

# Foreword: Poetry and the Poor

*Lessons Learned from Charles Wesley and S T Kimbrough, Jr.*

Methodism, in the beginning a movement among “the not well off,” became the exemplification of bourgeois Christianity. Methodism is the faith of the middle class. That characterization may fail to do justice to British Methodism. In England, where the class structure is well determined and acknowledged, Methodist discipline helped many rise from poverty to become well established, but their class origins continued to determine how they understood themselves. As a result Methodism in England became identified with the Labor Party on its knees. At least that was the case when the Labor Party *was* the party of people like Tony Benn.

The middle-class character of Methodism in America did not result in a politics exemplified by the Labor Party. Methodism in America, at least Methodism at the beginning of the turn of the last century, was identified with a people who took pride in having worked hard to become respectable. They did not necessarily think of themselves as middle class. Rather they thought they were neither very rich nor very poor. They simply had “just enough.” The “enough” that they had, however, they were pretty sure they deserved. They were generous people willing to share some of their “enough” with those who did not have “enough.” But they did worry about giving what they had to those who seemed to have no desire to escape being poor.

I am, of course, characterizing what has become known as mainstream Methodism. Methodism produced break-off movements such as the Free Methodists, the Nazarenes, and the Salvation Army. These movements were constituted by working-class people, whose jobs or finances would

not be sufficient for them to be understood as middle class. Accordingly, they found themselves still identified with the working poor.

My description of mainstream Methodism in America may seem not to take account of the involvement of Methodists as individuals and as a church in the Social Gospel movement. It is certainly the case that Methodists were among the early leaders in organizations created by advocates of the Social Gospel. But the Social Gospel was primarily a movement of the middle class. Thus, advocates of the Social Gospel, in the name of dealing with structural poverty, sought to develop social policies that could be enacted by government to end poverty. The significance of such a strategy is not to be discounted, but it is nonetheless a strategy of a bourgeois church and social order. The Christian duty is now thought to be getting governments to do what Christians no longer were sure the church or individual Christians were willing to do.

I begin with these observations about Methodism because I hope they will help us appreciate the significance of S T Kimbrough's account of Charles Wesley's commitment to the poor. Of course, Kimbrough has said what needs to be said in his concluding remarks about the implications of Charles Wesley's model for the church's obligation to the poor for the twenty-first century. I have little to add to his highlighting the importance of enduring concern, the importance of acquiring the virtues, the living out of divine grace, as well as the importance of memory for understanding why and how the poor must be the center of the life of the church. My task, however, is to suggest why Kimbrough's suggestions about the implications of Charles Wesley's understanding of the duty of Christians to preach the Gospel to the poor entails a theological position that was largely lost when Methodists became a church of the middle class.

The imagination of a middle-class church concerning the poor is restrained by the presumption that the task of the church is to make the poor well-off enough to be middle class. Therefore the church and Christians think of the poor primarily as people who need to have something done to or for them. In the process, "the poor" become an abstraction. We do not need to know those we identify as poor, we do not need to listen to the poor, we, that is the church, just need to do something for the poor. We simply cannot imagine that we might need to be with the poor. But because we cannot imagine what it might mean to be with the poor, we cannot imagine what it might mean to be with Christ.

What Kimbrough helps us see is this: Charles Wesley saw quite clearly that how the poor are understood is a christological issue. For Charles

Wesley, the poor could not be turned into an abstraction because Christ cannot be turned into an abstraction. That is why his poetry celebrating the lives of particular people who refused to abandon the poor is so important. They witness to the One that was at once poor and who cared for the poor.

We do well to pay particular attention to Charles Wesley's poem:

Savior, how few there are  
 Who thy condition share,  
 Few, who cordially embrace,  
 Love, and prize thy poverty,  
 Want on earth a resting place,  
 Needy and resigned like thee!

What strikes one when reading Kimbrough's account of Charles Wesley's understanding of our duty to the poor is that the poor for him were actual people; they were to be cared for, but equally important was the ability to be a friend to them. It is, after all, love that draws the poor to us just as it is love that draws the poor to the church. So the poor are not simply people Christians need so that we might do some "good," but the poor are God's people who make it possible to celebrate with the Father the Son's obedience even in the face of death.

Perhaps nothing makes Kimbrough's account of Charles Wesley's understanding of the Eucharist more compelling than his suggestion that the poor have spiritual as well as material needs. It is not simply the well-off who must be ready to sell their possessions, but the poor also can be possessed by what they do not possess. So it is surely right that Charles Wesley understood his preaching to the poor and their sharing in the meal of communion with Christ to be constitutive of what justice looks like when it is shaped by the love that is God's very life. Kimbrough rightly describes this participation as *theosis*, that is, the very participation of our lives in God's life. *Theosis* is often thought to be some ideal not reachable, but in Charles Wesley's understanding of what it means to be poor and to be with the poor, we begin to understand that this is no unrealizable ideal but the very substance of the life of the church. *Theosis* turns out to be the expression of Matthew 25. So understood, we gain a glimpse of what it means for all humankind to be made one through the love of God.

Accordingly, Charles Wesley's christological understanding of what it means for the church not only to care for the poor but also to be the church of the poor makes clear that his christological understanding of the

poor is inseparable from his understanding of the church. In particular, it is the worship of God that is the heart of what it means for the church to be the church of the poor. For it is in worship that any distinction between the poor and those who are not poor is called into question and even obliterated.

It may seem odd to think that the church's first responsibility to the poor is to provide right worship of God, but it turns out that the poor know better than others what they need. Through worship, through the beauty of liturgy, they discover, in a manner that those who are not poor do not, that there is no standing more significant for learning our worth than learning to kneel before God. That Kimbrough ends his reflections on Charles Wesley's accounts of his preaching to and care of the poor with "worship resources" is a gift to the poor.

I think it is, moreover, no accident that the one who rediscovered the christological significance of the poor was a poet. The worship of God depends on the language honed from souls shaped by the love of God—a love recognized most intensely by those not satiated by the goods of the world. Charles Wesley was an extraordinary poet whose poetry enabled us to sing that the poor and the not-so-poor could be united in one voice. As odd as it might seem, that unity turns out to be not only what is needed if the church called Methodist is to be renewed, but the unity thereby discovered is the hope of the church as a whole, and of the world.

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