

## THE FORM WITHOUT THE POWER?: WESLEYAN INFLUENCES AND THE WINNIPEG LABOR CHURCH

by

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I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.<sup>1</sup>

John Wesley's often quoted fear has clear meaning when examining the Methodist Church in Canada and its involvement in the Social Gospel. Many have argued that the social gospel's theology is shallow, based on discredited liberal theology and that churches who fell into its spell sold out their theological foundations for a liberal progressive secularism. The Labor Church movement in Canada has been uniformly so critiqued. The Methodist clergy who founded and led the Labor Church had abandoned their Methodist heritage and the result was a "church" in form only - one that lacked any power at all. The leaders of the Labor Church, however, were equally insistent that the Methodist Church had lost its power by acquiescing to the capitalist society in which they found themselves in twentieth century Canada.

No denomination in Canada was more actively involved in the twentieth century social gospel movement than was Methodism. Despite its growing support for the goals of the social gospel movement as reflected in its official statements, many of the denomination's social gospel leaders left the church for politics and to establish a Labor Church movement in Canada. Both of these Methodist factions are heirs of John Wesley. By examining the development, theology and actions of these movements/churches an insight into the value and use of an eighteenth century reformer's thought for addressing twentieth or twenty-first century issues can be gleaned.

Methodism in Canada developed from two streams of Methodism. The first was from Britain in the form of Wesleyan Methodists. The second, from the United States came from two sources, one the British Empire

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Methodism" in Jackson edition The Works of John Wesley, XIII, p. 258.

Loyalists who fled America during and following the American Revolution; the second, later stream, from the Methodist Episcopal Church in America which dominated the development of Methodism in Upper Canada and the western territories. Each of these streams brought their version of Wesley's teachings to the shaping of Canadian Methodism. But their main focus was satisfying the religious needs of the settlers in their part of the world. They found many people who had been involved with some religious group before coming to this land. They also found many who had not heard the good news of the Bible, included in this latter group were the native peoples of Canada. With all these groups of people, the Methodists saw it as their duty to bring the saving grace of God into their lives. It was a matter of saving souls.

With the large number of people involved and the long distances to be travelled (due to the remoteness of the places where the settlers lived), the task of ministering to the people was tremendous. One of the ways that the task was accomplished, with the limited human resources available, was through camp meetings. "These meetings proved mighty agencies in keeping before the people the doctrine of forgiveness of sin, not as a theory, but as a conscious experience, attested by the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> A significant aspect of the meetings was the emphasis placed on Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification or holiness. Methodism's distinguishing doctrine was held high, a doctrine that people treasured and did not want to lose. Included in this is the fact that it was a conscious experience. These points were again emphasized when in October/November 1871 it was noted that "Methodists believe in the experience of religion, the knowledge of sins forgiven, and the witness of the Spirit".<sup>3</sup>

Camp meetings were one way to keep the people true, but something was needed to provide spiritual nurturing on a regular basis. This was accomplished through the class-meeting, as it had been done in Britain. Both of these phenomenon were part of the general over all movement of revivalism which was central to Canadian Methodism. Revivalism in fact became the hallmark particularly of nineteenth century Canadian Methodism. Even though camp-meetings and class-meetings declined, the sense of revivalism remained alive in the people, but in a quieter way.

This quieter experience was emerging under the impact of education. "From 1854 to 1884 the Methodist Church was 'transformed from a select

<sup>2</sup>J.E. Sanderson, The First Century of Methodism in Canada, Toronto:William Briggs, 1910, Vol. II, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

body of converts into a far reaching social institution'.<sup>4</sup> As Canadian Methodists developed their institutional church their country was also growing and struggling with its own institutional and social identity. At the time of Confederation in 1867 Methodism was the largest of the Protestant denominations in Canada. Methodism was the "national" church of Canada and it felt keenly its responsibility in that. Thus its heritage and its sense of calling and duty led the Canadian Methodist Church to the forefront of the Social Gospel Movement.

Canada was behind both Britain and the United States in becoming an industrialized society. Its economic situation post confederation was confused and depressed. The turning of the century brought the industrial revolution to Canada. "After 1900 market forces, capital, new technologies, and mergers combined to produce a Canadian version of the 'big business' that we think of as part of the nineteenth century in other industrialized nations. The 'Laurier boom', fuelled by Canada's natural resource industry, brought almost uninterrupted economic growth between 1900 and 1913. The long awaited immigrants finally arrived to fill the prairies...News of large profits was commonplace and there seemed to be no end to prosperity. Laurier's boast that this would be 'Canada's century' suddenly seemed to have more substance than most election promises."<sup>5</sup> With this prosperity came the development of competitive capitalism to Canadian business, altering not only the business sector but also Canadian society. The middle class grew as did the class of industrialists. The size of the cities swelled with immigrants and folks in from the rural areas lured by the promises of prosperity. Slums and poverty grew along side prosperity. A vigorous organizational program by labour groups developed with a large number of workers becoming unionized in order to strive more effectively for a fuller share in the developing prosperity.

The churches in Canada also took note of the new patterns of economic and social life and began to exhibit an awareness of the need for a new ethical witness which would demonstrate the relevance of the Christian gospel to the contemporary situation and assist in promoting the ends of justice and human welfare. In the midst of this movement was the Methodist Church. The social problems which accompanied the nation's

<sup>4</sup>Marguerite van Die, An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989, p.15, quoting Semple, "The Nature and Admonition of the Lord", p. 158.

<sup>5</sup>Phyllis Airhart, Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992, pp. 63-4.



economic and social transformation was one of the factors which pulled the Methodist Church into the Social Gospel movement. Methodists were particularly affected by the rural migration to the cities. A large number of those migrants were Methodist. The church felt deeply the need to keep them from feeling alienated from the church and as a result turning to secular socialism. The early responses to these "new" problems were city missions, institutional churches and settlement houses. The social christianity which was "preached" and practiced in these organizations did much to develop the practical theology of the Methodist social gospel.

But there was also an internal motivation for Methodist involvement in the social gospel movement which has been alluded to previously. The christian perfection revival pietism which was so crucial to Methodist identity called Methodists to transform the society as they themselves had been transformed. It was a message which John Wesley had preached and lived and which was still alive in the Methodist movement.

This was not a cut and dried proposition, however. As Phyllis Airhart ably describes in her book, Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, the revival movement became split and more quietistic holiness groups joined Methodists in claiming souls for Christ but with a very different social agenda. Methodists began to critique these "new kids on the block" and asserted the intimate connection between religion and everyday life. E.H. Dewart, editor of the Christian Guardian, the Methodist newspaper in Canada, and a strong supporter of special revival services and the holiness movement, expresses this sentiment in an editorial entitled "Some Dangerous Tendencies" when he labeled the separation of religion and lived experience as a dangerous tendency. In this editorial he was arguing with the position that nothing one could do affected one's salvation.<sup>6</sup> His successor, W.B. Creighton, who took over as editor in 1906, wrote editorials that suggested that if the kingdom was to come, political participation was sometimes as important as attending prayer service, teaching Sunday School, or giving to the Church. "The religion that cleanses the city slums, purifies the politics of the state, ...was the real and only type of religion that is worth considering."<sup>7</sup>

This involvement in the social gospel was evident not only in church publications but also in the official statements made by the church. Throughout the 1880s the responses to labour unrest reflected the more individualistic aspect of revivalism. Collective forms of action for labour

<sup>6</sup>Christian Guardian, 10 November, 1880, p. 356.

<sup>7</sup>CG, 4 December, 1907, p.7 & 24 July, 1907, p. 5.



such as unionization and strikes were viewed with coolness or hostility, and as late as 1894 urban poverty was attributed to "indolence and intemperance" although "unsatisfactory economic conditions" were also held partially responsible. Yet the creation of a Committee on Sociological Questions in 1894 showed that Methodists were beginning to consider environmental factors in the human condition. In 1898 the Committee acknowledged that the city posed a special challenge for the individual and that social and economic forces contributed to an individual's moral and economic circumstances. Accordingly, unionization and strikes were now recognized as legitimate methods by which workers could seek an improvement in their condition, a recognition that their efforts as individuals were sometimes insufficient. In 1906 the General Conference accepted committee reports which were virtually proclamations of the social gospel. Canadian society was condemned as being "far from an ideal expression of the Christian Brotherhood", and the church was challenged "to set up the Kingdom of God among men, which we understand to be a social order founded upon the principles of the Gospel - the Golden Rule and the Sermon on-the Mount". General Conference recommendations for 1906, 1910 and 1914 included eight hour day for labour and any form of public ownership which would enrich both the community and the individual; it was assumed that the new social order ultimately would "be made possible through the regeneration of men's lives". Similarly, while willing to use the state as an instrument for social change, the General Conference policy statements placed greater weight on philanthropy, charity, and the willingness of individual businessmen to regard fair labour practices as moral obligations. This shows the vestiges of the traditional Methodist approach to reform - through the individual to the society. There is a radical shift in the 1918 General Conference. In its reports are found a rejection of the capitalist system stemming from a conviction that the idea of changing society by changing individual minds and spirits had to be abandoned in the face of "moral perils inherent in the system of production for profits". It was becoming clear that in Canada, more and more Methodists were convinced that the mission of Methodism was to spread scriptural holiness by reforming the nation.

They found support for this altered standard phrase even in John Wesley. For these revival social gospel Methodists, "John Wesley was no longer merely a revivalist but a social reformer with the world as his parish. It was Wesley, not Moody, whom the Methodists credited with having inspired

them to join Presbyterians and Congregationalists in the "new evangelism".<sup>8</sup> Even secular historians acknowledge Wesley's influence on the Canadian Methodist social gospel movement.

True to the strong social gospel of the founder, no circuit rider neglected man's duty to his neighbour. The Methodists became a people with a deep social conscience, the leaders in all movements of social progress. Though they might not then realize it, that road led straight to politics and if they were to be true to their faith, to the left wing in politics. Some interesting phenomena in Canadian life spring from this.<sup>9</sup>

Many prominent Methodists of the time grounded their work in the social gospel in Wesley's thought. James Henderson, a clergyman in Ontario, most notably at Timothy Eaton Memorial, one of Toronto's largest churches was convinced that Wesley's assumption that Christianity impinged on all aspects of life, including the social, still provided the strongest basis for social action. "I do not say we must preach just as Wesley did, but I say we must preach the same old Gospel in terms of the evangelical thinker today."<sup>10</sup> Wesley's emphasis on Christian Perfection and holiness as lived experiences which transformed people who in turn transformed society as well as his strong emphasis on perfect love was what Canadian Methodists understood as the basis of their faith and action, their Christian ethics. Wesley's ideas on theology and social justice spurred Canadian Methodists on to be involved in the social gospel movement. His influence pervaded the church press, conference pronouncements, & prominent preachers and theological professors. All this could not fail to influence the Methodist in the pew. And it did create Canadian Methodism's progressive revivalism which moved naturally into social gospel. But for some Methodists, the church was not going far enough in its work and support for the poor, the oppressed, the workers, the marginalized. These folks clashed with official Methodism and some left or were dismissed. But they did not leave their Methodism behind, nor did they shake off the influence of John Wesley. It was just these folks who formed the Labor Church in Winnipeg.

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<sup>8</sup>Airhart, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup>Arthur Lower, Colony to Nation: A History of Canada, Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co., 1946, p. 164.

<sup>10</sup>Salem Bland, The Life of James Henderson, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1926, p. 108.



The economic situation in Winnipeg was reflective of the growth of the earlier part of the century followed by economic recession during and following the war. A Royal Commission appointed to consider the causes of labour unrest in Winnipeg reported some important findings. It estimated that from 1914 to 1919 the cost of living rose 80% while wages climbed only 18%. It indicated that while the minimum wage board of Manitoba had estimated that an individual woman would require \$12 per week in order to support herself and secure the bare necessities of subsistence, one man testified that he was working seven days a week, 12 hours a day for \$20 per week to support his family of five children. Other men reported working 74 hours a week for \$55 a month.<sup>11</sup>

These conditions as well as their controversial pacifism led a number of prominent Methodist clergy to form and lead the Labor Church in Winnipeg. The Labor Church movement had antecedents in Britain and the States as well as some similar moves in Canada. G.S. Eby, a Canadian Methodist minister, former missionary and literary contributor to the holiness movement became disillusioned with the holiness movement in Canada. In an article in the Guardian he remarked, "Holiness has degenerated into a badge of cranks, or the experience of a few." and praised the more effective holiness of Hugh Price Hughes in England.<sup>12</sup> His solution was to organize a Socialist church in Toronto in 1909.

The Labor Church in Winnipeg was organized by William Ivens following his dismissal from the pulpit of McDougall Methodist Church in Winnipeg for his radical views, especially his staunch pacificism. He had accepted the editorship of the Western Labor News but still felt called to preach. On July 8, 1918 Ivens started the Church in the Labor Temple. The church had many guest speakers, among them the most prominent of the social gospel Methodists. J.S. Woodsworth (who took over as General Secretary and organizer in 1921), Salem Bland, A.E. Smith (Ivens former pastor and President of the Manitoba Conference), and F.J. Dixon, M.L.A. to name a few. These folks along with the Labor Church would soon become deeply involved in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. A full discussion of the strike is beyond the scope of this paper, but it focused the issues and provided a rallying point for the new Church. "The Winnipeg strike was...under the leadership of men who had had their views formed in British leftwing Labour circles, with co-operation from some who through Methodism had

<sup>11</sup> Royal Commission Report - Government of Manitoba - H.A. Robson K.C. - Archives of the Manitoba Legislature Library, Winnipeg.

<sup>12</sup> G.S. Eby, "To the Angel of the Church of Canadian Methodism", CG, 20 August, 1902, p. 533.

been deeply moved at the spectacle of injustice...Most of these latter trained in Wesley College Winnipeg, the Methodist Arts and Theological foundation in the University of Manitoba, a college which took the teachings of Christ seriously enough to father a remarkably large share of the movement for social justice in Canada." <sup>13</sup> All the above mentioned folks were connected to Wesley College and the influence of their Methodist theology and practices is clear in the Labor Church.

The Labor Church was announced as a creedless church, but it was said to be founded on the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Its aim was declared to be "the establishment of justice and righteousness on earth, among all men and nations" and the motto was: "If any man will not work, neither shall he eat." <sup>14</sup> The meetings opened with devotional exercises, "more or less after the Methodist form" but the platform was open to anyone with a message and there was considerable freedom of discussion. The Church was composed chiefly of Labour people and it came to be a rallying place for the more idealistic type of radical thought. <sup>15</sup> The Labor Church's organization strongly resembled a Methodist church. The Labor Church held regular Sunday meetings, conducted Sunday Schools, had Young People's Societies, Women's Guilds, Sick Visiting Committee, and choirs. Some of the more unique activities were Teacher's Training Classes, Economics Classes and orchestras. <sup>16</sup>

The Labor Church has been criticised for having little or no theological base. This is an unfair and biased assessment. The Labor Church did not want to be a creedal Church, that is true, but neither did Wesley lay down creeds for his new movement. They did not even want to build up an institution - again akin to Wesley's commitment to developing societies not a new church. Woodsworth in his First Story of the Labor Church is clear that they had strong beliefs and standards. "While the Labor Church refuses to be bound by dogmas we believe it is essentially in line with the teachings and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. Most of us gladly, if humbly, acknowledge his leadership and inspiration." <sup>17</sup>

The Labor Church was the fastest growing church in Canada. Within six months of its founding its membership had grown to 4,000. In June 1919 in

<sup>13</sup>Lower, p. 499.

<sup>14</sup>J.S. Woodsworth, The First Story of the Labor Church, pamphlet, n.p. n.d., p. 8.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 12.



the middle of the strike no building in Winnipeg could hold the congregation. At its service in Victoria Park 10,000 were estimated to be in attendance. During 1919, nine branch congregations developed in Winnipeg alone.<sup>18</sup> The Labor Church had become a movement of the people guided by these renegade Methodists. But it was not without its problems. The Church had folks who identified themselves as Christian and folks who had abandoned religion and were Marxist. Woodsworth tells of an incident revolving around Sunday School.

The parents who had taken their children from the 'regular' Sunday School, decided that they must have one of their own...We got the teachers together. They didn't know what to teach. One group said: 'We don't like to give up the Bible and the old teachings altogether. There is some good in the old, but we want a new application.' The other group said: 'We're tired of that old dope. We want to teach the children Marxian economics.' Then one man made a happy suggestion: 'Don't you think you could mix them a bit?' That put in a crude way, is the position of the majority. They want the teachings of Jesus applied to the complex condition of our modern industrial life. They are reaching after a viewpoint different from that of either Orthodox Christianity or Orthodox Marxism.<sup>19</sup>

This, in essence, is the Labor Church and in fact is the social gospel, the teachings of Jesus applied to today's conditions. It was Wesley's program too. The Labor Church did put a spin on everything they did. For example, one of the preachers at the Labor Church used the following text: Seek ye first God's Kingdom - a Kingdom of justice and love - other things - jobs and wages - will be added.<sup>20</sup>

In order to fully assess the influence Wesley had on the Labor Church it is necessary to look at the theology and actions of the principle organizers. The length of this paper precludes an indepth study of these men but it is hoped that the brief discussions of each will give a sense of Wesleyan influence.

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<sup>18</sup>D. Summers, "The Labor Church and Allied Movements of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries", unpublished dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1958., pp. 465-470.

<sup>19</sup>Woodsworth, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10.

William Ivens was born at Baford in Warwickshire, England on June 28, 1878. He came to Canada in 1896 and for a time worked as a market gardener in Winnipeg. He attended McDougall Methodist Church and was admitted to full membership in 1904. He attended Wesley College and was ordained into the Methodist ministry in 1909. After ordination he served rural pastorates until 1916 when he became minister of his home church, McDougall Methodist, Winnipeg. He was dismissed from McDougall in 1918 but did not leave the Methodist ministry as he was granted a leave for one year. In 1919 he applied for further leave to work at the Labor Church but was denied and he was put on location. This decision was taken to the court of appeal of the Methodist Church of Canada which upheld the conference decision. Ivens was arrested for his role in the 1919 strike and spent a year in jail. He was later elected to the Manitoba legislature in 1920 while still in prison. He was reelected in subsequent elections. Following his defeat in 1936 he became an organizer for the CCF Party in Manitoba and throughout the remainder of his life was an untiring writer and advocate of socialism. He died in June, 1957, at the age of 79.

Ivens was committed to what he understood was the Methodist cause. And in a real sense he felt betrayed by that same Methodist Church to which he had given his life. At his appeal trial the Rev. John A. Haw spoke in his defense and expressed the sentiment of a number of reforming folks within the church.

William Ivens is not on trial. But the Manitoba Conference is on trial; and the whole character of Methodism is on trial; and the genuineness of our desire to readjust ourselves to the people we have lost is on trial. For here is the first case of a minister risking his position to carry the Gospel to a class who, owing to a social position, are disinherited and despoiled.<sup>21</sup>

Sounds like a young Anglican priest who risked his position and received the scorn of his church for carrying the gospel to the disinherited and despoiled. Indeed Ivens own reflection on his circumstances echoes Wesley. In his sermon on the second anniversary of the Labor Church Ivens summed up his and the church's mission.

Two years ago circumstances rather than choice compelled us

<sup>21</sup>D. F. Pratt, "William Ivens and the Winnipeg Labor Church", unpublished thesis, St. Andrew's College, 1962.



to move forward from the static Orthodox Church into the untrodden field of the Labor Church Movement. We had to choose between the respectability of a formal movement, controlled not by the spirit of Christ so much as by the powers of finance, custom and ritual religion, and a new movement that would be misrepresented and maligned, but that represented a truer interpretation of the essentials of real religion. We made that choice; we found a home, not in a finely ornamented building with towers and spires, but in the commodious Temple of Labor in Winnipeg. From that first hour the response of Labor to the new interpretation of a religion for life and men rather than for death and angels was spontaneous and whole-souled...We have proven that while the masses of people were turning away from the established churches, they were not turning away from religion as such. It seemed then increasingly clear that our movement was divinely inspired and that in the future the heart of humanity would respond to our ministries...Pressed though we have been by government, financial and religious opposition; circumscribed as have been our efforts by lack of adequately prepared speakers; cramped as we have been by the persistent refusal of those in power to accord us places in which to meet, yet our movement has deepened and enlarged. <sup>22</sup>

This report, again, echoes Wesley's Journal entries describing his trials and tribulations as he tried to carry out his call. This could not have been lost on Ivens.

In Ivens condemnation of wealth and critique of the state of the church he again reminds one of Wesley.

God requires justice, not ceremonialism. The church is fast losing its hold. The conviction is growing that the Church is controlled by wealth in the interests of reaction. It has lent itself to the government and has fostered the worst instead of the best in the hearts of the people. It has crushed free thought and expression by expelling its prophets and lauding its priests. The need is for a religion based on the

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<sup>22</sup>William Ivens, "Address on the occasion of the second anniversary of The Labor Church" pamphlet, n.p., 1920.

Christianity of Christ. Inertia and formalism must go, and a religion throbbing with justice must take its place. Then, and then only, will civilization rise to its great objective, the brotherhood of man. Then, and then only, will peace replace war, competition give place to co-operation, and love to hate. <sup>23</sup>

Ivens was also the hymn writer for the Labor Church. He set to music the principles and theology of the Labor Church. It was his texts that were sung with enthusiasm at meetings, as reported by observers and news articles covering the meetings. The fourth verse of the Labor Anthem which Ivens wrote for the second anniversary gives voice to the primary principle of the social gospel movement and lifts up Wesleyan justice themes as well.

Hasten Thy Kingdom, Lord,  
When men of one accord  
Shall do the right;  
When profits curse no more,  
Strife, hate and war are o'er,  
Love's banner goes before,  
God bless our cause. <sup>24</sup>

J. S. Woodsworth is the major figure in the Canadian Social Gospel. He was born on a farm near Islington, Ontario in 1874. His father was a Methodist minister and was Superintendent of Methodist missions for Manitoba and the Northwest with a territory of two thousand miles from the Lakehead to Vancouver Island. J.S. received his B.A at Wesley College in 1896 and his B.D. from Victoria, Toronto three years later. Following this he did a year's post-graduate study at Oxford. In 1900 he was ordained into the Methodist ministry. He served rural churches, then moved to Grace Methodist in Winnipeg. He then was appointed to direct All People's Mission in Winnipeg. He resigned from the ministry in 1918 after two previous attempts to do so had been turned down by the Conference and worked as a long-shoreman for a year in British Columbia. He then came back to Winnipeg and was involved in the Labor movement and the Labor Church. He was elected to Parliament from Winnipeg in 1921 a position he held until his death in 1942. He was one of the founders of the CCF Party in 1932. His

<sup>23</sup>Ivens, excerpt from sermon delivered at Labor Church | Western Labor News, 12 December, 1919.

<sup>24</sup>op. cit.

*Cooperative Commonwealth Fund  
(now the New Democratic Party - Socialists)*



major contribution to Canada was helping the country develop a social conscience.<sup>25</sup>

Woodsworth was an extremely intelligent person who struggled with ideas and actions his whole life. He based his social principles on his experiences, especially the time he spent at the Mansfield Settlement House in London in 1899. He felt his experiences were the foundation of his beliefs and this he felt led him away from the ministry of the Methodist church. "In this matter of personal experience lies the root of the difficulty. My experience has not been what among Methodists is considered normal. From earliest childhood, I was taught the love of God, and have endeavored to be a follower of Jesus. My experience has determined my theology, and my theology my attitude toward the Discipline. And all three, according to our Standards, are un-Methodistical."<sup>26</sup> Woodsworth here is referring to the fact that he had never had a conversion experience and felt this placed him outside the bounds of Methodist standards. He also had many reservations about basic orthodox Christian doctrines such as the trinity, the atonement, the sacraments and the articles of religion. After outlining his concerns he then closes with "I still maintain my loyalty to our common Master. I still feel the call to service...If it were possible I would still be willing to work under the direction of the Methodist Church."<sup>27</sup> His resignation letter was rejected on the grounds that there was not enough basis. The wide interpretation of doctrine in the Methodist tradition had come into play. Woodsworth's resignation was accepted in 1918, not because of doctrinal issues but because of his radical pacifist stance and his critique of the church. "The church, as many other institutions, is becoming increasingly commercialized. This means the control of the policies of the church by men of wealth, and in many cases, the temptations for the minister to become a financial agent rather than a moral and spiritual leader. It also means that anything like a radical programme of social reform becomes almost impossible."<sup>28</sup>

At first glance it may seem that Woodsworth is far from Wesley. It is true that his theology differs greatly from Wesley in doctrinal matters but Wesley continued to have an influence as Woodsworth developed his

<sup>25</sup> For support for this assessment see Kenneth McNaught, A Prophet in Politics, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959; Olive Ziegler, Woodsworth, Social Pioneer, Toronto: Ontario Publishing Co., 1934; Grace McInnis, J.S. Woodsworth, A Man to Remember, Toronto: MacMillan, 1953.

<sup>26</sup> J.S. Woodsworth, Following the Gleam, pamphlet, n.p. n.d., p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

practical theology within the social gospel movement. Woodsworth took his history very seriously and used many historical references in his speeches and writing. He had two different series of lecture notes in his files based on De Gibbons, English Social Reformers.<sup>29</sup> It is telling which people Woodsworth selected for special attention: William Langland, Thomas More, Wilberforce, Richard Oastler, Lord Shaftesbury, Robert Owen, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, F. D. Maurice and John Ruskin. Woodsworth had a special section in his notes for the Wesleys who were specially raised up for their fight to counteract the coarseness and brutality of 18th century industrial Britain. He used Wesley to undergird his social action. "Christian perfection, personal holiness, entire sanctification are familiar phrases in the ears of all Methodists. But how about social perfection? What of God's place in the world? The current idea is that there are two kingdoms more or less antagonistic - the Kingdom of heaven and the Kingdom of this world. Do we not need a second Wesley to insist that light must and can banish darkness, that He must reign until He hath put all his enemies under his feet?"<sup>30</sup> A new Wesley, indeed. For Woodsworth, Wesley's message and actions were crucial for today's society if it was to act in a godly and just manner. Indeed, Woodsworth's writings constantly echo Wesley. "A curse still hangs over inactivity. A severe condemnation still rests upon indifference. Christianity stands for social righteousness as well as personal righteousness. It is quite right for me to be anxious to save my never dying soul, but it is of greater importance to try to serve the present age. Indeed, my friend, you will save your own precious soul only as you give your life in the service of others. We have tried to provide for the poor. Yet have we tried to alter the social conditions that lead to poverty?"<sup>31</sup>

Woodsworth theology was intricately intertwined with his work for the poor, the laborer, the marginalized. He worked to overturn the structures that kept people in grinding poverty. The articles of faith he developed for the All People's Mission reflect this clearly

We believe:

1. Pauperism can be eliminated.
2. Poverty is curable.

<sup>29</sup>Ben Smillie, "J.S. Woodsworth, Civic Pedagogue", unpublished dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1970, p. 108.

<sup>30</sup>J.S. Woodsworth, "Social Perfection", CG 23 April, 1913.

<sup>31</sup>Woodsworth, sermon at Grace Methodist, Winnipeg, quoted in McNaught, p. 26.



3. Both pauperism and poverty can be prevented.
4. In order to eliminate the one, cure the other, and prevent both, individual sentimentality must make way for enlightened sympathy and co-operative social effort.
5. Attempts to treat a poverty-sick man without finding out the cause of his poverty are like unto the efforts put forth to cure a fever-stricken patient without diagnosis. The one is the method of the charity quack, the other the method of the medical quack. Both cause mischief. There is no cure in either instance.
6. On account of the complicated neighbourhood, industrial, social and economic conditions in a large city, special knowledge and training and special personal fitness are called for in those who would deal effectively with human wreckage.
7. Careful attention to the condition of the children of the poor is absolutely necessary in the effort to reduce the volume of future poverty.
8. While scrutiny of the personal causes of poverty is important, still without the examination and remedying of social and economic causes little advance will be made in the campaign against misery, want, disease and death.
10. Winnipeg can have just as much beggary, poverty and pauperism as she is willing to pay for and can have just as much freedom from beggary, poverty and pauperism as she is willing to work for.<sup>32</sup>

This work was undergirded with a theology based on the teachings of Jesus. If you look around you and see poverty and ignorance and vice does that mean that the work of Jesus had been a failure? "No! His work had to be carried a step further - a step nearer completion - by each generation."<sup>33</sup> In fact, Woodsworth was clear that the teachings of Jesus had been such a strong influence on his life that they forced him to break with the church who though calling itself Christian, "sanctioned the war; strong enough to lead me to denounce the present social system as out of harmony with the teaching and spirit of the Carpenter of Nazareth".<sup>34</sup> The work of the carpenter must be done by each generation and must be done by each person, convictions shared by both Wesley and Woodsworth. "How can I help? Begin by trying to meet the nearest need. That need reveals one still deeper and

<sup>32</sup> Woodsworth, My Neighbor, Toronto: Young People's Forward Movement for Missions, 1911, p.287-8.

<sup>33</sup> Woodsworth, Hours that Stand Apart, pamphlet, n.p. n.d., p. 25.

<sup>34</sup> Woodsworth, Following the Gleam, p. 18

soon you reach a great social problem. Work at that and the whole field of social service opens up to you. Help effectively one man and you lift the world." <sup>35</sup> Woodsworth exhorted his generation with same the power and conviction which his Methodist founder exhorted his. Woodsworth may have resigned from the Methodist ministry but he did not lose his Methodist conscience or his Wesleyan influences.

Like Woodsworth, Salem Bland was the son of a prominent Methodist minister. He began his ministry in 1880. In 1903 he was persuaded by J.S. Sparling, the President of Wesley College, Winnipeg, to come to that institution as professor of Church History and New Testament. There his outspoken radical convictions on poverty and wealth got him into trouble. In 1917, amid considerable controversy, Bland was dismissed from his chair at Wesley College. His dismissal was on the ostensible grounds of financial retrenchment. He became even more active in labor and social gospel activities. He then went to serve a church in Toronto. Just after church union in 1925 Bland completed his formal ministry and began a twenty-year career as a journalist with the Toronto Daily Star. In 1950, Salem Goldworth Bland died.

Bland's major work, The New Christianity, has been called the theology for the Canadian Social Gospel. While not as theologically detailed as Rauschenbusch's work, Bland does set out the manifesto for the new christianity which will be needed to address the burning issues of this and future generations. He, like Wesley, had little patience for the sort of pious, other-worldly religion such as that espoused by Bernard of Cluny. Bland tersely declared, "It is not Christianity." Rather: "It is only the pale bloodless spectre of Christianity. Christianity is a torrent. It is a fire. It is a passion for brotherhood, a raging hatred of everything that denies or forbids brotherhood - It was a brotherhood at the first. Twisted, bent, repressed for nearly twice a thousand years, it will be a brotherhood at the last." <sup>36</sup> Bland was very clear that Christians could not permanently acquiesce in a society organized on unchristian principles, which this one clearly is. He asserted in a sermon preached at Grace Methodist in Winnipeg in 1913 (six years after Woodsworth had resigned) that all Christians have to share the blame for allowing economic conditions to become so corrupt that you can not expect a businessman to live a Christian life today. "We must begin the great work of attacking all the cruelties of our commercial

<sup>35</sup>Woodsworth, My Neighbor, p. 332.

<sup>36</sup>Salem Bland, The New Christianity, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973, reprint of 1920, p.



life, all the rascalities of high finance, all the abominations of our political system.<sup>37</sup> Not exactly the way to win scribes and influence pharisees! Again, we hear echoes of Wesley's bold pronouncements to congregations who were being complacent in their comfort. Bland condemned profit as anti-christian and wealth derived from profit as theft. Wesley has similar sentiments in some of his sermons. Bland carries it further however in a call to overthrow the capitalist system. "In the name of the brotherhood of Christianity, in the name of the richness and variety of the human soul, the Church must declare a truceless war upon this sterilizing and dehumanizing competition and upon the source of it, an economic order based on profit."<sup>38</sup>

The great Christianity which was Bland's proposal needed new prophets and new prophecy for its inspiration. Three of these prophets, Bland asserts, are found already in Christian history: St. Francis of Assisi, John Wesley and William Booth. After discussing Francis Bland turns to Wesley.

Wesley and Francis are not far removed. The Saint of Epworth was almost as ardent a devotee of poverty as the Saint of Assisi. If he did not absolutely strip himself, he gave away immensely more. He, too, had a passion for the souls of men, all of St. Francis' pity for the poor, and he won a wealth of reverence and love. He was a far wiser man, living in a more rational age. But he was not only extraordinarily competent. He knew, too, his own competence.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, notes Bland, Methodism failed to realize the full dream of its founder. It failed to develop the ethical implications of his doctrine of perfect love. While it "cherished his memory and his organization,...It refused to inherit his dread and hatred of riches."<sup>40</sup> Bland then goes on to state what was Wesley's true concern for his followers, that they would become too monetarily successful. "Its very thrift and industry and morality have been its undoing. It became, like Protestantism in general, a bourgeois religion."<sup>41</sup> While Bland has hope for it due to the recent (1918) General Conference reports he is not completely confident that any existing christianity can carry out the work which needs doing. In short, it is Bland's

<sup>37</sup>quoted in Richard Allen, "Salem Bland", Butcher et. al., Prairie Spirit, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985, p. 232.

<sup>38</sup>Bland, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup>ibid., p. 81.

<sup>40</sup>ibid., p. 82.

<sup>41</sup>ibid.

New Christianity which carries the hopes of the world.

The struggle will not be over religious opinions, or political theories, though both are involved. It will be over what touch men ordinarily much more deeply, their livelihood and their profits...Nothing but Christianity can carry the Western peoples through this unparalleled crisis. But it must be Christianity in its purity and fulness, not a Christianity wasting its energy on doctrinal controversy, broken by denominational divisions, or absorbed in taking care of its machinery. It must, in short, be a Christianity neither intellectualized nor sectarianized nor institutionalized. It must be a Christianity, born as at the first in the hearts of the common people. <sup>42</sup>

D. Summers offers a common conclusion about the Labor Church by asserting that it failed because it tried to enjoy the fruits of the Christian ethic without the roots of the Christian faith. <sup>43</sup> The above discussion at least calls that into question. The Labor Church, the people who led it and the social gospel which nurtured it did have a deep and abiding faith. No, it was not the strict orthodox christian faith, But that had been tried and found wanting over two thousand years of corruption. These folks were empowered by the teachings of Jesus and supported in their work by the founder of their movement, John Wesley. While Wesley would not have agreed with some of their unorthodox theology he would have recognized a large amount of what they were saying about the critique of society, especially wealth and poverty as stemming from his teachings. These three leaders of the Labor Church all acknowledged Wesley as a crucial social reformer and claimed him as a father. Indeed, the Labor Church and these three men resemble Wesley and his movement in the 18th century more than anyone has acknowledged.

The church had become irrelevant, but religion had not. It was at the heart of the social idealism which expressed itself in the hopes and aspirations of labour for a new social order of justice and equality. These are the same conditions which Wesley faced. The church had become irrelevant and was not meeting the needs of the people in the cities. Both situations stemmed in part from a rural migration to the cities to work within the newly industrialized society. Both based their theology and their actions on first hand experience with the poor and the oppressed. The same

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>43</sup> Summers, pp. 474 & 298

spirit of revival was present. Woodsworth reported that the service at the—  
Labor Church June 9, 1919 felt like "the spirit of a great revival".<sup>44</sup> The  
description of the Labor Church given by Woodsworth in the following quote  
could also describe the Methodist Society in John Wesley's time.

Iven's Church had become a 'movement' - a spontaneous movement  
of the people - an insistence upon a social code of ethics - a revolt  
against denominationalism and formality and commercialism in  
the churches - a hunger after righteousness and spiritual truth -  
a sense of fellowship in suffering and inspiration... This movement  
became solidified by the opposition of the ministers and the  
churches to the strikes. Staid old Presbyterian elders refused to  
darken the doors of the Kirk. Wesleyan local preachers could no  
longer be restrained. Anglican Sunday School teachers resigned  
their classes. Class lines became clearly drawn and the 'regular'  
churches stood out as middle class insitutions.<sup>45</sup>

Ted Jennings in his book, Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's  
Evangelical Economics, makes a strong and convincing case in support of The  
Wesley who influences these Labor Church and Canadian Social Gospel folks.

Wesley had in view the transformation of all of life on the basis  
of the Gospel. And this transformation was so intimately linked  
to economic issues that the enterprise of scriptural Christianity  
could be said to succeed or fail depending on the way in which it  
did or did not transform the relation to wealth, poverty and the poor.<sup>46</sup>

Wesley's evangelical economics undergirds the theology and work of  
Woodsworth, Ivens and Bland. It helped take an irrelevant religion and turn  
it into a transforming and revolutionary force for change. The teachings  
and the work of the Carpenter of Nazareth came alive in these people of  
conviction and deep faith. May we take the time to learn their lessons in  
order to transform our oppressive society through a church and a religion  
made newly alive and relevent, a church that will have the power and the  
form.

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<sup>44</sup>Woodsworth, The First Story of the Labor Church, p. 6

<sup>45</sup>ibid, p. 9

<sup>46</sup>Theodore W. Jennings, Jr, Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics,  
Nashville:Abingdon, 1990, p. 15.