In January 2011, the St. Jerome’s Centre for Catholic Lectures hosted an extraordinary event featuring a conversation between Dr. Gregory Baum and Bishop Remi De Roo about the promises of the Second Vatican Council. Now in their late 80s, both Baum and Bishop De Roo participated in the Council. As a young and newly ordained bishop, De Roo attended all four sessions from 1962 to 1965 and addressed the Council four times, including once on the role of the laity. Baum, who was also present at all four sessions of the Council, served as peritus or theological advisor to Cardinal Bea in the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. The conversation between Bishop De Roo and Gregory Baum took place at a public event moderated by David Seljak, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at St. Jerome’s and editor of The Ecumenist. He posed questions to Baum and De Roo regarding their participation in the Council and their analysis of the promises of Vatican II. What follows is a lightly edited transcript of that conversation.

David Seljak: Let us begin with some preliminaries. Under what circumstances were you invited to participate in the Second Vatican Council? What brought you to the Council?

Bishop De Roo: I was a parish priest with Holy Cross in Manitoba in 1959 when Pope John XXIII sent his letter to all the bishops of the world asking them for suggestions about the contents of the Council that he had announced he was planning to call. Our archbishop took 19 members of the clergy and put us into three committees based on the old Code of Canon Law, which is significant. That’s how things were run; you started with the Code of Canon Law. So we all got involved in making suggestions for the Council. When my appointment as bishop was announced on October 31, 1962, I was already “in that space,” you could say, because I had seen some of the preparations for the Council. I was totally surprised, of course, to be called to the bishopric. So, the Council had already started, and I was called to Ottawa and told I had to make up my mind.

Then I got a telegram telling me I was to report to the Council, since all bishops, even those not yet ordained, were expected, if they were in charge of a diocese (like I was in Victoria), to be part of the Council. So I did spend some time in the first session, but not the whole session,
because I had to get ready for the transfer from Manitoba to Victoria, British Columbia. From then on, I was an active participant in all four sessions. I had the honour of addressing the Council on four occasions. I submitted a number of papers and was a member of the team led by an outstanding archbishop, who was president of the Canadian bishops at the time, Maurice Baudoux of Saint Boniface. He had one of the most open and Catholic minds I had ever seen. To some extent I was helping him as well as doing my own private work at the Vatican Council. Consequently, I was kept very busy during the Council.

**Gregory Baum:** In the 1950s I was a student of theology in Fribourg, Switzerland. My special interest was the ecumenical movement. I wrote my dissertation on an ecumenical topic. I was beginning to participate in Catholic–Protestant dialogue. This was a minority movement in the Catholic Church, frowned upon by the bishops of that time. My dissertation was published as a book—it’s a very mediocre dissertation, but it was published nonetheless. When Pope John XXIII convoked the Council, he created commissions to prepare the work of the Council; in addition to the commissions, he created the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity and asked Cardinal Bea, a German Jesuit, to be its chair. Cardinal Bea and his secretary, Monsignor Willebrands, who later became the Cardinal and Chair of this department, looked for Catholic theologians who were interested in ecumenism.

I had returned to Canada in 1959 from Switzerland, and there weren’t many priests in Canada interested in ecumenism, and so they had no other choice, I suppose, but to ask me. I was appointed to be *peritus*, theological advisor, to the Secretariat of Christian Unity. I immediately went to Rome. We had many sessions before the Council started. During the Council I was there for four sessions, and in between Council gatherings I had to go to Rome because we were reviewing and rewriting the documents according to the wishes of the bishops, the Council Fathers, as they expressed this in the various sessions. This is how I got to the Second Vatican Council.

**David Seljak:** Did you know each other at that time? Did you meet at the Council?

**Bishop De Roo:** We had some occasional meetings because we were both from Canada, but we weren’t really in the same area.

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**Gregory Baum:** No, but I remember you. I remember this young man, the young, young bishop, who came in. And I remember this, yes.

**David Seljak:** Gregory, you say that ecumenism was frowned upon by the bishops of that time. What do you mean?

**Gregory Baum:** What I mean is that in 1928, Pius XI wrote an encyclical, *Mortalium Animus*, condemning ecumenism at the time. In this document he said that if Protestants are so interested in Christian unity, they should come back to the Church and obey him. Therefore Catholic theologians at that time were not permitted to attend ecumenical meetings. Some of these theologians did not take these instructions so seriously. They attended ecumenical meetings and produced a whole literature on this. It was thanks to this literature that the Vatican Council was able to produce ecumenical documents.

**David Seljak:** Bishop De Roo, what was your attitude towards ecumenism or what was your experience of ecumenism at this time?

**Bishop De Roo:** I was directing a centre of information on the Catholic Church, so I was dealing with non-Catholics regularly. But, in defense of the Canadian bishops, several of them were pretty avant garde: in particular, my own archbishop, Maurice Baudoux, as well as the then leading Ukrainian prelate, Archbishop Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk. I’ll give you an example of the kinds of things that happened and the breadth of vision of these men. There was a special commission set up to deal with the Eastern Church; Archbishop Hermaniuk was obviously one of the key members. The whole question of ecumenism was also an area that Archbishop Baudoux was interested in. Archbishop Baudoux and Archbishop Hermaniuk agreed to switch commissions so that first of all there would be a voice from the Eastern Church, Hermaniuk, on the discussions for unity, and in the Eastern Church there would be a Western bishop, Baudoux, who would help share in the conversation between the Eastern and the Western Church. This approach was very important at the time because there was very little contact between the Eastern Church and the Western Church. These two men were bridge builders and both were very interested in ecumenism. But I wouldn’t say that was true of all Canadian bishops.

**David Seljak:** Name one dramatic moment or event that captured the spirit of the Second Vatican Council for you personally.
**Gregory Baum:** Well, there wasn’t really one event. For me, participating in the Secretariat of Christian Unity was an extraordinary adventure because it was the opening of the Catholic Church to recognize dis- sident Christians as Christians; it showed respect for other Christian churches; it demonstrated a totally new attitude towards Jews and Judaism; it was the defense of religious liberty (a position that had been rejected in the 19th century and right into the 20th century). For me, participating in the Secretariat was almost an ecstatic experience of witnessing the Church as a living community capable of being challenged by new historical situations, rereading the Scriptures, rethinking the Tradition, and reacting in a creative way to new conditions. This was a profound experience for me, which has never left me. As a result, I always think of the Church as capable of rethinking its role, listening to what is going on in the world, and responding to challenges in a creative way that is faithful to the Gospel, but in a new way.

**Bishop De Roo:** I do remember a very dramatic moment and a very important moment in the Council. There had been lengthy, very heavy, and at times slightly acrimonious discussions about the whole question of the relationship between the papacy and the bishop, because that was at the heart of the First Vatican Council, held in 1869–70. Vatican II was called in part to balance Vatican I, which had been left unfinished. It appeared that the Church was split down the middle on that question of the relationship between the papacy and the bishop. The opposition was based particularly in the curia, but especially in Spain and Italy. The leaders decided they would have an orientation vote from the whole Council to decide whether it was worth pursuing the document in the direction it was moving. So there was a vote put to the bishops assembled on October 15, 1963. Eventually, the vote was taken on October 30. That’s a memorable date. Five questions were presented: 1) Did the episcopal consecration represent the fullness of the Sacrament of Orders? 2) Is every bishop a member of the whole body of bishops? 3) A very difficult question: Did the corpus of bishops succeed the college of apostles? 4) Did this authority belong to the college by divine law? 5) Should the diaconate be restored as a specific, officially recognized ministry in the Church?

We put in our ballots, which had to be counted by a special machine (this was before the advent of the computer). It took about an hour. During the hour it took to count the ballots, we were supposed to continue our discussion, but this issue weighed so heavily on us that we couldn’t discuss. So we sat there and prayed. Some bishops got up and walked around. Some said the rosary to avoid the chance that the bishops might be led astray. We knew the results would be very tight. So when the response came out, you can imagine the kind of reception there was in the hall. Out of 2157 votes, only 34 were against. I felt there, as I have rarely felt in my whole life, a movement of the Spirit. It was so obvious that this result didn’t come from the discussion, but straight from the Spirit. There was really only a tiny minority in opposition—when most of us thought the Church was split! The final question on the deaconate had the most negative votes. I think it was slightly over 500. The place just erupted when we heard that. It was clear that something very new was happening in the Church, and we were part of an extraordinary historic event.

**David Seljak:** The topic of tonight’s event is “The Promises of Vatican II.” Could you talk about a few of the promises and hopes that came out of Vatican II that have helped the Church respond to the modern world?

**Gregory Baum:** I will give a positive answer first. I would say that what really changed at the Vatican Council is the attitude of the Church and of Catholics in regard to humanity and the world. In the past we looked at the Catholic Church as the oasis of grace in a dark world. You may remember that in the prayers on Good Friday, the universal prayers, we talked about Catholics and then outsiders. We thought outsiders went to hell and we prayed for them. At the Second Vatican Council we reflected on God’s goodness and God’s grace. By rereading the Scriptures and by returning to some of the Church Fathers, especially the early Egyptian Fathers, it was recognized that God’s grace is everywhere. God has never left himself without a witness.

Therefore, wherever people are, they are summoned by God, and if they say “yes,” they will enter into friendship with God. This can be mediated by other religions. Of course, in regards to ecumenism, it was quite clear that at the Council we respected Protestants as Christians. We respected their churches as instruments used by God, by the Spirit, to save people. We looked at Judaism and at other world religions, and we, the Church, said that what is good and true in these religions, we respect. The Catholic Church, in this document *Lumen Gentium*, said that there is an echo of God’s word in other religions and therefore it is quite possible for people who belong to these traditions, religious or sapiential traditions, to be addressed by God, to say yes,
to love their neighbour, to yearn for union with God, and to be on the way to salvation.

There was a tradition in the Church. I remember Clement of Alexandria, a very early second- or third-century Christian philosopher. He very much admired Plato and Socrates, and so he asked himself, how is it possible that there is wisdom outside of the Scriptures? He thought the Word of God, which enlightens every person coming into this world, according to John’s Gospel, must have spoken to Socrates and Plato, and therefore they, too, must have heard it in some hidden way. Clement of Alexandria even said, “Saint Socrates, pray for us.”

This alternative tradition came to the fore thanks to many theologians. The Second Vatican Council presented this renewed understanding of God, the goodness of God: wherever people are, grace is offered; we can always rely on being helped and comforted, being guided. This is universal. This was really a kind of new experience. Later on, this was translated into our liturgy and into all kinds of practical gestures and activities: for example, cooperation with other people and goodwill towards religious people and non-religious people. There is a common good for all humanity. This has been an extraordinary experience, and I am still grateful for this.

**Bishop De Roo:** Among the many promises, if I may use the word *promise* in the sense of *vision or ideal*, that the Council brought to us was a return to our most ancient roots. The French have a word for this, *ressourcement*, and this became one of three key words that described the Council. It means going back to the sources in the sense in which Jesus spoke to the woman at the well about how a source of life would bubble up from within us and bring grace. A second word that was frequently used was an Italian word, *aggiornamento*, meaning “bringing up to date.” The third word was *development*. Cardinal Newman, who was beatified in Birmingham last September, was renowned for working on that idea. In that sense, it was even suggested that Vatican II was, in a way, Newman’s Council.

In looking back at the origin of the Church, we re-discovered in a sense the notion of “the People of God.” That became a big issue. So much so that in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, the section on the Church as the People of God was placed in the chapter before that on the hierarchy. This is when we brought into focus the fact that through baptism in faith, everyone, without exception, is equal in dignity and in capacity to serve. That is also, I think, what has gradually resulted, since Vatican II, in an awakening of consciousness and a new sense of history’s role in the Church as well as the Church’s role in history. I think both are important. Our gathering here tonight is really part of that. It is because you are awakening to your dignity and the duty of your calling as disciples that you are exploring. This awakening laid the whole groundwork, if you will, after Vatican II, for an explosion of movements among laypeople. Many of you are part of that. Before Vatican II, the Church was identified primarily as belonging to the Pope and the bishops. Even to this day, when the media and the press want to know what is going on in the Church, they want to know what the Pope and the bishops are thinking. The media, because they have not yet rediscovered the ancient truth of the Church as the People of God, rarely address themselves to lay people.

Each one of us in this hall tonight is equally responsible—from our own perspective and according to our own capacity, our own ministry, and our own callings—for the well-being of the Church. This is not a static event. When I was a boy, the church was a building that you went to every now and then and there was a priest there doing some marvellous things in Latin that you couldn’t understand. Today we say, “No, the Church is the People of God; it’s the assembly of believers, who, through faith and baptism, feel they are part of this movement of the Holy Spirit and who are guided by the Spirit to awaken to their own gifts.” That core rediscovery of the very base of the Church founded in the People of God is probably one of the most significant contributions that Vatican II has made to the progress in understanding what Catholicism is all about.

**David Seljak:** Are there Vatican II promises that remain unfulfilled? If so, what have we learned from these unfulfilled promises, and what can we do to strive towards realizing those promises today?

**Gregory Baum:** I want to go back to the wonderful words that Bishop De Roo said to us about collegiality, that is, the cooperation by which all bishops, together with the Pope, determine public policy. There was to be dialogue on this highest level, consultation and dialogue. The Pope was not to be a monarch, but he was to be the head of a college, and there was solidarity and there was cooperation. In addition to this, there was the sense that collegiality had a wider meaning. It meant that all baptized Christians were participating in a vital way in the Church. The Vatican document that Bishop De Roo mentioned, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, especially the chapter on the People of God, scandal-
ized many Catholics, because it sounded so Protestant to them. It talked about the priesthood of all believers. All believers through baptism and faith are priests and teachers: that is, they make a contribution to the building up of the body of Christ—and even to worship and teaching.

These texts are very promising, announcing this cooperative Church. Yet, it didn’t come about, because the Pope very soon decided to return to the more monarchical model of papal power that had developed since the Council of Trent. So the collegiality really disappeared to a large extent. The Vatican made public decisions and teachings without consulting bishops. The bishops learned through the newspapers what was going on in Rome. And also, the laity was not encouraged to be actively involved and no one wanted to listen to them.

There was disappointment because these promises that were written down were not really fulfilled. And yet an ecumenical Council is a major event in the life of the Church, and so this won’t disappear. This new spirit of the Council will live among us and will continue to live—even if there is, at the moment, a very monarchical understanding of the papacy. Charles Taylor, the great philosopher from Montreal, said in an interview in a French newspaper that, in the Church, we are currently living under Louis XIV. This is a major philosopher—a Catholic—who, in a poetic way, expresses the frustration that the aspirations of the Second Vatican Council have not been fulfilled.

Now, some Catholics get very bitter about this, but this is not really a big help. We cling to the Good News. We need to cling to the important things, and we are patient. There is a great deal of freedom for laypeople to do what they want to do: for example, to read, to think, to pray, and to meet in groups, and to be involved in all kinds of imaginative ways. Today, when you look at publications, such as books, journals, and reviews, you see the great creativity in Catholicism. This is, to a large extent, the result of the Second Vatican Council. Therefore, despite the fact that this understanding of collegiality and cooperation has not been translated historically, I think that things have changed at the base, at the bottom, of the Church. There is vitality and new ideas. New spiritualities are emerging. There are enough events taking place that we can keep the spirit of hope.

**Bishop De Roo:** Picking up on what Gregory just said, I’d like to go a step further and say that, as a result of Vatican II, we have also rediscovered the significance, the importance, of the local—you might say grassroots—church through a new clarification of the meaning of a diocese. The diocese is really the assembly of all the believers together under the leadership of their bishop, who is a symbol and an agent of unity. That’s the first task of a bishop as well as the first task of a pastor in each parish, which is, in its own way, part of this local church: to assure that there is unity and cohesion, along with the maintenance of the faith, work for justice and so forth, in each local church.

So we have a real problem right now, particularly with television, because television focuses on the Pope as a lone figure going into every diocese in the Popemobile. You will rarely even see the real leader of that diocese, who is the local bishop, because it is the bishop of Rome, really, who is coming to visit the bishops in the Church. The recent popes are doing wonderful work—and I’m not in any sense critical of them—but I am very critical about what the television cameras are doing by identifying the Church through that figure in the Popemobile.

That is totally contrary to what Vatican II has told us. Vatican II told us that every local church—that’s you people, all of you here together—you are representative of the local church here. And, in union with your bishop, you are the Church. Pius XII said that back in 1946, talking to a group of elderly cardinals, saying that they should recognize that the laity don’t belong to the Church, but they are the Church. And he repeated: the laity are the Church. I’m using the word laity here, of course, in the original Greek sense—the laios, the people. The People of God are the Church.

Each local church has within it all the gifts necessary for its own guidance. That’s why, for instance, when a local church is not able to raise up its own leaders—ordained ministers, priests—then something is very seriously amiss with that local church. It means it hasn’t taken advantage of the presence of the Spirit and the gifts that are there to raise up the kind of leadership that is required. So I pose the question to you: What are you, the local church, planning to do here for the well-being of your church and also the Church at large? The entire Church, all of us included, are also missionaries. So I invite you to revisit the texts of Vatican II that speak about the local church and how the local church is really, strictly speaking, self-sufficient unto itself. It does not need anyone from outside. The Spirit is there to guide it. But we have to be listening to the Spirit. We have to be discerning the Spirit. We have to read the signs of the times and we need to take initiative.

One of the things that causes me the most sorrow, as I meet with wonderful groups of people like yourselves...
Some Catholics have argued that the Vatican Council talked about the local church. The local church is the total Church; that is, the entire Church is present locally. The local church is not simply an administrative district within the universal Church, but the whole Church is there. Therefore, God summons among, in a local church, the leaders. But I would add that God may summon people to leadership, but the criteria at the moment for being admitted to the priesthood were not made by God. They are made by men. And, therefore, there may be all kinds of people called but at the moment the administration does not recognize this. I agree that if a community cannot provide its own leaders then something is wrong, but we have to think, where is this wrongness? [Much applause.]

**David Seljak:** Some Catholics have argued that the conservative turn in the Church has actually betrayed the promises of the Second Vatican Council. To what degree would you agree with this and why?

**Bishop De Roo:** If someone addressed that question directly to me, or raised that objection to me, I would ask that person whether they’ve read the documents, whether they really know what’s in there. Now, yes, there is a tendency, not only in the Church but throughout society today, to pull back in a moment of crisis. That’s a natural instinct that is governed largely by fear. It is good to remember that in most of the appearances of Jesus, he would say, “Do not be afraid. Fear not.” And to our credit, recent popes have used similar words. Why fear? We are under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So, ultimately to say that conservatism is taking over the Church, to me, is to fail in faith. It’s a lack of faith.

I’d like to open the horizon a little broader and ask you to look not just at what we see statistically or sociologically in the Church, or what is catching headlines, but to cast your net, cast your vision, a little more broadly and see that the Holy Spirit is alive and well. Having spoken, as I do, to audiences all over North America, even as far as England and China, I meet all kinds of wonderful people—people like yourselves here—who are taking Vatican II seriously and are moving forward. That there should be opposition is normal. In some ways, maybe it’s good. It keeps us awake; it keeps us on our toes. If the opposition is not reasonable, then they should be called to the truth and shown what Vatican II really did say. But I feel that in the 50 years since this new phenomenon has been moving, since Good Pope John XXIII called us into council, the Spirit is really moving. I see all kinds of growth going on.

The image I like to use best is the image of the garden, not only because it takes us back to Eden, to the initial plan, but because it’s also a very powerful image. I’m sure many of you are gardeners. Now, if you walk into your garden in January, obviously you see a lot of dead matter and possibly trees that have fallen or broken or whatever. You may deplore that. But you know very well that under that snow there is green life, and when the spring comes you’re going to see all that wonderful greenery. Well, because I do a lot of lecturing, I see an awful lot of green life. However, I also think of my nieces and nephews—the majority of whom, despite a very good Catholic upbringing, and very pious, devoted parents, are not darkening the doors of churches very often. Many of them tell me that they can’t because it’s just too hard on them when they discover what’s going on. They just can’t relate to what’s happening there, which is a very serious issue.

For us grey-hairs, we are faced with a great challenge—and all parents are faced with a terrific challenge. And we need to pray constantly and urgently to the Holy Spirit to help us. We are unable to find the language necessary to make what Vatican II has renewed—our faith—meaningful to the rising generation. That’s one of the big areas where Vatican II has not fulfilled its promise despite all the efforts of many good people: in the effort to reach out to the culture of modernity and find meaningful language and meaningful symbols to transmit our faith to the rising generation. If we can’t do this, we’re going to be really, really in trouble. So, that’s a real challenge. That’s why I suggest that all of you who know young people or have your own children, please sit down with them and speak with them and ask them questions. Ask them why they are not attending church.
And ask them, “What would really appeal to you in the Church?”

I’m going to throw out one word that I think is very important because it’s also linked with the personality of blessed Pope John who called the Council: the term is friendship. You will often hear it said or see it written that Vatican II has as its key term the word communion. Yes, we need communion—provided it’s not just vertical communion. That’s certainly there and, in some ways, there’s far too much centralization—too much, you might say, administrative involvement in minor things. That’s not really what we need. Beside the word communion, we also need the word friendship. I would venture to suggest that what made Vatican II possible was precisely the personality of John XXIII, who had remained in friendly relations with all the people he had met in the various places where he had served the Church. And I know that several of the non-Catholic ministers, as well as members from the Eastern Christian Church, were there who would not have been there if it had not been for a personal relationship with Pope John. So we’ve got to add to communion, both vertical and especially horizontal communion, the word friendship.

I think you’ll find that a lot of young people don’t find the Church friendly. I know a lot of adults, Catholic and non-Catholic, who have also had that same impression. They come to church and they don’t feel it’s a friendly place. And yet that’s exactly what Jesus was doing, going around and making friends with everybody. We need to work on getting a conversation going with the younger generation and ask, “What is it that could happen in the Church that would really make you feel that this is a Church where you want to be and where you want to be active?”

**Gregory Baum:** My impression is that the conservative movement in the Church, which is sponsored by the Vatican at this time, blocks many, many imaginative, creative and holy endeavours. I think that many theologians who write important things, who want to speak about the gospel in a language that is understandable today, who want to speak about the Church and about doctrine in a way that can be communicated, have enormous difficulties with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

That is, if you look at the documents that come from this Congregation in Rome, you have the impression that the Holy Spirit teaches the Church through one particular administrative organ, which isn’t really Catholic at all because the Vatican Council says that we all make a contribution to this. And, therefore, there has to be a conversation. Catholics feel they are not being listened to, that nobody listens to them. There are no institutions. I mean, there might be a friendly bishop who listens, but there are no institutions where this listening is possible. This is an enormous frustration. You tell people that they are Christians, that they are in touch with the Spirit, and that their ideas are serious, but then nobody listens to them. I think this creates enormous frustration.

I feel that at the moment there is a real conflict between the culture of the Church and the culture we live in, which is a sort of democratic culture that has influenced the teaching of the Church. In a number of places, John Paul II has said that, as human beings, we are all subjects. By that he meant we are responsible subjects, co-responsible for all the institutions to which we belong. He said this is true of democratic society, but it is also true of all the institutions we belong to. We are to be co-responsible subjects. He said this several times. However, nobody asked him why he didn’t apply this to the Catholic Church.

We are meant to be subjects, and we are summoned by Church teaching to be co-responsible, but we are not allowed to do this in practical terms, and so there is frustration. This is difficult for many people who love the Church and want to stay in the Church. I think they can only stay in the Church if they develop a deeper spirituality that we really are in touch with God, in touch with the deep things. If things in the Church are not in accordance with what we wish they were, we aren’t pushed into disappointment and depression because we are in touch with what the Church ultimately communicates to us. This is the redemptive presence of God in our lives.

**Bishop De Roo:** I agree with what Gregory just said about the redemptive presence of God in our lives. What is often not recognized is that there is a document put out by the Second Vatican Council that is actually the most foundational and, in some ways, maybe the most significant document of all, and that is *Dei Verbum*, the one on the revelation.

Vatican II took us back to a renewed understanding of revelation. You may recall that before the Council, Protestants and Catholics were in an argument about the Bible versus the Church and vice versa. Catholics would say, “Well, you know, we’re not against the Bible; the Church kept the Bible for us,” and Protestants would say, “Yes, but you’re not reading it.” And Catholics would say, “We read it all the time at the liturgy,” and so forth. It was, you might say, the dialogue of the deaf. That very
serious dilemma was resolved when we were led by the Council Fathers, who had a lot of prayer and reflection and help from some scripture scholars, to realize that revelation is not a book. Revelation is a person. The fullness of revelation comes in the very person of Jesus Christ himself. The foundation of our religion is not a creed; it’s not even the sacraments; it’s certainly not just the commandments as such. The very foundation is relationship. It’s when God became human and gave us these wonderful teachings in the person of Jesus Christ.

As an aside, I want you all to go home and read Article 22 of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, which talks about Christ as the model of a human who worked with human hands, thought with a human brain, and felt with a human heart. Do read that! It’s a magnificent document.

Vatican II said that henceforth, instead of starting our serious study with the Code of Canon Law, which we used to do, we have to turn that around, really. It’s not first canon law, then theology, and then scriptural quotations to back it up; it’s the other way around. It’s first the revelation in Christ Jesus as contained in scripture and tradition, then theological reflection, and afterwards we have, necessarily, the guidance of Canon Law. There has to be order so that the gifts are properly developed and used. But it’s very important to go back and recognize that all of Christianity is really founded primarily on the relationship with Jesus Christ, through whom we discover the reality of the Trinity.

It also teaches us about where to go with ecumenism. It’s precisely because we recognize Christ as the centre and foundation of our faith and of the Church that we open the doors to all those who believe in Christ to begin a dialogue. It’s also because of the example that Christ gave to us of reaching out to everyone, including the poorest and the most disabled and least appreciated, that our eyes were opened also to the fact that there are other elements of truth and beauty even beyond the Christian churches as found in the world religions.

They used a Latin expression, *semen verbi*, seeds of the word. One of the important things for us now, if we want to relate to modern culture, is to learn how to find in these foreign cultures, foreign languages, and all these other people who are not of our faith, if you will, the presence of the Spirit—the gifts that they bring also by a common pursuit of truth. Let’s make the Church like a real university that is truly universal, where everything is open. Then let’s enter into a dialogue with this modern culture, which is where we’ll meet the young people again—but also members of other faiths.

I would suggest something that each one of you could do personally. Find a friend or a couple of friends in another religion. Start with a cup of coffee or tea or something very small, but just ask them what their experience is of their own religion, and see how the Spirit is working there. Encourage them to develop this pursuit of truth and love and justice. Maybe the most important thing is to get engaged in the struggle for justice, because the 1971 Synod of Bishops said, to the great alarm of some at the Vatican, that action on behalf of justice is a constitutive part of the proclamation of the Gospel. This is an area where we have to move because our religion is far too cerebral. It’s still too much, you know, catechism and questions and answers and so forth. There’s not enough of the heart, and that’s where friendship and community come in. And we need a lot more moving of the body in terms of working in common for justice.
Can Methodism Be Saved? Wesley, Social Sin, and the Church in Crisis

By Michael Tapper
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I am not afraid that people called Methodists would ever cease to exist in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.¹

—John Wesley, Founder of World Methodism

As one who calls himself a Methodist in the 21st century, I cringe at John Wesley’s words, fearing that the powerlessness of which our founder spoke may be quickly approaching, if it is not already upon us. Contemporary Methodism is struggling with an identity crisis. William J. Abraham offers a striking description of Methodism’s decline:

What is gone is a coherent experiment in theology that bears any kind of robust continuity with Wesley. The great hymns are no longer sung; the fervent sacramentalism has been eroded; the robust orthodoxy has been undermined; the commitment to the poor has become a normative theology; the evangelical fervor has been sidelined; the biblical literacy has been lost; the official, canonical doctrines of the tradition are despised or are idling; and the specific doctrines of new birth, assurance, perfection, and predestination are unknown or received with consternation.²

As I consider Methodism’s future, it has been helpful for me to engage the work of Gregory Baum, especially his discussion, found in his seminal work Religion and Alienation, of social sin, in order to shed light on unsettling aspects of Methodism that remain invisible and hence resistant to analysis. Contemporary Methodism can profit from a fuller awareness of the complexity of social sin as it manifests itself in Methodism’s symbols, structures, religious norms, and decision making. However, if we could gain an increased understanding of how Methodism is influenced by social sin, then we might address its debilitating effects, clarify our identity, and become more purposeful agents of change.

My fellow Methodists may be surprised to learn that the inspiration for this critical assessment comes from an increased awareness of our own Wesleyan tradition—indeed, it comes from Wesley himself. While Wesley is not a perfect model for contemporary Methodists to imitate, his life and teaching can be applied in such a way as to inspire them to critical analysis. Using Baum’s definition of social sin as a guiding framework, this article considers ways to reappropriate Wesley’s thinking and practice into our contemporary context in order to make us more effective Methodists.

Social Sin in Wesley’s Context

Baum’s analysis of social sin begins with an identification of the dehumanizing trends embedded within social institutions, that is, formational contexts and traditions.³ Living in a world marred by human wickedness, we often uncritically accept destructive habits embedded in our social, political, economic, and religious institutions.⁴ Additionally, by embracing harmful ideologies, Baum argues, we commonly legitimize forms of social sin that serve to protect the power and privilege of society’s dominant individuals and institutions.⁵ Baum contends social sin is further characterized by a false consciousness through which “people involve themselves collectively in destructive action as if they were doing the right thing.”⁶ This self-delusion, adopted by both the rich and powerful as well as the weak and oppressed members of society, exacerbates unjust behaviour.⁷ Finally, social sin is comprised of collective decisions, exemplified in laws, policies, and norms, which reinforce or even amplify the dehumanizing trends in social institutions and practices—often contrary to our own wishes.⁸

Eighteenth-century Britain—the social context of Wesley’s life and work—offers one contextual setting to which Baum’s fourfold description of social sin can be applied. While this period represented the dawning of a new age in which Enlightenment reason introduced tremendous possibilities for social development, many examples show how 18th-century Britain was still marked by social sin: in particular, its harmful class stratification and destructive treatment of the poor.⁹ Despite rapid social development and economic growth, critics observe, the plight of the working class worsened...
as England industrialized. Karl Polanyi described the devastating situation in the latter half of the 1700s by noting, “It happened for the first time that a boom in trade was remarked to have been accompanied by signs of growing distress of the poor.”

The dehumanizing trends in early capitalist society were legitimated by an ideology of individualism that served the self-interest of the owners, generated alienation, and reinforced unjust systems. Alexis de Tocqueville, an important 19th-century thinker, observed that a “new individualism” fuelled the Industrial Revolution and separated people from their environment. Similarly, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies expressed concern that the autonomous spirit of this era encouraged a movement from community (Gemeinschaft) to society (Gesellschaft) and represented an alienation of people from each other.

This individualistic ideology, along with the unjust social structures, gave rise to what Baum would identify as false consciousness. As their society promoted increased personal comfort and financial gain, members of the upper classes could not see how their actions adversely affected other people. They often traced the plight of the poor to either the will of God or the low morals and behaviour among the lower classes. However, a false consciousness also typified those in the oppressed working classes as well. Surrounded by hopelessness and deplorable conditions, the poor became increasingly anesthetized to the oppression they endured.

Baum’s final factor in social sin, the harmful collective decisions rooted in this false consciousness, was also present in 18th-century Britain. Those in positions of power shaped social structures and institutions according to their values and furthered the dehumanizing trends that hurt people in the lower strata of society. Those in the ascending classes, who wanted to take advantage of the economic climate, were able to influence decisions and increase their power, wealth, and standard of living. Child labour and the enclosure acts demonstrate how destructive trends, ideology, and false consciousness were perpetuated by dehumanizing institutional and collective decisions.

Obviously, this brief application of Baum’s model is by no means exhaustive. Still, Baum’s four-part description of social sin allows us to see the alienating and dehumanizing elements inherent in the societal stratification and treatment of the poor in early industrial society. These trends were legitimated and fuelled by an ideology, adopted by many members of all strata of society, that championed the individual and blinded both the oppressed and the oppressor. Collective decisions endorsed by institutional leaders exacerbated problems and perpetuated the social sin inherent in the structures and institutions of the 18th-century.

**Wesley’s Response to Social Sin**

Having considered the pervasiveness of social sin in this historical context, we can ask: How did Wesley respond? Admittedly, some ambiguity exists both within Wesley’s own accounts and among interpretations by scholars regarding his ability to critically address the complexities of social evil. Some scholars argue that, within his historical context, he served as a model of how to successfully critique the complexities of structural or social sin. Others, however, are more cautious in their appraisal. They argue that his response to systemic evil was overly simplistic, individualistic, and, in some cases, more harmful than constructive.

In response to harmful class stratification and destructive treatment of the poor in 18th-century England, supporters of Wesley claim he was a cogent voice for those who were marginalized. For example, in a sermon preached after observing the way the poor were being oppressed, Wesley remarked, “It is hard, indeed, to comprehend this; nay, it is hard to believe it, considering the complicated wickedness and the complicated misery, which we see on every side.”

As he addressed the problem of poverty, in the midst of gross prosperity among the affluent British population, it became commonplace for Wesley to refer to complicated wickedness and complicated villainy as descriptions of the apathy, greed, and general disregard for human life he observed.

Some contend Wesley also attacked the injustices of class. One of his most consistent assaults against the extreme social stratification of the day came in the form of a critique against the accumulated wealth and property in the upper classes of society. To those who spent money, for example, on elegant clothing and “delicate” food, he wrote, “You bind your own hands. You make it impossible for you to do that good which otherwise you might. So that you injure the poor in the same proportion as you poison your own soul … And so this wasting of thy Lord’s goods is an instance of complicated wickedness; since hereby thy poor brother perisheth, for whom Christ died.” Expressions of this nature have led some to herald Wesley as a defender of the poor against the upper classes enchanted by the glory of early capitalism.
Despite these accolades, however, others insist that Wesley did not go far enough in his critique of dehumanizing trends that privileged the rich at the expense of the lower classes. Argentinean Methodist José Bonino, for example, suggests that Wesley’s article “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions” exemplifies his inability to fully understand the more systematic and complex aspects of evil in his day. Bonino posits, “His attempt to work with hard data, statistics, prices, and market conditions is extraordinary for a religious leader. But when he attempts to find causes and remedies, he remains totally within the premises of the mercantilist system and completely unaware of the structural causes of the crises.”

Furthermore, some contend Wesley’s inability to see the complex nature of the social problems around him ultimately helped to prevent those in the lower social classes from addressing the deeper causes of their problems and led them to complacently accept their subordinate role in society. Critics of Wesley point to the work of Elie Halévy, who asserted that Britain was able to avoid civil revolution because British Methodism worked to accommodate the lower classes to the new capitalist order in the 18th and 19th century. Thus, while some scholars consider Wesley to have effectively addressed the destructive social trends of poverty and stratification, there are those who consider his approach on these issues to have been naive and even detrimental to dealing with the major forms of social sin of his day.

In relation to the ideological individualism that characterized the British Industrial Revolution, supporters of Wesley interpret his writings as evidencing a soteriology focused on the atoning work of Christ for all humanity. In his sermon “Fourth Discourse Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” for example, Wesley remarked, “Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary one, is to destroy it … When I say this is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all, without society—without living and conversing with other men.” Wesley insisted upon a form of Christianity that makes a connection between a relationship with God and a relationship with fellow human beings. Nonetheless, Wesley has been criticized by some who consider his ideas to be firmly entrenched in 18th-century ideological individualism. While quick to concede that Wesley spoke of “social holiness,” some still criticize him for possessing an anthropology that was incurably individualistic and incapable of dealing with the complexity of social evil. For example, Rupert E. Davies argues that “salvation for Wesley concerned an individual’s personal life and personal relations, first with God and then with neighbors and friends and fellow Christians. This was as far as Wesley looked for the whole self.” Critics, then, claim that while his doctrine of holiness was “social” in the narrow sense (i.e. it related persons with one another), it still suffered from the influence of an ideology in which the individual was the primary focus.

Those who suggest Wesley dealt adequately with the blindness that Baum associates with social sin often argue that his longest essay and only explicit doctrinal opus is a strong defense of the doctrine of original sin. In a sermon condensing this treatise, Wesley wrote, “So long as a man born blind continues so, he is scarce sensible of his want: Much less, could we suppose a place where all were born without sight, would they be sensible of the want of it. In like manner, so long as men remain in their natural blindness of understanding, they are not sensible of their spiritual wants.” Moreover, some scholars interpret his strong denunciation of oppression of the poor as further evidence of his thorough understanding of the blindness generated by social sin. For example, in a sermon addressing moral blindness among the privileged class, he proclaimed,

Open your eyes! Look round you! See darkness that may be felt; see ignorance and error; see vice in ten thousand forms; see consciousness of guilt, fear, sorrow, shame, remorse, covering the face of the earth! See misery, daughter of sin. See on every side, sickness and pain, inhabitants of every nation under heaven; driving on the poor, helpless sons of men, in every age, to the gates of death!

In another sermon, Wesley chastised the rich, in particular, for being blind to the suffering of the poor. He wrote, “Hence it is that … one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they care not to know; they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness of heart.”

In contrast, modern critics of Wesley argue that his theology never addressed false consciousness, a central feature of social sin. In this respect, critics commonly point to his commentary entitled “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.” Here, Wesley established a clear distinction between sin as “voluntary” and “involuntary” disobedience. He wrote, “Not only sin, properly
so called, (that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law,) but sin, improperly so called, (that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown,) needs the atoning blood.”33 Detractors suggest these divisions in Wesley’s definition of sin reinforce a strident individualistic line in him that makes any notion of social sin difficult to reconcile with Wesleyan theology. In other words, if distinctions can be made between sin “properly so called” and sin “improperly so called,” then it becomes problematic to build an argument for a theology of social sin, which, by nature, is often expressed involuntarily and concealed in social structures.34

Finally, an examination of Wesley’s dealings with unjust collective decisions inevitably leads scholars to focus on his unique engagement with political issues in his day.35 Regarding the issue of government-sponsored land enclosures, proponents of Wesley note his objection to the way enclosures edged smaller farmers in Britain out of business. In his sermon “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions,” he argued,

But why are pork, poultry, and eggs so dear? Because of the monopolizing of farms; perhaps as mischievous a monopoly as was ever introduced into these kingdoms. The land which was some years ago divided between ten or twenty little farmers, and enabled them comfortably to provide for their families, is now generally engrossed by one great farmer.36

Similarly, Wesley invested considerable energy speaking out against the generally accepted institution of slavery.37 In 1774, he published a pamphlet entitled “Thoughts upon Slavery,” which outlined his position concerning the slave trade. Regarding slave owners, he acquisitely wrote,

Are you a man? Then you should have an human heart. But have you indeed? What is your heart made of? Is there no such principle as compassion there? Do you never feel another’s pain? If you do not, you must go on, till the measure of your iniquities is full. Then will the great God deal with you as you have dealt with them, and require all their blood at your hands.38

Nevertheless, some scholars argue that his strong allegiance to the British monarchy exemplified a more acquiescent approach when dealing with institutionalized social and political inequality. Undeniably, he demonstrated his loyalties to the king in several articles written later in his life. In a 1777 text, for example, he wrote, “Do any of you blaspheme God or the King? None of you, I trust who are in connexion with me. I would no more continue in fellowship with those who continued in such practice, than with whoremongers, or Sabbath-breakers, or thieves, or drunkards, or common swearers.”39

### The Relevance of Wesley Today

This review shows that, before addressing the question of whether Wesley be appropriated to inspire Methodists to confront social sin today, some issues must be addressed. Any attempt to apply Wesley to a discussion regarding present-day social sin must take into consideration some significant challenges, including issues of hermeneutics and the diverse, even contradictory, scholarly accounts of Wesley’s thought and practice. Certainly, the hermeneutic challenges associated with utilizing a historical character from an 18th-century context and reinterpreting him almost three centuries later cannot be overlooked. Many socio-economic, epistemological, and philosophical perspectives considered normative today simply did not exist in Wesley’s day. It is clear, for instance, that his understanding of the term “social holiness” did not carry with it the sociological, political, or economic weight it does today.40 Consequently, attempts to uncritically translate his words into contemporary theological terminology may likely prove unsuccessful.41

Another challenge that we must consider is the enormous ambiguity that surrounds the historical view of Wesley and early Methodism. Some argue coyly, “There are as many ‘Wesleys’ as there are Wesley scholars.”42 Certainly, it is indisputable that many interpretations of him exist.43 As a result, it is easy to overemphasize and celebrate certain aspects of his legacy, while ignoring others, in order to reinforce a particular viewpoint. The obstacles to the quest for a ‘historically accurate Wesley’ pose considerable challenges when we attempt to reinterpret him in light of today’s understanding of social
The challenges of hermeneutics and historical interpretation make it difficult for us to decide if Wesley can serve as a model of an adequate response for Methodists to emulate in response to today’s “complicated wickedness,” or whether his dealing with social sin is best understood in the context of his own time.

Despite these difficulties and ambiguities, I would argue that some important aspects of Wesley’s legacy can, indeed, be reappropriated in accordance with Baum’s discussion of social sin. Specifically, I suggest that Wesley’s identification with the poor, reform-motivated yet non-divisive spirit and his willingness to promote honest self-critique present Methodists today with three practical gifts, which, appropriately engaged, could prove life-giving and offer renewed incentive for much-needed change in the Methodist movement.

First, recovering Wesley will strengthen Methodism today by revitalizing the foundational Wesleyan emphasis on ministry to the marginalized, bringing a renewed sense of purpose to our churches. At its inception, Methodism was distinctly characterized as a religion “of the poor.” In the 19th century, though, as thrifty Methodists became members of the middle class, that emphasis shifted to ministry “for the poor.”

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the divide between affluent Methodists and the poor has continued to grow. Many Wesleyans have become increasingly committed to institutions associated with capitalism and the globalization of the free market. Bishop Peter Storey of the Methodist Church in South Africa, in his address to the World Methodist Council in 1996, described the “struggle for the soul of World Methodism” in these robust terms:

> There is a prosperous Methodism in the developed world, and Methodism with the poor in the rest of the world, and in some places like South Africa, where both exist in glaring contrast to each other. The question is: what model will become the true sign of what we are? The prosperity model of success is very seductive, and it is sad to see how many poorer congregations there are to emulate it. But the gospel of Jesus—who was rich, yet for our sakes became poor—surely calls for the opposite to happen. *Prosperous Methodism must do something about its manna pile.*

Contemporary Methodism’s unwillingness to acknowledge the enormous economic disparity between wealthy and poor nations has had a damaging effect on our sense of mission in the 21st century. While present-day problems within Methodism cannot be reduced to one particular cause, it is arguable that the clear shift in our religious movement’s socio-economic reality has played a part in our current identity crisis.

Methodism’s rediscovery of a compelling mission can come from a reappropriation of its early tradition. It is clear that, throughout Wesley’s life, he was closely engaged with the poor and involved in the struggle against the mistaken, yet pervasive, idea that God’s love and grace were limited to select members of humanity. Wesley exemplified a strong commitment to ministry among the poor. Today, this commitment is needed in contemporary contexts where people who are oppressed seek liberation from the constraining effects of social sin.

Wesley’s refusal to embrace extravagant wealth and his critique of dominant power structures are recognized as exemplary by many theologians today. In the closing remarks of Storey’s sermon, he proclaimed emphatically, “God’s warning to prosperous Methodism is: find ways of engaging face to face with the poor: your soul depends upon it.” This remark implies that ministry among the poor has as much to do with our own faith development, and perhaps even more, than with salvation for the marginalized. In other words, Methodism depends upon the poor to offer a unique perspective on redemption, which, Wesley argued, can be gained only by solidarity with the poor. In his journal, he wrote, “I love the poor. In many of them I find pure genuine grace, unmixed with paint, folly and affection.”

If affluent Methodism is to experience renewed vibrancy in its mission, it is improbable that we will discover it without a close engagement with the poor and the marginalized.

Second, reclaiming Wesley’s general resistance to fragmented and institutional formalism will reinvigorate Methodism with a renewed power of unity. The present lack of unified purpose among Methodists could be attributed to a selfish, individualistic mindset that has accentuated distinctions and failed to celebrate our commonalities, such as our history of engagement with the poor. In less than 300 years, Methodism has expanded from one Englishman’s vision within a national church, to an independent church, and, presently, to a complex, global community of over 100 self-regulating denominations and churches.9 At present, approximately 75 million people across 135 countries claim Wesley as a spiritual ancestor. In some respects, this expansion of Methodism is cause for celebration. On the other hand,
Methodism’s worldwide growth and complex denominational expansion has too often been the result of our unwillingness to work together. We are reminded that American Methodism was birthed in the 1800s without the blessing of British Methodism. Not long afterward, American Methodists became deeply divided over disagreements concerning slavery, temperament, and the role of women in the church, resulting in the emergence of several breakaway Methodist denominations. Canadian Methodism, for that matter, emerged in the Maritime provinces, shaped by Irish missionaries and former New England loyalists who held an anti-American sentiment following the War of 1812.\(^{51}\)

As a result, many of the denominational branches of Methodism today operate independently of one another, with varying appreciation of their Wesleyan tradition and its essentials.\(^{52}\) This division serves as an indictment against fragmented, contemporary Methodist institutionalism, especially since Wesley never set out to create an ecclesial body—never mind many of them. In fact, in his time, Wesley had difficulty conceiving of Methodism as playing a role beyond that of a reforming movement within the Church of England. As such, Wesley would presumably be shocked to see the division among Methodists today.

Those of us associated with contemporary Methodism would do well to reclaim the reforming and ecumenical spirit that Wesley possessed. The United Church of Canada, created in 1925 through the alliance of Canadian Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists, serves as a compelling historical example of Methodist Christians committed to the Gospel mission above an unyielding fixation upon their individual identity as Methodists. More recently, David Gamble, President of the Methodist Conference (UK), in his 2010 address to the General Synod of the Church of England, evoked some astonishment when he hinted at the potential of a future union between the Church of England and the Methodist Church. Gamble said, “We are prepared to go out of existence not because we are declining or failing in mission, but for the sake of mission. In other words we are prepared to be changed and even to cease having a separate existence as a Church if that will serve the needs of the Kingdom.”\(^{53}\) This sort of innovative approach, found often in Wesley, places similarities above differences and creates energy and hope in churches. As contemporary Methodists, we stand to benefit from such empowering unity if we choose to embrace it fully in the future.

Third, reappropriating Wesley will make contemporary Methodism a more effective agent of the Gospel by provoking honest and thorough self-criticism, which, though heart-rending, has the potential to increase contemporary Methodism’s ability to effectively proclaim the Christian message. Regrettably, Methodists have historically participated in social sin—for example, injustices related to slavery, apartheid, and missionary activity associated with colonialism.\(^{54}\) Undoubtedly, today, Methodists continue to be blind to their participation in other unjust structures and institutions. In this regard, Baum aptly describes the effects of social sin on the Christian Church, contending that corrupting religious trends “attach people uncritically to their tradition, protect them from coming to self-knowledge, defend the authority of the dominant classes, create a false sense of superiority over others, and produce dreams of victory over outsiders.”\(^{55}\) This, I argue, is an accurate description of the worst of contemporary Methodism.

We need a more critical understanding of our church today. While Methodists have a long-standing tradition of collecting statistical information regarding church attendance, finances, and capital investment, we have rarely engaged in significant critical analysis of our social reality.\(^{56}\) It is telling that attempts to collect research data at a deeper level (i.e. regarding gender, marital status, age, ethnicity, education, and social class) have consistently met with resistance and indifference among Methodists.\(^{57}\) The paucity of socio-religious research in Britain and North America today suggests that affluent Methodists, like other first world Christians, refuse to engage in a critical assessment of themselves and their churches.

Against this trend, we can look to Wesley as a source of inspiration to challenge respectfully the social structures and ideologies that exist among us. We are reminded by his example that this challenging can be done in an appropriate way and with a hopeful perspective. His ability to remain a loyal, yet inquiring, member of the Church of England is very well documented. Wesley is not unlike Baum in this respect. Baum, operating out of a 21st-century liberationist perspective, has remained unapologetically Roman Catholic, despite a long-standing reputation for challenging the magisterium on a number of significant issues. Reflecting this critical stance, Baum writes, “A church’s unwillingness to subject its corporate life to a systematic and principled critique is the great barrier that prevents it from proclaiming the Gospel with power.”\(^{58}\) Without

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14 / The Ecumenist, Vol. 48, No. 1 Winter 2011
this critical approach, the Methodist Church, along with other Christian denominations, for that matter, is sure to continue to perceive itself in elitist terms, as special members of Christ’s redeemed community, even while engaging in harmful superstition, hypocrisy, idolatry, legalism, and false consciousness.69

However, if, by drawing upon Baumn’s work and the very source of the Wesleyan tradition, we are willing to be open to an awareness of certain contradictions that exist between God’s intention for us and our present reality, a liberating consciousness raising can emerge.60

Our Methodist practices can be critiqued and evaluated in light of Wesleyan and biblical teaching so that these practices more adequately reflect our faith profession.61

To be sure, this process will demand great courage and resolve. It is a humbling task to discover elements of false consciousness, complicity, and forms of exploitation embedded in our religious traditions. Further, it is difficult to accept responsibility for shared involvement in these dehumanizing activities. Still, the benefits of engaging in this critical task are enormous: hearts and minds liberated from the grip of social sin. In that respect, an openness to be questioned and criticized, individually and collectively, may prove life-giving and provide inspiration for much-needed change in the contemporary churches associated with the Methodist movement.

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2 William J. Abraham, “The End of Wesleyan Theology,” in Wesleyan Theological Journal 40, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 18. Within the context of Abraham’s strong denunciation, I interpret his use of the term normative theology to be an indictment (not a compliment, as it is commonly understood) of contemporary Methodism. Abraham is implying here that Wesley’s ardent and distinctive emphasis on the poor has become a rather casual and unremarkable emphasis in the present age.


4 The Methodist Church of Bolivia, in its Manifesto a la Nacion (1970), affirmed: “Social, political, cultural, or economic structures become dehumanized when they do not serve ‘all men and the total man,’ in other words, when they are structured to perpetuate injustice. Structures are products of men, but they assume an impersonal character, even a satanic one, going beyond the possibility of individual action.”

5 Baum, Religion and Alienation, 175.

6 Baum, Religion and Alienation, 175.

7 “To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he’s doing is good, or else that it’s a well-considered act in conformity with natural law.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956. [emphasis added]
34 Baum makes a similar indictment against Roman Catholic believers based on the way the sacrament of penance is celebrated. He argues that Catholics are prone to see sin as exclusively being a conscious and free decision that violates a divine commandment. Baum, Religion and Alienation, 198.


37 Less than a week before his death, Wesley was reading The Interesting Narrative by prominent African Olaudah Equiano, a text that Wesley referred to in his final known letter, on March 2nd, 1791, to William Wilberforce.

38 Works, Article: “Thoughts on Slavery,” 11: 77.


40 Runyan, “Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation,” 42.


43 Abraham illuminates this challenge when he writes, “[Wesley’s] legacy is a contested one that has been claimed by Revivalists and Institutionals, by Social Gospellers and Personalists, by Fundamentals and Modernists, by Liberals and Conservatives, by Liberationists and Pietists, by Radicals and Moderates, by Revisionists and Traditionalists, by Marginalists and Centrists, by Systematicians and Occasionalists, by Inclusivists and Exclusivists, by Feminists and Patriarchs, by Holiness Advocates and Pentecostals, by Conventionists and Charismatics, and by Confessionalists and Pluralists.” Abraham, “The End of Wesleyan Theology,” 14.


46 Cracknell and White, An Introduction to World Methodism, 3–4.

47 Cracknell and White, An Introduction to World Methodism, 4.


49 Cracknell and White, An Introduction to World Methodism, 3.

50 Cracknell and White, An Introduction to World Methodism, 66.

51 Cracknell and White, An Introduction to World Methodism, 71–72.


54 Cracknell and White, An Introduction to World Methodism, 10.

55 Baum, Religion and Alienation, 76.


58 Baum, Religion and Alienation, 181.

59 Baum, Religion and Alienation, 75.

60 Meeks et al., The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions, 89–90.

61 Baum, Religion and Alienation, 169.
As part of Wipf and Stock’s series focusing on peacemaking and social justice, this volume provides a helpful description for theologians, community practitioners, and the academy alike. It addresses the many ways in which Pentecostal theology of the Spirit has informed Pentecostal notions of social justice. With contributors writing from a variety of Pentecostal and Charismatic as well as professional perspectives, the tone of the book is nuanced and yet surprisingly unified in the presentation of core Pentecostal tenets.

The essays focus on four ‘venues’ or issues in need of Pentecostal response: race and ethnicity, class, gender, and ecology. In the introduction, the volume’s editors argue that progressive Pentecostalism has adopted a theology of liberation in other locations around the world (i.e. Latin America, Asia, Africa), but the social awareness of North American Pentecostals has been restricted by our society’s rampant individualism. The editors call for North American Pentecostalism to recover the notion of the Spirit’s socially transformative nature in order to be true to both its scriptural and its traditional foundations. Each essay attempts to articulate a response to this challenge.

Estrela Alexander initiates the discussion of race by pointing out that Pentecostalism, especially in its African-American manifestation, has been accused of being other-worldly and “devoid of a relevant socio-political agenda” (24). Confronting and altering this supposition is one of the goals of the entire volume. Alexander contends that, though a systematic theological structure may not have emerged in the historical movement, early leaders addressed society using biblical witness and moral fortitude. She notes that early African-American Pentecostal leaders took various (and often confrontational) approaches to addressing racism and contends that these informed the “radical egalitarian nature of early Pentecostal meetings and rhetoric” (30). In these examples, she argues that it is therefore problematic to interpret African-American Pentecostals’ theological conservatism as socio-political accommodation. In chronicling contemporary ‘liberative’ efforts, she notes that many advocates view the earlier Pentecostal movement as having missed ‘an opportunity’ to have had a more tangible impact on American society.

Derrick Rosenior takes up the historical analysis of Pentecostalism’s relationship with racism by investigating the rhetoric of racial reconciliation that has emerged in the movement over the past 20 years. His analysis highlights what witnesses and participants called the interracial genesis of the Pentecostal movement at Azusa Street in Los Angeles under William Seymour. This interaction and cooperation between white and African-American Pentecostals continued for some time in such groups as the Church of God in Christ, founded by the son of a former slave, Charles Mason. Rosenior goes on to show how Pentecostal groups gradually separated racially, in large part as a response to the social pressures present in American society.

Rosenior argues that the reasons for this separation are numerous and varied, citing the differing collective memories of who started the Azusa Revival as an example. However, he goes on to show how mythologized claims to and nostalgic longing for a return to the racially integrated nature of the Revival are at the core of both white and African-American rhetoric. Based on these factors, he contends that the rhetoric of reconciliation found in such events as the Miracle in Memphis (a gathering of more than a thousand Pentecostal leaders in 1994, marked by white Pentecostals repenting) has resulted in only superficial or symbolic changes.

The last chapter in this section is a case study that shifts the focus from racial tension in the U.S. to that of the impact of Pentecostalism among Canada’s Aboriginal populations. Clinton Westman’s fieldwork addresses the arguments of other scholars that Aboriginal Pentecostals have been depoliticized by the desire to reach a heavenly kingdom, and that Pentecostalism has fragmented Aboriginal communities. He shows that Pentecostalism was present at the birth of contemporary political activism in northern Alberta and that Pentecostals continue to provide leadership in local political networks. He finds that Pentecostals are located across the political
spectrum when it comes to various issues of the community, and that their involvement is not determined by their faith.

The section on class contains essays by Peter Althouse and Adam Stewart, and there is significant overlap in the sources and arguments used by each. Both argue that the prevailing claims that Pentecostalism’s growth was or is most concentrated among the socially deprived are inadequate and need to be re-evaluated.

Althouse contends that in light of evidence showing that early Pentecostalism was made up of more than just society’s lowest tiers, social theorists have been forced to rethink their explanations of why groups such as this appear. He outlines various theoretical proposals (including ‘relative deprivation’) that are all found to be limited in explaining the connection between Pentecostalism’s genesis and growth and its social stratification. He relies heavily on the work of Grant Wacker, who points out that Pentecostals conceived of themselves as being in the margins (as a means of challenging the mainstream), but that this view did not correlate with their economic status. Althouse argues that, contrary to deprivation hypotheses, the average Pentecostal was an average American, committed to living out a prophetic, countercultural faith that was socially conscious.

Stewart adds to this analysis by including some of his own study of early Canadian Pentecostals who, in many cases, were members of the upper middle class. He also explores how deprivation theory is inadequate, in that it does not account for how those experiencing deprivation do not always choose religions of ‘the deprived.’ Stewart then turns to the work of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu contended that objective social structures such as class could not completely account for the actions of individuals in a society. Rather, the subjective choices of individuals (e.g. religious affinity), while multifarious, must be seen as being shaped by (but not reduced to) their social and class environment. Stewart contends that theorists misinterpret the common motivations of Pentecostals as stemming from deprivation instead of seeing them as deriving from shared experiences, social networks, and personal aspirations.

The two essays that address Pentecostalism and gender take divergent approaches to the issue. In their essay, Andrea Hollingsworth and Melissa Browning use multiple lenses to explore how Pentecostalism maintains the paradox of promoting both emancipatory rhetoric and simultaneous restriction of women. The authors demonstrate how Pentecostalism has often adopted a feminization of sin and evil and connect this to earlier strains of patriarchal European religious traditions. In contrast, they contend that prior to the abolition of slavery in the U.S., west African religion and slave religion were rooted in a kind of egalitarianism; however, after Reconstruction, sexist and racist politics fused to exclude women due to pressure from white mainstream groups. In spite of these realities, the authors argue that the free, uncharted nature of Pentecostalism and its emphasis on personal empowerment and piety provides theological and spiritual resources to women for subverting oppression.

Pamela Holmes’ essay echoes some of this sentiment by proposing a Pentecostal feminist hermeneutic for the Christian scriptures. Concerned with marginalization of women in the movement, she argues that Pentecostal approaches to Scripture are fluid enough (where interpretation requires faithfulness and inspired creativity) to allow for a re-evaluation of the traditional, androcentric reading of Scripture that restricts and controls women. She argues that feminist biblical scholars propose some of the best models for how religious communities can be more inclusive and egalitarian in their interpretation of Scripture—models that are ignored in North American Pentecostal practice. Holmes calls for the “Spirit-birthed” community to allow the marginalized to participate in the authoritative exploration of scripture.

Each of the three contributors in the final section provides an evaluation of Pentecostal response to the ecological crisis. Michael Wilkinson begins with a historical study of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada’s response to ecological crises. He then uses sociological theory to explain the varying responses within the movement. He observes that the opinions expressed in the denominational magazine with regards to the environment are spread across the liberal–conservative religious spectrum. Finally, using Roland Robertson’s categories of globalization, he suggests that such divergence and conflict is normal for a religious group’s response to the rampant change and fluctuation within a global society.

In his chapter, A.J. Swoboda argues that Pentecostalism’s influence in North American societies will be constrained without a more clearly defined and articulated eco-theology. He contrasts the Eastern Orthodox idea of situating the Spirit in all creation with the Pentecostal emphasis on the Spirit’s presence in the individual believer. However, he shows that the Pentecostal tradition of biblical interpretation finds connections between the presence, solidarity, and suffering
of the Spirit with all creation. In doing so, Swoboda is attempting to find and articulate a new Pentecostal soteriology that sees beyond the individual: where the nearness of the Spirit is not pursued for gifts, but also for “the materiality of salvation” (240). Steven Studebaker contributes to this theological reconstruction by arguing that Pentecostal soteriology often results in negative views of the body materiality and the environment. His theological treatise centres on Romans 8, in which the Spirit is seen as the spark in human and ecological ‘groaning’ for redemption. Thus, redemption, characterized in human repentance and ‘creation care,’ serves as a type of precursor to the coming kingdom of God that is realized in the closing chapters of Christian scripture.

For the reader looking for examples of contemporary Pentecostal practitioners of social justice, this volume provides minimal material. However, the overarching strength of the book is its historical consideration and articulation of Pentecostal social perspective and action. These emphases will certainly assure Pentecostals engaged in social action that their religious tradition supports their commitment to social justice. Scholars of Pentecostalism will find the book useful as a reference for the movement’s development, as will scholars of religion and globalization who are attempting to place North American religious phenomena in a broader context. The book certainly reaches its goal of assessing “the contemporary relationship between North American Pentecostalism and culture” (2). Moreover, in its effort to provide theological and social correctives to both internal and external perspectives of the movement, it becomes, in itself, an exercise in “social action.”

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