

Theological Principles for Global Economic Justice

Theodore W. Jennings, Jr

As Christians in the Wesleyan tradition the people called Methodists draw upon biblical and Wesleyan resources in order to address the issues that confront us in our mission and ministry. As we confront the issues of global economic justice we may identify 12 basic principles that should guide our reflection and our engagement.

1. In the life of Israel God is disclosed as committed to the welfare of the most vulnerable members of the human community. It is this commitment that distinguishes the God of the Bible from the false gods and idols against which the prophets contend.

When God reveals the divine name YHWH to Moses, it is in order to commission Moses to set the captives free (Ex. 3:10). The divine name reflects the divine nature as one who has heard the cry of the people, who has witnessed their suffering, who is giving heed to their yearning for deliverance. The divine being is thus disclosed as the hearing and heeding of the cry of the oppressed, the vulnerable and the violated (Ex. 2:24-25; 3:7,9,16).

The Eighty Second Psalm shows the Lord entering the council of the Gods to distinguish the true divinity of Israel's God from the false gods of the nations and empires. And the principle that distinguishes The Lord from these others is precisely the call to "Give justice to the weak and the orphan, maintain the right of the lowly and destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy, deliver them from the hand of the wicked." (vv3-4)

In consequence the Psalms can sing the praise of God as "Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land." (68:4-6) And the Psalmist can also sing:

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose help is the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoner free; the lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous

The Lord watches over the immigrants; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever

Your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord (Psalm 146)

The commitment to the most vulnerable is not something added on to the nature of God. It is the very heart of the divine being; it is that which makes God not an idol but the sovereign Lord of Creation and history.

In the world and in the church there are many ways in which idolatry threatens to overwhelm our worship of the true God. In the world, forces of the market masquerade as an invisible and benevolent hand in which the peoples of the earth are invited to trust for salvation, for progress, for the realization of their hopes for life and justice and wholeness.

But these forces betray themselves as false gods who demand human sacrifice on a stupefying scale.

At the same time the church is too easily seduced by the siren call of worldly success and prosperity, by the false hope of gaining respectability and security within the systems of the world. Or it invents for itself another god, one who is concerned only with the inward condition of the heart and is oblivious to the cry of the destitute and the needy or to the ways in which the prosperous make themselves at ease by becoming deaf to the cry of their neighbors and blind to the forces of division and domination.

Any approach to the issues of economic injustice that has a biblical foundation must confront the idols of the market place and of the sanctuary with the message of the God of biblical testimony whose commitment to the vulnerable and the violated is of the very essence of the divine being.

2. The commitment to the welfare of the impoverished is fundamental to the life of the people of God. From the prophets to Jesus we are reminded that God requires justice for the poor rather than religious ritual as the proper means of honoring God. Here women and children and refugees (widows, orphans and strangers) have special priority.

When the Hebrew people are set free from the oppression of Pharaoh Moses warns them that their relationship to YHWH is dependent on their relationship to the most vulnerable: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident immigrant, for you were refugees in Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.”(Exodus 22:21-24). And in a subsequent version of the law the people are called to a circumcision of the heart (a theme beloved of Wesley) which entails a transformation of their relationship to the poor and vulnerable: “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart and do not be stubborn any longer. For the lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the immigrant, providing them food and clothing. You shall love the immigrant, for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10: 12-20). The recollection of deliverance from the hand of the slave empire of Pharaoh entails a living commitment to justice for all who are violated and vulnerable.

This warning is the very heart of the prophetic tradition that speaks of the justice of God to the powerful of Israel and Judah. Thus when Israel itself became prosperous and powerful the prophets thundered from the heart of the divine being: I don’t want your worship in temple and ritual - I want justice for the poor, the oppressed and needy.

In the very first oracle of Isaiah we hear:

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation - I cannot endure assemblies with iniquity.

Your new moons and appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands I will hide my eyes from you even though you make many prayers I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doing from before my eyes. cease to do evil, learn to do good.

seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (1:12-17)

In common with all the eighth century prophets (Amos, Hosea and Micah) Isaiah warns the people of God that YHWH is not interested in the religious pieties and practices of an unjust people: religious observance however fervent cannot substitute for justice. Thus :

Remove the evil of your doing from before my eyes. cease to do evil, learn to do good,

seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (1:12-17)

Centuries later the prophet Zechariah could look back upon the destruction of Israel in the 8th century and the destruction of Jerusalem in the 6th and discern the just judgment of God:

The Word of the Lord came to Z. , saying: Thus says the Lord of Hosts: render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder,

and stopped their ears in order not to hear. They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. (7:8-12)

The words of Amos and Micah and Jeremiah confirm those of Isaiah and Zechariah. The relation of the people to God depends not on their religious activities but on their pursuit of justice for the poor.

As in the days of the law and the prophets so also today the people of God are tempted to believe that their standing before God depends only upon certain beliefs or on religious observance. We imagine that by attending the temple, by prayer and fasting alone, by any number of observances we can earn or receive the favor of God. But God is not mocked. While these observances and liturgies may please some other god they cannot relate us to the God of the biblical witness.

Moreover just as Israel and Judah found their own security and prosperity in the world forfeit when they turned a deaf ear to the cry of the vulnerable and destitute so also the nations of the earth cannot find lasting peace and prosperity if they continue to depend on the exploitation of the poor and the denial of justice for those who languish in destitution.

The churches must themselves turn away from a false religiosity and toward the One who is committed to justice and mercy for the poor and marginalized. And they do this in order to call nations and corporations to a more just and compassionate economic and social life, knowing that in God's time the prosperity of nations and societies depends ultimately upon social and economic justice.

3. The commitment to the welfare of the vulnerable and the violated is no mere abstraction but entails specific practices of justice directed to the poor and to the healing of the earth itself.

The law and the prophets did not content themselves with general principles and high sounding slogans. Rather in the law of Israel we find multiple examples of specific mandated practices that made the commitment to justice and mercy for the poor into concrete reality.

The rules for agriculture which was the basis of Israel's economy required that the poor be allowed free access to the incomplete harvest (see Ruth 2:2-7), a provision from which Jesus and his followers benefited many centuries later (Mark 2:23-28). Moreover the harvest was to leave the edges of the field for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10).

One of the most explicit bodies of such law is to be found in Leviticus 25 that speaks of the Jubilee, reference to which is at the heart of Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4: 18-19). This legal code provides for the proclamation of liberty at the end of the 50 year period marked by the sounding of the ram's horn signalling the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:9).

All land that had been sold to pay off debts was to be returned to its original users (Leviticus 25:10) All people who had been separated from their families and had had to become indentured servants because of poverty were to be allowed to return with their debts canceled (25:54).

Moreover, the land itself was to be left fallow for the entire seventh and fiftieth year as on the sabbath, so that it could recover from the stress of planting and production. In this way the sabbath law rooted in the creation of heaven and earth (Gen. 1) was meant for the well being of the earth and all its creatures; For the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof (Psalm 24; see Leviticus 25:23)

In all these ways the people of Israel were reminded that God is the true owner of the land that God had created and that even the chosen people could only be tenants who received the fruit of the land by the grace of God. The economic system was designed to overcome the inequalities that developed over time among the people in order that no such inequalities could become so ingrained as to come to seem an inevitable fate.

Today we are in urgent need of similar provisions to overcome the huge and growing and life-threatening inequalities that characterize the global economy. Many nations, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa are devastated by interest on debts that have often been foisted upon them by greedy international banks and domestic elites. The call for Jubilee 2000 on the part of the WCC and the WMC is in accord with basic principles of justice as attested by the biblical witness.

Poverty also threatens the land itself with overgrazing, deforestation and flooding being often the result of people having no access to land for farming. Land reform is an urgent need in most of the world as is the development of practicable ways for the land to rest from the ceaseless exploitation that threatens the health of the whole planet.

All peoples and all creatures need to be offered the rest and security that comes from the recognition that God is the creator and the lord of all and intends not only that all survive but that all the diversity of creation thrive as well.

4. In the life, mission and ministry and fate of Jesus the commitment of God to the poor becomes flesh and blood.

The God of the law and the prophets and the Psalms comes to us in the life of Jesus of Nazareth who is the word of that God made flesh among us. He is born among the poor having even from the beginning no place to call his own but being found in a stable. In his childhood, like millions of the world's children he is a refugee from violence, living far from the land of his fathers and mothers.

When he embarks upon his ministry it is in order to announce "good news to the poor" and he travels about the villages and countryside of Galilee announcing and enacting the good news that God cares for the vulnerable and the violated. He and his followers have no place to lay their heads but live from the kindness of villagers and townspeople.

Inevitably his message of God's care for the most vulnerable and for the excluded makes him enemies among the prosperous, the powerful and the respectable who conspire almost from the beginning to find ways to silence him and to disperse the crowds of the dispossessed who follow him.

Like many throughout history who have sided with the vulnerable and violated he is charged with impiety and sedition. He is executed by the imperial authorities among the bandits. And on his lips as he dies is heard the cry heard every day from the lips of all those who are dispossessed, who are violated by the avaricious and the powerful: "My God, my God, Why have you abandoned me? (Mark 15:34); the cry of violated humanity on the lips of God made flesh.

Yet he returns, for the power of division and domination and death is unable to prevail against the Spirit of Life that raises him from the dead. At first he is unrecognized, even by his companions for he seems to be a workman in the cemetery (John 20:15), a vagabond on the road (Luke 24:15-18), an idler on the beach (John 21:4-6). He returns to be with us throughout history as the presence of God among the poor.

The Law and the Prophets had warned that God demands justice and mercy of the poor and marginalized. But with Jesus of Nazareth we discover the true depth of the divine commitment to them since here God becomes one with them.

Systems of political economy that oppress the poor therefore must be regarded as blasphemous. And churches that turn away from the cry of the impoverished have turned away from God.

Those uncounted millions that are being crushed by the powerful and seemingly inexorable systems of political economy lose hope of fundamental change for they are tempted to believe that God is on the side of the powerful rather than present in their suffering. The poor of the earth must hear the good news that God has taken up permanent residence among them so

that the hope for the establishment of a just world may be kindled anew in their hearts and they may be empowered to become agents of transformation.

And the church that claims to represent this Word of God made flesh must not only announce but also dramatically enact the promise of the coming of God's dominion of justice and generosity and joy.

5. Jesus identifies with the least of these and warns us that to be in faithful solidarity with him is to serve the needs of those who are violated and vulnerable.

In his last parable Jesus points his hearers to the coming of the human one to judge the earth and all the nations. And the norm of this judgment is not whether they have become in some formal way “Christians” but whether they have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned, welcomed the immigrant and refugee (Matthew 25:31-46).

Jesus makes clear that we can have no relation to him that is not also a relation to the vulnerable and violated of the earth. When one comes to him seeking eternal life, it is not enough that he has observed the ten commandments but also that he sell what he has and distribute it to the poor so that he can truly follow Jesus (Mark 10:21).

And Jesus sends out his disciples without money or even a change of clothes so that they may be dependent on the kindness of strangers in the announcing and enacting of the coming of the divine reign (Mark 6:8-13).

Today the hearing and obeying of the instructions of Jesus means that his followers will pay special attention to all who are vulnerable and violated seeking through them to honor their Lord.

Our own economic life must be rearranged so that we may address the scandal of the deaths of millions of children every year from impoverishment; deaths that are preventable with only a modest commitment of our resources. Not to make the elimination of this needless

suffering and slaughter our first priority is to not only pass by on the other side but is to ignore the cry and suffering of Christ himself in those who are violated and vulnerable.

The need to live with simplicity so that others may simply live has never been more urgent. This applies not only to individuals but to congregations and denominations, including their boards and agencies. Only in this way can the church exhibit the values that are consistent with its own message and thus address others with integrity.

6. The early Christian community exemplifies the solidarity that makes it the visible and tangible “body of Christ”.

In order to be a sign of the presence of Christ's Spirit and the coming of God's reign the first community of faith was constituted as a koinonia of prayer and praise and of the sharing of life and substance with and among the impoverished. (Acts 2:43-47;4:32-35)

Notice the description of the Pentecostal community of believers from Acts:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need.
(Acts 2: 44-45)

The community constituted by the outpouring of the divine spirit is a community that mirrors the divine generosity. And if we should forget the point, the author of Acts reminds us - the very next time that the community is described as filled with the Spirit - we also have this description:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions but everything they owned was held in common...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.
(Acts 4: 32, 34-5).

This is what it means to be the community enlivened by the spirit of Christ - a community that has broken through the iron yoke of possession - of accumulation and consumption - and which has become a community of sharing. Just this is a community in which those who believe "are of one heart and soul".

And Wesley would maintain that wherever the power of God, the Spirit of God, the love of God, was poured out upon the people of God, the natural and necessary consequence of this would be that the community of faith would replicate in its life this same model of generosity, and so experience the same Pentecostal joy (See Notes to the New Testament).

Paul sought to make this community manifest through the joining of gentile congregations in the collection which he carried to Jerusalem to demonstrate the solidarity of the gentiles with the Jerusalem community's distribution of resources to the poor (Romans 15:25-28; 2Cor 8-9) thus fulfilling the condition that the gentile mission "remember the poor."(Gal. 2:10)

This community of sharing of resources continued to characterize the early church. For example, in the Epistle of Barnabas and the Didache (ca 135) we read:

Thou shalt communicate {practice koinonia} in all things with thy neighbor; thou shalt not call things thine own; for if ye are partakers in common [koinonia] of things which are incorruptible, how much more (should you be) of those things which are corruptible!

Our world today is characterized by an accelerating gap between the most prosperous and the most impoverished. In every nation this gap seems to increase at a growing pace and on the global scale it is even more dramatic. For example three executives of one corporation possess more wealth than the combined product of the 43 poorest nations combined. Three men with more wealth than that possessed by all the 600 million inhabitants of those poorest countries (The Chicago Tribune July 12 1999). This is not to indict a single corporation or group of people. There are many others with such wealth, and similarly dramatic comparisons

may be drawn in other ways. It is simply to show that the global economy has developed in such a way as to make the chasm between rich and poor almost unimaginable.

Yet all of us, rich and poor, have a common origin in God and a common fate upon this planet. Even mere worldly prudence would dictate that these disparities are unsupportable and are inconsistent with the hope of a human life even for the prosperous. If billions of people discover that far from having a stake in the economy they are actually its victims the violence of their resentment and of the fear of those who have something or much to lose will plunge us all into violent chaos from which none can hope to emerge with life and hope intact.

7. It is a critical principle of the Wesleyan tradition that Wesley directed himself to the poor and to the marginalized.

When Wesley came toward the end of his career to attempt to place Methodism in the story of the history of salvation he remarked:

“Never in any age or nation, since the age of the Apostles, have these words been so eminently fulfilled, “The poor have the gospel preached to them” as it is at this day. (The Signs of the Times VI p. 308)¹

Wesley does not regard this fact as fortuitous. It is the result of a conscious policy. Thus he claims that he avoids the rich:

Many of the rich and honourable were there; so that I found that it was time for me to fly away....(Journal April 15, 1745)

He makes a conscious effort to direct himself to the poor and he explains that this is theologically necessary

Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men (Journal May 21, 1764)

¹ . Volume and page numbers refer to the 14 volume Jackson edition of The Works of John Wesley.

Thus he can say to others:

The honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcasts of men (A Farther Appeal VIII p. 239)

It is clear then that Wesley sought in principle to direct himself to the poor.

But the people called methodist have, in the last century especially, been characterized by a turn away from the impoverished and toward the middle class of their respective nations. In this way much that is distinctive of the Wesleyan tradition and heritage has been lost.

Moreover Wesley's hope that the people called methodist might be a dramatic sign of God's new creation has been betrayed as we have come to resemble the social order of worldly prudence.

The spiritual renewal of the people called methodist depends upon a renewed commitment to the impoverished and to the building of genuine community with and among them. This can only happen if we direct ourselves toward them and learn first hand from them of the suffering and the humiliation that is inflicted upon them. And of course here it is not only a matter of sympathy but of the kind of identification that grows from the intimate community of brothers and sisters in Christ.

In this way a beginning can be made in overcoming the indifference to the cry of the poor and to their plight that characterizes the global situation.

8. For the people called methodist this takes as well the form of stewardship for God and the poor. All that we have belongs to those who are destitute.

Wesley maintains that we are to be stewards “for God and the poor.”

Be a steward, a faithful and wise steward, of God and the poor; differing from them in these two circumstances only,--that your wants are first supplied, out of

the portion of your Lord's goods which remains in your hands; and, that you have the blessedness of giving. (Sermon on the Mount, viii, V p. 377)

Everything beyond what is necessary for life belongs to the poor. God gives me what I have so that I may give it to the poor.

To speak more properly still, who lodged it for a time in your hands as his stewards; informing you at the same time for what purposes he entrusted you with it? And can you afford to waste your Lord's goods....Away with this vile diabolical cant! This affording to rob God is the very cant of hell. Do not you know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessaries for your family) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind. (Danger of Increasing Riches, VII p. 362)

In order to make this clear, Wesley maintains that I am to regard myself as another of the poor:

You may consider yourself as one in whose hands the Proprietor of heaven and earth, and all things therein, has lodged a part of his goods, to be disposed of according to his direction. And his direction is, that you should look upon yourself as one of a certain number of indigent persons, who are to be provided for out of that portion of his goods wherewith you are entrusted." (The More Excellent Way, VII p. 36)

Wesley's view of stewardship is that we are stewards for God and the poor and that all that we have beyond what is necessary to life and health is to be directed to the poor.

In this Wesley is simply echoing the tradition of the church. Basil who was one of the authors of the doctrine of the trinity and who wrote the first treatise on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the 4th century wrote as follows:

What is a miser? One who is not content with what is needful. What is a thief? One who takes what belongs to others. Why do you not consider yourself a miser and a thief when you claim as your own what was received in trust? If one who takes the clothing off another is called a thief, why give any other name to one who can clothe the naked and refuses to do so? The bread that you withhold belongs to the poor, the cape that you hide in your chest belongs to the naked; the shoes rotting in your house belongs to those who must go unshod.²

Similarly Ambrose also in the 4th century but writing in Latin wrote:

When you give to the poor, you give not of your own, but simply return what is his, for you have usurped that which is common and has been give for the common use of all. The land belongs to all, not to the rich; and yet those who are deprived of its use are many more than those who enjoy it.³

In this turn toward the poor and this stewardship for the impoverished it is essential that we understand that it is not a question of charity but of simple justice. It is not a question of disposing out of kindness from our largess but of returning to our neighbors that which God intends for them.

We in the churches must confess that we have turned the biblical and Wesleyan view of stewardship into slogans for fund raising to support middle class institutions. This must be confessed as an unwarranted diversion of resources away from the needy in order to support our institutional self-preoccupation.

² Quoted in Justo L. Gonzalez Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance and Use of Money Harper & Row, NY, 1990 p. 178

³ ibid p. 191

The prosperous of rich and poor nations must be challenged to regard their wealth not as the result of good fortune nor as a reward from the benevolent if invisible hand of the market but as a solemn trust that carries with it the responsibility to see that the most vulnerable members of society are assured of the means of a decent life. Where this responsibility is not met, the acquisition of wealth must be regarded as theft that carries the blood guilt of the death of the impoverished and so carries the curse of God.

9. Specific forms for the empowerment of the poor become distinctive attributes of the work of the people called methodist.

Although Wesley undertook to distribute his considerable income to the poor and to practice as well what he called “begging for the poor” whereby he solicited from the prosperous what the poor needed, yet this was by no means the extent of his labor on their behalf.

Rather Wesley sought to develop instruments whereby the impoverished would be able to escape from their plight. Thus he established a small lending bank in order to make small loans to people so that they could acquire the tools necessary to develop a trade.

He also established free clinics so that they make have relief from sickness and his best selling book was a book of herbal remedies that enabled the poor to better their own health without resorting to the medical establishment and the nascent pharmaceutical industry which he saw as profiting from the poor.

In the development of his own band societies he gave the poor and the working poor a new sense of self-responsibility and encouraged their efforts at gaining literacy. The “Sunday School movement” began as an instrument for promoting literacy among the poor and so for assisting them to become self sufficient.

In our own time the movement to establish banks that provide micro credit (small loans to people who are thus enabled to begin their own trades) has already reached millions of the

world's poor, especially women and enabled them to escape helplessness and dependence.

Support for these institutions is an urgent need today.

The development of affordable health care is also essential if the poor are to escape the debilitating effects of preventable disease. Often drugs developed by multinational corporations are sold at exorbitant prices beyond the reach of the populations of needy nations; yet these profits are protected by international patent rights that prevent the development of cheap or generic substitutes. Moreover research is directed toward what the rich can pay for rather than what the impoverished masses need.

More lives have been saved by the provision of safe drinking water and basic sanitation than by all the drugs and medical procedures invented combined. Yet hundreds of millions of people still lack this most basic of infrastructure.

It is increasingly recognized that the earth's population explosion can best be addressed by the empowerment of women to have more options in their lives and power over their own choices. And the spread of literacy and basic education is essential.

Today as in Wesley's day concrete programs that enable the impoverished to help themselves are essential if we are to escape the vicious cycles of impoverishment that threaten growing multitudes on our planet.

10. The commitment to the poor also takes the form of a specific critique of the forms of exploitation that are implicated in the global economy.

Wesley carried forward the prophetic tradition of exposing the ways in which the vulnerable were violated by unjust economic practices. In his sermon on the Uses of Money he warned against gaining wealth from the exploitation of the poor. This is the basis of his excoriation of those who profited from distilleries:

And what is their gain? Is it not the blood of these men? Who then would envy their large estates and sumptuous palaces? A curse is in the midst of them: The curse of God cleaves to the stones, the timber, the furniture of them! The curse of God is in their gardens, their walks, their groves; a fire that burns to the nethermost hell! Blood, blood is there: The foundation, the floor, the walls, the roof, are stained with blood! And canst thou hope, O thou man of blood, though thou art “clothed in scarlet and fine linen, and farest sumptuously every day;” canst thou hope to deliver down thy **fields of blood** to the third generation? not so; for there is a God in heaven: Therefore thy name shall be rooted out. (The Use of Money, VI p. 129)

To the argument that certain forms of trade were especially lucrative and thus enhanced the economic position of the nation, Wesley replied:

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. Thoughts Upon Slavery (XI p.73)

Wesley was unsparing in his criticism of domestic forms of exploitation whether carried out by merchants, doctors, lawyers or distillers. But he did not restrict himself to the domestic economy. He also directed himself to the twin pillars of British wealth creation: the slave trade and the colonial exploitation of India. His opposition to slavery is relatively well known but his opposition to the brutal domination of the “East Indies” is no less severe. In fact he comes to link these together in his reflections on the “rebellion” in England’s North American colonies. He writes:

As we are punished by the sword, it is not improbable but one principal sin of our nation is, the blood that we have shed in Asia, Africa, and America. Here I would beg your serious attention, while I observe, that however extensively pursued, and of long continuance, the African slave trade may be, it is nonetheless iniquitous

from first to last. It is the price of blood! It is a trade of blood, and has stained our land with blood! (Seasonable Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain, XI p.125)

And Wesley sees that this slave trade does not stand alone but is closely tied to the policy of colonialism in India:

And is the East-India trader a jot better? I fear not. They seem very nearly allied. For though here is no leading into captivity, as in the former; yet the refined iniquity practiced there, of fomenting war amongst the natives, and seizing the chief of the plunder, has been as conspicuous to the serious and attentive. What millions have fallen by these means, as well as by artificial famine! O earth, cover not thou their blood! It will speak to heaven and to the inhabitants of the earth to the latest posterity. (Ibid. XI p.125-6)

While many, perhaps most later methodists turned away from Wesley's prophetic critique of domestic and global economic structures there have continued to be a prophetic minority among the people called methodists who have been unafraid to champion the cause of the vulnerable and violated against the principalities and powers of the market.

Although chattel slavery has been abolished and 18th and 19th century forms of colonialism have been discarded there are still ways in which the law of nations and international institutions perpetuate the bondage of the impoverished masses of human beings to debt and to exploitation.

It is essential for the people called methodists to become as aware as Wesley in his own day of the way in which trade agreements and the quest for exorbitant profit result in impoverishment and misery for hundreds of millions and in death for millions of the most vulnerable every year. This is not something that can be simply left to secular institutions for we

are called to be prophetic voices that unmask the idols of the marketplace and expose the mechanisms of injustice.

The constant press for open markets without regard for the conditions of workers or the protection of the environment serves to make the wealthiest nations richer but only further weakens the poorest societies and populations.

Often people of good will lament the impoverishment and violence that stalk many sub-Saharan nations of Africa but seldom is there a recognition of the way in which the wealth of Euro-American societies has been built on the history of slavery and colonialism or continues to depend on the extraction of cheap raw materials from Africa (gold, oil, etc.) without attention to the welfare of the people of that continent. Or the profits reaped by arms merchants that fuel the resentments and clashes of people just as slave traders depended on fomenting tribal war to acquire more slaves.

11. The people called methodists are now a global people and as such are given the opportunity to form a global network of solidarity in which the suffering and the rejoicing of others is a part of the experience of the body .

Paul calls upon his congregations to rejoice with those that rejoice, and weep with those who mourn. And he rejoiced at the solidarity among his own congregations and between them and the Jewish Christian congregations in Jerusalem. Thus the author of Ephesians could point to the unity of “those who are near” and “those who are far off” as the decisive sign of the triumph of God over the forces of division and domination. The interconnectedness of peoples of distinct cultures, nations, and circumstances is the most dramatic and visible proof of the truth of the gospel.

The people called methodist have developed a number of ways of being “connected” with one another And we have grown to cover the globe.

In this era of powerful multinational corporations and institutions that seek to promote the interests of the wealthy and powerful it is essential that there also be webs of sympathy, of neighborliness of sisterhood and brotherhood where the interests of the least can be shared and heard and responded to. The church may become this network of caring and sympathy that refuses to allow the pains and joys of the neighbor to be drowned out by infotainment and the interests of the onward march of the “winners”. We may have a special mission to become places where true koinonia develops across cultural, class and continental lines.

But this means that the more prosperous churches have a special obligation to listen to and learn from those that are nearest the places of suffering. The prosperous churches must renounce the arrogance whereby they think always to instruct their younger and poorer sisters. For in truth the so-called third world churches have much to teach more prosperous and established churches concerning the faith that perseveres in suffering, concerning what it means to rejoice in hope even in the midst of adversity. On the one side there may be a sharing of material abundance, on the other a sharing of spiritual wealth. (2 Corinthians 8:2,14). In this way mutuality rather than dependence is nourished and the world may witness the foretaste of God’s shalom.

12. The goal of economy is not production or accumulation or consumption but the anticipation of the divine shalom in which human beings are in community with one another, with the whole of nature and so with the One who has created all and wills to be all in all.

Again and again the biblical testimony points us to the goal of the divine mission as the horizon of our life. The story of creation ends with the divine rest and rejoicing into which all are invited. The prophets point Israel toward the end of suffering and strife and the creation of shalom in which all may live in security and justice with one another and in harmony with the land and all creatures. In the New Testament Jesus announces the coming of the divine reign of justice and generosity and joy and calls upon all to live in accordance with that reality rather than

the worldly values of exclusion and self-preoccupation. Paul places the transformation of our lives by grace in the context of the renewal of the whole of creation as an anticipation of the new heaven and new earth.

One of the distinctive features of Wesley's later theology is that of the restoration of all things. He could envision the healing of the earth, its mountains and rivers, the redemption from suffering of all animals both domestic and wild, all as part of the divine goal of the new creation.

Economy is one of the most basic ways we have of relating to one another and to the earth. As such it is also one of the most crucial areas for relating to the One who is creator and redeemer of all people and all the earth. Our economic relations are by no means an end in themselves, still less a sphere separate from the practice of faith.

How we relate to the earth and one another in labor and producing, in buying and selling, in accumulation and expenditure must be an anticipation of what we have learned to hope for on the basis of the divine promise.

The goal of our economic activity is the great feast into which all humanity and all of creation is invited, the end of suffering and anxiety; the sharing of life and love and joy with one another and with the One who has created us and is even now calling the world into the New Creation.

The measure thus of any economy must be the quality of life that it enables for all people and all creation so that all may share in the divine rest and recreation that is our common destiny.