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*Mr. Wesley, Since you Wanted to Help the Poor, Why did you Ignore
the English Poor Law of your Day?*

Abstract

Beginning more than one hundred years before John Wesley's well-known eighteenth century work with the poor, the English Parliament had created a tax-supported Poor Law program to provide assistance to the poor. This unique English program continued in place in Wesley's day. However, Wesley paid little attention to this public welfare program. We describe the philosophy and eighteenth century implementation of the Poor Law, as well as Wesley's approach to the poor and offer suggestions that may explain Wesley's lack of interest in the Poor Law.

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Introduction

As we reflected on how we might help the impoverished persons living in our community today, we were drawn to study the multifaceted ministries to the poor that John Wesley developed in the eighteenth century. As a part of our study, we sought to understand the time period in which Wesley worked. In that century, we discovered the English Poor Law, a national tax-supported program unique to England whose purpose was to provide assistance to the poor. The Poor Law's implementation across England in the eighteenth century should have made it familiar to Wesley, yet we were surprised that Wesley, despite his intense interest in the poor, showed little knowledge of or interest in this important publicly supported program. We were unable to find a direct reference that provided a comment about, or an evaluation of the Poor Law in any primary Wesley source.¹ In addition, except in one chapter in Heitzenrater's book, *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (2003:15-38), the Poor Law is seldom discussed in secondary Wesley sources.² MacArthur points out that Wesley has been criticized for not paying more attention to the environmental causes of the wretchedness of the paupers of eighteenth century England. "He did not attack in so many words the operation of the Elizabethan Poor Law...he initiated no social legislation....But... his social gospel was a standing protest against the social effects of the industrial system and the Poor Law" (MacArthur 1936:81). But there were no direct words of condemnation or support. The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on Wesley's apparent lack of comment or interest in the Poor Law. We hope that this preliminary study will encourage serious Wesley scholars to investigate further his strange silence on this important law.

John Wesley: The Servant of God's Poor

For all of Christian history, it is hard to find a Christian leader who understood more clearly than John Wesley the Christian's responsibility to provide for the needs of the poor. Marquardt writes "Wesley was one of the first not only to see the poor as recipients of alms and objects of charitable care but also to set forth the genuinely Christian duty to eliminate their wretchedness" (Marquardt 1992:27). "Rarely did the eighteenth century see poverty and unemployment as results of social inequity. In this sense it may be said that 'Wesley discovered the poor' for he was at least able to see past these superficial analyses of the causes of poverty and to point to some social sources of poverty apart from individual responsibility" (Madron 1965-66:35-36).

Wesley clearly sought to meet the needs, both material and spiritual, of the poor. In fact, Wesley probably felt more at home among the poor than the rich,

wellborn, and able, and he likely considered the poor his “natural crowd.” In his journal, he writes that “It is well a few of the rich and noble are called. Oh that God would increase their number! But I should rejoice (were it the will of God) if it were done by the ministry of others. If I must choose, I should still (as I have done hitherto) preach the gospel to the poor” (Marquardt 1992:27). Moreover, in *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, he wrote “The rich, the honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing (if it be the will of our Lord) to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcast of men” (Wesley 1872:VIII: 239). Indeed, Wesley had little patience with those who, like the Duchess of Buckingham, relied on “high rank and good breeding” (Marquardt, 1992 149:note 47). As Himmelfarb says of Wesley,

His poor ...were not only the ‘deserving’, ‘respectable poor’ who were the likeliest candidates for conversion. He made a point of seeking out ‘the outcast of men, the forlorn ones the most flagrant, hardened desperate sinner.’ No one was beyond salvation, no one too poor, benighted, or uncivilized to attain the spiritual and moral level deserving of the name Christian (Himmelfarb 1997:8).

At the start of our study of Wesley, the authors of this paper already knew a little about Wesley’s work with and for the poor, but we did not grasp the full extent or complexity of this special ministry. Over the course of the study, the author who is a social worker noted that Wesley’s ministries to the poor in the eighteenth century had substantial similarities to the activities of many twenty-first century social workers. Among Wesley’s personal concerns and activities which he urged among his Methodist followers were collecting money for the poor, providing them with food, clothing, free medical services, creating a “get back on your feet” micro-loan service, distributing inexpensive informational publications to the poor so as to offer assistance in developing a useful trade, and help in getting a job. Wesley also created educational opportunities for the poor (Marquardt 1992:27-29).

In addition to Wesley’s famous work as an evangelist he engaged in many of the activities of a social worker. There does, however, appear to be one major difference between contemporary social workers and Wesley’s ministries to the poor: Much of the time and energy of a twentieth-first century social worker is spent helping needy clients to access government funded sources of support. That kind of activity is missing in Wesley’s work, and the question is why? Were there public sources of support for the poor in Wesley’s day similar, in any way, to the public support available in the present century? If there were such sources, what was Wesley’s interest in them and what was his reaction to these public programs?

In light of the social and economic climate of Wesley's day, it is surprising to learn of the existence in the 1700's of a nationwide, government mandated, tax-supported relief program for the poor, which had its origins in the Elizabethan era of the sixteenth century. As early as 1598, the *Act for the Relief of the Poor* authorized "overseers in every parish to set children and poor to work, relieve the impotent, bind out pauper children as apprentices, and tax every inhabitant and occupier of lands in the parish for these purposes [and to] distain the goods of those refusing to pay" (Slack 1990:52). In our opinion, the most striking aspect of this late sixteenth century law was that it imposed taxes on the rich to care for the poor.

Over time, there were many modifications of the original Poor Law. However, the basic underlying philosophy of this public, tax-supported relief for the poor did not change. Thus, long before Wesley's day (1703-1791), there was already a nationwide program for the relief of the poor in place throughout most of England. By Wesley's time this Poor Law had been in place, at least in preliminary form, for over 100 years, and the wealthy in every parish in England had become accustomed to being taxed for the benefit of the poor. Moreover, this tax was supported by an enforcement threat of having one's property taken to pay the levy or, even worse, being imprisoned for failure to pay. Given Wesley's special concern for the poor, and, the long-standing English Poor Law, it is puzzling as to why Wesley showed so little interest in the Poor Law. The intention of the Poor Law clearly overlapped with his interest in the poor. The authors of this paper would have understood if Wesley had liked the Poor Law or if he had detested it. We would have understood if he had favored the Poor Law and advocated its expansion or if he had commented on its need for replacement or revision. We would also have understood if, alongside of his numerous programs for the poor, Wesley had mentioned the Poor Law. But that he simply ignored it, puzzled us.

At first we considered that perhaps the Poor Law was a minor program benefiting very few people and that its cost was small. But further study revealed that both conjectures (few people, small cost) were not supported. Slack's data shows that the percent of the population who were supported by the Poor Law grew from about 4 percent in 1700 to around 14 percent in 1799 (Slack 1990:22). Porter reports that by 1800 28 percent of the population was receiving poor relief (Porter 1990:94). Slack concludes his analysis of the proportion of the population receiving poor relief by observing "Surveys of the numbers receiving relief of any kind in a parish over a five year period in the latter eighteenth century might well reveal proportions of 20 percent or more" (Slack 1990:25). In short, this was a large fraction of the population, too large, in our opinion, for Wesley not to have noticed. Furthermore, since a significant portion of the members of the Methodist Societies

were poor, it seems certain that Wesley knew many persons who were receiving government support.

The large percentage of people receiving poor relief was likely one of the major reasons that, by the middle of Wesley's life, the cost of supporting poor relief was being seen by many critics of the Poor Law as creating an unbearable financial burden on taxpayers. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, there were numerous applications to Parliament seeking relief of the burden created in many parishes as the result of the increasing cost of obeying the Poor Law (Marshall 2007:75). Wesley would, in all likelihood, have known of these petitions.

The rising number of people who qualified for poor relief support and the increased cost necessary to provide for them was such that by Wesley's day the Poor Law was a major financial program across England. In 1700 the total national cost of the Poor Law program was between £600,000 and £700,000. By 1776 the relief cost had increased to £1.0 million and to £2.0 million by 1786 (Porter 1990:129). Slack reports that, in the period 1748-50, a time at the height of the Methodist revival, the total poor relief expenditures in England and Wales were costing 1.0 percent of the national income. By 1783-85 this expenditure as a fraction of national income had risen to 2.0 percent (Slack 1990: 22). This significant percentage of national income would have been hard to ignore for a thoughtful and well-read man like Wesley.

No Christian in the eighteenth century was more passionately committed to helping the poor than John Wesley. And he taught both by precept and example. Wesley was a successful author who gave away to the poor all of his significant earnings. Wearmouth quoting Samuel Bradburn says that Wesley "never gave away out of his own pocket less than £1,000 a year" (Wearmouth 1945:211). That amount is consistent with the estimate that Wesley had lifetime earnings of around £30,000 from his publications and that he contributed nearly all of those earnings to his programs for the poor. In his *Earnest Appeal* (1745) Wesley said "if he left more than ten pounds at his death, anyone could call him a thief and a robber" (Heitzenrater 1984:1:217). At Wesley's death in 1791, his remaining cash was only the 6£ stipend paid to the six poor men who were his pallbearers. At his death the *Leeds Intelligencer* commented that "Mr. Wesley's real worth is demonstrated by nothing more convincingly than by his dying...worth nothing. It proves that the influence which he acquired...was not employed to any sordid purpose" (Wearmouth 1945:211). In the opinion of Heitzenrater, however, his personal property was "rather substantial" (mainly books and printing equipment) and these assets went primarily to the Methodist connection (Heitzenrater 1984:1:217).

Most Methodists were not wealthy. Very few came from the upper strata of society. Nevertheless, Wesley encouraged them to practice his kind of generosity towards the poor, and within their limited resources, most Methodists were generous. Still, it seems strange that Wesley urged generosity to the poor on the part of the not very wealthy Methodists, but took no notice of the massive financial support for the poor being provided by the public, tax-supported Poor Law program.

As the authors learned more about the well-established Poor Law in England, we increasingly sought an explanation regarding Wesley's lack of interest or attention regarding the financial resources that the Poor Law made available. Given Wesley's frequent references to scriptural mandates concerning care for the poor, and his repeated proclamation regarding the Christian's responsibility, especially the Methodist's responsibility, to the poor, it struck us as unlikely that Wesley would have left any stone unturned regarding opportunities to find and use resources already at hand. There must be a reason, or reasons, for Wesley's lack of interest or comment regarding the Poor Law, a massive and ready source of support for the poor.

On the continent, especially in France, there was at times massive starvation, a situation that never occurred in England (Slack 1990:5). Interestingly, however, England was the only country to develop a public relief program like the Poor Laws. In most Catholic countries, such as France, help for the poor was left to alms-distribution through the Church. (Porter 1990:127) In contrast to France and other countries on the continent, in England, since the Elizabethan era, the responsibility for caring for the poor was recognized as a government duty. Or, as Heitzenrater says, "By the eighteenth century the whole system had become a social program of national welfare" (Heitzenrater 2002:19). And yet, the eighteenth century's chief advocate for the poor said nothing about this national program.

The Poor Law: Philosophy

Regarding Wesley's apparent lack of interest in the Poor Law, we concluded that it would be helpful to provide a brief review of the *philosophy* of the Poor Law and a summary of its *implementation* in Wesley's day. The Poor Law of the Elizabethan period was a multi-based effort designed to treat "poverty and destitution." It began as special concern for the impotent poor (widows, orphans, the sick, disabled, unsupported children, etc.). But by Wesley's day, however, the number of eligible candidates for Poor Law support had increased beyond the strictly impotent and came to include workers who were able to work, and who did often work, but who were unable to live off the fruits of their labor.

An especially important English concept that probably predated even the Elizabethan time was the recognition that the community, not just the family, had a responsibility to support poorer members of society. According to Slack, “the question was not whether collective assistance should be provided for these people, but who should assist them and in what ways” (Slack 1990:6) or, similarly, according to Hietzenrater, “the question was never whether to provide help, but rather who would provide it.” (Heitzenrater 2002:17).

Over time there were many modifications to the original Elizabethan Poor Law. Slack summarizes the main provisions of more than twenty-seven acts of parliament between 1531 and the Gilbert Act of 1782 that modified the implementation of the Poor Law program (Slack 1990:51-56). Two of these modifications are of particular interest. First, in 1662, the Act of Settlement was an attempt to reduce a parish’s economic burden by removing from the parish individuals the parish was not legally required to support. The Settlement concept was based on the premise that each person had a home parish, usually by birth. The Poor Law responsibility to support was limited to the person’s “home” parish. If a person was living outside of his home parish, he was subject to being removed from the parish, and such removal frequently did happen. Eventually, a modification of the law provided for a certificate from the home parish acknowledging the home parish’s Poor Law responsibility.

A second major effort designed to reduce the economic burden on the parish was the Workhouse Test Act of 1723. This act authorized the creation of workhouses, and denied relief to any poor person who refused to labor in a workhouse. This law also allowed two or more parishes to unite in the creation of a workhouse (Slack 1990:2). The workhouse was a place for the poor to live and to work without wages, in exchange for meager food and basic shelter. Even as early as the Elizabethan era, it was the responsibility of the parish to “set the poor to work.” According to many critics of the 18th century, “The workhouse was the favorite panacea for all the social ills of the eighteenth century” (Marshall 2007:47). It was widely acclaimed as “the only sure method by which rates might be reduced” (Ibid: 48).

Slack estimates that by 1732 there were at least 700 workhouses across the country. By 1782 it is likely that at least a third of the parishes in England (and probably more) either had established their own workhouses or had entered into cooperative arrangements with other parishes for collective workhouses (Slack 1990:35). It was difficult for many parishes, especially the smaller ones, to create and operate workhouses. As a result parishes often contracted out the operation of the

workhouse, either their own workhouse or the collective workhouse used by more than one parish.

It is not clear that there was, over the long term, any significant economic improvement resulting from the creation of the workhouses. What is clear is that a large majority of the eighteenth century workhouses were threats to the physical, mental, and moral health of those who lived and worked there. Marshall provides many descriptions of the devastating conditions that those who had been forced into living and working in workhouses had to endure (Marshall 1926:125-160: *passim*). The experience of infant children in the workhouses was especially bleak. Porter reports that in the view of one philanthropist, when infants were farmed out to workhouses the “Parish officers never intended that parish infants should live.... an infant of one to three years might on average survive a month in a London workhouse. The death rate in the workhouse of St. George’ Middlesex was 100 percent” (1990:131).

As previously mentioned, parishes often contracted out the operation of workhouses, either their own or the collective workhouse used by more than one parish. Marshall observes that for the contractor it was not possible “to employ the Poor with any hope of an adequate return for the time and capital expended... the only chance was to cut to the absolute minimum the amount spent on their maintenance [of the workers] and this was the course adopted” (Marshall 2007:137).

By the end of the eighteenth century, it was generally acknowledged that the workhouse concept was not successful. Porter evaluates it bluntly: “As cheap and productive cures for poverty, workhouses proved duds” (Porter 1990: 127). The same conclusion, in more restrained language, is expressed by Marshall, many “years of continual effort to evolve some scheme for employing the poor produced no reward” (Marshall 2007:160). Critics like Marshall argue that the stench and starvation of the workhouse environment and the inhumanity of turning the most helpless of the country’s poor, especially the children, over to a merciless contractor was too high a human price to pay, even if, in a few rare cases, it may have reduced the poor rate.

Since its beginning, and in spite of numerous variations in implementation and practice, the basic philosophy of the Poor Law did not change: “The question was not whether collective assistance should be provided...but who should assist [the impotent] and in what ways” (Slack 1990: 6). It was the responsibility of the community rather than the family to support the impotent. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the Poor Law increasingly incorporated openness to providing poor relief not only to the impotent, but also to those capable of work but who were unable to earn enough to support their families (Marshall 2007:52-53).

Moreover, the “working poor” came to see the Poor Law as an entitlement, something that they had a right to expect, and about which they felt increasingly empowered to argue with the parish overseers for more generous support. By the early part of the eighteenth century, the poor were frequently appealing to justices of the peace in complaining about the amount of poor relief set by overseers. The appeal process was difficult for the overseers. It often involved excessive time and travel and, as a result, “in many a rural parish, five to twenty miles of bad roads might separate [overseer] from the nearest justice, and the business could not take less than a day...which the overseer could ill afford. The result was that the clamorous pauper, who threatened to appeal...tended to get more than his fair share of relief...” (Marshall 2007:89). This systemic flaw, among others, contributed to the increasing costs of running Poor Law programs.

The Poor Law: Implementation

Marshall began her study of poverty in eighteenth century England by noting that how a civilized country responds to poverty is of vital importance (Marshall 2007:1). The English response to poverty was early (1598) and unique in Europe. It consisted of a local tax (in each parish), creating funds supporting the poor of *that* parish. The entire process was under local control regarding both collection and distribution of the Poor Law fund. Slack is of the opinion that without local control Parliament would never have implemented the Poor Law (Slack 1990:13). Thus, local control made the Poor Law possible but local control was also the source of the Poor Law’s inefficiency and, ultimately its ineffectiveness.

The poor rate (that is the amount that each person with property worth £30 or more must pay) was set by the local overseers as they assessed what was needed to meet the basic Poor Law requirements in their parish. The overseers also determined the way the money collected through the poor rate was to be spent. “The poor rate is due immediately upon its being published...but if the rate be not paid voluntarily, it may be levied by the churchwardens and overseers by distress and sale of the defaulter’s goods, and if no sufficient distress, he may be committed to the county gaol” (Theboald 1836:149). When the amount collected through the poor rate was not sufficient to meet the needs of the poor in the parish, a Justice of the Peace was usually willing to approve an additional assessment necessary to supply the deficiency.

The law required that the overseers be appointed in each parish for service for a year without pay. They were legally compelled to serve and were subject to a fine if they refused. The national law assumed that the wealthier and land-owning citizens of the parish (thus, the more literate and educated citizens)

would be appointed as overseers. However, gentlemen and persons of substance often preferred to pay the fine rather than to serve. As a result, the overseers were often farmers and small business owners. "It was not uncommon to find overseers who could only make their mark . . . their aim was to get through the parish business with as little trouble to themselves as possible...A careless, lazy administration was the utmost that could be expected.... The worst that could be anticipated was a state of intolerable corruption" (Marshall 2007: 10). There was wide "distrust of the overseers. Complaints about their 'partiality', 'misconduct' and 'laxity' mounted from the 1660s right up to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834" (Slack 1990:37). Marshall reports that the majority of the parish poor rates were paid by freeholders, farmers, merchants and tradesman, who in their daily labors experienced fatigue of body and mind in their work to gain the resources necessary to pay the required poor rate. These "middle class" citizens were disgusted by the sight of vagrants begging on every street, while they found it difficult to hire workers for businesses or farms. Their "sense of irritation...explains much of the hardness by which even good and philanthropic men regard the poor" (Marshall 2007:33).

In addition to ineffective administration, the Poor Law was also burdened by outright corruption. There were numerous means by which the parish overseers could obtain illegal income from their work. One method was by entering into contracts that resulted in a commission to themselves. Another inappropriate overseer activity, while not strictly illegal, was that of providing at their "business" meetings elaborate and expensive feasts. Marshall (2007:64) describes one meeting of overseers at which the price of the food for the meeting would have provided food for a dozen paupers for a year.

Marshall, a rather sympathetic interpreter of the Poor Law, gives two different assessments of the effectiveness of the two categories of Poor Law programs. In addition to the workhouses, which were, rife with the difficulties noted above, there was another approach to support for the poor that was described as "Outdoor relief." This involved direct payments to the poor through weekly or monthly stipends to the poor so that they could purchase food. In addition, the parish often provided help with housing, clothes, shoes, fuel, and medical treatments. In short, many of the things of normal life were supported including funeral expenses (grave digging, pall bearers, bell ringing and shrouds). In contrast to the workhouse projects which required administrative skill often beyond that possessed by the overseers, Outdoor Relief was probably "the best executed branch of the poor law...it was the easiest part of the law to keep in working order...To collect the rate and share out the proceeds among the parish poor presented no

great difficulties” (Marshall, 2007:87), and this task was usually within the limited administrative skills of the overseers.

We suspect that many, perhaps most, of the poor that Wesley and the Methodist helped were eligible for poor relief, but it may also have been the case that some of the people Wesley served were not eligible for poor relief because they were not in their home parishes or had not obtained the necessary certificates. The growth of Methodist membership was largely in the expanding areas of industrial developments, which included the old areas at “Newcastle, Staffs, Cornwall and Bristol and the new ones in Lancashire and Yorkshire and the North” (Edwards 1955:201). Many of these new residents of the industrial areas had been forced by the enclosure process to leave their native rural areas where they could hunt, fish, tend a garden, or to have a cow on the rapidly disappearing commons. In the industrial areas they might find employment, but often lacked eligibility for Poor Law participation.

Wesley Scholars and the Poor Law

According to Jennings, Wesley’s primary writings occupy about seven thousand pages (Jennings 1990:10). The authors of this paper have read widely in the works of Wesley, although certainly not everything, and we have concluded that Wesley says almost nothing about the parliament-mandated, publicly supported program for relief of the poor. As we reflected on our discovery of the Poor Laws and the lack of attention to them by Wesley, it seemed to us that the Poor Laws were almost as surprising to Wesley as they were to us. Yet we knew, of course, that this could not possibly be true for the well-read Oxford scholar. Nevertheless, the puzzling disconnect continued.

We extended our search for information of Wesley’s knowledge of the Poor Laws to a perusal of many biographies, ancient and recent, of Wesley’s life and work. This search confirmed that the biographers of Wesley had no interest in the Poor Law topic. When it became clear that Wesley did not comment on the Poor Laws we moved out to the next circle and asked if in the recent past the community of Wesley scholars were concerned with the Poor Laws. Again, we reached the same conclusion as before. We conjectured that since Wesley had not addressed the Poor Law then, with one major exception, the Poor Law was also of little interest to most current Wesley scholars.

Marquardt does provide a one-sentence comment that Wesley had no interest in reforming the Poor Law (Marquardt 1992:132). The major exception to this general lack of interest in the Poor Laws among Wesley scholars is the valuable chapter by Heitzenrater “The Poor and The People Called Methodist” in his book

by the same name (Hietzenrater 2003:15-38). This chapter begins with a discussion and definition of the meaning of poverty, provides insight into the Poor Law as implemented in the eighteenth century, and concludes with a summary of the efforts of the Methodists to serve the poor. We found this chapter very helpful and commend it as an excellent introduction into the Poor Law, and to the Methodist's responses to the eighteenth English poverty problem.

In the end, however, Heitzenrater's chapter does not provide an understanding of Wesley's view of the Poor Law. We still cannot answer such questions as: How familiar was Wesley with the Poor Law? What was Wesley's opinion of the Poor Law? Did he favor or ever suggest alterations and improvements? This absence is not a criticism of Heitzenrater's valuable analysis. His purpose, in our view, was not to discuss Wesley's opinion of the Poor Law, but to summarize from a historical perspective the successes and, increasingly during the eighteenth century, the failures of the Poor Law program to remove or even reduce poverty.

An Analysis of Wesley's 1773 tract, *Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions*²

Some scholars identified this tract as Wesley's most serious effort to address economic issues (Marquardt 1992:44). Realizing that the Poor Law was in many ways an "economic issue" we approached the tract with high anticipation that it might help us to understand Wesley's view of and silence regarding the Poor Law. But we were disappointed.

First, the tract makes no direct mention of the Poor Law or the poor rate, which was used to raise money to relieve the poor. In the tract Wesley discusses systemic flaws in the English economic system and he indicates how these flaws contributed to the extensive level of poverty. He does not, however, mention the flaws in the Poor Law itself either in the collection of funds or the allocation of the collected money. In fact, Wesley in this tract does not mention the Poor Law at all.

The tract begins with Wesley's poignant descriptions of two near-starvation experiences of which he was aware, that show the effects of poverty. This is followed with Wesley's observation that the poor have no food because they have no work. He details why various foodstuffs: corn, oats, beef, mutton, pork, poultry, and eggs are in short supply and thus are very expensive. Wesley writes, "Thousands of people throughout the land are perishing for want of food. This is owing to various causes; but above all to distilling, taxes and luxury" (Jennings 1990:68).

As a general rule Wesley's Tory political philosophy discouraged him from "demanding... fundamental reforms that only the state could have carried through" (Marquardt 1992: 131). This 1773 tract, however, is an exception to

Wesley's generally conservative approach. In this tract, Wesley does recommend government intervention regarding distilling, taxes, and luxury. Weber writes that,

To counteract these economic trends and restore unemployment and reduce food prices, Wesley suggests a number of measures- most of which involve interventionary government policy. He proposes prohibition of the making of distilled liquors, the setting of hefty taxes on luxury horses (especially horses for export) and carriages, the elimination of other taxes that drive up prices on necessities, curbing luxury by law and example, reducing the national debt (by simply erasing half of it!) and the canceling of useless and unwarranted pensions (Weber 2001: 295).

Economists usually see Wesley's conclusions and corrections in this tract as naïve, sketchy, and unrealizable (Kingdon 1957:345).

For the purposes of this paper can this 1773 tract be seen as an argument by Wesley for or against the Poor Law? In our opinion the answer is, "no." As we read it, the tract is not about the Poor Law. Rather, it involves suggestions regarding government programs, regulations, and tax policy especially regarding luxury goods. It does not address the issue of resource allocation, which is the burden of the Poor Law.

It might be asserted that this tract is an *indirect* argument in support of the Poor Law. Heitzenrater, in the appendix to *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* notes that the tract provides Wesley's responses to the arguments of two opponents of the Poor Law³. These include John M'Farlan, *Inquires Concerning the Poor* (Heitzenrater 2002: 212) and Joseph Townsend, *Dissertation on the Poor Laws by a Well-wisher to Mankind*, (Heitzenrater 2002:213). Heitzenrater says that Wesley's tract "in part, counteracts the views of M'Farlan and Townsend" (Ibid: 219).

If one embraces the old proverb "that the enemy of my enemy is my friend" then, perhaps Wesley's tract should be viewed as an indirect support of the Poor Law, even though the Poor Law itself is never mentioned in the tract. In this tract, M'Farlan and Townsend can be viewed as "enemies" of the Poor Law. Wesley, in challenging the arguments of these Poor Law enemies, has made himself, at least indirectly, a "friend" of the Poor Law. The authors of this paper, however, are of the opinion that if Wesley, with his deliberate and direct approach, had intended to support the Poor Law that that support would have been clear. Thus, in our opinion, this tract should not be viewed as an argument for or against the Poor Law.

Comparison of Wesley's "Social Work" in the Eighteenth Century With the Work of a Twenty-first Century Social Worker

The original stimulus for this paper was the similarity of John Wesley's work with the poor in the eighteenth century compared with the work of twenty first century social workers with their clients. While there is certainly general similarity of the two ministries there is one significant difference: Modern social workers in the United States encourage and often assist their clients to seek support from government provided funds. We were unable to find any evidence that Wesley encouraged the poor that he served to seek support from Poor Law funds. The eighteenth century quasi-social worker, Wesley, was always eager to help the poor. The fact that Wesley says very little about the poor obtaining parish relief provides a remarkable contrast with the experience of many twenty-first century social workers who are often deeply involved with their client's eligibility struggles.

Perhaps this absence of interest or action on the part of Wesley regarding the Poor Law is not entirely surprising since Parliament's law was dispersed across approximately nine thousand different parishes in England. Each local parish had its own individualized plan for implementing the Poor Law. In every parish there were local Poor Law rules plus a set of community circumstances and attitudes that shaped and limited local application of the Poor Law. In eighteenth century England, there were very few national policies or guidelines with regard to the Poor Law. Each parish was a world unto itself.

(1) Recommendations for improvement in the implementation of the Poor Law across the nation could not easily have been made. While this reality may help to explain the lack of recommendations or suggestion for improvement of the Poor Law program, it does not, in our opinion, explain the absence of Wesley's interest in or his lack of comments regarding the Poor Law itself.

(2) Modern social workers speak not just to their clients. They have a responsibility to a broader audience. This witness includes speaking to politicians who fund relief programs, to administrators who manage programs, and to society-at-large which benefits from the presence of such programs. In short, a major role and expectation of the modern social workers in the United States is to *advocate* for "individuals, families and communities." (National Association of Social Workers Mission Statement, 2004) and to work to improve the operation of current social service programs, which often means seeking to influence government policy. Wesley was certainly interested in helping the poor, but as Marquardt observes "His unique

efforts towards the plight of the poor did not have the reform of the poor laws as their aim” (Marquardt 1992:131-132). In other words, Wesley’s advocacy was not usually directed to the realms of government, but was what might be called “moral” advocacy. He encouraged a charitable and loving orientation on the part of individuals and private organizations as he sought to increase their sensitivity to the poor and their action relative to the poor. When it came to the issue of slavery, however, Wesley had no reservations about calling for government action to correct what he considered a great evil. (See his *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (Wesley 1773)). Regarding the Poor Law program, however, Wesley was not moved to issue a call for similar governmental action.

Concern for the poor in both eighteenth century England and the United States in the twenty-first century gave rise to public, tax-supported programs to assist the poor, yet there are vast differences in the social and political climates of these two situations. These wide differences in societal and cultural realities limit the appropriateness of efforts at comparison.

Possible Answers Regarding the Question of Wesley’s Silence on the Poor Laws

At the end of this study we propose the following considerations as possible clues to Wesley’s silence:

1. *The Poor Law with its mandatory poor rate taxation and its cold and distant delivery of relief to the poor did not resonate with Wesley’s “get to know the poor style.” In short, Wesley wanted the rich and the poor to get to know each other, especially he wanted the rich to get to know the poor, and the Poor Law approach did not support this goal.*

The Poor Law certainly generated large sums of money for the poor. In Wesley’s view, however, the Poor Law did not increase Christian love and charity. The well-organized Wesley, a man of detail and good practice, probably believed that improving the Poor Law’s administration would likely have contributed to his secondary goal of improving the life of the poor. Yet improvement of this secondary goal would not address Wesley’s concern about the primary or fundamental goal of spiritual development of the poor, nor enhance an appreciation on the part of the rich, regarding the circumstances of the poor.

Wesley constantly encouraged the Methodists to give generously to the poor. The style in which most “gifts” were given to the poor through the Poor Law usually fell far short of the ministry that Wesley envisioned. In his sermon

“On Visiting the Sick,” Wesley describes the kind of ministry he preferred. Wesley wrote,

One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them... Many of them do not know because they do not care to know: They keep out of the way of knowing it-and then plead their voluntary ignorance...”Indeed, Sir” (said a person of large substance), “I am a very compassionate man. But to tell you the truth, I do not know anybody in the world that is in want.” How did this come to pass? Why, he took good care to keep out of their way. And if he fell upon any of them unawares, he passed over on the other side (Collins 2013:349).

Wesley wrote “How much better is it, when it can be done, to carry relief to the poor rather than send it! And that both for our own sakes and theirs. For theirs, as it is so much more comfortable to them and as we may then assist them in spirituals as well as temporals; and for our own as it is far more apt to soften our hearts and makes us naturally care for each other” (Rack 1989: 363).

MacArthur points out that for Wesley the essential thing in philanthropic activities “was the spirit or attitude with which he approached those whom he would help.... Important as was the relief he gave, in itself, still more precious was the quality of his giving.” (MacArthur 1936:114). Wesley says, “if you cannot relieve, do not grieve the poor; give them soft words, if nothing else; abstain from either sour looks, or harsh words. Let them be glad to come, even though, they should go empty away. Put yourself in the place of every poor man; and deal with him as you would God should deal with you” (MacArthur 1936:114).

It appears to us that Wesley believed that the motivation for charitable gifts could take one of three paths. Gift to the poor and needy can be given: (1) Out of Christian love (2) Out of Christian duty (3) By paying a mandatory tax that will be used to support the poor. This mandatory tax of the Poor Law is two steps removed from Wesley’s ideal of Christian love. Even when gifts are given out of Christian duty from Wesley’s view they miss a fundamental point. This is especially true for the remote, mandatory, Poor Law approach that only feeds the body of the poor; it does not feed the soul of either the rich or the poor. Sending gifts to the poor, rather than carrying them, will cause relief to appear as done from duty rather than from a warm heart or as a generous act.

Thus, in Wesley’s view of the gospel, the Poor Law’s way of supporting the needy failed on both sides of the equation: Wesley wanted the charitable contribution process to result in an interaction between the gift giver and the poor person. In Wesley’s ideal, the collection of the money for the poor and its

distribution as a gift should spring out of the generosity that arises from Christian love rather than what was required by law. Rack reminds us that Wesley's point in visiting the poor "is to create a tender relationship" (Rack 1989:363) between the rich and the poor. No one in Wesley's century (or we suspect in the twenty-first century!) made the claim that gifts coming from the mandatory tax of the Poor Law, or allocations to the poor from any of the twenty-first century's many different taxes, resulted in a particularly tender relationship between the rich and poor. In fact, distant, mandatory, tax "contributions" to the poor may be counter-productive, creating hostility rather than Rack's "tenderness."

2. *Wesley, although an active and effective social worker, was first and foremost an evangelist. His primary interests were spiritual. The Poor Law, which by its nature focused on, the economic needs of the poor, while very important, could never be for Wesley the ultimate goal of ministry.*

It should not be surprising that the Poor Law program, which was fundamentally, an economic program including a "spirit-less" approach to supporting the poor, did not gain Wesley's enthusiastic endorsement. Collins points out that during a discussion at an early Methodist conference (in the 1740s) Wesley asked, "What is the office of a Christian minister? To which he and others replied 'To watch over souls, as he that must give an account.'...shortly thereafter Wesley exclaimed... 'You have nothing³ to do but to save souls...spend and be spent in this work'" (Collins 1995:82). Likewise, years later in 1772, Wesley sounds the same theme in a letter to his brother, Charles, that among other things, his business was "to save souls."

Without doubt, financial resources were required to fulfill Wesley's desire, and more importantly, Christ's command, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Financially focused ministries are concerned with the "economic needs" of the poor. As Collins (1995) makes clear, Wesley never considered that meeting the economic needs of the poor changed, in any way, the spiritual needs of the poor. In Wesley's view, meeting the economic needs of the poor were *necessary* but they were never the *sufficient* conditions of Christian ministry.

3. *The Poor Law was poorly implemented, carelessly administered, and, very inefficient, and by the eighteenth century it was not well respected across English society. A poorly run program would never appeal to a "methodical" person like John Wesley.*

It is not surprising that Wesley, who insisted on things being done properly would have been embarrassed in trying to work with or through such

a poorly administered and widely criticized program. “In 1735 a Committee of the House of Commons passed a series of resolutions to the effect that the laws regulating the Poor were defective, that they were difficult to execute and of little use. But, in spite of this condemnation, nothing was done...Thus, a feeling grew up on the part of some that the Poor Laws were actually responsible for creating much of the poverty which they were supposed to relieve” (Marshall 2007:36).

A major part of the problem with the Poor Law was that the overseers were ill prepared to manage such a program. They lacked training and stayed in office for only a year. Just as they began “to learn the ropes” they were “out the door.” Parliament did not help by refusing to strengthen the oversight of the program. In fact, over the eighteenth century oversight actually grew more relaxed. For example,

it was decided that if the overseer was prepared to swear to his accounts, it was not necessary for him to produce details... In the same way, the provision that the rates made by the overseers should be signed by the justices before they could be collected, was rendered nugatory by a legal decision declaring that though signature was indeed necessary before the rate could become legal, yet the justices had no power either to refuse to sign or to alter the assessment, however unjust it might seem to them...Hence there was very little effective control over the way in which the parishes assessed, levied, and spent their poor rates....The average overseer was either a farmer in rural parishes or a shop-keeper in urban ones; he was engaged in earning his own living, and was generally unwilling to waste more time and thought over his troublesome duties than was absolutely necessary. It was to his interest to keep the machine running until his year was over...he was usually quite unqualified for his task.... One cannot write down all overseers...as embezzlers; the most to be said is that their circumstances did afford opportunities for fraud, of which, in many cases, they availed themselves.... Moreover, economy was not forced on them; the income within which they must keep was limited only by public opinion and the ability of rate payers to pay. (Marshall, 2007:57-58).

It is not difficult to imagine how a man of Wesley’s personality and precision would find the entire Poor Law administrative process distressing, with its obvious inefficiency and clear and common incidents of graft and corruption. These realities probably encouraged Wesley to stay as far away from the Poor Law process as possible.

4. *In the early days of the Methodist revival Wesley and his followers were subject to significant persecution. Wesley wanted to avoid returning to those early days. He feared that suggesting changes to important programs, like the Poor Law, would be misinterpreted and put the Methodist movement again at risk of persecution.*

Having begun in 1738, by 1745 the Methodist revival was up and running. There were large crowds responding to the growing number of Methodist preachers, their services witnessed emotional displays, the movement was experiencing rapid growth, and an emerging Methodist structure was appearing. On the other hand, riots, opposition, and criticism from the religious and political establishments had begun to appear. Methodism had become a visible, influential, and controversial movement. Wesley, as the Methodist leader, no longer had the luxury of being a nonpolitical religious figure, nor could he continue the life that he had known as a quiet Anglican priest and an Oxford tutor. His increasing personal prominence drew him, often against his will, into new controversies (Weber 2001:72-83). The Methodists people were accused of being Dissenters, and, Wesley himself, was accused of being a Jacobite⁴ and thus a threat to the crown.

The Jacobite charge was exacerbated by the 1745 invasion of England by Prince Charles Edward Stuart, a Roman Catholic, the grandson of James II, who had been deposed by parliament in 1688. This grandson claimed to be the legitimate heir to the throne and with the invasion of England in 1745 he hoped to establish his claim to the throne.

Although the invasion was totally unrelated, it happened in 1745, in the midst of the Methodist revival. There were significant numbers of people in England (the Jacobites) who supported the Pretender's claim to the English throne. Nevertheless, his invasion was unsuccessful. The grandson's army was defeated in 1746, which put an end to any serious Jacobite threat to the realm. This defeat, however, did not eliminate charges regarding Jacobitism against Wesley and the Methodist followers of Wesley. "The linking of John Wesley and Methodism with the Jacobite question did not end with the defeat of the '45 rebellion. This linkage continued to dog Wesley for the rest of his life" (Weber, 2001, 82). In the period just after the rebellion, the "riots against Methodists continued, and the press gangs persisted in efforts to force the Methodist preachers- including Wesley himself- into military service" (Weber 2001:78).

John Wesley certainly was not a Jacobite, a supporter of a Stuart's claim to the throne in 1745, although there is a debate among scholars as to whether Wesley in his younger years had been a Jacobite.⁵ Weber makes the stronger case on this issue when he claims that Wesley never was a Jacobite at least in his post-

Oxford days (Weber 2001:78-85). Although not a Jacobite, Wesley was concerned, not so much for himself personally as for the Methodist movement, that even a false charge of Jacobitism would be a major problem for the revival.

With regard to the Poor Law, Wesley's was concerned that "demanding comprehensive and fundamental reforms that only the state could have carried through" (Marquardt, 1992 131) would appear to associate the Methodist movement as Dissenters. If the Methodist, like Dissenters, were "causing or promoting" unrest it might have reignited the persecution that the Methodist movement had earlier experienced. "Some of the suspicion of and antipathy toward the Methodists reflected a genuine fear of the social chaos and conflict rooted in the memory of the revolutionary disorders of the 1640s" (Weber 2001:79).

Challenging the operation of the Poor Law on the basis of its structure, operation, appropriateness, or morality would have smacked of fundamental opposition to the law of the King or his ministers in Parliament. Wesley had no interest in doing anything that might reignite the simmering claim that the Methodists, like the Dissenters, were threats to the realm and to Parliament's laws. While Wesley was moved to challenge the morality of slavery and call for its elimination with a lengthy and powerful tract, *Upon Slavery* (Wesley, 1773), he did not feel free to challenge the Poor Law whose purpose he likely would have supported, but whose careless administration he likely would have despised.

End Notes

¹ There are a few places, for example, in the following Weymouth quote from the *Journal*, that refer to the Poor Law. "After preaching at Hannam on Monday, January 21, 1740, "[Wesley] made a collection...³for the poor without Lawford's gate.' These people, he says, 'having no work (because of the severe frost) and *no assistance from the parish wherein they live*, were reduced to the last extremity" (Weymouth 1945:203. Italics added). This observation, which mentions the poor relief from the parish, does not provide an evaluation by Wesley of the Poor Law. No reason is given why the poor were not receiving support. We learn nothing of Wesley's assessment of the Poor Law from this and similar statements.

² In exhibit 12 of the appendix to his book *The Poor and the People Called Methodist 1729-1999*, Heitzenrater discusses Wesley's tract *The Present Scarcity of Provisions* published in 1773. He says that the tract "counteracts the views of Townsend and M'Farlan." Their views are summarized in exhibit 1 of the appendix (M'Farlan) and exhibit 4 (Townsend). However, there appear to be errors in the publication dates. M'Farlan's *Inquiries Concerning the Poor* is reported as published in 1782 and Townsend's *Dissertation on the Poor Laws* as published in 1786. Both of these dates are after the publication date assigned to Wesley's 1773 publication. It is possible that Wesley knew the ideas of M'Farlan and Townsend prior to the publication of his tract or, perhaps, Wesley's tract was published at a later date.

The MFarlan and Townsend tracts were summarized by Heitzenrater but were not otherwise available to us.

³ The authors of this paper take exception to Wesley's careless use of the word "nothing." As the earlier part of this paper notes, Wesley spends much time, energy, and resources in responding to the temporal needs of the poor, often before there is any "preaching." In fact, "Throughout his ministry [Wesley] admonished his people that they should not limit their works of mercy to only those who respond (or are likely to do so), but rather they should offer this ministry as Christ did- to all who are in need and simply because of their need" (Maddox 2002:69).

⁴ A Jacobite is a partisan who supported James II after he was deposed as the king of England and overthrown in 1688. Jacobitism is the movement supporting one of James II's descendants such as Charles Stuart, his grandson, who launched an unsuccessful invasion of England in 1745. Jacobites were usually Catholic and Wesley, with his practice of frequent communion and ascetic discipline, was often suspected of being a Catholic (Weber 2001:79; Heitzenrater, 1984b:90-103) and thus a political threat.

⁵ Semmel argues that the early Wesley was a Jacobite who "converted" during the 1745 revolution (Semmel 1973:57-61). We agree with Weber's opposition to Semmel's conclusion. Whatever he was in his Oxford years, Wesley prior to 1733, become convinced that the Hanoverian on the throne was the legitimate king (Weber 2001:58-60).

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