

Politics in the Order of Salvation, by Theodore R. Weber

reviewed by [Eugene H. Winkler](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

In his delightful, informative book about the Wesleyan movement in America, Charles Ferguson characterized Methodists as *Organized to Beat the Devil*. Our Book of Discipline, Book of Resolutions, Book of Worship, even that little Daily Suggester mailed out each year to clergy so that they can remember all those meetings they should attend (not to mention the liturgical calendar) illustrate what Ferguson's whimsical title expresses. A modern psychiatrist would diagnose John Wesley as obsessive-compulsive, and Methodism, the movement he founded, reflects Wesley's passion for order, organization and detail.

Wesley's life (1703-1788) virtually spanned the 18th century--the time of the Enlightenment, one of the most exciting watersheds in Western thought. The century also witnessed the American War for Independence, the throes of the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the English working class. Wesley himself was never a Methodist. He died as a priest of the Church of England and was buried in the robes denoting his Anglican ordination. When the Methodist movement came to America, Wesley quickly realized its potential for evangelism and social action.

A committed Tory (a political conservative) whose political ideas were shaped by his imperious parents--his father, Samuel, an Anglican clergyman who supported William and Mary, and his mother, Susanna, who did not believe them to be legitimate heirs of the throne--and his commitments as a high churchman, Wesley left his followers no common symbols of discourse with which to think and speak as Wesleyans about political reality and responsibility.

Lutherans can speak the language of two kingdoms; Roman Catholics can talk all day about natural law; Calvinists know about federalism and covenant; and Mennonites speak of a community of faithful disciples living under the law of Christ. These conversations interpret political reality and set expectations for political

behavior. Such language, writes Theodore Weber, "embodies and expresses a communion's characteristic and fundamental theological perspectives." It is both a religious and a political language, "permeated with understandings of state, people, authority, obedience, law, but integrated--more or less--with understandings of the saving work of God." Lutherans, Catholics, Calvinists and Mennonites may not always use their common language--indeed, it may be foreign to the average parishioner--and they sometimes may offend against its implications and requirements, but they have the language. They know how to speak it.

Not so contemporary Methodists. As an example, Weber cites the document "In Defense of Creation," in which United Methodist bishops address issues of nuclear war and deterrence. Its few, scattered references to Wesley mainly reiterate his claim that war is the chief manifestation of original sin. "At no time did [the bishops] advise the Methodist faithful . . . on how to think about such matters in a Wesleyan theological manner, nor did they employ and exemplify a characteristically Wesleyan approach in their own deliberations." Of course, bishops are often good politicians rather than theologians, which may explain such omissions.

Still, if we examine Methodist statements on social issues over the past 50 years or so and if we scan the writings on political questions of Methodist theologians and ethicists, Weber declares, "we find much the same thing. References to Wesley are more a matter of claiming relationship than of drawing substance." Methodist thinkers reflect diverse and mixed theological influences--liberal, Niebuhurian, Barthian, evangelical, process, liberation, African-American, feminist. But they hardly ever communicate a sense of working within a specifically Wesleyan tradition of political discourse.

One major exception to this dearth of political language is the United Methodist Church's Social Principles. Although they did not appear in written form until 1908 and have been revised and expanded several times since then, the Social Principles rise out of Wesley's concern for the poor, his history of establishing educational and charitable institutions, his magnificent influence on Wilberforce and the fight against slavery and his moral imperative against the exploitation of children and the lower classes.

The Social Principles may be a major repository of a Wesleyan political language that once defined Methodist self-understanding but began to disappear in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Part of the problem is Wesley himself. He formed a

movement that reflected his personality; it was autocratic and under tight clerical control, but leavened by his kindness and personal charisma. That leaven disappeared when he died.

When the movement came to America it took on the characteristics of our culture. After the Christmas Conference of 1789, where Francis Asbury was ordained, elected a superintendent and consecrated a bishop within a three-day span, Methodism expanded with the frontier and became a hugely successful evangelistic and cultural enterprise. "Bernard Semmel [one of the Wesleyan scholars Weber appreciates] reports that in the years following the French Revolution the Methodist movement came under great suspicion because of the popular base of its membership, its egalitarian theological doctrines, its vitality and dynamism, its accelerating growth, and its disciplined organization."

Exactly. Wesley and his followers were primarily evangelists. They were "theologians on the run," not systematic thinkers. While Wesley was, in Albert Outler's words, a "fanatical Tory," his disciples, particularly his American friends, moved in the opposite direction. If Methodists are to develop a Wesleyan political language that remains Wesleyan in its theology while transcending the limitations of Wesley's political thought, then Weber's book is an essential tool. Weber wants to draw politics into the Wesleyan categories of prevenient grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace.

Such an enterprise will require more than a work of theological transformation or a creative restatement of John Wesley's politics. It will mean returning to the primary task of the church in its relation to politics: "to understand and declare the political work of God and the political imaging for which humankind is created, and to make clear that Christian discipleship implies the vocational recovery of the political image." To bring politics into the order of salvation means that we must experience a theological transformation before we can undertake a political one.