

John Wesley and Sustainable Investments

BY ASHLEY BOGGAN, PHD

GENERAL SECRETARY, GENERAL COMMISSION ON ARCHIVES & HISTORY

It is accurate to say that John Wesley is the founder of sustainable investment strategies, both in the negative form (avoiding entities associated with social sins) and positive form (financially supporting and investing in entities which seek to improve humanity and creation).

Book of Discipline Changes

In 1968, ¶1382 discussed financial policies but did not regulate those policies according to social morals/sins. The paragraph solely mentioned giving “primary consideration” based on the “soundness and safety” of investments. However, by 1972, the paragraph (¶1382) shifted noticeably to include directions to invest in “institutions, companies, corporations, or funds which make a positive contribution toward the realization of the goals outlined in the social principles of our Church.”

It is important to note that in 1968 The United Methodist Church (UMC) did not have approved Social Principles. The merging denominations that formed the UMC—The Methodist Church (TMC) and The Evangelical United Brethren (EUB)—each had their own social resolutions. These separate social resolutions were each printed in the 1968 *Book of Discipline* (BOD). The UMC’s 1968 General Conference also created a Study Committee on Social Principles to develop social/ethical guidelines for the newly formed United Methodist Church. In 1972, the statements were completely rewritten and called the Social Principles, thus borrowing terminology from the former Evangelical United Brethren and applying it to the new UMC.

With Social Principles written, it is safe to assume that the 1972 General Conference was hoping to align financial policies with the Social Principles.

The next major change in language happened in 1988, including:

- The phrase “Socially Responsible Investments” is used.
- Expansion of financial responsibility from “the agency” to “all general boards and agencies, including the General Board of Pensions, and all administrative agencies and institutions, including hospitals, homes, and educational institutions.”
- These entities are asked (“shall” language) to “make a conscious effort to invest in institutions, companies, corporations, or funds which make a positive contribution toward the realization of the goals outlined in the Social Principles.”

- Whereas previously the language of this paragraph discussed the “soundness and safety” as priority, the new language named social sins: “racial discrimination...nuclear armaments, alcoholic beverages or tobacco, ...pornography.”
- All entities are called to consider “shareholder advocacy” including “corporate divestment.”

The reason for the above shifts in language stems from a global effort to divest from South Africa in the 1980s due to the country’s continuation of the racist system of Apartheid. The 1980s also saw the first time that stocks were screened according to a “positive and negative” portfolio – naming certain social sins as modern filters, particularly those dealing with humanity and the planet. Since the 1980s, more social sins have been added to the negative filters, encouraging further divestment as a means of protest and progress.

The main change in 1992 is that the “Annual Conferences, foundations, and local churches” are added to the list of those named entities whom shall “make a conscious effort” to invest responsibly. One social sin is added to the list: “apartheid.”

From 1996 through 2012, the language is quite consistent. The above mandate is maintained, and a few more social sins are added: “violation of human rights” (1996); “gambling” (1996); “sweatshop or forced labor” (2000). “Apartheid” was removed by 1996.

In 2016, language is added regarding positive filtering of funds, calling upon United Methodist institutions to “seek investments in institutions, companies, corporations, or funds that promote racial and gender justice, protect human rights, prevent the use of sweatshop or forced labor, avoid human suffering, and preserve the natural world, including mitigating the effects of climate change.” The negative filtering was expanded to include a call to “avoid investments” that “direct[ly] or indirect[ly]” were involved with [only naming the new social sins]: “production of anti-personnel weapons and armaments (both nuclear and conventional weapons) ...privately operated correctional facilities ...other forms of exploitative adult entertainment.” Furthermore, the 2016 *Discipline* language called directly upon the boards and agencies to “give careful consideration to environmental, social, and governance factors” in their investments and asked them to engage with companies that “create positive change.” The main change here is the paragraph does not just forbid or mandate avoiding companies for certain social sins, but asks UM bodies to actively seek out and invest in those companies that have a positive social portfolio [i.e., calling for active engagement in addition to negative screens (ethical exclusions)].

At the 2020/2024 GC, the only change in *Discipline* ¶1717 language is “Wespath” (replacing “General Board of Pension and Health Benefits”).

Wesley’s Writings on Money

It seems generally consistent that most investment companies and agencies give credit to John Wesley as the original advocate of socially responsible investing. Several documents support this idea: *Use of Money* and *The General Rules*. These are analyzed below.

1) Use of Money—Sermon 50

Overall points:

- Warns to have precaution of those who earn their money through unrighteous means.
- Suggests “the right use of money,” i.e., using it for good (“food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked: it gives the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. We may be a defence for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death.”)
- Wesley acknowledges the social connections of money, connecting husband and widow, father and child: “By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless.”
- In order to use money well, Wesley suggests three rules:
 - *“Gain all you can.”*
 - Do not gain all you can at the expense of life nor health.
 - Nor your mind (this is where Wesley discusses “sinful trades” and defines them as “contrary to the law of God, or of our country.”)
 - Nor by hurting your neighbor – do not overtake their land, increase their bills, or charge interest (“pawn-broking”); do not sell goods below market price. Do not steal their workers nor take their substance.
 - Do not hurt neighbors’ bodies through what you sell (or how you gain):
 - Do not sell “anything which tends to impair health. Such is, eminently, all that liquid fire, commonly called drams or spirituous liquors.” (He then okays the use of drams for medical purposes.) He calls on people to actively buy from the “ten such distillers in England” which “prepare and sell them” for medical purposes, but to avoid those who sell “them in the common way” and calls them “poisoners general.”
 - He also calls out landlords here for the way that they overcharge tenants while living in “large estates and sumptuous palaces.”
 - He also calls out “surgeons, apothecaries, or physicians, who play with the lives or health of men, to enlarge their own gain.” Namely, those who lengthen disease in order to charge more and those who withhold cures.
 - Do not hurt your neighbors’ souls via “unchastity or intemperance.” Do not invite your neighbors to “taverns, victualling-houses, opera-houses, play-houses, or any other places of public, fashionable diversion.”

- *“Save all you can.”*
 - Don’t waste your money on “idle expenses” – do not spend it to “gratify the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life.”
 - The flesh – don’t waste it on fancy food: “Despise delicacy and variety, and be content with what plain nature requires.”
 - The eye – don’t waste it on expensive clothes or accessories, including furniture, paintings, books, gardens.
 - The pride of life – do not waste money on things that play into your vanity – “do not buy [the neighbors] applause. Rather be content with the honour that cometh from God.”
 - Be warned that the more you spend money on the above, the more you’ll desire to spend money on the above – addictive shopping or addictive luxury?
 - Be warned of your inheritance – if you think your kids are going to waste the money they inherit from you (because you saved the money responsibly) then it’s better to spend it responsibly than let them have it (“Do not leave it to them to throw away.”).
- *“Give all you can.”*
 - “Not to use [your saved money] is effectually to throw it away.”
 - Your body and soul are God’s, so give to God.
 - Provide yourself and family (and servants) with things that are useful – “food to eat, raiment to put on, whatever nature moderately requires for preserving the body in health and strength.”
 - If you still have left overs, then give to the poor.
 - Questions to ponder before giving:
 - “In expending this, am I acting according to my character? Am I acting herein, not as a proprietor, but as a steward of my Lord’s goods?”
 - “Am I doing this in obedience to [God’s] word? In what Scripture does [God] require me so to do?”
 - “Can I offer up this action, this expense, as a sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ?”
 - “Have I reason to believe that for this very work I shall have a reward at the resurrection of the just?”
 - If you still doubt your intentions, pray.

Other quotes from John Wesley's *Use of Money* sermon:

- “The fault does not lie in the money, but in them that use it. It may be used ill: and what may not? But it may likewise be used well.”
- “[Money] is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked: it gives the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defence for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death.”
- “For to gain money we must not lose our souls.”
- “Gain all you can by honest industry. Use all possible diligence in your calling.”
- “Gain all you can by common sense, by using in your business all the understanding which God has given you. It is amazing to observe, how few do this; how men run on in the same dull track with their forefathers.”
- “Save all you can. Do not throw the precious talent into the sea: Leave that folly to heathen philosophers.”
- “Gain all you can, without hurting either yourself or your neighbour, in soul or body, by applying hereto with unintermitted diligence, and with all the understanding which God has given you; – save all you can, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire; to gratify either the desire of flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life; waste nothing, living or dying, on sin or folly, whether for yourself or your children; – and then, give all you can, or, in other words, give all you have to God.”

Warning: Wesley is anti-Semitic in this sermon, accusing Jewish persons of being “stint[y].”

2) *Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies*

- This is the tract where Wesley lays out the three general rules (do no harm, do good, attend to the ordinances of God) and applies them to the societies and classes.
- The first rule, “**do no harm**,” relates to the rules in *Use of Money*, particularly “the buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty,” “the giving or taking things on usury – i.e., unlawful interest,” “putting on of gold and costly apparel,” “laying up treasure upon earth,” “borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.”
- The second rule, “**do good**,” relates to the UMC’s addition of positive profiling: “By doing good, especially to them that are of the household of faith or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others; buying of one another, helping each other in business, and so much the more because the world will love its own and them only.”

Other Things to Consider Regarding Wesley and Money

- Classes were begun, not as a communal space, but as a way to pay off debt incurred with the construction of the New Room (1739). Class leaders were tasked with visiting everyone in their homes once per week to collect their tithe (defined as a penny per person or whatever they could afford). While visiting them, class leaders did inquire as to the state of souls. But this soon became overwhelming to the class leader and awkward for the tither (not everyone wanted to welcome a Methodist class leader into their homes because many were secretly Methodist). So, the class transitioned to a communal meeting space where tithes were then collected all at once.
- Wesley received a substantial income in his lifetime as a Fellow of Lincoln College and earnings from his myriad publications. He did follow his own rules and did not keep a penny more than he needed for the bare necessities of life.
- Poverty in England during the 18th Century:
 - The “Poor Laws,” begun in 1601, classified poverty as “having housing (a tenement) worth £10 or less per year.”¹ The laws “increasingly tried to put everyone to work who could work, attempted to train children, and endeavored to relieve the aged and infirm.”² Those who lived above the poverty line were required to pay a “poor tax” to provide relief to those below the poverty line, even though many paying the tax were just above the poverty line. According to Heitzenrater, “the system inflicted especially undue hardships on single women, widows with dependent children, and married laborers in rural areas,” and these categories just happen to be the same categories that flocked to Methodism.³ By 1760, at the heart of Methodist growth, a majority of the English population would have been classified as “the working poor.”
 - Most Methodists in the 18th Century were classified as poor. If you were to survey the class lists around this time, it appears that the Methodists were “slightly poorer” than the average English person. Heitzenrater argues that “65 percent of Methodists belonged to occupational groups whose income averaged less than £20 per year, while 25 percent were in groups that averaged over £30.”⁴
- Relative poverty – Wesley chose to categorize poverty not along a clear demarcation of income, but in relative terms. For him, “The poor were those who lacked the necessities of

¹ Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People Called Methodist*, 18

² Heitzenrater, 18

³ Heitzenrater, 21.

⁴ Heitzenrater, 27.

life.”⁵ Whether it be food, clothing or housing, most who lacked basic necessities were victims of a rapidly changing economy, one that was for centuries centered on a pastoral system and was quickly shifting to an urban, industrial system. In his analysis of Wesley’s relationship with the poor, Heitzenrater argues that “Wesley declassified the concept of poverty, identified the breadth of the problem, and universalized the responsibility for dealing with it.”⁶ He measured poverty or wealth not in terms of pounds per year, but in terms of contentment – was a person’s life “sufficient, decent, or adequate”? Even those who were considered relatively impoverished, Wesley argued, could still contribute in some way to those around them and could always find someone worse off than they were. As Wesley encountered poverty more and more, he came to understand wealth as having anything more than the basic necessities of life.

- By the 1760s, as Wesley encountered the economic diversity around England, he began to critique the idea that the poor were seen to be lazy and indolent. Instead, he argued that “the problems of hunger and unemployment were caused by poor government policy, economic management, and societal choices.”⁷ Instead of band-aid fixes, Wesley sought to address real, spoken needs through systemic change where all parties (even those classified as impoverished) participated. Heitzenrater argues that John Wesley categorized persons by needs and then provided a variety of ways to meet those needs.

The rumor that John Wesley is responsible for modern-day sustainable investments holds true! May we all strive to continue to support our local communities and business, invest with an eye and heart toward God’s creation, and seek to continue to do good in all the ways we are able.

###

⁵ Heitzenrater, 27

⁶ Heitzenrater, 28

⁷ Heitzenrater 33.