developing a pro-LGBTQ social ethic in response to both the suffering of LGBTQ friends, and the flourishing of LGBTQ couples experiencing God's grace through marriage.

The final section of this paper focused on *who* all would benefit from a pro-LGBTQ social ethic: First, we saw that Wesleyans in particular would benefit from a pro-LGBTQ social ethic, as Osinski, Nickell, and Harper drew parallels between Wesleyans' evolution on slavery, racism, and sexism to changing views on LGBTQ inclusion. Second, the personal narratives of Vines and Robinson-Brown vividly illustrated how LGBTQ Christians would benefit, both in freedom from oppression, and in the opportunity to offer their gifts to the church. Finally, Oliveto, Udis-Kessler, and Bryant explained how the mission and ministry of The United Methodist Church could more fully share God's grace through a pro-LGBTQ social ethic. Having explored the *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, and *how* of a Wesleyan pro-LGBTQ social ethic, we are left with just one question: *when* will Wesleyan Christians stop harming their LGBTQ siblings, and in so doing experience more fully the grace and love of Jesus Christ?

For Wesleyan Christians seeking to grow in holiness, the answer to the question "when?" is always "now!" In my own personal journey of transformation surrounding LGBTQ acceptance, I have followed the patterns of John Wesley in proclaiming good news to poor, sharing a gospel with LGBTQ persons that enables them to live into the image of God through expressions of holy love. I am thankful for the many opportunities I have had to live out this pro-LGBTQ social ethic in my pastoral ministry, while advocating for policy changes in the UMC. But I believe that my own ministry, and the ministry of the UMC, are at a similar point in the development of our social ethic to where John Wesley was at the time of publishing *Thoughts upon Slavery*. The conversion that began in his heart, and came to fruition in his mind, now had to be put into action. The pro-LGBTQ policy changes adopted at the postponed 2020 General Conference of The United Methodist Church⁸² must take expression through transformed hearts, minds, and actions. Local churches must learn how to become fully inclusive, with explicitly pro-LGBTQ practices and policies. The UMC must continue to eliminate all anti-LGBTQ policies, and advocate for the elimination of such policies at all levels of government. To truly follow in the footsteps of Wesley, we must draw upon our experience of God's grace and love in order to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people in words and actions.

Following Wesley's example in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, I will conclude with a prayer of exhortation: O thou God of love, whose love extends to every LGBTQ person created in your image, convict your Methodist children of the harm their anti-LGBTQ policies are causing. Set at liberty those oppressed by your church and those in your church perpetuating and benefiting from oppression. Enable people of every sexual orientation and gender identity to experience your salvation, so they might reflect the justice, grace, and love of Jesus Christ!

⁸² 'Church Ends 52-Year-Old Anti-Gay Stance,' United Methodist News Service, available at <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/church-ends-52-year-old-anti-gay-stance> (Accessed August 31st 2024).

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