The numerical peak of Methodism in the United States of America came shortly after the Methodist Church, the largest Wesleyan body in the country, united with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968. The combined numbers shortly after this celebrated merger totaled over eleven million people. After this peak of popularity the newly formed denomination lost significant numbers of adherents from decade to decade, drip by drip, as indicated in the following chart:

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Source: http://www.gcah.org/history/united-methodist-membership-statistics

In light of such trends, a spate of books emerged of late that have attempted to address this precipitous decline of United Methodism in the United States of America. These works, listed below, all appeared in 2008 as United Methodism celebrated its fortieth anniversary:
— Scott Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist?: Rediscovering Our Evangelistic Mission*¹

— William B. Lawrence, *Methodism in Recovery: Renewing Mission, Reclaiming History, Restoring Health*²


In his breezy account of what is actually a very complicated history, with significant cultural and political developments in play, Kisker contends that The United Methodist Church in its American context has departed from its historic Methodist roots to take on the mainline task of “cultivating good citizens.”⁴ “We find practices [in the UM church],” Kisker writes, “that are little more than thinly veiled attempts to manipulate others through politics or marketing techniques.”⁵

Recognizing that United Methodist decline in the United States is not unique but is actually a part of a larger American culture trend that includes virtually all denominations, Lawrence, for his part, moves the analysis a bit further. His contribution is able to point to the larger tectonic shifts in both cultural and political trends that proved to be impervious to simplistic calls of “back to Wesley.” Simply put, one must not only know the Methodist tradition on the way to renewal but also the challenging American context in which that tradition (so it is hoped) will be received.⁶

The third offering, championed by Yrigoyen, McEllhenney, and Rowe, takes the decade of the birth of United Methodism and makes it the gold standard by which most other judgments are made. Thus, persons and groups are defined principally as either pro- or anti-sixties. Readers, no doubt, are already familiar with the language of *sola scriptura* as a standard or norm. Here, however, in this oddly drawn book, they are introduced to what is in effect “sola sixties,” as a newfangled norm. That is, anti-sixties folk are portrayed as those who view things in terms of “right versus wrong.”⁷ Republicans, led by Newt Gingrich, so it is claimed, “ushered in

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⁵ Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist*, 73.
⁶ See Lawrence, *Methodism in Recovery*, 100.
⁷ Yrigoyen, McEllhenney, and Rowe, *United Methodism at Forty*, 12.
an anti-sixties agenda for America."8 Such a typology, however, is undoubtedly tedious, inadequate, and may even be prejudicial, since it routes readers down the well-grooved paths of the social mores and political judgments that the authors so vigorously prefer9 but that are clearly not shared by so many other United Methodists. For one thing, the sixties decade was far more complicated than such a glib analysis can ever allow. It was marked by both good and bad, promise and tragedy, hope as well as disaster. On the one hand, the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, which gave African Americans the freedoms they so richly deserved. On the other hand, the sexual revolution of this decade led to the cataclysmic rise of unwed motherhood, which is one of the leading engines of poverty in this country even today.

In the essay that follows, then, we will explore the hope and promise of the missio Dei in the United States of America, a mission that it is hoped will be led by a renewed and invigorated United Methodism. Our basic definition of the missio Dei is as follows: “[It] is essentially that the work or mission of the church [that] is a subset of the work of God in the world, rather than something with an independent existence.”10 Though the phrase was likely coined by Karl Hartenstein in 1934,11 and subsequently made popular by Georg Vicedom,12 it eventually took on a Trinitarian emphasis at the hands of H. Richard Niebuhr and others.13 Since the principal agent in the missio Dei is God, then the church is necessarily viewed in an instrumental way. The mission, then, cannot be confused with, nor is it exhausted through, either soteriology or ecclesiology. The danger, however, in such a definition is that the crucial areas of soteriology (the depth and corporate dimensions of redemption) and ecclesiology (seen as nothing less than the body of Christ in the world) can be bracketed out or at least minimized by revolutionary movements, political or otherwise, over which a sacred canopy will be placed as Peter Berger, in a different context, recognized all too well.14 Timothy Tennent explores this risk specifically in terms of ecclesiology: “It is one thing to propose that mission should not be a subset of the doctrine of the church; it is another to disconnect the missio

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8 Yrigoyen, McEllhenney, and Rowe, United Methodism at Forty, 18.
9 Some of the material in this paragraph is taken from my review of Yrigoyen, McEllhenney, and Rowe, United Methodism at Forty in Asbury Journal 65, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 98–100.
12 Tennent, Invitation to World Missions, 55.
Dei altogether from a robust ecclesiology.”¹⁵ This same concern can also be expressed in regard to soteriology in which the personal, depth dimensions of religion may be neglected or outright repudiated for the sake of the reigning politics of the day.

In terms of an assessment of The United Methodist Church and its role with respect to the missio Dei, it must be recognized at the outset that two pools of resources, not just one, are necessary for this task: first, knowledge of the Methodist tradition itself as a part of a larger scriptural Christianity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; second, knowledge of the context in which that mission will occur, especially in terms of those cultural and political elements that make the gospel so difficult to hear in the twenty-first century in the United States. Indeed, though both revisionists and traditionalists in The UMC today can quote scripture and tradition fairly well, neither group has considered the wide-ranging extent to which North American culture itself can significantly co-opt, and thereby corrupt the gospel message, frustrating, at least to some extent, the prospect of the missio Dei. This difficult and at times baffling context in which the missio occurs, so neglected in other treatments, will, therefore, be our chief point of attention in this essay.

Methodism and American Culture Early On

Matthew Arnold is perhaps best remembered for his pithy and engaging definition of culture as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.”¹⁶ This definition, however, may be too high-brow for some. Generally speaking, culture is more often seen as the way of life of a people, passed along by language, art in its various forms, artifacts and tradition. It includes knowledge, behaviors, values, practices, habits, and goals, as well as the moral and religious beliefs of a people. These elements over time make up patterns of life that are habituated and are not easily shaken. More recently, James Davison Hunter, the gifted sociologist, observed in a very focused way that culture, in part, is a “system of truth claims and moral obligations.”¹⁷ Although the Methodist Episcopal Church during the mid-nineteenth century was never known for its cultural presence in the form of intellectual prowess, it nevertheless tried to hold together the truth claims as

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¹⁵ Tennent, Invitation to World Missions, 56.
well as the moral obligations of which Hunter wrote, as it proclaimed its faith to a rapidly changing American society. The church was aided in this effort in the nineteenth century through taking up the basic maxims of Common Sense Realism, a practical philosophy that harkened back to the previous century through the work of Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart.

Though Methodism was fractured by the question of slavery and other issues at the General Conference in 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church, now separated from its southern counterpart, was culturally powerful by the outbreak of the Civil War and was led by bishops, such as Matthew Simpson, who were well-known to the governing elite, and in Simpson’s case, to President Lincoln in particular. The denomination, however, was ill prepared for the intellectual challenges that surfaced during the second half of the nineteenth century through the rise of Darwinism as well as the higher criticism of the Bible. Unwilling (and perhaps even unable) to think through some of the challenges to the faith, the Methodist Episcopal Church basically abandoned the intellectual defense of Christianity in the face of its emerging critics. Beyond this, and in what no doubt was viewed at the time as an attempt at apologetics, the church moved the whole discussion of Christ and culture over to a simple defense of moral obligations, especially as they were related to the Christian faith. Such a move was well-suited to the Methodist ethos at the time, which saw an outlet for its undiminished reforming energy in the progressive movement of the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the social gospel in the twentieth. It is no surprise that, given this history, it was among the Methodists that a proclamation of social principles was made at the General Conference of 1908. These principles, in other words, were emblematic of a cultural shift that had already occurred. In short, if there was to be any defense of the Methodist faith it would be on moral grounds not intellectual ones.

Methodism, along with several other Protestant denominations, supported the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, headed up by Frances Willard, in the nineteenth century and embraced Prohibition in the twentieth when the eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution was enacted on January 29, 1919. Though many women claimed that eliminating drink would save the home, some Protestant Americans were more concerned about the waves of German and Irish immigrants

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19 In this distorted vision in which Protestants mistook themselves for the heart of the Christian faith, and as the soul of the nation, they viewed immigration and the increasing Roman Catholic population that went along with it as a threat to the nation along with their own place within it. Such tribalism, animated by fear, always distorts the Christian faith, and it was expressed in some ugly and ignorant forms in the nineteenth century, especially in the Know Nothing Party.
(and later Italians as well), many of whom were beer-drinking Roman Catholics. By the time Prohibition was repealed in the twenty-first Amendment in December 1933, the nation had grown weary of this reforming cause, which had taken on ultraist proportions, and of those who had championed it. Indeed, Robert Handy, in his engaging work *A Christian America*, marks the year 1935 as the time when the cultural leaders of the nation, chafing under the recently imposed Protestant morality with its array of taboos, set in earnest to remove Protestant leaders from cultural power. “Since 1935,” Handy argues, “the debate over the relation of church and state has often been clouded by lack of clear recognition that the Protestant era of American history had indeed come to an end.”

The aftermath of the earlier Scopes trial in 1925 added to the general dismay that many American cultural leaders felt in terms of the Christian faith in the 1930s. Moreover, though a revival of religion of sorts occurred in the next generation, during the 1950s, a general indifference to the cultural significance of religion—in other words, that it actually mattered—could be discerned in the comments even of President Eisenhower, who quipped shortly before his inauguration, “Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.” And though the black church did indeed matter greatly in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, its significance was by and large muted by some intellectuals who wrote the later histories, such as Howard Zinn in his book *A People’s History of the United States*, an account in which the church, black or white, hardly mattered at all.

### The Rise of the New Left

The United Methodist Church formally emerged during a decade in which the rise of a new movement was to have enormous consequences for American culture in general and for the political climate in particular. The moral and cultural space that Methodism had once enjoyed in the early twentieth century, with its social principles and reforms, was soon taken over during the 1960s by revolutionaries and

20 Anbinder writes, “Such sentiments reflected more than the simple desire of Germans to drink. Immigrants organized much of their political activity in their saloons and beer halls. Prohibition would strike at their political power, not just their drinking habits” (see Tyler Anbinder, *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York* [New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016], 199–200).


23 Zinn repeatedly misprizes the significant impact that the black church had upon the civil rights movement throughout his narrative. See Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492 to Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).
radicals who were unceasingly critical of most religion, but especially the Christian faith. The challenge for any future Methodist missio Dei in the United States from the 1960s forward was therefore abundantly clear.

Though some might mark the rise of the New Left with the proclamation of the Port Huron Statement in 1962 by Tom Hayden, an act that also established Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), many historians point to its intellectual origins in the seminal work of Herbert Marcuse, whose *One Dimensional Man* was published in 1964. What was “new” about the New Left was its joint rejection of both the violent and ugly Stalinism that had been unveiled by Khrushchev in 1956 and the social democracy that was being offered in many Western nations. 24 David Horowitz expressed the social and political location of the New Left more sharply in a recent book by referring to this movement as a “Third Way,” that is, “as an independent socialism located somewhere between the Soviet gulag and American democracy.” 25

What also made the New Left “new,” however, and gave it a different cultural trajectory, was its reconfiguration of the Marxist paradigm, in which the working class and unions had hitherto figured so prominently, to embrace instead a different sector of the population as well as many new social reforms that went far beyond the economic interests of common laborers. As Ellen Wood points out, “The various New Lefts shared a commitment to emancipatory struggles apart from—or at least in addition to—traditional class struggle, especially the student, anti-Vietnam War and black liberation movements.” 26 Much of this divergence can be understood in terms of the different social location of the leadership of the New Left who were, in the opening words of the Port Huron Statement, “bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.” 27 Indeed, the academic housing of the New Left made the movement not only culturally powerful in a relatively short period of time, as members of the knowledge class took up the cause, but it also ensured that the intellectual resources of this movement, buttressed by the efforts of Marcuse, Gramsci, Althusser, and others, would far outstrip those of North American denominations. 28

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The Long March

The shift in the Marxist paradigm taken up by the New Left is also evident in the work of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Neo-Marxist who helped found the Communist party in Italy. Though Gramsci wrote during the 1930s, his writings did not become popular in the United States until the 1970s.29 Believing that “the working class had failed in its historic mission as a revolutionary force,”30 Gramsci turned to cultural leaders, and even elites, to take up the cause, a move interestingly enough initially resisted by the New Left. Whereas Marx had written about the means of production, thinking of factories, utilities, and the like, Gramsci moved the discussion over to “controlling the means of cultural production,”31 in which universities, churches, and media would play an important role.32 This Italian revolutionary had hoped to replace, in the words of Roger Scruton, “the bourgeois culture with a new and objective cultural hegemony.”33

During the 1970s, members of the New Left in the United States began to realize that their attempts at an overt revolution had failed. In other words, they were unable to achieve significant political power (which, by the way, is much more narrow and focused than cultural power), in that they were unable to translate their agenda—the way things ought to be—into how the United States was actually governed. Failing here, they appropriated Gramsci’s earlier thought and thereby sought to precipitate a cultural revolution by marching through the basic institutions of society with universities, churches, and the arts playing a key role. The exact phrase the “long march through the institutions,” was popularized by the New Left activist Rudi Dutschke,34 and it both predicted and portrayed the transition in American society over the next generation from revolutionaries in the streets to tenured radicals in the classroom.35 To illustrate, Kathy Boudin, a member of the radical and violent group the Weather Underground, was made a professor at Columbia University. Surviving the famous Weather Underground bomb factory explosion in 1970, Bernardine Dohrn cobbled together enough credits on her resume to be hired

29 See Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks (Seattle, WA: Amazon Digital Services, 2015).
35 The phrase “Tenured Radicals” is also the title of a book by Roger Kimball; see Roger Kimball, Tenured Radicals (Lanham, Maryland: Ivan R. Dee, 2008).
by the University of Illinois and Northwestern University. And Bill Ayers, for his part, cofounder of the Underground, eventually made his way to the University of Illinois at Chicago. Numerous other examples could be cited in terms of this transition. Indeed, the whole idea of Gramsci’s theoretical shift, eventually taken up by New Leftists, was that by seizing control of the culture, especially the universities, “you could extend that control to the rest of the social order as well.”36 Andrew Hartman expressed these developments in a similar fashion and noted that “whereas New Leftists might have failed in their efforts to revolutionize the American political system, they succeeded in reorienting American culture.”37

**Undermining Subsidiarity**

Though the cultural interface between the New Left and American society would eventually become significant, these revolutionaries from the 1960s and 1970s had not given up many of the Marxist cues as to what the new order should look like. Ever focused on a centralization of both political and economic power in the midst of their cultural interests, the New Left sought to undermine the intermediating institutions of American society, such as family, school, and church, institutions that stood in the way of the Neo-Marxist utopia. Indeed, according to the French Marxist, Louis Althusser, who was championed by many on the American Left, “Every institution plays its part in the ‘objective’ conspiracy that oppresses him. Church, family, school, trade union, culture, press, judiciary—all belong to the ‘ideological state apparatus’ whose purpose is the ‘reproduction’ of repressive power.”38

Viewed another way, such traditional intermediating institutions, well-rooted in American society, posed an additional threat to the left in that such structures flowered in the decentralization of decision-making. In other words, judgments that would invariably have a significant impact on the life of the community should be made at the lowest level possible, thereby evidencing a genuine subsidiarity that Marxists, both old and new, would always find troubling. Indeed, twentieth-century history has demonstrated repeatedly that “the socialist state absorbs and extinguishes free associations, replacing them with top-down bureaucracies of its own.”39

With the weakening of such stabilizing institutions, the church among them, individuals are no longer members of vibrant, strong communities that could resist, in many important respects, the move toward a centralized state or at least a socialist

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36 Horowitz, *Culture Wars*, loc. 806–9, Kindle.
one. Consequently, at the furthest reaches of the leftist agenda, “The goal has been for a society without institutions: a society in which people spontaneously group together in life-affirming globules, from which the dead shell of law and custom has fallen away.”

Why the Focus on the Left?

The attention given to one part of the cultural and political spectrum in this essay is justified by a couple of pertinent considerations. First of all, it is helpful to make a distinction between cultural power on the one hand and political power on the other. To illustrate this difference, take the case of the Christian Right. While this movement did, after all, manifest eye grabbing political power during the 1980s with the election of Ronald Reagan, its cultural power was never as remarkable. In other words, though this movement was able to win at the voting booth on occasion, it was never capable of influencing, to any meaningful degree, key cultural leaders such as judges sitting on benches, editors of leading newspapers, university professors in classrooms, or the mainstream media. This ongoing cultural failure was not always appreciated by the leaders of the Christian Right themselves. Thus, emboldened at one point by the political victories of Christian conservatives, James Dobson, fundamentalist icon, mistakenly thought that success at the ballot box would readily translate into cultural power as well. It did not. To be sure, political and cultural power remain very different animals, so to speak, especially in American society. That is, a movement can win elections and yet lose the culture; just as another movement, positioned somewhat differently, can lose elections and yet win the culture as Stephen Prothero has argued so ably in his recent book, *Why Liberals Win the Culture Wars (Even When They Lose Elections)*.

Failing to make the proper distinctions here, at one point Dobson enthusiastically exclaimed, “In one generation, you change the whole culture,” to which Hunter wryly replied, “[This] is nothing short of ludicrous.”

Second, once the distinction between political and cultural power is properly recognized, it is only then that the inordinate cultural influence of the Left can be fully appreciated. James O’Keefe, the founder of Project Veritas, describes such power and influence in the following fashion: “In 2017 progressives of one stripe

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43 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 45.
or another had nearly complete control of academia, public education, the advertising industry, Broadway, Hollywood, the publishing industry, large newspapers and magazines, ESPN, the comedy shows, the TV networks, the major social media sites, and, most troubling of all, the deep state.”

Third, the leadership of The United Methodist Church in the form of its bishops, the secretaries of its many boards, as well as professors at its colleges and seminars throughout the United States today, hardly look to the Christian Right or even to evangelicals for that matter (who can be distinguished from fundamentalists), with but a few exceptions, as they chart the course of the denomination and think of ways to foster the missio Dei. Simply put, the cultural and political environment of the leaders of The United Methodist Church, that is, those at the top, is by and large not very different from that of the broader American cultural elites, the knowledge class, which they ever seek to emulate. Given such considerations, the focus on the left in this essay is both warranted and appropriate.

The Shift to Identity Politics

As radicals from the 1960s began to enter the halls of cultural power in the following decades, they presented themselves to the larger American public rarely as socialists or leftists, sometimes as advocates of social justice, but most often, especially of late, simply as liberals, or better yet, as progressives. Though the New Left continued to offer basic Marxist critiques of American capitalism, championing the works of Lukács, Adorno, and Habermas (scholarship, by the way, that was mimicked in part by UM Professors), it began to take on new forms during the early 1970s, largely through embracing concerns surrounding the troika of race, gender, and social class.

Like Marx, leftists from the 1970s considered capitalism to be a zero sum game in which “the Haves will defend what they have and thus deprive the Have-Not of what they want.” Such a distinction was given greater rhetorical strength and even moral power in the polarity of “oppressor/oppressed,” a construction that had been such a useful, eminently practical tool in Marxist revolutionary thought. What made the 1970s so different, however, was that the language of “oppressor/oppressed” no longer simply referred to a distinction of classes and economic

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45 For example, attributing far more power to capitalism than it actually has, Professor Douglas Meeks criticizes capitalism for its supposed “commodification of life” (see M. Douglas Meeks, God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], 169).
46 Horowitz, Clinton to Obama, loc. 2952–54, Kindle.
concerns; now it was vigorously applied to the social reforms of the day, especially in terms of race and gender. Gathering up the very real social justice issues of the civil rights movement and the second wave of feminism, the Left packaged these social concerns in the polarizing language of Marxism such that the structure of “oppressor/oppressed” now began to inform the distinctions of white/black, male/female, and later of heterosexual/homosexual as well.

Moreover, when the polarity of oppressor/oppressed is employed in a rigid, ideological way, then the language of perpetrator and victim quickly emerges in which perpetrators, on the one hand, are no longer a part of the moral community (who could possibly be redeemed at some later point) since they have been utterly demonized. On the other hand, victims are presented as unduly passive in terms of the social ill of poverty, for example, when in fact their own behaviors may have at least in some sense contributed to their unenviable condition in terms of this particular social problem.

The dynamics of these moves, significant in so many respects, were evident in Saul Alinsky’s 1971 publication *Rules for Radicals* in which he began with the usual Marxist economic and materialist concerns (“*The Prince* was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away.”47), but then he proceeded to polarize virtually every issue of social justice precisely in order to add considerable moral force and political will to the mix. “Before men can act an issue must be polarized,”48 Alinsky observed, “Men will act when they are convinced that their cause is 100 per cent on the side of the angels and that the opposition are 100 per cent on the side of the devil.”49 Though Alinsky was in fact a moral relativist (who was yet guided by the lodestar of a utopia) arguing that a radical “does not have a fixed truth . . . everything to him is relative and changing,”50 he nevertheless was critical of Machiavelli for his failure to realize the considerable utility of an instrumental use of morality. “Machiavelli’s blindness to the necessity for moral clothing to all acts and motives . . .,” Alinsky pointed out, “was his major weakness.”51 I recall attending a session of the American Academy of Religion recently at which a professor at a leading United Methodist seminary employed Alinski’s name and the phrase “the kingdom of God,” in the same sentence without blinking an eye, so to speak.

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Moreover, viewing race, gender, and eventually sexual orientation through the typology of oppressor/oppressed, beyond the usual considerations of class, not only helped to politicize personal life in which the feminist Carol Hanisch, for example, is supposed to have proclaimed that “the personal is political,” in an important essay drafted in 1970; but this typology also worked its way into the academy such that the pursuit of knowledge was now broadly politicized in nearly formulaic ways. With some fits and starts throughout the 1970s, identity politics had been born—and it ultimately found its way into the church as well. This new orienting concern of virtually every discipline outside the hard sciences eventually dominated and on some levels even undermined the disciplines of the academy. To cite just one example of that politicization, Joan Scott lifted up “the American Historical Association (AHA)’s founding motto—‘history is past politics and politics present history’—as a defense of New History.” As a professor at the University of Chicago during the 1980s, Allan Bloom responded to these politicizing trends in American education and offered a cri de coeur in his celebrated work, The Closing of the American Mind. More recently, Hunter pointed out that “the politicization of everything is an indirect measure of the loss of a common culture and, in turn, the competition among factions to dominate others on their own terms.”

Remarkably enough, the embrace of identity politics eventually led to the breakup of the New Left, simply because the preoccupation with the social concerns of race and gender (and later on other issues as well) did not fit well into the old Marxist economic and materialist prescription, which had claimed that a change in how the means of production are held in a given society would ultimately solve all of its annoying social ills. This key shift, which planted leftists during the 1970s on much different revolutionary ground than their predecessors, posed an unsolvable problem for them as well, one that the Old Left never had to face. Put another way, the Old Left had argued that the ills of the superstructure of a society, even its culture and ideational life, could be transformed such that a “new humanity” would emerge through changing the economic relations of society, specifically its mode of production. This was, after all, the kind of textbook Marxism that was brutally forced upon Soviet peasants during the 1930s under Stalin’s collectivist schemes in the name of agricultural reform. However, with the inclusion of race and gender

52 “The phrase was popularized by the publication of a 1969 essay by feminist Carol Hanisch under the title ‘The Personal is Political’ in 1970, but she disavows authorship of the phrase” (see Wikipedia entry “The personal is political,” edited July 5, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_personal_is_political).
53 Hartman, A War for the Soul, 258.
55 Hunter, To Change the World, 107.
now in the revolutionary mix during the 1970s, these concerns were deemed to be so deeply embedded in American society as to be virtually impervious to the kinds of changes the Old Left had called for. Simply put, activists might be able to change a nation’s given mode of production, but they were powerless to alter the race of its people—as well as its ongoing significance.

Susan Sontag, the doyen of the Left, emerged as the new prophetess of the ugly turn that identity politics would take in America, with its ethnocentrism and divisiveness, and she excoriated all people of European heritage in the following claim: “The white race is the cancer of human history; it is the white race and it alone—its ideologies and inventions—which eradicates autonomous civilizations wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of life itself.” More recently, Marissa Jenae Johnson, the cofounder of the Black Lives Matter chapter in Seattle, rejected what some believed was an attempt at racial unity by use of the inclusive phrase “All lives matter,” but she deemed such language simply “a new racial slur.” These forms of polarizing thinking, in which groups of people were denounced for being born into a particular racial or gender categories through no fault of their own, were now being celebrated by the Left. “The cant of identity underlies identity politics . . . which proposes to deduce a position, a tradition, a deep truth, or a way of life from a fact of birth, physiognomy, national origin, sex, or physical disability.”

This kind of thinking, along with its moral judgments, has become so mainstream in American society of late that it has even worked its way into the church under the banner of “social justice.” I recall the incident at the last Oxford Institute of Methodist Theology Studies in 2013, when an Afro American professor led a plenary session by writing on the whiteboard the following four words in very large letters: white, male, heterosexual, and affluent. She then turned to the audience and sternly warned, “This is the problem!”

Another difference between the Old and New Left had to do with the appearance, at least, of a universality that had characterized the international socialism of old, where comrades were embraced across all sorts of social, cultural, and national lines. That older vision, however, was now in sharp contrast to the one offered by a reworked leftism that vigorously hardened the distinctions of race and gender.


57 Horowitz, Clinton to Obama, loc. 6858–59, Kindle. The phrase “all lives matter” does in fact take into account the distinct suffering of blacks, as well as others, but addresses such matters in terms of a well-grounded universal basis, that is, the imago Dei, which is an extraordinary and powerful venue to address grievances far better than any group ideology could ever do.

to set up a veritable tribal structure within American society. Indeed, the celebration of group identity could create the same kind of problem that had emerged for the Old Left through the intermediate structures of family, school, and church, by offering well-ensconced bases of group resistance to any universal, collectivist order. That is, by adding race, gender, and eventually sexual orientation to the mix, beyond class, the newly constituted Left, known as progressives by this point, had taken on a stubborn contradiction on the way to the revolution. Whereas class consciousness, on the one hand, could be resolved in the universality of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the intensification of group identity, in the name of social justice, on the other hand, never had such universality so clearly in mind, a fact that even the progressive Mark Lilla belabors. To be sure, identity politics encouraged group orientation, and group speak almost unswervingly, in what looked like the balkanization of American society.

Political activists, both within and without the church, began to explore the interconnected nature of the social categorizations of race, gender, and class in what became known as “intersectionality.” Theorists argued that the oppressed experience of a black woman, for example, was much different from that of a white woman simply because it was further complicated by race. A calculus of sorts was eventually worked out that took into account overlapping systems of advantage/disadvantage that together compounded the effects of discrimination. Such thinking, routing one’s thought down a grid of moral evaluation and judgment, was so culturally pervasive at the time that it even worked its way into a workshop held by the Kentucky Conference of The United Methodist Church at the turn of the millennium. During one of the sessions, a sheet was passed out that contained the distinctions of white/black, male/female, gay/straight, rich/poor, and numerical values of pluses and minuses were assigned to each category. Some of the ministers in attendance began to recognize that this calculus could easily result in racial and gender stereotyping, and even shaming, in which any given person was deemed guilty and blameworthy simply by being born into a certain group. Indeed, not even Jesus Christ would fare very well in such an analysis with two strikes, and possibly


61 Thomas Sowell, an African American intellectual, has argued that “the intelligentsia of lagging groups have likewise promoted group identity ideology and group identity politics” (Thomas Sowell, Wealth, Poverty and Politics: An International Perspective [New York: Basic Books, 2015], loc. 1650–51, Kindle.)
three, against him. What was the leadership of the conference thinking when they orchestrated this event? It clearly was not the coming of the kingdom of God.

Political Correctness and the Politics of Personal Destruction

Beyond the moral valuation assigned to social categorizations against the backdrop of identity politics, political progressives ascribe considerable moral worth to those who think rightly about these social-justice issues whether or not they score highly on any intersectionality grid. This is precisely the point at which thinking itself—in the form of ideology and not the body per se (its given race or gender)—is well taken into account. Hunter considers how this added dimension of proper thinking or political correctness plays out in the contemporary social justice mix: “Identity becomes so tightly linked with ideology that partisan commitment becomes a measure of their moral significance; of whether a person is judged good or bad. This is the face of identity politics.”62 The etymology of the phrase “political correctness” is noteworthy, for it reveals its deep, partisan, and undoubtedly leftist origins. That is, the phrase is “an updated version of the ‘party line’—a stock feature of the organizations of the Communist-progressive left.”63 More to the point, “The term was coined by Mao Zedong as a slogan for closing party ranks.”64

The social-justice issues surrounding race, gender, and class are important enough to require all members of American cultural and political communities to participate freely in an open discussion that will have as its goal not division but unity, not adverse labeling even before the conversation begins, the stuff of which prejudice is made, but an openness to hear the “other,”—and all of this to ensure that such a conversation will be characterized not only by the pursuit of truth, wherever it leads, no matter how painful it is, but also by an openness to genuine reconciliation as past and current injustices are addressed. Unfortunately, however, the public discussion of these matters in America today is riven with name calling, moral labeling, and in the worst instances, character assassination even before the conversation begins!

To illustrate this last point, Charles Murray, libertarian political scientist and author of the popular book, Coming Apart, a work that identifies class as a key and at times an overriding factor in the assessment of social justice, was shouted down at Middlebury College on March 2, 2017, and his venue was changed due to

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62 Hunter, To Change the World, 105.
63 Horowitz, Culture Wars, loc. 94–98, Kindle.
64 Horowitz, Culture Wars, loc. 94–98, Kindle.
this disruption. As this drama played out before the entire nation, it was clear that the student protestors were not at all open to a conversation with Dr. Murray, one with possibilities for mutual correction and discovery. And all of this student-led, self-propelled drama was wildly ironic and even predictable, for Dr. Murray had maintained earlier in *Coming Apart*, “When you get down to it, it is not acceptable in the new upper class to use derogatory labels for anyone, with three exceptions: people with differing political views, fundamentalist Christians, and rural working-class whites.” Moreover, Kirsten Powers, for her part, has argued that “the illiberal left . . . believes that people who express ideological, philosophical, or political views that don’t line up with their preferences should be completely silenced.” Such censorship of different ideas goes back, once again, to Marcuse and his theory of “repressive tolerance,” which maintained that “curbing freedom of expression in pursuit of left-wing ideological goals is both necessary and defensible.”

**Christians in the Crosshairs**

Though Christians in the United States make up approximately 70 percent of the population, many political and cultural leaders are loathe to acknowledge this basic demographic truth. Instead they, like the former President Barack Obama, revel in the notion that “we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation.” Oddly enough, these two very different expressions are in some sense both accurate in that they appeal to different standards of assessment in the postulation of their claims. The first claim, for example, is buttressed by a rich acquaintance with statistics, and the numbers clearly do not lie. The second claim, however, makes no appeal to data at all but has the worldview of a cultural elite in mind, and the power they hold, in defining the American nation.

The shakers and movers of American culture are not simply indifferent to Christians who have been marginalized in terms of the maze-ways of cultural power; but these same leaders are more often than not openly hostile to Christians, in other words, to a whole class of American people. Evidence abounds in the support of this last observation. Recently a US military training brief “labelled Catholics and

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evangelical Christians as religious extremists.”71 In fact, Lieutenant General Jerry Boykin (now retired) contended that “a Christian cleansing of the military is under way.”72 Among other things, “Chaplains are punished for praying in the name of Jesus [and] crosses have been removed from chapels.”73 The Internal Revenue Service, for its part, under the former Obama administration, targeted “Christian ministries and pro-life groups”74 and even “set its sights on one of the most famous evangelical Christians in the world: America’s pastor, Billy Graham.”75 Not to be outdone, the Department of Justice under the previous administration targeted religious belief in general, along with its personal and sexual ethics, by sending out an e-mail requiring all employees “to verbally affirm homosexuality.”76 Not surprisingly, those who refused to do so were marginalized. However, as Mary Eberstadt observes, in these and other forums of American society, “Citing Judeo-Christian teachings about marriage as ‘proof’ that believers ‘hate’ anybody is the modern equivalent of using spectral evidence to convict witches: it does not prove what it claims to prove.”77

American universities, dominated as they are by identity politics, have been especially hostile to the Christian faith of late, casting doubt on the prospects for any missio Dei. To illustrate, Kenneth Howell was hired as an adjunct professor at the University of Illinois to teach a course on Roman Catholic social thought.78 Integral to Catholic social ethics is an appeal to natural law, which in any moral deliberation will take into account such things as the evidence of design on a personal and more global level, the offerings of conscience, as well as an in-depth consideration of the consequences of any course of human action.79 This, however, was simply too much illumination for the administrators of the University of Illinois who promptly suspended Howell from the classroom.80 What was likely behind this censure was the fear on the part of the administration that natural law would impugn the sexual practices of homosexuality as well as reject the choice of abortion in most instances as morally problematic. Indeed, the prejudices among the knowledge class against

71 Starnes, God Less America, 7.
72 Starnes, God Less America, 140.
73 Starnes, God Less America, 140.
74 Starnes, God Less America, 7.
75 Starnes, God Less America, 7.
76 Starnes, God Less America, 78.
78 Eberstadt, It’s Dangerous to Believe, loc. 96–97, Kindle.
80 Eberstadt, It’s Dangerous to Believe, loc. 96–97, Kindle.
The Christian faith run so deep that in 2014 a University of Pennsylvania professor in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called “accreditation for any Christian college a ‘scandal,’ adding that ‘providing accreditation to colleges like [evangelical Protestant] Wheaton [College] makes a mockery of whatever academic and intellectual standards the process of accreditation is supposed to uphold.”[81](#)

The Roman Catholic Church, beyond evangelical Christians, has often run afoul of the precepts of identity politics given the church’s rich tradition of social service and carefully thought-out Christian ethics. For example, in 2006, Catholic Charities of Boston, after more than a century of service to that community, had little choice but to close its doors since “a new municipal rule would have forced the agency to place children in nontraditional households, meaning those without a married mother and father.”[82](#) Beyond this, a chilling effect spread across the city of Houston as subpoenas were issued to pastors, ordering them to turn over “any sermons mentioning homosexuality, gender identity—and/or the mayor.”[83](#) Reflecting on these and other matters, the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago predicted the coming darkness: “I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square.”[84](#)

### The Church, Culture, and Politics

Beginning in the 1960s, the American state began to intrude into common civil life in new ways with the result that larger areas of human experience and endeavor were now broadly politicized. Such a process can be described in the following fashion: “The State has permeated civil society to such an extent that the two are mostly indistinguishable. Indeed, the State has effectively co-opted any efforts in education, science and technology, human welfare, and the professions to effectively prohibit them from acting contrary to the State’s interests.”[85](#) This significant cultural and political shift, brought about by many players, basically undermined the integrity of an older, traditional order that had made allowance for the public expression of religion as a cultural phenomenon, that is, as a vital part of the life of the people, rather than as a political expression, one to be governed by the state. This transformation of the civil order, “the reduction of the public to the political,”[86](#) was oddly enough taken up by the churches as well, whether by leftist-leaning...

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81 Eberstadt, *It’s Dangerous to Believe*, loc. 1300–02, Kindle.
82 Eberstadt, *It’s Dangerous to Believe*, loc. 1584–86, Kindle.
83 Eberstadt, *It’s Dangerous to Believe*, loc. 110–11, Kindle.
84 Eberstadt, *It’s Dangerous to Believe*, loc. 275–77, Kindle.
86 Hunter, *To Change the World*, 173.
revisionists or by conservative traditionalists. In short, all eventually learned how to speak the language of Caesar in the public square.

Whether the Lutheran Church in America is in mind or The United Methodist Church, it makes little difference; the public witness of Christian denominations today, the voice that they employ to address those outside the church in the broader American environment, is decisively political. Simply put, “the public identity of the church is a political identity.”87 Indeed, what often matters today in the eyes of many believers when they come together is not the nuances of their Christologies but “the ideological direction of [their] politics,”88 whether it be to the left or to the right. Unfortunately, differences here can become inflated to the point that ongoing fellowship may be cast into doubt, even though, as Christian believers, far more basic and deeper commitments should unite them.89 This relatively recent phenomenon, expressive of what the democratic order in the United States has become and what it will now tolerate in the public realm, is likewise descriptive of the accommodation and adjustments that many Christians have made, regardless of their denominational background or political persuasion. Hunter writes: “As contradictory as the intentions and directions of various actors may be, in the end, the Christian Right and Left and the neo-Anabaptists operate with an understanding of the good society through the prism of politics.”90

Indeed, a good example of how the gospel has been “politicized”91 in order to speak the language of Caesar (and some would claim in order to make it more palpable to the knowledge class in contemporary America) can be seen in the popular work of the Anabaptist scholar, John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. In this work, for example, he wrote:

“Jesus was, like themselves, a social critic and an agitator, a drop-out from the social climb, and the spokesman of a counterculture.”92

“The cross is beginning to loom not as a ritually prescribed instrument of propitiation but as the political alternative to both insurrection and quietism.”93

91 I am not arguing for a neo-Anabaptist position. American Christians are not second-class citizens. They therefore should be involved in the politics of the nation and seek the common good that is in harmony with the dignity of a human being. An ongoing problem, however, is that when the church speaks publicly it often does so simply with a political voice. It is, however, also important for the church to speak more broadly to American society in a cultural voice.
“The political import of the formation of a group of disciples is heightened if we take seriously Oscar Cullmann’s suggestion that perhaps as many as half of the twelve were recruited from among the ranks of the Zealots.”

“Still the events in the temple court and the language Jesus used were not calculated to avoid any impression of insurrectionary vision. Both Jewish and Roman authorities were defending themselves against a real threat.”

“The ‘cross’ of Jesus was a political punishment and when Christians are made to suffer by government it is usually because of the practical import of their faith.”

Hunter has parsed the political differences of the Christian Right, Christian Left, and neo-Anabaptists along “the leading edge of larger paradigms of cultural engagement,” such as entailed in the terminology of “defensive against,” ‘relevance to,’ and ‘purity from.’ While this typology is clearly helpful in assessing the nature of the relation between Christ and culture through the eyes of diverse Christian communities, nevertheless, the typology worked out by Arnold Kling, given its more general nature, seems to be even more helpful in that it targets how various groups within American society, whether Christian or not, frame the basic problem of political life in America today. In this setting, then, Christians take up a political rhetoric that is employed both within and without the church and then claim it as their own. Kling’s three languages of politics are revealed in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>How the Political Problem Is Framed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progressives</td>
<td>In terms of oppressors and oppressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>In terms of civilization and barbarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertarians</td>
<td>In terms of freedom and coercion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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95 Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 49.
96 Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 125. The identity politics spawned by the New Left would utterly dismiss the work of John Howard Yoder since he was an “acknowledged serial sexual abuser.” That’s how the structural dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed, developed in a rigid ideological way, would play out here. Oppressors are demonized with the result that we don’t even listen to them. However, I believe the work of Yoder needs to be taken seriously despite his oppressive behavior and despite his broad confusions of the spiritual, the religious and the political. See Wikipedia entry “John Howard Yoder,” last edited June 14, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Howard_Yoder.
Even though the typologies offered by Hunter and Kling address different dimensions of political life, they are not, after all, incompatible. The danger in each, however, especially as they play out in the church, is that a particular paradigm may be so eagerly embraced that believers will inevitably talk past each other, and in the worst instances, actually become alienated from one other.

The Politicalization of the Wesleyan Tradition

The Wesleyan tradition, broadly speaking, was of course not impervious to the tectonic shifts occurring in the United States in the last few generations with respect to religion, culture, and politics. Thus, in his edited work *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*, Richard Heitzenrater contends that “the concept of poverty as a social problem is a relatively recent phenomenon. Christianity has always had a concern for the poor.”100 After making this pungent observation, Heitzenrater maintains that “the twenty-first century manifests the results of the politicization of the problem into a social obsession often largely out of touch with any religious or theological sensitivity.”101

This politicization of the problem of poverty of which Heitzenrater writes can be seen in the works of several Wesleyan scholars as they began to retool, theologically speaking, by exploring the Christian faith against the backdrop and insights of leftist thought in general, and of Marxism in particular, so popular among cultural insiders. Though the Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch likely came into contact with Marxist thinking as he studied economics and theology at the University of Berlin during 1891 and 1892, and this may have influenced his understanding of what he termed “social sin,”102 it was actually a later generation of scholars, with several Wesleyans among them, who developed and strengthened the distinction between personal and social sin to such an extent that it became a veritable staple, a shibboleth, of current theological discourse. Methodist scholar, David Lowes Watson, typical of this later trend, drew a very sharp contrast between these two types of sin in his following observation: “To suggest that Christ dies for character flaws [lust, greed, envy, hatred, and revenge one supposes] that can be addressed by any competent counselor is an obscenity. Only a fraction of our sins are personal. By far the

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greater part are sins of neglect, sins of default, our social sin, our systemic sin, our economic sin.”

Several problems immediately arise in the wake of Watson’s analysis. First of all, in the biblical sense, sin is always a missing of the mark. This failure is expressive of nothing less than the violation of a sacred covenant; it is a perversion, in other words, of a hitherto holy relation to God. Though Watson, no doubt, would like to apply his analysis to the social and political dimensions of American society, the question must inevitably be raised, upon what basis would he be able to do so? Many cultural leaders in the United States, for instance, who view themselves as responsible in several respects for the social order, are decidedly secular in orientation and would undoubtedly reject Watson’s infusion of theology into economics and judge his whole project as little more than an intrusion.

Second, though personal sin clearly entails moral responsibility, in that one could have done otherwise (even if it were to be by God’s grace), the lines of responsibility (justly punished, suitably rewarded) of systemic sin, for example, are often obscure and may even suggest a determinism (one could not have done otherwise) that Wesley himself flatly rejected. Indeed, as Rupert Davies notes, “If a liberation theologian accepted any form of Marxist determinism, that would indeed disqualify that person from any claim to thinking with Wesley. Economic determinism is, after all, the modern equivalent of predestination.”

Third, discoursing on sins of default as well as systemic sin without also offering definitional precision with regard to the moral dimension and with clear lines of accountability, may be an invitation to move the analysis over to the identity politics of the day in which one is blameworthy and morally faulted, simply by participating in the disfavored groups and classes into which one was born. In such an assessment even Jesus Christ, once again, would emerge as a sinner; that is, he would be guilty of systemic or economic faults over which he, at least in some sense, had little control—given his own social location and his true humanity. This troubling matter is compounded further in the recognition that the disciples of Jesus were likely all comfortable, if not outright wealthy. Kimbrough explains: “Recent sociological and anthropological studies indicate that Jesus attracted all segments of society. I cannot find one of his Twelve who was poor. James and John, the sons


of Zebedee, were well-to-do if not wealthy.”

Accordingly, if the Master is found wanting in terms of twenty-first-century political judgments, many of which have been embraced by Methodism, then how is the mission of the church, the missio Dei, ever to proceed?

The late Theodore Runyon, for his part, opined during the early 1980s that “the older social liberalism, which produced among other things an impressive body of Wesley scholarship, is no longer able to interpret Wesley convincingly in a world that has been sensitized by the Marxist critique of liberalism.” In order to aid that interpretation in a shifting intellectual and cultural context, Runyon edited the work *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*. In this book, Jose Bonino re-visioned the entire Wesleyan tradition in light of a Marxist paradigm and offered stinging critiques of the work of John Wesley himself from that economic and philosophically materialist vantage point. With his eye on the mode of production in Argentina and other Latin American countries, Bonino exclaimed that “Wesley’s anthropology seems to me incurably individualistic,” and that “the inherited theological framework of the *ordo salutis* is a straitjacket that Wesley was unable to cast off.”

What Bonino, however, missed in Wesley’s understanding of a human being, was the incredible depth of personhood (not individualism) that emerged in Wesley’s writings, a dimension that in some sense reflected the glory of the Most High itself, specifically in the form of the *imago Dei*, a terminology that this Argentine scholar studiously avoids in his chapter. Beyond this, Bonino’s assessment of the genius of Methodism is equally distorted and considerably malformed by his Marxist commitments: “Methodism seems to have served to incorporate significant sectors of the emerging British proletariat into the liberal bourgeois ideology that undergirded the consolidation of the capitalist system and reinforced its imperialist expansion.”

The most egregious example, however, of the re-visioning of the Wesleyan heritage from a Marxist perspective—that would of course be palpable to the culturally popular American left, who are and remain well-ensconced in American

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universities—came at the hands of Theodore Jennings in his egregiously mistitled work, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics*.\(^{110}\) Claiming a moral equivalence between Marx and Wesley, in other words, that they had similar ends in view, Jennings postulates that “Marx chose a different path to reach a goal something like that envisioned by Wesley.”\(^{111}\) But is the dictatorship of the proletariat really the coming of the Kingdom? Moreover, while Jennings does indeed affirm a similarity between Wesley and Marx, at least on some levels, the bulk of his book is actually taken up with their many differences. In this regard, his judgment of Methodism is hardly different from that of Bonino. “The truth is that,” Jennings observes, “I found the whole business of eighteenth-century Christianity unspeakably boring and the preoccupation of the founder of Methodism tedious in the extreme.”\(^{112}\) Again, like Bonino, Jennings is critical of both Wesley’s personal and social ethics, and he contends that “the study of Wesley’s social ethics is frequently rendered difficult by the apparently reactionary character of Wesley’s politics. . . . The real questions, we suppose, are political ones.”\(^{113}\) A New Left activist could not have expressed it better. Interestingly enough, this revisionist scholar eventually saw the value of Wesley’s practical theology only when he realized that it could be interpreted or better yet reinterpreted through a Marxist lens. Indeed, Jennings delivers the *coup de grâce* later in his book, demonstrating that the Marxist paradigm, when all is said and done, has actually displaced the Christian faith in general and Methodism in particular in his work: “If the study of the bible would not make people just, then perhaps the study of economic reality would. If class meetings failed, perhaps party discipline would not. If the message of divine love yielded nothing, perhaps class warfare would work. If grace proved impotent, perhaps a totalitarian state would be less impotent.”\(^{114}\)

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110 There is little that is evangelical or Wesleyan about Marxist economics, which forms the clear substance of the argument of Jennings. For a more accurate assessment of John Wesley’s economics, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, “*The Imitatio Christi* and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley’s Ministry with the Poor,” in *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 49–64.


113 Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 13, emphasis added. In a similar fashion, Richard Heitzenrater calls into question the substance and methods of Jennings’ Wesley studies scholarship in the following observation: “In all of this discussion, the theological basis of Wesley’s ethic is only outlined in very general terms, and Jennings’ comments that purport to present Wesley’s views and intentions are often not quite recognizable and often not documented in Wesley’s own writings.” See Heitzenrater, “*The Imitatio Christi*,” 49–64.

114 Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, 188.
Re-visioning the Great Commission

The re-visioning of the broader Wesleyan tradition, undertaken by Bonino and Jennings against the backdrop of culturally powerful and socially validated leftist thought, continued apace at the “Consultation on the Great Commission” that was held in Atlanta on the campus of Emory University in spring 2002. Its findings were published in the form of an edited book a few years later. Though the scholars at this consultation were clearly not as extreme in their judgments, effectively switching out the Methodist ethos for a Marxist one in key places, as some of their forbearers had done; nevertheless, the pull of a particular ideology, often celebrated in university settings, took its toll on this scholarship as well and distorted in some respects an earlier robust Wesleyan vision.

Harold J. Recinos, a contributor to this consultation and its subsequent volume, is so focused on “the structures of sin in society” (though he never addresses the theological, covenantal, and ethical questions entailed here), that he judges such structures to be of far greater importance than the ontological reality of the human soul. Indeed, this scholar declares that “the mission of the church is far more than simply ‘saving souls.’”115 This disparaging language of “simply saving souls,” underestimating their inordinate worth, hardly expresses the value judgments, with their judicious and prudent assessment, as found, for example, in the declaration of no one less than Jesus Christ: “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mark 8:36 NIV, italics mine). What Recinos and others have failed to realize is that the basic anthropology embedded in their structural analysis, informed in some respects by Marxist thought, is necessarily deprecatory in terms of the awesome and glorious reality of the soul itself. Moreover, in another celebrated book published a couple of years earlier, Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition, Cedric Mayson, in considering the whole matter of human transformation, actually places the name of Jesus in the same sentence as Marx and Castro! He writes: “Human renewal from Jesus and Mohammed to Marx and Castro has always been through small groups with a social purpose and a living experience.”116

W. Stephen Gunter and Elaine Robinson conclude their volume of the published papers of the consultation at Emory in the following observation: “No longer conceptualizing mission and evangelism in terms of mere ‘conversion’ to the Christian faith, the Great Commission is viewed as a lifetime process involving baptizing and

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While it is clearly necessary to affirm that the Christian walk is a lifelong journey, with crucial points along the way, it is simply mistaken, verging once again on the dismissive, to refer to the glorious transformation in being that occurs at conversion, with the graces of justification and regeneration in play, as “mere.” To be sure, there is nothing “mere” about Christian conversion, and to claim that it is so is simply to misunderstand it quite badly. A different paradigm here, seeping through a distinct and novel context, almost imperceptibly, is actually pulling the Christian faith down corridors it should not go.

**Conclusion**

The complicated relationship between United Methodism and the broader American environment has issued unfortunately in the co-optation of the church on a number of levels as it sought to become more culturally and politically relevant to a knowledge class that hardly thought in religious terms at all. Forsaking a posture that would actually foster the missio Dei in very generous ways, that is, by affirming the gospel glory of the universal love of God, leaders in the church on boards, at annual conferences, and participating in international meetings eventually took up the partisan, provincial, sectarian and tribal language of identity politics with its winners and losers, in groups and out groups, oppressors and oppressed. Beyond this, many scholars of the church tweaked social-justice issues in line with the politics of the day, and they sought to transform Methodism into little more than a religion of American society. That is, they reconfigured the gospel narrative in oddly drawn ways by making it instrumental to political goals actually generated by those outside the church.

Like ancient Gnostics, church leaders employed all the usual words of the church (gospel, grace, and salvation, for example), but they then gave them all new meanings in line with the leading movements of the day. On one level, this entire enterprise was pathetic, since by means of it the church sought the favor of its cultural despisers in an ill-conceived and anxious attempt at a broader legitimacy, one that the church believed it could not achieve by any other means. This process, which played out in all of the mainline denominations, was a testament, interestingly enough, to their increasing irrelevance to American society, and the demographics over the course of the past half century clearly bear this out. Indeed, “The endless position taking, policy proposals, and commissions [conducted by the

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church] have been mostly ignored by the government, political parties, the media, and the general public.”

Accordingly, if The United Methodist Church is serious about the missio Dei in the United States in the twenty-first century in a difficult and challenging context, then three courses of action appear to be in order. First of all, the church must repent of its spiritual idolatry, on the one hand, in overvaluing the sinful and divisive narratives of American political and cultural life and, on the other hand, in undervaluing the gospel narrative itself, which was and remains the greatest story ever told—or that could ever be told. Indeed, the good news of the Logos made flesh, descending to the very depths at Golgotha, with its mocking and shame, in his vigorous embrace of all of humanity (and all means all!), male and female, Jew and Gentile, white and black, rich and poor—all of this is nothing less than the treasure of the church, and it remains a healing balm of unity for the nations today. The UMC then must forsake all attempts at becoming simply an enculturated religion, a mirror of American sin and failure. Instead, it must become genuinely countercultural, a shining witness in an increasingly dark, divided, and bitter world. In other words, Methodism must take on the form of a suffering servant, of the church prior to the time of Constantine, when the body of Christ posed a challenge precisely in its goodness, beauty, and truth to the viciousness and moral corruption of the Roman state.

Second, even with such repentance in place in which the church is once again back on its own story, its first love, the prospects of the missio Dei in the United States remain stubbornly challenging. Given the strong cultural currents now in play, Christians are hardly welcomed in many settings, and they are often broadly maligned. As one person put it, having in mind the context of American education, “If you are a Christian you are a bigot, a homophobe, you’re a creep, you’re intolerant.” The confusion surrounding, as well as the prejudices directed against, the church are in fact so great that a frontal assault against them by earnest, faithful believers would only likely, ironically enough, increase their power. This means, of course, that “political” means and other top-down approaches should be employed more sparingly, again as part of a larger act of repentance, in favor of an approach that the church must dust off due to its rare usage of late: the power of loving persuasion, the glad, ebullient sharing of a people who are truly blessed, and as a consequence are willing to both share and sacrifice, precisely because they are marked by special graces, the fragrances of the Most High.

118 Hunter, To Change the World, 136–37.
119 Starnes, God Less America, 89.
Third, the best way then for The United Methodist Church to undertake the missio Dei, given the distortions and corruptions in place, is to become a loving and healing presence among peoples who have suffered so greatly, who have become alienated from one another due to the “group speak,” the divisiveness and rampant ethnocentrism of identity politics. Given this baffling, perplexing environment, in which the church’s first intuition is likely to be wrong and counterproductive, it may be best then, odd as this may seem, not to begin with God talk at all—at least not directly. That is, the prejudices against Christians are so culturally strong and embedded that they will likely carry over to the “God of the Christians as well.” Becoming a healing presence among all people, focusing at least initially on a very different understanding of a human being than that offered by cultural leaders, this starting point may allow for the reception of so much more.

Moreover, the deficient and ultimately diminishing anthropologies (views of a human being) reigning in so many corners today—left in the wake of a Darwinism that was no longer content to remain within the confines of science but branched out into philosophy as well, or left in the aftermath of a yet enduring Marxism and other socialist thought that viewed a human being more or less as a cog, a unit, a cell that had worth only as a part of a collective on the way to a proletariat Shangri-la—all of these distorted views of a human being must be ably challenged by the church. Indeed, the imago Dei has been renounced by science, denied by Marxists, repudiated by secularists, doubted by agnostics, and not fully appreciated by theologians who are overly influenced by the Marxist paradigm and therefore fail to comprehend in a rich and judicious way that the soul is nothing less than ten million fathoms deep. Viewed in another way, all of this thinking poses a great opportunity for the church. This is the case, even though old, familiar, and comfortable ways of evangelism and mission will likely no longer work. In other words, the veritable emptiness of a human being in some but not all of these modern constructions, the void left in the wake of utterly materialist assessments, for example, whether through an improper use of science or through popular political philosophies, creates an environment in which the church can do enormous good and as a result, gain a hearing.

If the church begins, then, with a consideration of a human being; if it raises, in other words, the pointed anthropological question in a deep way—first through a reflection on consciousness, a reality not well-explained either by science or popular political philosophy, and then through an estimate of the personal relations manifested in transcending love—the door will likely open to that more that is ultimately liberating and that has been a part of the inheritance of the church throughout the centuries. Put another way, bringing forth the elements of the imago Dei in faithful witness that truly unites us all (even if its divine source is yet to be explored
more fully) will likely attract contemporary men and women who, in the midst of a
cacophony of voices today, have a keen sense that they are missing something im-
portant, even crucial, in terms of their own being—and in terms of their relations
with others. It is the *imago Dei* in its personal, relational, and loving splendor that
not only reveals the glory of a human being, beyond current and popular dimin-
ishments, but also points beyond to its divine transcendent and ultimately unifying
source, that is, the universal love of God manifested in Jesus Christ. With an iden-
tity that is not intractably rooted in tribe, nation, race, gender, or class, but ever
points to the Holy One above all human power, the radiance of the *imago Dei* can
deconstruct the divisiveness, the alienation, as well as the hardened walls of group
life wherever they are found. In bringing forth the mystery of the human soul (now
rightly understood once again as worth more than the whole world) in its uncanny
and numinous power, the *imago Dei* will displace any materialist agenda, with all
of its sham and reductionist narratives, with a glorious vision of the kingdom of
God—the true, rightful and eternal goal of the missio Dei.