



NEGOTIATING THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL AND METHODIST DENOMINATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF AIDS



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Introduction

For more than fifteen years, I have done research on how Christians read (or should read) the Bible in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. My work has focused on my own African American community, but I have incorporated insights resulting from experiences with theological and biblical colleagues who are doing comparable work in South Africa and Brazil. Given the decades of activism globally, and medical advancements on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that causes the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), it would be reasonable to expect that new infections would be rare; yet in each of these countries, new infections continue to occur. According to the most recent statistics available, in one year there were just under forty thousand new infections in the United States, about forty-four thousand new infections in Brazil, and about three hundred eighty thousand new infections in South Africa.¹ These statistics are shocking because HIV is completely preventable, and information about effective prevention measures has

1 Centers for Disease Control, "HIV in the United States: *At a Glance*," <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/overview/ata glance.html> (accessed June 30, 2017); Avert, "HIV and AIDS in South Africa," www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/south-africa (accessed June 30, 2017); and Avert, "HIV and AIDS in Brazil," <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/latin-america/brazil> (accessed June 30, 2017).

been widely disseminated. Nevertheless, there are clearly impediments that limit the ability of all segments of these populations to learn about and adopt effective prevention methods.

In each of these three countries, there is a high percentage of Christians, and there is a strong Methodist presence. The respective Methodist denominations are The United Methodist Church and the historical African American Methodist traditions in the United States, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in South Africa, and the Igreja Metodista in Brazil. From my research, I know that each denomination has acted on the AIDS pandemic and has had and continues to have ministries directed toward those who are living with the virus. However, I also know that conversations about effective HIV prevention are rare, that is, ones that would include but go beyond solely promoting abstinence and faithfulness in marriage. As I have argued elsewhere, the prevention strategy to abstain, be faithful, and, if necessary, use a condom (better known as "ABC"), is not very effective, given contemporary realities.² In the United States, the reluctance to have frank conversations about sexual expression in African American communities has been observed and explained, in part, as a legacy of slavery, where Black sexuality was exploited and demonized.³ Another reason, though, is that church leaders and their congregations fear that if they discuss HIV, they would appear to condone behaviors that are associated with its transmission.⁴ Yet the basic premise of this article is that an additional factor hinders church-based discussions and activities around effective HIV prevention, and that factor is the popularity of a brand of theology widely known as the Prosperity Gospel. Essentially, the Prosperity Gospel, or the gospel of "health and wealth," asserts that its faithful believers will receive blessings from God.

The dramatic, worldwide growth in congregations that offer these mes-

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- 2 Cheryl B. Anderson, "Song of Songs: Redeeming Gender Constructions in the Age of AIDS," in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, eds. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 73–92.
 - 3 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 67–86.
 - 4 Cathy J. Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Angelique Harris, *AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black Church: Making the Wounded Whole* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 5–6.

sages has not gone unnoticed by these Methodist churches in their respective countries. When facing an aging congregation and a declining number of persons in the pews, it makes sense to adopt (whether intentionally or unintentionally) the popular message of prosperity that seems guaranteed to bring in the crowds. Consequently, I have heard discussions about the pervasive influence of the Prosperity Gospel in Methodist churches in the United States, South Africa, and Brazil.

The purpose of this paper is to question the use of the Prosperity Gospel by Methodist churches for two reasons. The first reason is that the Prosperity Gospel is not consistent with some basic teachings of John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of Methodism. The second reason is that, in the age of AIDS, it hinders the ability of Methodist churches to fight new HIV infections in the most effective manner. Therefore, this article will argue that John Wesley's approach to comparable theological and biblical issues remains relevant, counters prosperity messages, and can help us to combat the continued spreading of the virus today. Finally, this article will consider a Wesleyan approach to reading Scripture that will enable Methodist churches to return to their heritage, have a more distinctive identity in today's denominational landscape, and actively engage in the lives of their congregations and surrounding populations as they confront a pandemic.

The Prosperity Gospel: Definitions and Advantages

As Sandra Barnes summarizes in her study on the “health and wealth” messages in Black megachurches: “prosperity theology boasts the promise of spiritual, physical, and material blessings for those who follow its tenets,” or stated another way, “one’s righteousness and faithfulness necessitate success.” Prosperity theology, then, would contend that negative dynamics such as poverty or illness are due to a person’s limited faith or “questionable Christian lifestyle.”⁵ Known also by the slogan “Name it and Claim it,” the Prosperity Gospel’s lineage can be traced to the Word of Faith movement that began in the second half of the twentieth century, which combined New Thought principles with neo-Pentecostal elements. As it is now expressed, the Prosperity Gospel

5 Sandra Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper: How Black Megachurches Address HIV/AIDS and Poverty in the Age of Prosperity Theology* (New York: Fordham University, 2013), 50–51.

has resonances with Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism as well.⁶ Some of the best known ministers within this tradition are Kenneth Hagin Sr., Joel Osteen, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, and Frederick K. Price. T. D. Jakes is also a Word of Faith pastor, and his tremendous commercial success in television, films, and merchandising has arguably redefined the parameters of Christian ministry. In fact, there are now three important works on Jakes as a religious phenomenon—with more studies sure to come.⁷

Globally, as Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori attest, the Prosperity Gospel is “one of the fastest growing segments of Pentecostalism.”⁸ Yet, because there are various forms of this theology, it might be more appropriate to refer to Prosperity *theologies*.⁹ Aspects of prosperity theologies can be found in traditional Pentecostal churches, namely, those that trace their heritage back to the Azuza Street experience, such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), but those aspects can also be found through charismatic movements in the Roman Catholic Church, traditional Protestant denominations, and even in a new denomination such as the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church) that started in Brazil in the late 1970s. In some periods, these earlier expressions of charismatic fervor have been labeled “neo-pentecostal,” but today they are no longer viewed as derivative and may have come to define contemporary Pentecostalism.¹⁰ Regardless of the specific denominational name, the unifying element of these congregations is “an affinity for prosperity messages.”¹¹ Furthermore, given the global reach

6 Jonathan L. Walton, “Prosperity Gospel and African American Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, eds. Anthony B. Pinn and Katie G. Cannon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1, 10. See also Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007).

7 See Paula L. McGee, *Brand New Theology: The Wal-Martization of T. D. Jakes and the New Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017); Shayne Lee, *T. D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

8 Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 175.

9 Walton, “Prosperity Gospel and African American Theology,” 2.

10 Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995), 152–53.

11 Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong, *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3.

of Pentecostalism, any one country's Pentecostal churches may be heavily influenced by traditions from other countries. For example, Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong note that Pentecostal churches in South Africa "are strongly influenced by global Pentecostalism, with particularly dominant strands coming from the United States and from Latin America (especially Brazil), as well as West Africa (especially Nigeria)."¹²

On the whole, the Prosperity Gospel provides a message that is sorely needed in a variety of different national and socioeconomic contexts—and it does provide material benefits. For example, Berge Furre suggests that the Universal Church, founded in Brazil but with ministries around the world, helps those who are on the margins of society to survive. For him, today's globalized economy creates a society "without mercy," and the Universal Church becomes a means of survival—by offering survival strategies—for those who have been marginalized in their own country or in another one due to migration patterns that the globalized economy necessitates.¹³ Specifically, prosperity messages offer hope and affirmation to every person. As described by Miller and Yamamori, a lack of self-worth can be debilitating, and the affirmation provided can motivate a person to change her or his circumstances.

One thing that keeps poor people stuck in their circumstances is their lack of a sense of self-worth. They have no confidence that they can move up the economic ladder, because they are constantly told they are a failure. But Pentecostal theology deals directly with the issue of personal self-worth. As a child of God, one has value. In fact, Pentecostals claim that everyone has equal worth in God's eyes because all human beings are created in his image. It doesn't matter if you were born into lowly circumstances or if you have lived a disreputable lifestyle. God loves you, there is a purpose in living, and through God all things are possible. For people with low self-esteem, this is a remarkable affirmation. It potentially gives them hope and the motivation to change their circumstances.¹⁴

12 Attanasi and Yong, *Pentecostalism and Prosperity*, 68.

13 Berge Furre, "Crossing Boundaries: The 'Universal Church' and the Spirit of Globalization," in *Spirits of Globalization: The Growth of Pentecostalism and Experiential Spiritualities in a Global Age*, ed. Sturla Stalsett (London: SCM Pres, 2006), 48–49.

14 Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 169.

In addition to hope and affirmation, scholars have noted that Pentecostalism can contribute to a believer's economic mobility, because becoming "a new creature in Christ" "means that one does not drink alcohol, gamble, engage in illicit sex, or waste one's time and money on frivolous activities." As a result, improvements can be seen in all areas of a convert's life, as illustrated in the following paragraph.

Pentecostal converts who are not wasting money on alcohol, drugs, and partying now have surplus capital that they can invest into their businesses or the education of family members. Furthermore, their businesses gain a reputation for honest transactions, and this in itself leads to a greater volume of exchange, since customers know they will not be cheated. Or if they are not self-employed, these hardworking people are promoted in their workplace faster than their more self-indulgent colleagues.¹⁵

The connection between Pentecostalism and economic advancement is deemed clear enough that some scholars have labeled it "the Pentecostal ethic," and compared it to Max Weber's notion of the "Protestant work ethic" of an earlier faith tradition.¹⁶

Interestingly, the argument can be made that the Prosperity Gospel is also popular with those who are more privileged and not struggling economically. The idea is that, in the United States, the Prosperity Gospel rose in popularity as a stronger economy enabled more African Americans to accumulate wealth. Arguably, this segment of the population no longer saw themselves as "voiceless" or "victims" who needed to take refuge in the traditional Black church, as had happened during the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s.¹⁷ With the rising economic prosperity of the 1990s, members of the middle and upper classes needed "to affirm and reinforce [their] economic achievements," and the Prosperity Gospel allowed them "to reinterpret the quest of the American

15 Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 164–65.

16 Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 164; Nimi Wariboko, "Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa," in Attanasi and Yong, *Pentecostalism and Prosperity*, 35–59.

17 McGee, *Brand New Theology*, 6–16.

dream as central to Christian experience.”¹⁸ As described by Barnes, the Prosperity Gospel appears to give believers the ability to overcome any obstacle.

Supporters, many of whom have been historically disenfranchised, are able to embrace a belief system that emphasizes that they have the *right* and *ability* to harness God’s power to improve their lives such that poverty, racism, classism, and sexism are no longer threats but can be circumvented by God’s favor.¹⁹

However, during the time that some African Americans were accumulating more wealth, an even bigger number were being pushed into an economic underclass. Here, the logic of the Prosperity Gospel served two purposes: it assuaged the guilt of the more affluent,²⁰ and it explained why some prospered and some did not: it is because they lacked faith.²¹

Taken together, these advantages of Pentecostal churches and the related Prosperity Gospel offer the believer a sense of wholeness and encourage the affluent and poor alike.²² Since we will consider a Methodist response to the Prosperity Gospel later in this article, it will be important to keep in mind these comprehensive benefits of the “prosperity” theology and its practical implications.

The Prosperity Gospel and Its Disadvantages in the Age of AIDS

In 2013, Barnes’s work *Live Long and Prosper* was published, and it is a major study of Black megachurches and their engagement with poverty and the AIDS pandemic. Although she found that the majority of pastoral leaders did not fully espouse the Prosperity Gospel, she noted its features in their theological perspectives.²³ So, given the pervasiveness of the Prosperity Gospel, her

18 Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 109.

19 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 50.

20 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 52.

21 Day, *Unfinished Business*, 109–10.

22 Ntozakhe Cezula, “Reading the Bible in the African Context: Assessing Africa’s Love Affair with the Prosperity Gospel,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015): 131–53.

23 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 67–68.

basic research question was the following: If members think that the Christian believer should have “health and wealth,” how would these churches address the persistent poverty and disproportionate rates of HIV infections in the African American community? Would they simply ignore those issues? Fortunately, Barnes found that the churches she studied did address both issues—but they addressed them differently. To explain those differences, she posits two basic overarching frames: one for health and one for poverty. For the purposes of this study, however, we will only discuss the four specific frames she identifies that pertain to health.

The first health-related frame sees the pandemic as an issue of sexuality. Having the condemnation of same-sex relationships as its point of departure, it considers HIV to be primarily the result of immorality and promiscuity in various forms: homosexuality, drug use, and prostitution.²⁴ In this way, those who have the disease tend to be blamed for their condition, and having HIV is understood “as both a warning and a challenge to the unrighteous to make amends.” Nevertheless, some churches using this frame have HIV ministries with the understanding that, as Christians, they are to “Hate the sin and love the sinner.”²⁵

The next frame addresses the pandemic as a health issue; and it is based on the Black church tradition of seeing itself as “a spiritual hospital,” as well as on Jesus Christ’s model of interacting with the lepers and other outcasts of his day. Because this frame does not focus on sexuality, it allows the churches to have HIV-related ministries and to collaborate with other churches and organizations. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that a pastor interviewed made it a point to say that the “homosexual lifestyle” was still condemned.²⁶

The poverty frame “associates the pandemic largely with the heterosexual population and the risky behavior stemming from poverty and related challenges.” The assumption is that the impact of a globalized economy, deindustrialization, and mass incarceration is an emotional impoverishment, and this

24 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 104–5.

25 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 104–6.

26 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 113–15.

impoverishment leads to behaviors that “put their very lives at risk.” Correspondingly, the presumption is that if chronic poverty can be countered, then there will be a decrease in risky behavior.²⁷

The final health frame is the prosperity frame, and is used by those who fully embrace the Prosperity Gospel. The emphasis here is not on any specific disease, whether HIV, diabetes, or cancer—but on Christ as a healer and the believer’s expectation of receiving miracles. The prosperity frame places the emphasis on the believer “practicing confessing and tithing” and believing in an omnipotent God who can intervene and bring healing, “despite human frailty and medical reports.”²⁸

In her conclusions, Barnes notes that her research on Black megachurches and their response to HIV and AIDS indicates the need for “multipronged approaches” that are “based on a thorough understanding of specific church profiles,” which would help to identify “which church cultural tools should be best implemented to encourage involvement, and when and how.” Barnes points out that Black churches are able to have HIV ministries, even if they have ongoing concerns about homosexuality. Consequently, she argues there is no need for the Black church to address the fundamental issues of human sexuality or homosexuality before there can be an effective response, as some pastors contend.²⁹ Unfortunately, the current statistics on the patterns of new HIV infections indicate that those fundamental issues do need to be addressed.

In the United States today, two groups are most disproportionately impacted by HIV, and they are both African American: gay men (or “men who have sex with men” [MSM]), whether or not they would refer to themselves as homosexual) and heterosexual women. To understand the magnitude of the problem, some statistics are needed. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), nearly half of all persons who were diagnosed with HIV in 2015 were African American, and more than half of all African Americans diagnosed were gay and bisexual men.³⁰ More recently, in the beginning of 2016, the

27 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 115–17.

28 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 119–22.

29 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 181.

30 Centers for Disease Control, “HIV among African Americans,” <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/group/raciaethnic/africanamericans/cdc-hiv-africanamericans.pdf>, accessed June 30, 2017.

CDC announced that if current rates of infection persist, about half of all Black gay men will be infected with HIV in their lifetime.³¹ Comparable statistics exist for African American women. Of all women in the United States who were living with HIV in 2015, 61 percent were African American, and Black women were approximately sixteen times more like to receive a diagnosis of HIV infection than White women.³²

The disproportionate impact on Black women can be observed to an even greater degree in sub-Saharan Africa where, unlike the United States and Brazil, the virus is spread primarily through heterosexual sex. In 2016, women accounted for about 60 percent of all persons living with HIV there.³³ Furthermore there are seven thousand five hundred young women globally who are infected each week, and in South Africa alone, about two thousand young women and adolescent girls are infected each week.³⁴ A similar impact is identifiable in Brazil. I was saddened to learn, in 2016, that the most recent statistics indicated a higher rate of HIV infection for Black women than Black men.

Globally, two groups—gay men and heterosexual women—are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and it is worthwhile to explore *why*. Of course, a variety of factors drive the pandemic, but an important one—and the one that negatively affects these two groups—is the traditional gender paradigm. Gender is a complex subject that cannot be fully explained here, so a brief and simplistic explanation will have to suffice. This traditional paradigm presumes a hierarchy of men over women and basically means that men must always be dominant and women must always be subordinate. If men must always be dominant, then homosexuality is condemned, because it

31 Centers for Disease Control, "Lifetime Risk of HIV," <https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/2016/croi-press-release-risk.html>, accessed June 30, 2017.

32 The Foundation for AIDS Research, "Statistics: Women and HIV/AIDS," <http://www.amfar.org/about-hiv-and-aids/facts-and-stats/statistics--women-and-hiv-aids/>, accessed June 30, 2017.

33 UNAIDS, "Statistics: Fact Sheet: Sub-Saharan Africa," <http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/campaigns/2014/2014gapreport/factsheet>, accessed June 30, 2017.

34 Avert.org, "Women and Girls: HIV and AIDS," <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-social-issues/key-affected-populations/women>, accessed June 30, 2017; UNAIDS, South Africa Launches National Campaign for Young Women and Adolescent Girls," http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2016/june/20160624_south-africa, accessed June 30, 2017.

would involve a man who is subordinate, that is, in the female position.³⁵ That same gendered hierarchy appears in the New Testament: Paul's reference to the abandoning of "natural" for "unnatural" intercourse in Romans 1:26-27 refers to intercourse that disrupts the presumed "natural" paradigm by having a male in a subordinate position or a woman in the dominant position.³⁶ In the context of HIV, when homosexuality is condemned, gay men are made more vulnerable to infection. For example, if a young person is homeless or a runaway, that person may have to engage in sex to survive or may be trafficked sexually by others. Of all homeless and runaway youth in the United States, 40 percent of them identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender; and the most frequently cited reasons for their homelessness are that they ran away from home or were forced to leave home because of their parents' rejection of their gender identity or sexual orientation.³⁷

Similarly, according to the traditional gender paradigm, women are to be subordinate to men, and, in the context of the AIDS pandemic, subordination increases the likelihood that women will become infected. In fact, marriage is a major risk factor for women. For example, since they are to be subordinate to their husbands, a wife is not able to negotiate the use of safer sex practices at home—even if she knows her husband is having extramarital affairs.³⁸ Correspondingly, to maintain their dominance, men resort to the use of violence against women, and intimate partner violence and other forms of gender-based violence are related to higher HIV rates for women. For example, a study done in Brazil found high correlation rates between male violence against women and HIV rates.

A study in the regions of Brazil with the highest rates of gender based violence and highest prevalence of HIV (São Paulo in the Southeastern

35 Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 107–8.

36 Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 58–59.

37 Human Rights Campaign, "LGBTQ Youth Homelessness," <http://www.hrc.org/resources/lgbt-youth-homelessness>, accessed June 30, 2017.

38 Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women of Faith Speak Out in an HIV/AIDS Era," in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, eds. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele) (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Books, 2003), 8, 13.

region and Porto Alegre in the Southern region) found women were at increasingly greater odds of being HIV-positive with greater frequency of experiencing gender based violence during their lifetime. Overall, in Brazil 98% of women living with HIV reported a lifetime history of violence and 79% reported violence prior to an HIV diagnosis.³⁹

Researchers and activists involved with the pandemic recognize the harm that unequal gender hierarchies cause both gay men and heterosexual women, and one of their objectives is modifying that paradigm to reduce gender inequalities and thereby reducing infection rates. The churches in the study Barnes conducted, though, condemned homosexuality. As Stephanie Mitchem describes in her book *Name It and Claim It?* the Word of Faith tradition ties “righteousness” to a traditional concept of gender roles.

In the Word of Faith lineage, prosperity is tied to “righteousness,” and the right way to live in America is to fully conform to Victorian-era concepts of how women and men are supposed to act. Such appropriate action is set out as a sign of alignment with God’s will. Preaching is used to construct gender roles in ways that privilege men at the expense of women.⁴⁰

In the limited gender-identity and sexual-orientation parameters of this discussion, we can see that traditional gender paradigms privilege *heterosexual* men at the expense of both MSM and heterosexual women, and that these latter groups are at higher risks of HIV infection as a result. Since the HIV ministries Barnes describes, as well as most theologically conservative churches, uphold the traditional gender paradigms, they were not as effective as they might be, at best, and they increased the vulnerability of MSM and heterosexual women to HIV, at worst.

That worst-case scenario already exists in South Africa, and needs to be addressed here. Ultimately, the most harmful aspect to the Prosperity Gospel is that *how* someone got his or her wealth is ignored. A specific example of that harm can be seen in southern Africa, where one of the drivers of the HIV pandemic is transactional sex. Transactional sex is defined as “non-commercial,

39 Avert.org, “Women and Girls: HIV and AIDS.”

40 Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?*, 112.

non-marital sexual relations motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits."⁴¹ Transactional sex correlates with unsafe sexual behaviors, increased sexually transmitted infections, and age-disparate sex (where there is a substantial difference in age between the male and female involved). Taken together, these dynamics have resulted in a "transmission cycle" that has intensified the disparate impact of the HIV pandemic on young women.

A long-term study of age-disparate sex and HIV risk for young women took place between 2002 to 2012 in South Africa, where a third of sexually active adolescent girls will experience a relationship with a man at least five years older than them. The study found a cycle of transmission, whereby high HIV prevalence in young women was driven by sex with older men (on average 8.7 years older) who themselves had female partners with HIV, many of whom had acquired HIV as young women.⁴²

Alternatively stated, this "transmission cycle" for HIV means that a young woman enters into a sexual relationship with an older man, often referred to as a Sugar Daddy, in exchange for material benefits, and under the Prosperity Gospel, those benefits are assumed to be blessings from God. Without any critique of *how* the money is gained, transactional sex is a "blessing," and, in effect, theological sanction is given to a major driver of the pandemic in southern Africa.⁴³ To counter this dynamic, Black churches on both sides of the Atlantic need to discuss the issues of gender, human sexuality, and homosexuality. Without such basic conversations on gender, these two groups—MSM and heterosexual women—will continue to be disproportionately infected. In the next section, we will explore additional theological statements that make it difficult for effective prevention programs to be implemented. To engage those statements more constructively, insights from the legacy of John Wesley will also be incorporated.

41 Avert.org, "Women and Girls: HIV and AIDS."

42 Avert.org, "Women and Girls: HIV and AIDS."

43 Gerald O. West and Beverley G. Haddad, "Boaz as 'Sugar Daddy': Re-Reading Ruth in the Context of HIV," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (July 2016, Special Issue): 137–56.

The Prosperity Gospel, the Bible, and John Wesley

Without a doubt, the Prosperity Gospel and its related neo-Pentecostal and charismatic movements have seen global success, and it is easy to understand why they have. As discussed earlier, prosperity messages do offer benefits by meeting deep human needs; but in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, these messages are also problematic. The previous section detailed the ways in which one such message, adherence to hierarchical gender norms, limited the effectiveness of HIV prevention programs. Three additional messages will be covered in this section. My contention is that these messages, although there may be a biblical basis for them, prevent the implementation of truly effective HIV prevention programs. Furthermore, I will show that there are other biblical texts with messages that would be more helpful, and that these other messages are more consistent with the legacy of John Wesley. Consequently, in the era of AIDS, Methodist churches would be better served by reclaiming their own heritage than resorting to the Prosperity Gospel.

It is worth stating at the outset that I have personally heard the statements discussed here over the years I have done HIV-related work. However, I am not claiming that I have heard them consistently in each of the countries—South Africa, Brazil, and the United States—and I am not claiming that the statements have been endorsed officially by the Methodist denominations in these countries. These are statements, though, that have come from practicing Christians, and they represent beliefs that have been influenced by the Prosperity Gospel and conservative evangelical theology. To some extent, these statements show how church members internalize perceived messages, whether or not those messages have been explicitly endorsed by their church leaders.

Statement One: “If you are HIV positive, it is because you have sinned.”

Essentially, the Prosperity Gospel offers “the promise of spiritual, physical, and material blessings for those who follow its tenets.”⁴⁴ On the one hand, such an underlying assumption means that, if a believer succeeds, that person is being blessed for faithfulness. On the other hand, if a believer experiences

44 Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*, 50.

any misfortune or setback, then it is because he or she has not followed the faith's tenets and therefore sinned in some way. Within this schema, becoming HIV positive is easily explained as the result of sin. Given the identification of the virus with gay men, promiscuous women, and drug users, all of whom are deemed to have violated conservative sexual and behavioral norms, the statement makes sense. After all, since God punishes because of sin, then a HIV-positive person has been simply punished for her or his sin. The impact of such an understanding, though, is to increase stigma and discrimination against persons living with HIV, which limits the willingness of HIV-positive persons to get tested or to receive treatment.

A Scriptural verse (or portion thereof) used in this context is Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death" (NRSV). However, this is a problematic use of this verse, because it undercuts HIV prevention efforts. After all, if God punishes sinners, then God has punished the HIV-positive person, and if we work to prevent infections, are we not trying to interfere with what would be God's punishment of the person? Plus, such a reading is harmful for two additional reasons. First, it misinterprets the text. Basic exegetical work connects this verse with a broader discussion in the whole chapter. Paul considers slavery to sin to have been "death," but "sin" here does not refer to specific individual actions as we might think. Furthermore, such slavery ends with baptism in Christ, at which point, the believer gains sanctification and eternal life.⁴⁵ Therefore, the "death" referred to in the verse is figurative and not literal. In contrast, the physical consequences of (untreated) HIV infections would mean a literal and not figurative death. Second, such a reading misrepresents the full biblical witness.

It may be comforting for Christians to think that the only ones who suffer are those who sin, but that is simply not the case. Bad things do happen to good people, and the Bible acknowledges that fact. Job is a righteous man who suffers but proclaims his innocence, and his friends try to convince him that God is punishing or disciplining him because of sin. In Job 42:7, God expresses anger at Job's friends because they "have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (NRSV). After reading the book of Job, we do not

45 Cynthia Briggs Kitteridge, "Romans," in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, eds. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kitteridge, and David A. Sanchez (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 406.

know why suffering occurs—but we do know that it is not because those persons have sinned. Similarly, in the New Testament, John 9 relates an encounter between Jesus and a blind man. The disciples ask Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” and Jesus answers, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (John 9:2-3 NRSV). Just as in the book of Job, the assumed connection between sin and suffering is disrupted. Moreover, Jesus’ healing of the blind man “is a sign that testifies to the divine glory and his identity as God’s son.”⁴⁶ In the context of the HIV pandemic, these texts in Job and John are significant because they counter the misuse of Romans 6:23 in the Prosperity Gospel. Instead of condemning those who are HIV positive, we can shift our focus toward compassion and healing in the name of Jesus Christ.

Arguably, the Bible has two different views on whether suffering is punishment for sin or other misdeeds. Contrary to the perspective based on the Prosperity Gospel, the perspective seen in Job and John is, by far, the more helpful one in the context of HIV. To discern if it is also the most Methodist approach, we will need to turn to the ministry of John Wesley. On two important issues, the poor and slavery, Wesley refused to “blame the unfortunate for their own conditions.” Concerning the poor, Wesley rejected the typical notion of his day (and our own) that the poor are poor “only because they are idle,” as seen in this excerpt from his *Journal* dated February 9–10, 1753.

On Friday and Saturday I visited as many more [sick] as I could. I found some in their cells underground, others in their garrets, half starved both with cold and hunger, added to weakness and pain. But I found not one of them unemployed who was able to crawl about the room. So wickedly, devilishly false is the common objection, “They are poor because they are idle.”⁴⁷

Similarly, in his day, the enslavement of Africans was justified based on, among other things, their supposed inferiority, a proposition that Wesley rejected. According to him, “certainly the African is in no respect inferior to the European.” From his theological perspective, all persons were “equally

46 Adele Reinhartz, “John,” in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, eds. Aymer, Kitteridge, and Sanchez, 285.

47 John Wesley, *Journal*, February 9–10, 1753, *Journal and Diaries III*, in *Works*, 20:445.

depraved” but also “equally the recipients of God’s grace.”⁴⁸ Wesley saw the harm caused by attributing the suffering or misfortune of whole groups of people to their status or deeds (or lack thereof)—and we should as well. Rather than the Romans text and the approach of the Prosperity Gospel, the message of the books of Job and John is the better one to use in the age of AIDS, and it is the more Methodist one.

Statement Two: “I know that the culture is more affirming of women and gays, but I’m going to hold fast to the Bible.”

In many respects, the Prosperity Gospel has been influenced by multiple traditions, and one of them is evangelicalism and its conservative political impulses. Even though Word of Faith pastors have not emphasized “hot-button issues,” they support them based on their reading of Scripture.

Word of Faith teachers have been successful at reaching across political, generational, and racial lines due to their emphasis on scripture, prophecy, healing, and wealth rather than the hot-button political issues that have largely defined the American culture wars. This is not to say, however, that the theology of the Word of Faith movement is not consistent with conservative political currents. Abortion, homosexuality, the teaching of evolution, and any form of religious pluralism are all generally rejected as counter to their interpretation of scripture.⁴⁹

A scriptural reading that seems to support the concept of “holding fast” against liberal developments in society is Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (NRSV). According to N. T. Wright, Paul is not only asking Christians “to learn to live authentically, without external pressure, but for them to be renewed, so that what proceeds from the transformed mind does indeed reflect the image of God.”⁵⁰ The scriptural texts themselves, though, indicate a range of possible interpretations concerning heterosexual women and gay men, the two groups that are disproportionately affected by the HIV pandemic. For example, the

48 Irv A. Brendlinger, *Social Justice through the Eyes of John Wesley: John Wesley’s Theological Challenge to Slavery* (Ontario, Canada: Joshua Press, 2006), 68.

49 Attanasi and Yong, *Pentecostalism and Prosperity*, 119.

50 N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *New Interpreters’ Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 10:705.

normative gender paradigm for male/female relationships is usually a hierarchical one, based on Genesis 3:16, but a more mutual and interdependent one is found in the Song of Songs.⁵¹ Similarly, same-sex relationships are condemned, at least in part, because they are non-procreative relationships. Deuteronomy 23:1 does forbid the admission to the assembly of anyone “whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off.” However, Isaiah 56:3-5 specifically includes eunuchs, and Acts 8:26-40 describes the baptism and inclusion of an Ethiopian eunuch. These biblical contrasts are mentioned here just to illustrate that there is diversity in the biblical witness, and that different interpretations of Scripture on these two topics are possible.

Over time, Methodist denominations have adopted conservative evangelical positions on social issues, including gender, and so conform to the surrounding culture, but we would do well to remember that those positions have not always been those of John Wesley or Methodism. For example, Wesley supported women preaching during his lifetime. In fact, women had flourishing ministries, but the British conference passed a resolution in 1803 that prohibited women from preaching. Even with women’s evangelistic successes, the first reason listed for the decision was simply that “a vast majority of our people are opposed to it.”⁵² I am astonished by the fact that Wesley had only died in 1791, which means that there would have been preachers in that gathering who knew Wesley and knew of his support for women, but the resolution passed. In the same way, Wesley was known for his anti-slavery work, and just days before his death, he wrote a letter of encouragement to William Wilberforce, the abolitionist.⁵³

In spite of conference restrictions concerning slave ownership, the practice continued among Methodists in the southern areas of the United States, and those Methodists split from the northern church, rather than end slavery. Finally, the restrictive language on homosexuality that now exists in The UMC’s *Book of Discipline* was first added only in 1972. Unlike the conservative evangelicals and proponents of the Prosperity Gospel, who might consider

51 Anderson, “Song of Songs.”

52 Paul Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1991), 236.

53 Brendlinger, *Social Justice through the Eyes of John Wesley*, 42.

themselves “holding fast” against a culture perceived as more liberal, United Methodists in the United States have tended to forsake their own tradition and adopted more conservative policies from the surrounding culture. Therefore, Methodists cannot claim that they *never* adopt the prevalent values from the surrounding culture; they could do so now that the surrounding culture is more liberal on these issues, even if that stance does not have a widely agreed upon biblical basis. Methodists need to know that Wesley’s staunch anti-slavery position was not based on references to the Bible. One Wesley scholar thinks that Wesley may not have written a biblical treatment against slavery because “he believed authentic Christians could not possibly be involved in such a gross evil; thus to make a biblical case would be irrelevant.”⁵⁴ Another scholar writes that Wesley “set aside” the necessity of biblical answers on slavery; instead, “he turned to criteria of justice and mercy, asking if the practices described could be reconciled with them.”⁵⁵

Given the extensive impact of HIV on heterosexual women, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where nearly two-thirds of all HIV-positive persons live, there are church leaders who want to promote a more egalitarian reading of the Bible that will support the dignity of women—but they either ignore the issue of homosexuality or merely attempt to soften the condemnation.⁵⁶ Such a strategy, though, will eventually fail to counter the negative impact of the pandemic on women because of the underlying assumptions on which traditional gender hierarchies are based. Specifically, traditional gender paradigms assume that men are to be dominant, and women are to be subordinate. Correspondingly, that devalued subordinate role prescribed for women is directly related to the disdain held for any such subordinate role for men. As expressed by Dale Martin, the “unnaturalness” of desire in the Greco-Roman era “has nothing to do with one man’s erotic interest in another, but with the ‘unnaturalness’ of a man desiring to demean himself by assuming the despised, lower

54 Brendlinger, *Social Justice through the Eyes of John Wesley*, 54.

55 Ronald H. Stone, *John Wesley’s Life & Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 194.

56 Arthur J. Ammann, with Julie Ponsford Holland, *Women, HIV, and the Church: In Search of Refuge* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012); Marvin A. McMickle, *A Time to Speak: How Black Pastors Can Respond to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

position appropriate for women.”⁵⁷ With its inherent devaluing of women and hierarchical privileging of men, the traditional gender paradigm must be challenged. Basically, heterosexual women and gay men are devalued in the same way, and it will be ineffective to try to “treat” women better while continuing to condemn homosexuality. The fates of these groups are intimately connected and, to reduce new HIV infections, both women and gay men must be accorded dignity and respect. Returning to Romans 12:2, it is interesting to note that Robert Jewett translates the first phrase of the verse as follows: “Do not be conformed to this aeon.” According to Jewett, Paul views “this aeon” as an evil power that seeks “to extend its tentacles once again about those set free in Christ,” and that “evil power” is the Roman Empire.⁵⁸ In the context of the AIDS pandemic, a traditional gender paradigm that renders women and gay men more vulnerable to infection is indeed an “evil power.”

Statement 3: “All of this death from AIDS is a sign. It means that Christ is returning soon.”

According to the latest UNAIDS statistics, about 35 million people have died since the beginning of the pandemic, and 1.1 million people died in 2015 alone.⁵⁹ With such death tolls, some Christians have discerned resonances with the book of Revelation and popular concepts of the “Rapture,” a time of trial and tribulation, and Christ’s return. In her critique of the Rapture, Barbara Rossing describes those persons in the following way: “They love to cite statistics about how the world is getting worse: crime is on the increase, wars and earthquakes are more frequent, the oceans are polluted, environmental degradation is worsening. To them, these ‘signs’ prove that the prophetic clock has counted down almost all the way and then they can soon escape.”⁶⁰ Rather than explore the nuances of the Rapture and the dispensational theology that

57 Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 58.

58 Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 732.

59 UNAIDS, “Fact Sheet: Latest Statistics on the Status of the AIDS Epidemic,” <http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>, accessed June 30, 2017.

60 Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 13.

accompanies premillennial thought, we will focus on the most basic differences between premillennial and postmillennial perspectives.

Revelation 20:1-5 speaks of a thousand-year period (millennium), where evil seems to be bound, but questions remain about the details. Basically, premillennialism emphasizes the imminent coming of Christ and the destruction of the world as we know it, "prior to the establishment of the millennial reign of God on earth." Adopted by conservative evangelicals such as Dwight L. Moody (1837–1899), it deems the Christian's task to be evangelism, referred to as "saving souls," and "there is no place for social restructuring because the world is simply getting worse." The postmillennial perspective, in contrast, is exemplified by the Social Gospel movement and Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918). It has a more optimistic outlook where "the stress on the divine fulfillment of God's plan for the world became less identified with a cataclysmic millennial consummation of God's rule and more connected with the present Kingdom of God—a 'realized eschatology.'"⁶¹ From this perspective, social transformation is possible and seems consistent with the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10 NRSV).

For our purposes, the difference between postmillennial theology and premillennial theology, then, is that the former allows consideration of current systemic social and economic struggles, whereas the latter does not. In general, conservative evangelical theology and Pentecostal theology tend to focus on individual behavior rather than the systemic issues affecting that behavior, and both of these traditions influence the Prosperity Gospel. Consequently, while the Prosperity Gospel "attempts to aid persons to self-actualize, it simultaneously ignores those structural inequalities that undermine any attempt at self-actualization."⁶² Yet the myriad systemic factors that shape individual behavior are pivotal in the context of HIV and AIDS, because, as Musa Dube contends, "HIV and AIDS is an epidemic that functions through social injustice."

61 Douglas M. Strong, *They Walked in the Spirit: Personal Faith and Social Action in America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), xxx–xxxii.

62 Day, *Unfinished Business*, 110.

Its spread is closely linked to poverty, human rights violations, violence, abuse of children, gender inequality, injecting drug users, stigmatization and discrimination, racism, national and international trade injustice, ethnic violence and sexual discrimination.⁶³

Concluding her discussion, she writes that “we can only sufficiently deal with HIV and AIDS when we also focus on both individual and structural evils and social injustice issues that affect the individual’s choices and decisions.”⁶⁴

Unlike those who uphold the Prosperity Gospel, John Wesley was a post-millennialist based on his “conviction that the incipient presence of the Reign of God in our world is a *growing* reality, spurred on by the expectation of a penultimate fulfillment of that Reign prior to the New Creation.”⁶⁵

This emergence of explicit postmillennial sympathies was actually a consistent development of Wesley’s central abiding eschatological convictions. For example, a basic assumption of postmillennialism is that the Reign of God does not imply a transcendent contrast to the fallen earthly situation, or a blessing reserved solely for some future era. Rather, God’s Reign has an active presence in our current reality through the work of the Spirit in and through believers. This conviction is evident throughout Wesley’s writings.⁶⁶

According to Randy Maddox, then, Wesley advocated a “truly holistic salvation” that had wholeness of body and spirit in the present.⁶⁷ With his focus on the current reality rather than the afterlife, Wesley could develop an emphasis on compassion for the poor as part of the Christian commitment to love one’s neighbor.⁶⁸ His efforts on behalf of the poor were numerous and included

63 Musa Wenkosi Dube, *The HIV and AIDS Bible: Selected Essays* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 173.

64 Dube, *The HIV and AIDS Bible*, 173.

65 Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 240.

66 Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 239.

67 Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing,” *Methodist History* 46, no. 1 (October 2007): 7.

68 Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, trans. John F. Seely and W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 31.

establishing a medical clinic, offering revolving loans (micro-lending), and starting the Kingswood School for poor children.⁶⁹

As mentioned earlier, Wesley was aware that the poor were not poor because they were lazy. Moreover, he identified those groups that tended to benefit from exploiting the poor: merchants, distillers, doctors, and lawyers.⁷⁰ Given Wesley's critique of wealth that is gained at the expense of the poor, Ted Jennings finds an early expression of "a preferential option for the poor." For our purposes, though, the crucial element of Jennings's analysis is that Wesley "demythified wealth" so that wealth and power are not "the sign of divine favor" and "the models of faith," while poverty is "seen as an indication of divine disapproval," or "as punishment for sins of sloth or unbelief." Jennings summarizes the theological harm of such unquestioned wealth in the following way:

Whenever wealth and power are uncritically celebrated as the gift of God, and so the sign of the divine favor, then the presence of poverty and powerlessness is all too naturally seen as an indication of divine disapproval, as punishment for sins of sloth or unbelief. The remedy suggested by the proponents of the gospel of wealth and success is conversion; this will then lead to those material blessings that, it is presumed, follow from a life of faith. Such a position makes it possible to hold the poor in contempt and makes the wealthy and powerful the role models of faith. But where wealth and power are not understood as the *prima facie* evidence of divine approval, where those are in fact understood in a negative light, then the way is open for what is today called a preferential option for the poor.⁷¹

Jennings clearly finds in Wesley's writings a critique of the gospel of wealth and success, that is, the Prosperity Gospel. Such a critique reminds us that the Prosperity Gospel is not consistent with the legacy of John Wesley.⁷² and encourages us to determine the dynamics that exploit the poor today. Since nearly two thirds of all persons living with HIV live in sub-Saharan Africa and

69 Stone, *John Wesley's Life and Ethics*, 102–3.

70 Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Good News for the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 72–78.

71 Jennings, *Good News for the Poor*, 47.

72 Lisa R. Withrow, "Success and the Prosperity Gospel: From Commodification to Transformation—A Wesleyan Perspective," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 15–41.

are disproportionately poor, following Wesley's lead would help us to address some of the systemic drivers of new HIV infections, rather than see the related deaths as a divine sign.

Methodist Re-Readings of the Bible in the Context of HIV and AIDS

It is worth noting that, for each of the problematic statements discussed in the previous section, there were biblical passages cited that supported the statement and others that opposed it. As a reminder, here are the three contrasting pairs: Romans 6:23 and Job 42:7/John 9:2-3; Romans 12:2/Genesis 3:16 and the Song of Songs/Isaiah 56:3-5/Acts 8:26-40; and Revelation 20:1-5 and Matthew 6:10. Obviously, both sides can claim that their position is biblically based; the broader question must be if one perspective more fully reflects the will of God in this time and place. As a biblical scholar, I know that, since the biblical texts were written by human beings, they are contextual, and we should consider the differences between those contexts and our own when we interpret these biblical texts today. Furthermore, as a Methodist, I believe that these texts were "breathed into" by God (inspired) and that the work of the Holy Spirit in shaping these texts helps communities of faith to interpret them today. I am referring to these as Methodist understandings here because they were actually held by John Wesley too.

John Wesley, whose commitment to the Bible as scripture is undisputed, affirmed the importance of the original biblical languages over translations; consulted a variety of English, French, and German translations; read the Bible with the standard scholarly tools of his day; and could acknowledge the role of human authors and therefore the cultural specificity of biblical texts.⁷³ In addition, he knew that "we need the same spirit to *understand* the Scripture which enabled the holy men of old to *write* it."⁷⁴ Acknowledging the ancient context of biblical texts means that it is the interpretive process itself that gives a text meaning. As Robert Wall wrote in his development of a

73 Randy L. Maddox, "The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible," *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 2-12.

74 Maddox, "The Rule of Christian Faith," 14.

Wesleyan hermeneutics of Scripture, “the ‘plain sense’ of every canonical text unfolds throughout its history as every talented interpreter adapts its meaning to ever-changing social locations.”⁷⁵

For our purposes, it is most important to consider how Wesley read the Bible, and, as will be shown, he has at least three approaches that can help us identify a Methodist approach. First, Wesley read the biblical canon as a whole, which reflected “his commitment to the theological and spiritual value of the whole Bible,”⁷⁶ and he assumed that biblical passages should be read comparatively with other passages.⁷⁷ Applying these insights to the contrasting passages discussed here means that neither passage should be considered “the” determinative meaning on its own, and that both sets of passages need to be evaluated within the theological and spiritual value of the whole Bible. Second, Wesley emphasized the importance of reading the Bible in conference with other readers, even those who disagreed with him.

Wesley’s emphasis on the value of reading the Bible in conference with others was not limited to considerations of relative Christian maturity. It was grounded in his recognition of the limits of all human understanding, even that of spiritually mature persons. He was convinced that, as finite creatures, our human understandings of our experience, of tradition, and of Scripture itself are “opinions” or interpretations of their subject matter.⁷⁸

For Wesley, the goal of the openness to dialogue with others was to reach “the most adequate understandings,” and he “specifically invited any who believed that he presented mistaken readings of the Bible in his *Sermons* to be in touch, so that they could confer together over Scripture.”⁷⁹ In the context of the HIV pandemic, it is crucial that Methodists who adhere to traditional paradigms on gender and sexuality confer with those with whom they disagree,

75 Robert W. Wall, “Toward a Wesleyan Hermeneutics of Scripture,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 54.

76 Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith,” 16.

77 Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley—A Man of One Book,” in *Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading the Bible as Scripture*, eds. Joel B. Green and David F. Watson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 8.

78 Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith,” 18–19.

79 Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith,” 19.

including those who are living with the virus. They need to learn how the Bible is being read differently by those who are HIV positive, and to hear from them about the physical and emotional damage caused by those traditional values. Under these circumstances, learning and hearing from persons living with HIV is consistent with Wesley's concept of "global listening," which, in turn, reflects Wesley's understanding of the "catholic spirit."⁸⁰ To live out that "catholic spirit" by engaging with those often deemed "Other" is compatible with our Methodist heritage.

In my book *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies*, I argued that one small segment of humanity—the *mythical norm*—determines "the" meaning of the Bible generally and of individual texts, specifically. The *mythical norm*, a term from Audre Lorde's work, represents the perspectives, realities, and traditions of privileged, White, heterosexual males; considers itself to be the normative perspective for all Christians; and dictates what is considered "the" Christian perspective on any subject. Once "the" Christian perspective is determined, it is taught to all Christians as the definitive one.⁸¹ Such a dynamic necessarily marginalizes as "Other": those who are not White, not heterosexual, not male, and not privileged. In other words, the perspectives and realities of those deemed "Other" are not considered when "the" Christian perspective is established. Determining Christian policies and doctrine without considering the "Other" is especially problematic in the context of HIV and AIDS, because those deemed "Other" are the ones who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic: Africans and those of African descent, females, MSM, and the poor. As a result, the ones who are most affected by the pandemic are not the ones who set "the" Christian perspectives on handling the pandemic, including the determination of acceptable prevention strategies. To go beyond the *mythical norm* and decide the appropriate interpretations of Scripture for all Christians, we need to have an interpretive lens that allows us to distinguish between the limited readings of the *mythical norm* and those that

80 Barry Bryant, "Contextual and Connectional: 'Hearing' the Scripture," <http://www.umglobal.org/2017/06/barry-bryant-contextual-connectional.html?m=1>, June 6, 2017, accessed June 29, 2017.

81 Cheryl B. Anderson, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–29.

should truly apply to all Christians. Fortunately, John Wesley provides such an interpretive lens.

The most distinctive feature of how Wesley read the Bible is the way he used 1 John 4:19, “We love [God] because he first loved us,” as the interpretive lens through which the rest of Scripture should be read.⁸² Maddox notes that Wesley preached on or alluded to 1 John more than any other biblical book; and he finds that, after his Aldersgate experience, Wesley came to fully understand that the “enduring love of God and others is a *response* to knowing God’s pardoning love for us.”⁸³

To summarize, Wesley increasingly and self-consciously read the whole of the Bible in light of a deep conviction that God was present in the assuring work of the Spirit both to *pardon* and to *transform* all who respond to that inviting and empowering love—and *all* can respond!⁸⁴

Maddox refers to Wesley’s distinctive emphasis on “God’s universal pardoning and transforming love,” and I wonder if that interpretive lens can help us move away from traditional readings of Scripture that harm many Christians. Can the *mythical norm* itself be transformed by God’s universal love? Considering Wesley’s interpretive practices, and nudged by the Spirit, I have “updated” Romans 8:38-39 to show how that universal love could be expressed in the midst of the HIV pandemic.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor height, nor depth,
nor male nor female,
nor gay nor straight,
nor cisgender nor transgender,
nor being HIV positive or being HIV negative,
nor being high class, or having no class at all,
nor powers, nor anything else in all creation,

82 Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith,” 26–27; Robert W. Wall, “Wesley as Biblical Interpreter,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, eds. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113–28.

83 Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith,” 26–28.

84 Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith,” 30.

will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Clearly, my inclusive and contextual reading of Romans 8:38-39 is different from the biblical one, and it necessarily raises the issue of biblical authority. Biblical authority is usually thought of in hierarchical terms; traditional readings are thought to come "from above," and our task as persons of faith is to submit to them. As mentioned earlier, though, in too many instances, those definitive readings of biblical texts are simply established by the *mythical norm* and then imposed on everyone else. A different option is to re-define "biblical authority," and several scholars in the Wesleyan tradition have re-conceptualized it as a relational dynamic, rather than a hierarchical one. For example, Robert Wall argues that Wesley did not think Scripture's authority was "unilateral and absolute," but that it was instead "conversational and relational."⁸⁵ Similarly, Sarah Lancaster writes that "at its heart, authority is relational; it cannot be exercised in isolation."⁸⁶

Along with a more relational concept of biblical authority, our notion of *inspiration* must be re-conceptualized. As Bryan Stone observes, when we think of the Bible as "inspired" by God, traditionally we think of it "being a 'deposit' of true information dropped down coercively on scribes who simply penned the work." Instead, Stone proposes that it is a type of dialogue that offers us the possibility of "a healed humanity."

"Inspiration" refers to the transforming power of grace that does not negate human frailty, error, and other limitations with which we all live as human beings (for example, the patriarchy of the biblical witnesses), but rather enters into "dialogue" with our wounded and limited humanity and poses to it the possibility of a healed humanity.⁸⁷

For Stone, then, biblical authority is an educational process, and we look to the Bible "for how the biblical witnesses 'learned how to learn' from within their

85 Wall, "Toward a Wesleyan Hermeneutics," 59.

86 Sarah Heaner Lancaster, "What Does the Authority of the Bible Mean for United Methodists?" *Quarterly Review* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 198.

87 Bryan P. Stone, "Wesleyan Theology, Scriptural Authority, and Homosexuality," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 126.

own context, experience, and understanding. What we are ultimately looking for is the movement, trajectory, and dynamics of an educational process leading us toward the fullest expression of the *imago dei* in our lives.”⁸⁸ Stone’s concept of biblical authority as “divine pedagogy” means that we remain open to challenges to our own experiences and understandings as we engage the biblical text.

The divine pedagogy is a process of our coming to the truth about the possibility of our own existence as human beings in relationship to God, world, and neighbor. While that process is never finished and continually poses new challenges to our experience and understanding, we can with confidence claim that the process has a normative trajectory, dynamics, and goal. The point, however, is that the normativity of revelation lies not in the particular experiences or information available to the biblical witnesses, but in the divine educational process that poses problems for how that experience is interpreted or “punctuated.”⁸⁹

Basically then, a Methodist re-reading of the Bible would be one that reminds us of God’s universal love that is open to all (1 John) and engages us in an educational process where the goal is for us to become a new community of healed humanity. Unlike the Prosperity Gospel, which tends to read the Bible in traditional ways concerning gender and sexuality, the Methodist tradition offers the possibility of biblical re-readings. We can use God’s universal love as an interpretive lens that will allow us to affirm the *imago Dei* within ourselves and others and move us toward full inclusion for all. In the context of HIV and AIDS, that message offered by Methodist denominations would be good news indeed!

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the Word of Faith movement and its related Prosperity Gospel are popular globally. As a result, Methodist denominations in South Africa, Brazil, and the United States have incorporated some of its theological tenets. However, the Methodist tradition itself can offer many of the same

88 Stone, “Wesleyan Theology,” 129.

89 Stone, “Wesleyan Theology,” 131.

advantages that the Prosperity Gospel offers, without its negative consequences. For example, the Prosperity Gospel offers a renewed self-esteem and sense of hope—especially to those who have often been socially and economically marginalized. One of the roots of that theological affirmation is Arminianism, which supports the possibility of universal salvation for all and opposes theories of limited atonement such as the Calvinist tradition’s concept of predestination. Such a theological stance, though, is not unique to the Prosperity Gospel or the Pentecostal tradition from which that gospel message comes. To the contrary, both Methodists and Pentecostals have that Arminian tradition, given their shared historical trajectories, and it would be good for Methodists to reaffirm it.

Similarly, the Prosperity Gospel is applauded for the upward social mobility achieved by some of its followers, but that same dynamic happened with early Methodists, even during Wesley’s lifetime.⁹⁰

Over the decades, Methodist values had prospered the faithful. This is because Wesley taught them the values of industry and abstinence and his religion encouraged literacy, as well as articulate self-confidence, while discouraging spending on spirits and tobacco, jewellery [*sic*] and ribbons, gambling and the theatre.⁹¹

Yet Wesley had a maxim by which he himself lived: “Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can.”⁹² Apparently, his followers took the third part of the maxim, “Give all you can,” less literally than did Wesley himself.⁹³ Nevertheless, the maxim is part of Methodist heritage and can be reclaimed to emphasize that the accumulation of wealth is not in and of itself the goal of the Christian life, as it is thought to be, to a large extent, in the Prosperity Gospel.

Finally, the health aspect of the “Health and Wealth” gospel also has a precedent from Wesley’s era. Wesley established a free medical clinic in London

90 Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Janet Meyer Everts, “Living to Give: The Prosperity Gospel in Global Context and Biblical Perspective,” unpublished paper presented at the International Society of Biblical Literature Meeting in Buenos Aires, Argentina, July 21, 2015.

91 Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography*, 183–84.

92 Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography*, 184.

93 Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography*, 184.

in the 1740s, and, about that time, his collection of home remedies, *Primitive Physick*, was published for the first time. Randy Maddox reports that the volume “went through 23 editions in Wesley’s lifetime . . . and stayed in print (and use!) until the 1880s.”⁹⁴ Plus, Wesley’s lay assistants were to know its contents and have the book with them when they made pastoral visits.⁹⁵ According to Maddox, Wesley “longed for Christians to see the participation in God’s saving work involves nurturing both our souls and our bodies,” and he wanted both addressed “in reaching out to others.”⁹⁶ For our purposes here, a significant feature of Wesley’s commitments to health and healing is that he “did not reject professional medical care, in favor of sole reliance on either traditional treatments or divine healing.” Instead, Wesley affirmed both divine and medical healing.⁹⁷ This aspect of his legacy on health contrasts sharply with the message, given in some Prosperity Gospel circles, that HIV can be cured by divine healing alone. Returning to Wesley’s understanding could be an important corrective for Methodist denominations.

For the final word, we will return to 1 John, the biblical text that John Wesley so favored. First John is one of three Johannine letters, and they were written to churches that were “struggling with false teaching and false prophets.” According to Joel Green, the author’s general message to these churches is one of encouragement: “he writes to encourage his readers to continue embracing and putting into play in their lives the truth that they had received—and, in so doing, to ward off the influence of false teachers.”⁹⁸ In the context of HIV and AIDS, this message still rings true: Methodist denominations should embrace and put into play what we have received from John Wesley, and so ward off the influence of the Prosperity Gospel.

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98 Joel B. Green, *Reading Scripture as Wesleyans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 141.

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