

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES  
OF  
JOHN WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts  
Department of Religion  
Thesis Advisor: Dr. H. Gordon Harland

by  
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1989



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DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF JOHN WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

BY

EARL ROBINSON

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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## PREFACE

During the writing of this thesis I had the privilege of being associated through personal discussion and class and public lectures with Dr. Gordon Harland of the Department of Religion at the University of Manitoba. I am indebted to Dr. Harland for insights into great theologians from Martin Luther to those engaged in the Liberation Theology movement of the late twentieth century. I am particularly indebted to him for the guidance he has provided to my own thought concerning the most significant theologian of my own tradition, John Wesley. I would also express my gratitude to other members of my thesis examining committee in the persons of Professors E. Grislis, G.A. Schultz, and A.M. Watts.

It has been an instructive experience to study the works of John Wesley and the writings of those who have reflected upon him as a theologian of note. In referring to John Wesley's Works I should indicate that I have used the 1979 Baker Book House reprint of the third edition of the Thomas Jackson compilation of 1831. Although the newer Oxford Bicentennial edition (editor-in-chief Frank Baker) was in process at the time of my writing this thesis, most of the commentators I was reading were using the Jackson

edition and thus my use of the same edition allowed for ease of footnoting. As well, while the new edition will ultimately be more comprehensive, it had not been completed at the time of my writing.

I am grateful to The Salvation Army for allowing me this opportunity of extra study during a busy administrative period as the President of the Salvation Army's Catherine Booth Bible College. My faculty and staff have been supportive in this project and I would particularly acknowledge the work of my secretary, Glennis Bowles, in making legible my often illegible manuscript.

To my wife Benita and my children Manda and Sean I would express my thanks for their interest and co-operation. They were deprived of what leisure time I might have been able to spend with them had I not been engaged in this extra study and I am grateful for their understanding.

My life and thought have been enriched by coming to know John Wesley more thoroughly and to understand the distinctive features of his theology more completely.

Winnipeg, 1989.

Earl Robinson

## ABSTRACT

Title: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF JOHN WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

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On May 24th, 1738 John Wesley came to the climax of his search for a right relationship with God in Christ. In an upper room in Aldersgate Street in London, Luther's Preface to Romans was being read, and Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."<sup>1</sup>

Following the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Wesley's Aldersgate experience, many contemporary Christian groups continue to trace their distinctive features to this giant of the Christian faith. In such an exercise, mainstream Methodists such as the United Church of Canada may emphasize the Wesleyan tradition of social reform. The Nazarenes may think of Wesley as an evangelist as they work towards church growth. The Free Methodists may concentrate

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<sup>1</sup>Works, Vol. I, p. 103. Journal, May 24, 1738.

on his theme of holiness. The Salvation Army may emphasize the Wesleyan order of salvation and its issue of faith working by love. Various conservative bodies may focus on Wesley's biblical centrality.

Perhaps more today than ever before, each of those groups tracing their traditions to John Wesley will view him as a major theologian. Albert C. Outler suggests that Wesley's importance as a theologian "has been sadly underestimated by both his devotees and critics....He was, I have come to believe, the most important Anglican theologian in his century. He is, I also believe, a very considerable resource in our own time."<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation attempts to follow through that suggestion with the thesis that the eighteenth century evangelist and reformer can be seen as a significant theologian whose insights are of relevance not only for his own era but for the church and the world of today.

Following a biographical sketch, Wesley's writings are researched with reference to the Scriptures, salvation, holiness, and the kingdom of God. The result of that research is to clarify distinctive features of Wesleyan theology and to support the thesis that John Wesley is indeed a theologian of major significance.

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<sup>2</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 1.

CHAPTER I  
OUT OF THE FLAMES

Epworth

On February 9th, 1709, at about eleven o'clock at night, the five year old John Wesley was dramatically rescued from a fire which destroyed his father's rectory in the village of Epworth. The memory of that incident left such an impression on Wesley that he often referred to its significance, suggesting that God had allowed him to be delivered for a special purpose. For example, in his journal of February 9th, 1750 he refers to a chapel meeting in London when the remembrance of that incident came forcibly to him.

We had a comfortable watch-night at the chapel. About eleven o'clock it came into my mind that this was the very day and hour in which, forty years ago, I was taken out of the flames. I stopped and gave a short account of that wonderful providence. The voice of praise and thanksgiving went up on high, and great was our rejoicing before the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

Later when he thought he might be dying of "consumption" he decided to write his own epitath in order to guard against someone else engaging in a too elaborate praise. There was just one praise he wanted to give and that was to God for saving him for His purposes.

Here lieth the Body  
of  
John Wesley,

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<sup>3</sup>Works, Vol. II, p. 173. Journal, February 9, 1750.

A brand plucked out of the burning:  
 who died of consumption in the fifty-first year of his age,  
 not leaving, after his debts are paid,  
 ten pounds behind him:

praying,  
 God be merciful to me, an unprofitable servant!<sup>4</sup>

The scriptural reference to his being "a brand plucked out of the burning"<sup>5</sup> was clearly an allusion to the childhood deliverance from the fire of the Epworth rectory. And just as in Zechariah 3:2 the Lord indicates that Joshua the high priest was like a burning stick snatched from the fire, drawn out of sinful Jerusalem for God's future purposes, so John Wesley must also have sensed in his deliverance a similar providential destiny. It was almost as if he too had heard the angel of the Lord giving the same charge to him.

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here."<sup>6</sup>

Probably Wesley himself would not have gone so far as to think he would be given a place of governance and control of the house and courts of God. For Wesley, that too would be a too elaborate praise, or as he would put it - a "vile panegyric."<sup>7</sup> But those today who follow in his tradition would very much regard him as one who was delivered from the

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<sup>4</sup>Works, Vol. II, p. 309. Journal, November 26, 1753.

<sup>5</sup>Zechariah 3:2. cf. Amos 4:11.

<sup>6</sup>Zechariah 3:7

<sup>7</sup>Works, Vol. II, p. 309. Journal, November 26, 1753.

fire and raised up by God for a special place in the church of God, a man like the high priest Joshua, "symbolic of things to come".<sup>8</sup> He too was to make the way clear for the "Branch", the Messiah, to remove the sin of the land of England and that of many lands of future generations, and to equip those servants who would follow Wesley to be engaged like their forefather in the evangelistic thrust of inviting their neighbors to sit in peace and safety under the "vine and fig tree."<sup>9</sup>

#### Aldersgate

But the deliverance at Epworth would have been of little significance for God's kingdom without another deliverance. That deliverance, at Aldersgate Street, was also carefully recorded in Wesley's journal in what has become the most well-known of all his journal entries, the record of May 24th, 1738.

I think it was about five this morning, that I opened my Testament on those words, "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Just as I went out, I opened it again on "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." In the afternoon I was asked to go to St. Paul's. The anthem was, "Out of the depths have I called unto thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice."

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone

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<sup>8</sup>Zechariah 3:8.

<sup>9</sup>Zechariah 3:10.

for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner so pitifully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?" Then was I taught that grace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them.

After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and "he sent me help from his holy place." And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now I was always conqueror."<sup>10</sup>

Wesley's "former state" had been one of struggle and discouragement even though, or perhaps because he was born into a very religious family. His paternal great grandfather Bartholomew was an Anglican Rector. Bartholomew however was eventually ejected from his parish because of leaning towards 17th century Puritanism with its emphasis on experiential religion, a disciplined life-style, and the holy community.<sup>11</sup>

Wesley's paternal grandfather after whom he was named, John, was an itinerant evangelist. He later served as an unordained minister but was imprisoned because of his

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<sup>10</sup>Works, Vol. I, pp. 103-104. Journal, May 23, 1738.

<sup>11</sup>A. Skevington Wood, The Burning Heart (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1967), p. 20.

refusal to use the liturgy of the Anglican Prayer Book along with Puritan leanings similar to those of his father.<sup>12</sup>

John Wesley's father, Samuel, was prepared for a nonconformist Puritan ministry. Eventually he sided with the Church of England over against the Dissenters and worked his way through Oxford to become an Anglican Priest in the High Church tradition. It was in this capacity that he served as the Rector at Epworth. However he still owed a great deal to his Puritan heritage with its emphasis on repentance and conversion and the "inward witness". This last mentioned emphasis was particularly to have a significant impact on his son John. John Wesley refers to it in one of his letters to John Smith.

My father did not die unacquainted with the faith of the Gospel, of the primitive Christians, or of our first Reformers; the same which, by the grace of God, I preach, and which is just as new as Christianity. What he experienced before, I know not; but I know that during his last illness, which continued eight months, he enjoyed a clear sense of his acceptance with God. I heard him express it more than once, although at that time I understood him not. "The inward witness, son, the inward witness," said he to me, "that is the proof, the strongest proof, of Christianity." And when I asked him, (the time of his change drawing nigh) "Sir, are you in much pain?" he answered aloud with a smile, "God does chasten me with pain, yea all my bones with strong pain; but I thank Him for all, I bless Him for all, I love Him for all!" I think the last words he spoke, when I had just commended his soul to God, were, "Now you have done all." And with the same serene, cheerful countenance he fell asleep, without one struggle, or sigh, or groan. I cannot therefore doubt but

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

the Spirit of God bore an inward witness with his spirit, that he was a child of God.<sup>13</sup>

John's mother Susanna also had a Puritan non-conformist heritage although she like Samuel decided to support Anglicanism. She became a theological confidant for her son, reinforcing the search John himself was making for the Puritan ideal of experimental assurance that one was born again of the Spirit of God.

### Oxford

Before his journal record of the Aldersgate experience, Wesley tells of his agony of spirit in the events of his life leading to Aldersgate. This recounting was suggested as the premise to make the experience of Aldersgate better understood. He tells of his being strictly taught in the first ten years of his childhood that he could only be saved "by universal obedience, by keeping all the commandments of God".<sup>14</sup> The next six or seven years during his time at Charterhouse School in London England he speaks of being a period when he was "almost continually guilty of outward sins," indicating that what he hoped to be saved by was,

1. Not being so bad as other people.
2. Having still a fondness for religion. And
3. Reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Works, Vol. XII, p. 100. Letters - To Mr. John Smith, March 22, 1747-8.

<sup>14</sup>Works, Vol. I, p. 98. Journal, May 24, 1738.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

He then turns to his university years at Oxford when at first he found himself "continually sinning against what little light I had."<sup>16</sup> Then, after being pressed by his father to enter into holy orders, he began to "aim at, and pray for, inward holiness. So that now, 'doing so much, and living so good a life,' I doubted not but I was a good Christian."<sup>17</sup> This thought was further reinforced in his association with the Holy Club of Oxford while he was a tutor at Lincoln College and engaged in strict Christian disciplines and good works. Because of that life-style Wesley claimed that "by my continued endeavor to keep His whole law, inward and outward, to the utmost of my power, I was persuaded that I should be accepted of Him, and that I was even in a state of salvation."<sup>18</sup>

The complete assurance of salvation which he sought for still eluded him however. He tells of one point at which he thought himself as being near death and not finding any "comfort" or "assurance of acceptance with God" through his good works.<sup>19</sup> Later he was convinced to replace outward acts of righteousness with inward "mental prayer and the like exercises, as the most effectual means of purifying the

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

soul, and uniting it with God,"<sup>20</sup> but these too proved of no comfort or help.

### Georgia

His next attempt at earning the favour of God was to accept a missionary appointment to the native Indians of the colony of Georgia in what is now the United States of America. He frankly admitted in his journal entry of the day of his departure for that mission, that his chief purpose, along with that of other members of the Oxford Holy Club travelling with him, was for the assurance of salvation.

Mr. Benjamin Ingham, of Queen's College, Oxford, Mr. Charles Delamotti, son of a merchant, in London, who had offered himself some days before, my brother Charles Wesley, and myself, took boat for Gravesend, in order to embark for Georgia. Our end in leaving our native country was not to avoid want, (God having given us plenty of temporal blessings,) nor to gain the dung or dross of riches or honour; but simply this, - to save our souls; to live wholly to the glory of God.<sup>21</sup>

But this further attempt to earn assurance of salvation also proved to be fruitless. Wesley described the experience by saying, "all the time I was at Savannah I was thus beating the air."<sup>22</sup> On January 24th, 1738, after being released from his less than three-year mission to Georgia and while on the ship returning to England, Wesley

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Works, Vol. I., p. 17. Journal, October 14, 1735.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 100-101. Journal, May 24, 1738.

reflected on the experience which Gordon Harland describes as "one magnificent flop."<sup>23</sup>

I went to America, to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me? who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near; But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, "To die is gain!"<sup>24</sup>

But it was while on his mission to Georgia that Wesley was introduced to a group of people through whom he was to learn of that way which was to lead to the salvation assurance of Aldersgate. That group consisted of German Moravian missionaries who had displayed a remarkable calmness of trust in their Lord when Wesley himself had faced fear of death. A sea storm had threatened to destroy the ship on which they were travelling to the Georgia Colony. Wesley had already noticed that the Moravians were apparently delivered from the spirit of pride and anger and revenge. And then in the midst of the storm he found them calmly continuing to sing a psalm. When asked if they were not afraid he heard them say, "I thank God, no....No; our women and children are not afraid to die."<sup>25</sup>

After arrival in Savannah, Wesley asked one of the German Moravian pastors for advice about his own conduct, and this remarkable exchange occurred, an exchange which

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<sup>23</sup>H. Gordon Harland, "John Wesley", Touchstone, October 1984, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup>Works, Vol. I, p. 74. Journal, January 24, 1738.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 22. Journal, January 25, 1736.

gave to Wesley a hint as to the Moravian lack of fear in the face of death.

He said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions, Have you the witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused, and said, "I know he is the Saviour of the world," "True," replied he; "but do you know he has saved you?" I answered, "I hope he has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said, "I do." But I fear they were vain words.<sup>26</sup>

After his return to England Wesley met another group of Moravians, this time in London, and amongst them a young man by the name of Peter Böhler. He was to come to know Böhler through a series of meetings over the next few months prior to the Aldersgate experience. In those meetings he was exhorted by Böhler to "Preach faith till you have it; and then because you have it, you will preach faith."<sup>27</sup> He was convinced by Böhler and his examination of the Scriptural record that there could be an "instantaneous work" of faith whereby "a man could at once be thus turned from darkness to light, from sin and misery to righteousness and joy in the Holy Ghost."<sup>28</sup> And that teaching was confirmed to Wesley when Böhler brought to him "several living witnesses; who testified, God has thus wrought in themselves; giving them in a moment such a faith in the

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 23. Journal, February 7, 1736.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 86. Journal, March 4, 1738.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 91. Journal, April 22, 1738.

blood of his Son, as translated them out of darkness into light, out of sin and fear into holiness and happiness."<sup>29</sup>

Böhler then left England for missionary work in America but on the journey wrote a letter which exhorted Wesley, "Delay not, I beseech you, to believe in your Jesus Christ; but so put Him in mind of His promises to poor sinners, that He may not be able to refrain from doing for you, what He hath done for so many others. O how great, how inexpressable, how unexhausted is his love! Surely He is now ready to help; and nothing can offend Him but our unbelief."<sup>30</sup>

And so Wesley had been prepared by the struggles of his youth through to the exhortations of a man named Böhler for May 24th, 1738. In his "premise" to the Aldersgate account Wesley comments on the result of that pilgrimage as he speaks of the "living witnesses" whom Böhler had brought to him.

They added with one mouth, that this faith was a gift of God; and that he would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly and perseveringly sought it. I was now thoroughly convinced; and by the grace of God, I resolved to seek it unto the end, 1. By absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon my own works or righteousness; on which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it not, from my youth up. 2. By adding to the constant use of all the other means of grace, continual prayer for this very thing, justifying, saving faith, a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for me; a

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid. Journal, April 23, 1738.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 95. Journal, May 13, 1738.

trust in Him, as my Christ, as my sole justification, sanctification, and redemption. <sup>31</sup>

### The Nation

The experience of Aldersgate impelled Wesley to the fulfilment of the destiny for which he sensed God had plucked him from the fire. Gordon Harland suggests that it is only as the Aldersgate experience is associated with Wesley's sense of mission that it can be properly understood.

It is a mistake to understand the "heart strangely warmed" in a sentimental or narrowly pietistic way. This decisive experience of Wesley's should rather be seen in the most intimate association with his passionate sense of mission. The inner meaning of Aldersgate could find expression only in the outreach and compassionate care and nurture that marked the later development. Indeed, to get the full meaning of the phrase "heart strangely warmed", it should be linked with another of Wesley's statements, "I submitted to be more vile", uttered less than a year later when he reluctantly ventured into field-preaching.<sup>32</sup>

Another statement of Wesley's which is associated with his sense of mission indicated the direction of his life from Aldersgate until its conclusion. In his "Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others," or "The Large Minutes," the question is asked, "What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?" And Wesley replies, "Not to form any new sect but to reform the nation,

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 102. Journal, May 24, 1738.

<sup>32</sup>H. Gordon Harland, "John Wesley", Touchstone, October 1984, pp. 9-10.

particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."<sup>33</sup> And so we see Wesley immediately going out to preach the gospel of salvation by grace through faith and its issue in scriptural holiness, at first within the Church of England, and then to the religious societies as he found his message to be unwelcome in the established churches.

Ultimately Wesley was led to what was to be the thrust of his witness - the open air, or field-preaching. In his journal of March 31, 1739 he refers to the example of George Whitefield in Bristol: "I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost as a sin, if it had not been done in a church."<sup>34</sup>

Wesley then went through the nation on horseback, on borrowed carriage, walking, and travelling by boat to the Irish Sea or English Channel. He preached in the streets, in the market-place, in the fields, in houses, amongst the coal-miners, in the soldiers' barracks, and even before angry and belligerent mobs. He would often start his preaching at five in the morning and preach several times throughout the day and into the evening. Whenever and

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<sup>33</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 299. Minutes, 1744 to 1789.

<sup>34</sup>Works, Vol. I. p. 185. Journal, March 29, 1739.

wherever there were people to be gathered to hear the gospel, Wesley would be there convincing sinners to receive Christ.

But Wesley did not stop with simply inviting sinners to a repentant faith. He recognized that this was only the beginning to a pilgrimage of faith. Throughout the land he also established societies to nurture those converts in that life of holiness which was such a vital part of his message, and bands and class meetings to provide community accountability to the disciplined holy life. These became the forerunners to the Methodist Church which developed after his death outside of the established Anglican Church of which Wesley remained a loyal member to the end, even though often feeling ostracized from it.

### The World

Wesley was criticized by his fellow Anglicans for crossing parish boundary lines but he made no apology for such invasions. A. Skevington Wood describes as the "Magna Charta of evangelism"<sup>35</sup> the intention which Wesley proclaimed in a letter to one of his critics, Mr. James Hervey: "I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>A. Skevington Wood, The Burning Heart (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1978), p. 106.

<sup>36</sup>Works, Vol. I, p. 201. Journal, June 11, 1739.

Unfortunately, with all the world as his parish, Wesley apparently had insufficient time and energy to devote to those who should have been nearest to him. This may be partly to blame for the strained relationship he had with his brother Charles. It is particularly evident in the unsatisfactory marriage life which was his, although a number of factors apparently contributed to that failure, including previous romantic disappointments.

His relationship with Sophie Hopkey had not worked out when he was in Georgia, and the woman he later wanted to marry, Grace Murray, was lost to one of his preachers, John Bennett. Then within fifteen months of the break-up with Grace Murray, he married a merchant's widow, Mary (Molly) Vazeille, in February of 1751.

The marriage was a stormy one from the beginning with Molly leaving John on several occasions until an almost total separation in 1771. Robert G. Tuttle summarizes Wesley's perspective of the marriage as follows.

If we ever properly loved each other (and I doubt that we did), it lasted but a few months....We lived together only occasionally for twenty years. In 1771 she decided to live with her married daughter in Newcastle, proposing "never to return." I could only comment: "Non eam reliqui: Non dimisi: Non revocabo." (I did not desert her: I did not send her away: I will never recall her.) From that point on (though her daughter persuaded her to return to me) we lived and travelled together only sparingly. Though she shared our homes both in London and Bristol, for the most part, even while we were together, we were apart. Then, years after our separation, she died (October 8, 1781). I was not informed until four days later. There have been times when I wished we had never met. I am certain that she must have

felt the same way; but surely God will somehow even glorify Himself by this unfortunate match.

Ultimately, the work of revival is still God's work. He continues to bless us abundantly, far more than we could ever have imagined. I have few regrets, except perhaps regarding my poor wife. She was so miserably married to a man perhaps already married to a cause.<sup>37</sup>

One wonders if he might have been able to work both marriages together if he had paid at least minimal attention to the marriage to Molly. That he was apparently determined not to give such consideration is evident from a journal entry of March 19, 1751, just a month after his marriage. "I cannot understand, how a Methodist Preacher can answer it to God, to preach one sermon, or travel one day less, in a married, than in a single state. In this respect surely, 'it remaineth, that they who have wives be as though they had none.'"<sup>38</sup>

If for Wesley it was either marriage to his wife or marriage to a cause, perhaps the world is better today because he felt "married to a cause," the cause of being an evangelist for Christ to the world.

To an extent Wesley himself would never have envisaged, the world indeed has become his parish. Not alone in Britain and Georgia nor in the 18th century has his influence been known. He was the brand plucked out of the literal fire of Epworth Rectory as a child. He was the burning stick plucked out of the fire of the sinful England

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<sup>37</sup>Robert G. Tuttle, Jr. John Wesley: His Life and Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 309-310.

<sup>38</sup>Works, Vol. II, p. 224. Journal, March 19, 1751.

of his day just as Joshua the high priest was plucked out of sinful Jerusalem. And the flame from that stick was to set the world alight with biblically-based theological insights, with the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, with the inward witness of the fire of the Holy Spirit, with lives committed to living a holy life in an evil environment, with a cloud of witnesses to the change which can be wrought by a right relationship with Jesus Christ.

As a consequence, Christians of the Wesleyan tradition have ever since regarded John Wesley as having been chosen for a destiny beyond his own age and beyond the world of his own century as they look to him as one of the modern fathers of their faith and as an inspiration for their own life and witness in Christ.

To serve the present age,  
My calling to fulfil,  
O may it all my powers engage,  
To do my Master's will!<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Charles Wesley. The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Volume 7. "A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists," edited by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 465.

CHAPTER II  
THE BOOK OF GOD

The Book of a Theologian

Increasingly John Wesley is being recognized not only as an evangelist and reformer and the founder of the Methodist tradition, but as a theologian of significance. Albert C. Outler followed up an interpretation of Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit with a book entitled Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit and explained his reason for the second volume by saying,

Now, I'm concerned to enlarge our angle of vision somewhat and to propose another interpretative sketch of Wesley this time as a significant theologian whose importance as theologian - then and now - has been sadly underestimated by both his devotees and critics. He was, I have come to believe, the most important Anglican theologian in his century. He is, I also believe, a very considerable resource in our own time for our theological reflections, especially for those who have any serious interest in the ecumenical dialogue and in the cause of Christian unity. My aim and hope is to help rescue Wesley from his status as cult-hero to the Methodists (by whom he has been revered but not carefully studied) and to exhibit him as a creative Christian thinker....<sup>40</sup>

Outler refers in his book John Wesley to the estimate of Alexander Knox that Wesley "was a major theologian who managed to fuse the best of St. Augustine and St.

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<sup>40</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), pp. 1-2.

Chrysostum," but suggests that this estimate "passed almost unnoticed and with slight credit."<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the failure to recognize Wesley as a theologian of significance was due to his not deliberately setting out as a scholar systematizing a new set of theological principles, and certainly not in the scholarly language of some theologians. He was rather a "folk-theologian"<sup>42</sup> who spoke in the language of the common people of his day and who was concerned with the applicability of theology to life. His theology of assurance of salvation for example seems to find its source in his own struggles for the definite knowledge that he was saved. His theology related to the possibility of instantaneous conversion was associated with his seeing "living witnesses" of instantaneous conversion in the persons of Moravian Christians brought to him by his confidant, Peter Böhler.<sup>43</sup>

However, although applicability to life was important to Wesley's theological thought, the determinative source of that theology was not the experience of life but rather the words of Scripture. The book of God was the essential rule for Wesley's theology. Thus we see him for example carefully examining scripture to test Böhler's insistence on

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<sup>41</sup>Albert C. Outler, John Wesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. vii.

<sup>42</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 3.

<sup>43</sup>A. Skevington Wood, The Burning Heart (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1967), p. 65.

the possibility of one's knowing in an instant that he was converted by the Spirit of God.

But I could not comprehend what he spoke of an instantaneous work. I could not understand how this faith should be given in a moment: How a man could at once be turned from darkness to righteousness and joy in the Holy Ghost. I searched the Scriptures again, touching this very thing, particularly the Acts of the Apostles: But, to my utter astonishment, found scarce any instances there of other than instantaneous conversions; scarce any so slow as that of St. Paul, who was three days in the pangs of the new birth.<sup>44</sup>

#### A Man of One Book

Wesley emphasized his dependancy on the Scriptures for his source of ultimate truth in every matter associated with Christian faith and practice. He referred to himself as "a man of one book" - "homo unius libri". Perhaps most notably that emphasis is seen in the Preface to his Sermons on Several Occasions.

I want to know one thing, - the way to heaven; how to land on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me that book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.<sup>45</sup>

He dates this emphasis on Holy Scripture as the year 1729. In A Plain Account of Christian Perfection he states that, "In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to

<sup>44</sup>Works, Vol. I, p. 91. Journal, April 2, 1738.

<sup>45</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 3. Sermons on Several Occasions, Preface.

study, the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion."<sup>46</sup>

Neither of the above two statements meant however that Wesley read nothing else but the Bible in his search for truth. Professor Outler carefully amasses evidence to the contrary as he reveals the extensive background of reading which can be detected in Wesley's writings and sermons. Outler says that the record of Wesley's reading after 1725 runs to "more than fourteen hundred different authors."<sup>47</sup>

The wide reading in which Wesley engaged included the classics from Plato to à Kempis, the mystics and secularists such as Shakespeare and Milton, the English divines such as Baxter, the modern scientists of his day such as Newton, and even the English dramatists whom he often denounced, such as Thomas Otway.<sup>48</sup>

Outler terms Wesley's pattern as that of "plundering the Egyptians," receiving the treasures of human wisdom wherever they might be found, just as the Israelites took treasures from their Egyptian captors when they fled that land. Outler explains that the phrase was used by Origen as a "metaphor, pointing to the freedom that Christians have (by divine allowance) to explore, appraise, and appropriate

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<sup>46</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 367. A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

<sup>47</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 6.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 6-8.

all the insights and resources of any and all secular culture."<sup>49</sup>

While a "man of one book," Wesley therefore did not exclude insights from other sources. He was not exclusively a "biblicist"<sup>50</sup> although scripture was "His first and final norm for the validation of any theological discussion."<sup>51</sup>

#### The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Wesley's reliance upon other than pure Scripture for religious authority and theological truth is so significant that Professor Outler suggests there are four sources of truth which feature prominently in Wesleyan thought, what Outler calls the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral".<sup>52</sup> The term "Quadrilateral" is not Wesley's, but Outler and others before him<sup>53</sup> draw from Wesley's writings a quadrilateral or four-sided appeal to religious authority. The four sources of truth which Outler sees in Wesley are Scripture,

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 4. cf. Exodus 12:18-36.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>52</sup>Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley," Wesleyan Theological Journal, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 1985, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup>cf. Albert C. Knudson, The Doctrine of God (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1930), p. 187: "We have, then, as definitive of the unique or special field of theology, one main source, the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, and three additional sources which may be described as supplementary or regulative; namely the church, the natural reason as expressed in the theistic philosophies, and Christian Experience."

tradition, reason, and experience. He particularly sees this quadrilateral in Wesley's Notes Upon the New Testament which in 1763 became the standard of doctrine for preachers in Methodist chapels, a doctrinal canon. "In it," Outler says, "the Holy Scriptures stand first and foremost, and yet subject to interpretations that are informed by 'Christian Antiquity', critical reason and an existential appeal to the 'Christian experience' of grace."<sup>54</sup>

While therefore Wesley's first and final appeal was always to Scripture, he recognized that a scriptural passage or text could be interpreted in a variety of ways. He would "appeal to 'the primitive church' and to the Christian tradition at large as competent, complementing witnesses to 'the meaning' of this Scripture or that'".<sup>55</sup> Critical reason and the Christian experience of assurance would then be applied to Scripture and tradition in order to arrive at truth. Outler concludes that "we can see a distinctive theological method, with Scripture as its pre-eminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture."<sup>56</sup>

Wesley had added the concept of "experience" to the Anglican triad of reason, Scripture and tradition. This

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<sup>54</sup>Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley", Wesleyan Theological Journal, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 1985, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

opened up the possibility of making "every Methodist man and woman his/her own theologian,"<sup>57</sup> but always with Scripture as the norm, and the experiential element "not merely subjective 'religious affection'. It is an objective encounter (within 'the heart,' to be sure) of something not ourselves and not our own (something truly transcendent). It is an inward assurance of an objective reality. e.g., God's unmerited favor..."<sup>58</sup>

What Wesley therefore appears to mean by being a "man of only one book" is that while other writings and other ways may be helpful in leading to the truth, Scripture alone is ultimately authoritative. An understanding of truth from that "one book", should take precedence over all other paths to knowledge. This principle is clear from A Plain Account of Christian Perfection in which he pays tribute to three authors who were particularly determinative in his thinking. He sees those authors as simply complementary to the study of the Bible which remains as the ultimate standard of truth.

He indicates that in 1725 when only 23 years of age he met with Bishop Jeremy Taylor's Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying. Wesley was so affected by reading Taylor that he instantly resolved to dedicate all his life to God - "all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced, there was no medium; but that every part of my

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or myself, that is, in effect to the devil."<sup>59</sup>

In 1726 he met with Thomas à Kempis's Christian Pattern or De Imitatione Christi. This book caused Wesley to see that giving all of his life to God was insufficient to ascend the mount of God if his intentions, his affections, his heart, were not totally given to Him.<sup>60</sup>

Then a year or two later he read William Law's On Christian Perfection and A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life. These works reinforced Wesley's conviction that he could not be half a Christian but must give all his soul, body and substance to "Him who has given Himself for us."<sup>61</sup>

But his search for truth in these writings culminated in his deeper study of the Bible. The Bible thus clarified truth received from any other source. It was the Bible which pointed to the necessity of having "the mind which was in Christ," and of "walking as Christ also walked" in all things.<sup>62</sup>

#### The Language of the Holy Ghost

To understand the Scriptural centrality which Wesley brought to the subject of religious truth and authority, we must have some insight into his view of the inspiration of

<sup>59</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 366. A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

Holy Scripture. In this regard he goes so far as saying the following:

God speaks not as man, but as God. His thoughts are very deep; and hence his words are of unexhaustible virtue. And the language of his messengers, also, is exact in the highest degree: for the words which were given them accurately answered the impression made upon their minds: and hence Luther says, "Divinity is nothing but a grammar of the language of the Holy Ghost."<sup>63</sup>

Wesley's view of Scripture as the language of the Holy Ghost appears in some of his statements to be almost what might be thought of today as a verbal dictation theory of the inspiration of Scripture. This is seen for example in his comment on John 19:24 which contains a quotation from Psalm 22:18 that John relates to the casting of lots for the garments of Christ at the cross. Wesley says that this cannot relate to anything in the life of the Psalmist David himself but that David was here impersonating the Messiah as he spoke "What the Spirit dictated, without any regard for himself."<sup>64</sup>

A similar comment is made with reference to his notes on Revelation 1:19-20 which contains the command to John to write what he had seen, what is now and what will take place later. Wesley says, "As soon as this was spoken St. John wrote it down, even all that is contained in this first

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<sup>63</sup>Works, Vol. XIV, pp. 238-239. Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Vol. I, Preface 12.

<sup>64</sup>Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Vol. I, John 19:24.

chapter. Afterwards what was contained in the second and third chapters was dictated to him in like manner."<sup>65</sup>

He further appeared in at least one of his statements to adopt today what might be regarded as a total inerrancy position with respect to the Scriptures. In his journal entry of July 24th, 1776 he refers to Soame Jenyns' tract on the "Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion." He questions as to whether Jenyns is a Christian and then makes the following statement.

If he is a Christian, he betrays his own cause by averring, that "all Scripture is not given by inspiration of God; but the writers of it were sometimes left to themselves, and consequently made some mistakes." Nay if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.<sup>66</sup>

On the other hand there are parts of his writings in which Wesley appears to take a much more liberal approach. In the Preface to his Explanatory Notes on the New Testament he indicates that he cannot affirm that the Greek copies from which the common English translation were made were always correct, and therefore states that he "shall take the liberty, as occasion may require, to make here and there a small alteration."<sup>67</sup> He thus allows for the corruption of the received text and would affirm textual criticism.

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., Vol. II, Revelation 1:19-20.

<sup>66</sup>Works, Vol. IV, p. 82. Journal, July 24, 1776.

<sup>67</sup>Works, Vol. XIV, p. 236. Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, Vol. I, Preface 4.

In other comments he clearly contradicts a purely verbal dictation approach to the theory of the inspiration of Scripture. He indicates in connection with the quotation of Psalm 8:4 in Hebrews 2:7 that the Hebrew text of Psalm 8:4 is "a little lower than God" while the Greek text in Hebrews 2:7 is "a little lower than angels." In explaining this discrepancy he points out that the common Old Testament translation of that day was the Septuagint Greek Version which the authors of the New Testament would frequently cite without variation. His comment is, "It was not their business, in writing to the Jews, who at that time had it in high esteem, to amend or alter this, which would have occasioned dispute without end."<sup>68</sup> He thus indicates that rather than being the recipients of passive dictation the authors of the New Testament used materials available to them, and were not necessarily careful about exactness with reference to the original autographs of Scripture which they quoted.

He goes further in his comment on the genealogical table with reference to the birth of Christ in the first chapter of Matthew. In speaking of the Jewish genealogical tables used by Matthew and Luke he says that,

...they act only as historians, setting down these genealogies, as they stood in those public and allowed records. Therefore they were to take them as they found them. Nor was it needful they should correct the mistakes, if there were any.

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<sup>68</sup>Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, Vol II, Hebrews 2:7.

For these accounts sufficiently answer the end for which they were recited.<sup>69</sup>

Wesley thus allows for errors in statements of fact at least when those errors do not affect the essence of the message.

It is necessary therefore to interpret Wesley's beliefs in the context of his total teaching concerning the Scriptures. For example, he quotes 2 Timothy 3:16 in one of his sermons: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." And he adds the comment: "Consequently, all Scripture is infallible, true."<sup>70</sup> But J. Kenneth Grider in his article, "Wesleyanism and the Inerrancy Issue" points out that his meaning of "infallible" needs to be interpreted in light of another comment. "In a letter, he said, 'The Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice; and they are clear in all necessary points,' This shows that 'faith and practice' are the 'necessary points' and that those are the points in Scripture he is interested in."<sup>71</sup>

#### The Only and Sufficient Rule

Verbal inspiration and inerrancy were not of course the issues at the time of Wesley that they were to become in the twentieth century with the fundamentalist-modernist

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., Vol. I. Matthew 1:1.

<sup>70</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 193, Sermons XVI, "The Means of Grace".

<sup>71</sup>J. Kenneth Grider, "Wesleyanism and the Inerrancy Issue," Wesleyan Theological Journal, Vol. 19, Number 2, Fall 1984, p. 57.

controversies. The Bible's authority for Wesley as for the Reformers lay not in some view of inerrancy but in its content, the content being the record of and witness to the saving events of God. Wesley's comments concerning Scripture would thus appear to be related to its authority in the "necessary points" of "faith and practice", particularly as those points related to the message of salvation. In writing on "The Character of a Methodist," he says concerning a Methodist's belief in the Bible: "We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice."<sup>72</sup>

For Wesley, it is in matters of Christian faith and practice that Holy Scripture is to be considered as the "book of God,"<sup>73</sup> "the language of the Holy Ghost",<sup>74</sup> the "oracles of God",<sup>75</sup> the "rule of right and wrong of whatever is really good or evil,"<sup>76</sup> "a most solid and precious system of divine truth,"<sup>77</sup> and ultimately as "the one, the only standard of truth."<sup>78</sup> It was in the sense of his reliance

<sup>72</sup>Works, Vol. VII, p. 340.

<sup>73</sup>Works, Vol. V., p. 3, Sermons on Several Occasions, Preface.

<sup>74</sup>Works, Vol. XIV, pp. 238-239. Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, Vol. I. Preface 12.

<sup>75</sup>Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Vol. I, Romans 12:6, and used by Wesley to refer to the Scriptures in other notes and sermons.

<sup>76</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 136.

<sup>77</sup>Works, Vol. XIV, p. 238.

<sup>78</sup>Works, Vol. II, p. 367.

upon the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments for instruction and guidance in matters affecting Divine truth and the Christian life that he considered himself as a "man of one book"<sup>79</sup> and said, "My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible - bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small."<sup>80</sup>

And it was the "following of it" that he particularly emphasized in his teaching and practice. He studied the Bible faithfully himself to the end of personal application of its truths to his own life, rising at four in the morning for most of his life for prayer and Bible reading, as he did for example on the morning of his Aldersgate conversion. During his time at Oxford University he had devised a strict pattern of discipline for the Holy Club of Oxford which he followed himself and which included an hour morning and evening in prayer, a further hour a day for meditation, and throughout the day frequently consulting the Bible,<sup>81</sup> with "one desire and design to be downright Bible-Christians."<sup>82</sup>

In his Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament Wesley provides directions for the profitable reading of Scripture in order that those who used his notes in their reading of the Scriptures would similarly seek for a personal application of scriptural truths to their lives. In the

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<sup>79</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 3.

<sup>80</sup>Works, Vol. III, p. 251. Journal, June 5, 1766.

<sup>81</sup>Howard A. Snyder, The Radical Wesley (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), p. 18.

<sup>82</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 348.

form of questions and statements he asks if it would not be advisable for those who desire to read the Scriptures in such a manner,

(1) To set apart a little time, if you can, every morning and evening for that purpose?

(2) At each time, if you have leisure, to read a chapter out of the Old, and one out of the New, Testament; if you cannot do this, to take a single chapter, or a part of one?

(3) To read this with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it? In order to know his will, you should,

(4) Have a constant eye to the analogy of faith, the connexion and harmony there is between those good fundamental doctrines, original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, inward and outward holiness.

(5) Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used before we consult the oracles of God; seeing "Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given." Our reading should likewise be closed with prayer, that what we read may be written on our hearts.

(6) It might also be of use, if, while we read, we were frequently to pause, and examine ourselves by what we read, both with regard to our hearts and lives. This would furnish us with matter of praise, where we found God had enabled us to conform to his blessed will, and matter of humiliation and prayer, where we were conscious of having fallen short. And whatever light you then receive should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve, begin to execute the first moment you can. So shall you find this word to be indeed the power of God unto present and eternal salvation.<sup>83</sup>

It is this practical application of the Scriptures to life in matters of Christian faith and practice which defines what Wesley meant in describing himself as "'homo unius libri,' 'a man of one book,' regarding none,

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<sup>83</sup>Works, Vol. XIV, p. 253. Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament, Preface 18.

comparatively, but the Bible."<sup>e4</sup> The background of Christian tradition is important to the understanding of that Bible, as are the exercise of reason and the witness of personal experience. But the "one book", the Reformation principle of "sola scriptura", "scripture alone," is at the centre of the theological thought of John Wesley, is the primary focus for his exposition of Christian faith and practice, is the "way to heaven".<sup>e5</sup>

It is through that book, the Word written, that the Holy Spirit reveals the Word made flesh, the Christ, and applies all of the revelatory events of scripture to life - the life of salvation and holiness and a full and eternal enjoyment of God.

Wesley identifies this as the work of the Holy Spirit in his "Letter to a Roman Catholic."

I believe the infinite and Eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy in Himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us; enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of the adoption of sons, leading us in our actions, purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies, to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.<sup>e6</sup>

It is therefore as the Holy Spirit unlocks the truths of Holy Scripture and applies those truths to life that the

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<sup>e4</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 373, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

<sup>e5</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 3. Sermons on Several Occasions, Preface 5.

<sup>e6</sup>Works, Vol. X, p. 82. Letter to a Roman Catholic.

"one book" becomes primary, leading to salvation by faith, holiness of heart and life, and the kingdom of God.

Come, Holy Ghost (for moved by thee  
The prophets wrote and spoke);  
Unlock the truth, thyself the key,  
Unseal the sacred book.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Charles Wesley. The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Volume 7. "A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists," edited by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 185.

## CHAPTER III

## SALVATION BY FAITH (A)

The Foundation of the Christian Religion

Wesley's reference to the book of God teaching the way to heaven suggests what he considered to be the central message of the Bible. Gordon Harland underlines the centrality of that Wesleyan theme when he says,

There is not much debate about the general character of Wesley's message. "Plenteous grace with thee is found": these words from Charles Wesley's familiar hymn sound the central theme. The doctrine and experience of grace became for Wesley the basis of a new way of understanding existence, the spring of purified affections and the source of fresh energies for engaging the tasks and opportunities presented by life. . . As grace sustained and directed his life, so it also became the dynamic centre of his theology, giving distinctive shape to a whole cluster of themes to which he gave prominence. In Thomas Langford's words, "Around this point - the grace of God in Jesus Christ - several attendant commitments form a tight nexus: biblical witness to Jesus Christ, vital experience of God in Christ as Saviour and sanctifier, commitment to human freedom and ethical discipleship, and the shaping of church life around missional responsibility. Together these themes constitute the nucleus of the Wesleyan tradition...."<sup>88</sup>

In establishing the centrality of "salvation by grace through faith alone" Wesley was of course falling in line

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<sup>88</sup>H. Gordon Harland, "John Wesley," Touchstone, October 1984, p. 11. Quotation from Thomas A. Langford, Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), p. 263.

with the Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. But it was a truth also borne out of his own personal experience. He had tried in his early years at Epworth and Oxford and Georgia to gain assurance of salvation by works, by trying to live a godly life, by following Christian disciplines, by serving his fellows, by ministering as a cross-cultural missionary in America. But all of these attempts at salvation by works had proven fruitless.

It was not until the Aldersgate Chapel experience that Wesley knew for a certainty that he was saved, and the essence of that experience was reliance not on anything he could do but only on what God in Christ had done at Calvary. With Martin Luther he had come to recognize that truth which went back to the apostle Paul and before him to the Old Testament record, that salvation is for those who believe, those who have faith. "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"<sup>89</sup> Wesley not only accepted the Protestant Reformation principle of "sola scriptura" (scripture alone), but also that of "sola gratia, sola fide" (by grace alone, by faith alone), the promise of righteousness that "comes by faith, so that it may be by grace."<sup>90</sup>

Wesley emphasized the theme of justification by grace through faith alone in all of his preaching and teaching

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<sup>89</sup>Romans 1:17, N.I.V.

<sup>90</sup>Romans 4:16, N.I.V.

from the Aldersgate Chapel experience of May 1738 and onwards. Twenty-eight years following his personal life-changing experience at Aldersgate, when he was facing a criticism that he was preaching a gospel of salvation by works, Wesley was able to affirm,

I believe justification by faith alone, as much as I believe there is a God. I declared this in a sermon, preached before the University of Oxford, eight-and-twenty years ago....I have never varied from it, no, not an hair's breadth, from 1738 to this day....I absolutely, once for all, renounce every expression which contradicts that fundamental truth, We are justified by Faith alone.<sup>91</sup>

It would appear that Wesley saw his emphasis on this theme as a necessary corrective for his own era, and as confirmation of the Protestant Reformation principle. He lived in an age when his own Anglican Church was in danger of departing from that truth and relying on a gospel of salvation by faith and works, which was the belief he himself had before May 24th, 1738. In a somewhat uncharitable reference to Roman Catholicism and the papacy, he said this in a sermon preached before the University of Oxford less than a month following the Aldersgate experience, a sermon which took as its text Ephesians 2:8 - "By grace are you saved through faith."

....never was the maintaining of this doctrine more seasonable than it is at this day. Nothing but this can effectually prevent the increase of the Roman delusion among us. It is needless to attack, one by one, all the errors of that Church. But salvation by faith strikes at the root, and all fall at once where this is established. It was this doctrine which our Church justly calls the

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<sup>91</sup>Works, Vol. X, p. 349.

strong rock and foundation of the Christian religion, that first drove Papacy out of this kingdom and it is this alone can keep it out.<sup>92</sup>

While holiness of heart and life and perfect love were to become important aspects of the teaching of John Wesley, these must be considered as the outworkings of the Christian's faith-life. They are not the source of salvation, for salvation is by grace through faith alone, but the justification which is by faith alone produces good works. Wesley points this out in his sermon on "Salvation by Faith" when he deals with the usual objection to this emphasis.

The First usual objection to this is,  
 1. That "to preach salvation, or justification, by faith only, is to preach against holiness and good works." To which a short answer might be given: "It would be so, if we spoke, as some do, of a faith which was separate from them: But we speak of a faith which is not so, but productive of all good works, and all holiness."<sup>93</sup>

While the holiness motif will be dealt with as a separate aspect of Wesley's theology, it is really part of the total salvation emphasis. Wesley made the mistake of putting the ideal of holy living before the experience of justification in his own life. In what is sometimes referred to as his "first conversion" in 1725 after reading Bishop Taylor's Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying, he made a resolution to dedicate all of his life to God, all

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<sup>92</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 15, Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon I, Salvation by Faith."

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

of his thoughts and words and actions.<sup>94</sup> But the striving towards this ideal was met with frustration until the experience of Aldersgate with its assurance that he was justified by grace through faith. The resolution was then converted from a self-striving to a reliance upon the grace of God and the outworkings of a faith in that grace.

Aldersgate was Wesley's personal, inward appropriation of the meaning of justification by grace. It was "the dramatic moment" to use Outler's words "when he reversed the priorities between sola fide and holy living, never to reverse them again." This experience set him free from the anxious self-concern that had heretofore marred his labour.<sup>95</sup>

That is not to negate the importance of resolutions and discipline but rather to place them in their proper place. Salvation by grace through faith is the point of beginning in the life of a Christian. Outler suggests that Wesley's premise established the priorities of "salvation, faith and good works" but with the watchword of "sola fide" suggesting that "our aspiration to holiness is as truly a function of faith as justification itself is. The faith that justifies bears its fruits in the faith that works by love."<sup>96</sup>

And so it is that Wesley could say,

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<sup>94</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 366. A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

<sup>95</sup>H. Gordon Harland, "John Wesley," Touchstone, October 1984, p. 9. Quotation from Albert C. Outler, in Kenneth E. Rowe (ed.), The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition, p. 20.

<sup>96</sup>Albert C. Outler, John Wesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 27, 28.

....that from May 24, 1738, "wherever I was desired to preach, salvation by faith was my only theme;" - that is, such a love of God and man, as produces all inward and outward holiness, and springs from a conviction, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost, of the pardoning love of God.<sup>97</sup>

### The Doctrine of Sin

In order properly to understand Wesley's foundation theme of "salvation by faith" it is necessary to be knowledgeable of his doctrine of sin, and that of original sin in particular. Here again, Professor Outler's insights into the theological thought of Wesley are invaluable.

Professor Outler suggests that Wesley's "driving passion was to find a third alternative to Pelagian optimism and Augustinian pessimism with respect to the human flaw and the human potential."<sup>98</sup> Pelagian optimism contends "that man is able to sin or not to sin as he chooses,"<sup>99</sup> while Augustinian pessimism suggests "that we are sinful by nature i.e., that the power only to sin is the actual human condition."<sup>100</sup> The first is a "gospel of self-salvation" which Wesley found from personal experience to be impossible and which denied the principle of salvation by faith, the concept of original sin being "the general ground of the

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<sup>97</sup>Works, Vol. XII, p. 71. "Letters to Mr. John Smith," XXXIX, December 30, 1745.

<sup>98</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 35.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

whole doctrine of justification."<sup>101</sup> The second had two variations both of which were also unacceptable to Wesley.

The first of these variations is that which Albert Outler sees as being represented by Lutheranism, that although the sinful nature remains, grace abounds, the unmerited favour of God by which one is "justified before God and still a sinner all at the same time - but your being justified by grace is what really counts."<sup>102</sup> At its farthest extreme this view could lead to the antinomianism of the Moravians which finally caused a rift between Wesley and those who had originally led him to the assurance of salvation. He came to be suspect of their "quietism," their tendencies towards spiritual complacency which disregarded the value of works and the keeping of the law.<sup>103</sup> It should be noted of course that Lutheranism does not go this far but rather stresses "good works following after faith."<sup>104</sup>

The second variation of Augustinian pessimism is that which Outler sees represented by Calvinism, "that sin is

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<sup>101</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 55. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon V, "Justification by Faith."

<sup>102</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 49.

<sup>103</sup>Albert C. Outler, John Wesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 353. cf. Works, Vol. X, pp. 201-202: "The difference between the Moravian doctrine and ours...lies here....That Christ has taken away all other commands and duties, having wholly 'abolished the law;' that a believer is therefore, 'free from the law,' is not obliged thereby to do or omit anything; it being inconsistent with his liberty to do anything as commanded."

<sup>104</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 49.

radical and that justification is by divine fiat,"<sup>105</sup> with God's divine sovereign irresistible grace predestinating that some, the chosen ones or the elect, would eternally "have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them and so come to be regarded as righteous by God for Christ's sake, having no righteousness of their own to plead."<sup>106</sup> This was unacceptable to Wesley because of its limitations to the freedom of man's will.

Wesley accepted the Augustinian pessimism about human nature unaided by God. He accepted the concept of original sin, that although men and women were created in a state of innocence, they fell into sin through disobedience, with the consequence of a totally depraved human nature. He states this clearly throughout his lengthy treatise on "The Doctrine of Original Sin According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience." One small section of that treatise presents somewhat of a summary.

The unrenewed will is wholly perverse....man was created looking directly to God, as his last end; but, falling into sin, he fell off from God, and turned into himself. Now, this infers a total apostasy and universal corruption in man; for where the last end is changed, there can be no real goodness. And this is the case of all men in their natural state: They seek not God, but themselves. Hence though many fair shreds of morality are among them, yet "there is none that doeth good, no, not one." For though some of them "run well," they are still off the way; they never aim at the right mark. Withersoever they move, they cannot move beyond the circle of self. They seek themselves, they act for themselves; their natural, civil, and

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

religious actions, from whatever spring they come, do all run into, and meet in, this dead sea....

Here is "a threefold cord" against Heaven, not easily broken, - a blind mind, a perverse will, disordered affections. The mind, swelled with pride, says, The man should not stoop; the will, opposite to the will of God, says, He will not; and the corrupt affections, rising against the Lord, in defence of this corrupt will, say, He shall not. And thus we stand out against God, till we are created anew in Christ Jesus.<sup>107</sup>

But the question remains - how does corrupt man come to the position of being "created anew in Christ Jesus"? Wesley apparently believed that Lutheranism had not adequately responded to that question and left "open the question as to why some people accept their acceptance (by God) while so many others apparently do not."<sup>108</sup> His view of Calvinism was that it responded to the question by indicating that God's grace was irresistibly extended to some as a matter of the divine sovereign will - that the elect could do no other than accept by faith the free gift of God's grace. How was Wesley to conteract that denial of free will without falling into the trap of Pelagianism with its false reliance upon self-salvation or moral rectitude? How was he to escape the emphasis on "moral effort, encouraged, sanctioned and rewarded" by the Anglican Church of his day, including "the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and a sacramental life that, in some sense,

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<sup>107</sup>Works, Vol. IX, pp. 456-457. "The Doctrine of Original Sin".

<sup>108</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 26.

guaranteed grace"<sup>109</sup> through administering the means of forgiveness for the moral failures which inevitably ensued?

The response of Wesley was to introduce an essentially new concept - an alternative definition of total depravity which allowed that no man is wholly devoid of the prevenient grace of God, but a prevenient grace which could be resisted by the human will.

### Prevenient Grace

The Augustinian-Calvinist concept of original sin and total depravity was that sin pervades the whole being of natural man. John Calvin put it this way: "that whatever is in man, from the understanding to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, has been defiled and crammed with this concupiscence. Or, to put it more briefly, the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence...."<sup>110</sup> The will of man is so infected by his perverted depraved nature that "free will is not sufficient to enable man to do good works, unless he be helped by grace, indeed by special grace, which only the elect receive through regeneration."<sup>111</sup>

Augustine said this with reference to human will and divine grace: "that the wills of men are prevented ('are started,' 'set going,' hence 'prevenient' grace) by the

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<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>110</sup>Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2.1.8, from John T. McNeill (editor), The Library of Christian Classics volume XX (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 252.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 2.2.6, p. 262.

grace of God, and that it is God who makes them to will the good which they refused...."<sup>112</sup> "Therefore assistance was bestowed on the weaknesses of man's will, that it might be unalterably and irresistibly influenced by divine grace."<sup>113</sup>

John Wesley could not agree with what he saw in Calvin and Augustine, that man is nothing but evil desire and can therefore only be saved by irresistible grace. But neither could he agree with Pelagius that we are born "with a capacity for good and evil."<sup>114</sup> As we have seen, he maintained the doctrine of original sin and total depravity in that no part of human nature escapes the power of sin so that man is powerless and unable to save himself. However, his doctrine of total depravity was an "essentially catholic view of sin as a malignant disease rather than an obliteration of the imago Dei in fallen human nature."<sup>115</sup> For Wesley, man's natural state therefore is in some sense a state of grace so that all men are able to make a faith response to the will of God. That possibility of a faith response is due to the prevenient or preventing grace of God in man rather than due to the Pelagian view of an equal capacity for either good or evil. It is not due to man's effort but due to God's grace, that grace of which no man is

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<sup>112</sup>Henry Bettenson (ed.) Documents of the Christian Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 78. "Augustine on Prevenient Grace."

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 79. "Irresistible Grace," Augustine.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 75. "Pelagius denies Original Sin."

<sup>115</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 34.

devoid unless he has deliberately quenched the Spirit of God. In his sermon, "Working Out Our Own Salvation," Wesley stresses the truth of Philippians 2:13 that it is God working in us that issues in our capacity to work out our salvation.

....allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed preventing grace. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Every one has, sooner or later, good desires; although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root, or produce any considerable fruit. Every one has some measure of light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world.<sup>116</sup>

Professor Outler suggests that the Wesleyan view of prevenient grace, the grace which comes before conversion, enabling grace, thus "functions as an alternative to election," and that "what is original here is Wesley's stout upholding of the sovereignty of grace but not its irresistibility."<sup>117</sup>

Salvation by faith begins then with preventing or prevenient grace, grace which can be resisted by the free will of man, but if accepted becomes,

...the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight

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<sup>116</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 512. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon LXXXV, "Working Out Our Own Salvation."

<sup>117</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 37.

transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.<sup>118</sup>

Colin Williams suggests that in bringing together his doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace Wesley combines what Gordon Rupp calls a "pessimism of nature" with an "optimism of grace".<sup>119</sup> Wesley has been criticized for underestimating the "pessimism of nature" in some of his teachings on sanctification and holiness, not being sufficiently realistic in recognizing the continued possibility of sinning and the consequent continuing need for the forgiveness and renewal of grace. But certainly at the point of original sin and prevenient grace he is one with the Reformers in admitting that man "coram deo," unaided man in the presence of a Holy God, is,

... "wretched, and poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked." He is convicted that he is spiritually poor indeed; having no spiritual good abiding in him. "In me," saith he, "dwelleth no good thing," but whatsoever is evil and abominable. He has a deep sense of the loathsome leprosy of sin, which he brought with him from his mother's womb, which overspreads his whole soul, and totally corrupts every power and faculty thereof.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 509. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon LXXXV, "Working Out Our Own Salvation."

<sup>119</sup>Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 54, Quotation from G. Rupp, Principalities and Powers (London: Epworth Press, 1952), pp. 77ff.

<sup>120</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 253. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XXI, "Sermon on the Mount - 1."

That is the pessimism of human nature. And all man can do is fall on the grace of God in Christ, the grace of the Cross which offers forgiveness and new life.

Be it all thy hope to be washed in His blood, and renewed by his almighty Spirit, who himself "bare all our sins in his own body on the tree!" So shalt thou witness, "Happy are the poor in Spirit: For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."<sup>121</sup>

And that is the optimism of grace - forgiveness and new life through the Cross of Christ, salvation through faith!

### The Atonement

Before considering the subjective or experiential aspects of salvation by faith, it is of importance to note that for Wesley that which may be considered subjective is dependent on the objective fact of the atonement of Christ on the cross. Because of distinctive Wesleyan experiential features such as repentance and faith and the assurance of the new birth, there is a danger that the centrality of the cross in Wesley's thought may not be given the prominence it deserves. A proof-texting of Wesley's own writings might cause one to think that the doctrine of the atonement was not one of the primary essentials in his thinking. For example, when he wrote to a number of clergymen about effecting a union amongst them, he suggested that those involved would have to agree on three essentials,

- I. Original Sin.
- II. Justification by Faith.

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<sup>121</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

III. Holiness of Heart and Life; provided their life be answerable to the doctrine.<sup>122</sup>

That Wesley saw the doctrine of the atonement as central to each of the above is however clear from his other writings. For example in the first of his discourses on the Sermon on the Mount, after dealing with the recognition that one is totally "poor in spirit", totally depraved with a deep sense of the "loathsome leprosy of sin," Wesley then deals with the way by which the totally depraved might inherit the kingdom of heaven.

"Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Whosoever thou art, to whom God hath given to be "poor in spirit," to feel thyself lost, thou hast a right thereto, through the gracious promise of Him who cannot lie. It is purchased for thee by the Blood of the Lamb. It is very nigh: Thou art on the brink of heaven! Another step, and thou enterest into the kingdom of righteousness, and peace, and joy! Art thou all sin? "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world!" - all unholy? See thy "advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous!" - Art thou unable to atone for the least of thy sins? "He is the propitiation for" all thy "sins". Now believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and all thy sins are blotted out! - Art thou totally unclean in soul and body? Here is the "fountain for sin and uncleanness!" "Arise, and wash away thy sins!" Stagger no more at the promise through unbelief! Give glory to God! Dare to believe! Now cry out, from the ground of thy heart, -

Yes, I yield, I yield at last  
Listen to thy speaking blood;  
Me, with all my sins, I cast  
On my atoning God.<sup>123</sup>

It is clear from the above that original sin ("all sin"), justification by faith ("dare to believe"), and

<sup>122</sup>Works, Vol. III, p. 170, Journal, April 19, 1764.

<sup>123</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 257. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XXI, "Sermon on the Mount - 1".

Holiness of Heart and Life ("all unholy") are all dealt with by the Blood of the Lamb, by Christ the propitiation for sins, by the "atoning God". The essentials for unity amongst God's servants therefore find their meeting at the cross where God deals with the sin of the world through that inexhaustible grace which causes Him to take their sins unto Himself in the sacrifice of Christ. The sense of grace is thus at the core of Wesley's concept of the atonement as it is for Luther and Calvin.

One of the distinctive features of Wesleyan theology with reference to the atonement is that its benefits are not limited to the elect as Augustinian-Calvinistic theology would suggest. Prevenient grace therefore is a benefit of the atonement since Christ tasted death for every man. In a "Letter to a Person Lately Joined with the Quakers," Wesley says that there is no difference between "Quakerism and Christianity" on this point.

God out of his infinite love hath so loved the world that he gave his only Son, to the end that whosoever believeth on him might have everlasting life. And he enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world, as he tasted death for every man.

The benefit of the death of Christ is not only extended to such as have the distinct knowledge of his death and sufferings, but even unto those who are inevitably excluded from that knowledge. Even these may be partakers of the benefit of his death, though ignorant of the history, if they suffer his grace to take place in their hearts, so as of wicked men to become holy.<sup>124</sup>

Even the salvation of the heathen is thus related to the death of Christ on the cross, as also are "infants,

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<sup>124</sup>Works, Vol. X, pp. 178-179.

being baptized and dying in their infancy...by this sacrifice washed from their sins."<sup>125</sup>

Wesley claimed that "nothing in the Christian system is of greater consequence than the doctrine of the Atonement."<sup>126</sup> Professor Outler says that "In a hundred different ways on thousands of different occasions, decade after five decades, his one consistent message was Jesus Christ and him crucified - Christus crucifixus, Christus redemptor, Christus victor."<sup>127</sup>

And can it be, that I should gain  
An interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain?  
For me? Who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for  
me?<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>Albert C. Outler, John Wesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 124. "The Doctrine of Salvation, Faith and Good Works, Extracted from the Homilies of the Church of England" and accepted by Wesley as his own beliefs.

<sup>126</sup>Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), p. 76. Quotation from Letters VI, 297-87.

<sup>127</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 45.

<sup>128</sup>Charles Wesley, The Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7. "A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists" edited by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 322.

CHAPTER IV  
SALVATION BY FAITH (B)

Repentance and Faith

In order for the benefits of the atonement to be fully operative, the objective fact of Christ's dying on the cross for the sins of men must be personally appropriated. And here we move from that which is objective to that which is subjective or experiential and which relates to man's response to God's grace. The first stage of that experiential appropriation in Wesley's thought is that God's prevenient grace or enabling grace ordinarily leads first to "convincing grace" or that which in Scripture is termed "repentance".<sup>129</sup>

Wesley makes a very separate distinction between repentance and faith. Colin Williams points out that in this respect he differs from Luther and Calvin who "include two movements in justifying faith: (1) repentance (2) trust in Christ. Wesley limits it (i.e., justifying faith) to the latter moment of conscious acceptance of Christ, accompanied by a sense of forgiveness."<sup>130</sup> Repentance thus precedes faith.

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<sup>129</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 509. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon LXXXV, "Working Out Our Own Salvation."

<sup>130</sup>Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), p. 64.

For Wesley, repentance is the result of the convincing grace of the Holy Spirit which arises from prevenient grace and leads to saving grace. It includes the conviction of sinfulness with the awareness of a need for a Saviour, and also the indication of the intent for change, as "the works meet for repentance...obeying God as far as we can, forgiving our brother, leaving off from evil, choosing good, and using his ordinances according to the power we have received."<sup>131</sup>

The conviction part of repentance comes about through the awareness which the Holy Spirit brings to us as to our failure to meet the requirements of God. Therefore, the "ordinary method of God is to convict sinners by the law"<sup>132</sup> rather than through the preaching of the Gospel. It is an awareness of the law of God which causes a man to be conscious of his own failures, of the sickness of sin. The preaching of the Gospel on the other hand is the offer of a physician for the disease of sin, but "it is absurd...to offer a physician to those that are whole, or that at least imagine themselves to be. You are first to convince them that they are sick; otherwise they will not thank you for your labour."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, pp. 275-276. Minutes of Some Later Conversations, Conversation I, June 25, 1744.

<sup>132</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 449. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XXXV, "The Law Established Through Faith."

<sup>133</sup>Ibid.

This conviction of sin and of a need for a Saviour thus is the focal point of repentance which is the "porch of religion" leading to justifying faith or the "door" which in turn is the entrance to that holiness which is "religion itself."<sup>134</sup> Repentance is not justifying faith but leads to justifying faith. Wesley even goes so far as to say that a man may be justified without that repentance which includes bringing forth fruits meet for repentance since these are works and we are not saved by works. Repentance is only necessary "conditionally; if there be time and opportunity," while "faith is the only condition which is immediately and proximately necessary to justification."<sup>135</sup>

It is therefore the response of faith in the work of Christ, by grace through faith alone, that a man is justified. And what is the nature of that faith?

It is not, as some have fondly conceived, a bare assent to the truth of the Bible, of the articles of our Creed, or of all that is contained in the Old and New Testament. The devils believe this, as well as I or thou! And yet they are devils still. But it is, over and above this, a sure trust in the mercy of God, through Christ Jesus. It is a confidence in a pardoning God. It is a divine evidence or conviction that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing to them their" former "trespasses;" and, in particular, that the Son of God hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that I, even I, am now reconciled to God by the blood of the cross.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 472. "Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained."

<sup>135</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 48. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLIII, "The Scripture Way of Salvation."

<sup>136</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 85. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon VII, "The Way to the Kingdom."

Wesley also has a cautionary word about the nature of justification. He says that "it is not the being actually just and righteous. That is sanctification; which is, indeed, in some degree, the immediate fruit of justification, but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature. The one implies what God does for us through his Son; the other, what he works in us by his Spirit."<sup>137</sup>

But Wesley does not feel comfortable with the term "imputed righteousness" to distinguish justification from the "imparted righteousness" of sanctification.<sup>138</sup> He fears that this notion could be mistaken to imply "that God is deceived in those whom he justifies; that he thinks them to be what, in fact, they are not; that he accounts them to be otherwise than they are. It does by no means imply that God judges concerning us contrary to the real nature of things; that he esteems us better than we really are or believes us righteous when we are unrighteous."<sup>139</sup> Our sins are covered or blotted out and God "watches over us for good, even as if we had never sinned."<sup>140</sup> But that is because we are

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<sup>137</sup>Ibid., p. 56. Sermon V, "Justification by Faith."

<sup>138</sup>Works, Vol. X, p. 318. "A Treatise on Justification."

<sup>139</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 57. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon V, "Justification by Faith."

<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

pardoned, forgiven. "The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins."<sup>141</sup>

Wesley summarizes his thoughts on justification by saying,

I believe, three things must go together in our justification: upon God's part, his great mercy and grace; upon Christ's part, the satisfaction of God's justice, by the offering of his body, and shedding his blood; and upon our part, true and living faith in the merits of Jesus Christ....

And therefore St. Paul requires nothing on the part of man, but only true and living faith. Yet this faith does not shut out repentance, hope, and love, which are joined with faith in every man that is justified. But it shuts them out from the office of justifying.<sup>142</sup>

### The New Birth

Simultaneous with justification by faith in Wesley's thought was the act of the new birth, of regeneration. His opening words in his sermon on "The New Birth" suggest the relationship between justification and regeneration and the primacy of these two doctrines.

If any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental, they are doubtless two, - the doctrine of justification, and that of the new birth: The former relating to that great work which God does for us, in forgiving our sins; the latter, to the great work which God does in us, in reviving our fallen nature. In order of time, neither of these is before the other; in the moment we are justified by the grace of God, through the redemption that is in Jesus, we are also "born of the Spirit;" but in order of thinking, as it is termed, justification precedes the new birth. We first conceive the wrath

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<sup>141</sup>Ibid.

<sup>142</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, pp. 361-362. "Principles of a Methodist."

to be turned away, and then his Spirit to work in our hearts.<sup>143</sup>

The new birth or regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit as is the total salvation process. It is the Holy Spirit who is operative in prevenient grace in the conscience of man or the inward light which is common to all men: "it is his Spirit who giveth thee an inward check, who causeth thee to feel uneasy, when thou walkest in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given thee."<sup>144</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who is operative in convincing and convicting grace or repentance: "it is the ordinary method of the Spirit of God to convict by the law."<sup>145</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who is operative in saving grace which has to do with our being justified by faith in the pardoning mercy of God: "a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost; a confidence whereby every true believer is enabled to bear witness, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' that I have an 'Advocate with the Father,' and that 'Jesus Christ the righteous' is my Lord, and 'the propitiation for my sins'."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup>Works, Vol. VI, pp. 65-66. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLIV, "The New Birth."

<sup>144</sup>Works, Vol. VII, p. 188. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon CV, "On Conscience."

<sup>145</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 443. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XXXIV, "The Original, Nature, Property, and Use of the Law."

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., p. 205. Sermon XVII, "The Circumcision of the Heart."

But Wesley's references to the new birth, to regeneration, are particularly replete with an emphasis on this being the work of the Holy Spirit of God as one is "born of the Spirit" and a change is "wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is 'created anew in Christ Jesus'."<sup>147</sup> That is of course the emphasis of the encounter which Nicodemus had with our Lord as recorded in John 3 with Spirit giving birth to spirit in him who is born again of the Spirit.<sup>148</sup>

It is in his sermon on John 3:7, "Ye must be born again," that Wesley particularly develops his teaching on regeneration.<sup>149</sup> That discourse has as its goal that of giving a full, and at the same time a clear, account of the new birth. He first of all deals with why we must be born again - because while man was born in the image of God as a creation full of love, in Adam he fell from that high estate and "died to God - the most dreadful of all deaths. He lost the life of God: He was separated from Him, in union with whom his spiritual life consisted."<sup>150</sup> "And in Adam all died, all human kind, all the children of men who were then in Adam's loins. The natural consequence of this is, that every one descended from him comes into the world

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<sup>147</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 71. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLV, "The New Birth."

<sup>148</sup>John 3:8.

<sup>149</sup>Works, Vol. VI, pp. 65-77. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLV, "The New Birth."

<sup>150</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

spiritually dead, dead to God, wholly dead in sin; entirely void of the life of God; void of the image of God....Hence every one that is born of a woman must be born of the Spirit of God."<sup>151</sup>

Wesley then deals with the question as to how a man is born again, the nature of the new birth. Our Lord indicates to Nicodemus that the effect of the new birth is of more importance than its rational explanation, just as the effect of the wind is real regardless of whether or not we understand how it came to be. Nicodemus as a teacher in Israel would have been familiar with the concept itself since it was used in reference to an adult heathen who became a Jew and "was said to be born again; by which they meant, that he who was before a child of the devil was now adopted into the family of God, and accounted one of his children."<sup>152</sup> But Nicodemus apparently did not fully understand how that familiar concept related to change in the life of one born again of the Spirit.

To be born again of God is to know a change as radical as that of one's first birth when he leaves the womb and his eyes begin to see the light, his ears hear the sounds around him, and he breathes and lives in a manner wholly different from what he did before. Similarly one who is born again of the Spirit has the eyes of his understanding opened so that he can see the light of the glory of God in the face of

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<sup>151</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

Jesus Christ. His ears now hear the inward voice of God saying, "Be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee. Go and sin no more." He feels the mighty working of the Spirit of God and "now he may be properly said to live: God having quickened him by his Spirit, he is alive to God through Jesus Christ. He lives a life which the world knoweth not of, a 'life which is hid with Christ in God.' God is continually breathing, as it were, upon the soul; and his soul is breathing unto God."<sup>153</sup>

Wesley's third question is to what end it is necessary that we are born again. He replies that the first end is that of holiness with the image of God's love in Christ Jesus stamped upon the heart. The new birth is necessary in order to obtain eternal salvation because without holiness no man shall see the face of God in glory and he cannot be holy unless he is born again. The new birth is necessary for true happiness because "every desire which is not according to the will of God is liable to 'pierce' us 'through with many sorrows'."<sup>154</sup>

The final paragraph of Wesley's sermon on "The New Birth" is particularly dramatic. He indicates that it is not enough to have the sacrament of baptism, not enough to do no harm to any man, not enough to do all the good you can, not enough to go to church twice a day or to go to the Lord's table every week or say ever so many prayers or hear

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<sup>153</sup>Ibid., p. 70-71.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., p. 72-73.

ever so many good sermons or read ever so many good books.

And then he adds:

None of these things will stand in the place of the new birth; no, nor anything under heaven. Let this therefore, if you have not already experienced this inward work of God, be your continual prayer: "Lord, add this to all thy blessings, - let me be born again! Deny whatever thou pleasest, but deny not this; let me be 'born from above !' Take away whatsoever seemeth thee good, - reputation, fortune, friends, health, - only give me this, to be born of the Spirit, to be received among the children of God! Let me be born, 'not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever;' and then let me daily 'grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!'"<sup>155</sup>

Professor Outler points out that in this emphasis on regeneration Wesley was "committed to a doctrine of justification that involved both a relative and a real change in the forgiven sinner (a relative change in one's forensic status before God and a real change in the moral quality of one's interpersonal relationships)."<sup>156</sup> It is therefore not only what God does for us on the Cross of Calvary to speak His word of forgiveness, but what God does in us through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit of Christ whereby there is "an actual change of character, along with the change in the God-human relationship."<sup>157</sup>

Wesley thus accepts the Protestant emphasis of "sola fide" bringing about a change in the God-human relationship

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<sup>155</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>156</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 52.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid.

through justification by faith alone. But he also adds the Anglican and Catholic emphasis of life in Christ being imparted to the believer, though not by sacramental infusion but rather by the new birth.

The change of regeneration, of the new birth, is the personal appropriation of the promise received through the apostle Paul that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"<sup>158</sup> Paul's words suggest a radical crisis-point experience. Wesley too suggested that while regeneration is only the beginning to a new life in Christ, it is normally an instantaneous beginning just as "a child is born of a woman in a moment, or at least in a very short time."<sup>159</sup> He does seem to allow for variations to this however and emphasizes that the important thing is the experience itself rather than its timing:

....the moment a penitent sinner believes this (that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me), God pardons and absolves him.

And as soon as his pardon or justification is witnessed to him by the Holy Ghost, he is saved. He loves God and all mankind. He has "the mind that was in Christ," and promises to "walk as he also walked." From that time (unless he make shipwreck of the faith) salvation gradually increases in his soul; and it springeth up, "first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear."

The first sowing of this seed I cannot conceive to be other than instantaneous; whether I consider experience, or the word of God, or the very nature

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<sup>158</sup>2 Corinthians 5:17. N.I.V.

<sup>159</sup>Works, Vol. VI. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLV, "The New Birth."

of the thing; - however, I contend not for a circumstance, but the substance: If you can attain it another way, do. Only see that you do attain it; for if you fall short, you perish everlastingly,

The beginning of that vast, inward change, is usually termed the new birth.<sup>160</sup>

### Assurance

For Wesley the great issue leading to his Aldersgate experience was to know for sure that he was saved by faith, justified, born again, adopted into the family of God. The great issue was assurance, the inward witness of the Spirit of God. That is the issue which relates to the impression made upon him by words expressed more than once by his father on his death-bed, words which at the time John Wesley did not really understand. "'The inward witness, son, the inward witness,' said he to me, 'that is the proof, the strongest proof, of Christianity'....I think the last words he spoke, when I had just commended his soul to God, were, 'Now you have done all.' And with the same serene, cheerful countenance he fell asleep, without one struggle, or sigh, or groan. I cannot therefore doubt but the Spirit of God bore an inward witness with his Spirit, that he was a child of God."<sup>161</sup>

That was the assurance which Wesley searched for through those struggles to earn the favour of God which

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<sup>160</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 48. A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.

<sup>161</sup>Works, Vol. XII, p. 100. "Letters to Mr. John Smith," March 22, 1747-8.

eventually took him to the missionary fiasco in Georgia. The assurance finally came, not through human merit but rather through the faith experience at Aldersgate on May 24, 1738: "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation"<sup>162</sup> He knew he was justified by grace through faith. And as new impulses and strength and peace and victory ensued, he knew he was born again of the Spirit of God.

He believed that such assurance was available to all who truly trusted in Christ for salvation. In later years he did admit that there could be some who were in the favour of God through justifying faith but did not have a consciousness of their acceptance. Even he did not at first experience the joy he thought he should have known after Aldersgate,<sup>163</sup> and recognized that disorder of the body or ignorance of the gospel promises might hinder the assurance of the inward witness. "Therefore," he said in a letter dated thirty years after Aldersgate, "I have not for many years thought a consciousness of acceptance to be essential to justifying faith."<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup>Works, Vol. I, p. 193. Journal, May 24, 1738.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid. "...it was not long before the enemy suggested, 'This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?' Then was I taught, that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation: But that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of his own will."

<sup>164</sup>Works, Vol. XIV, p. 348. "Letter to Dr. Rutherford," March 28, 1768.

Nevertheless even in the letter just quoted, he indicated his belief that "a consciousness of being in the favour of God (which I do not term plerophory, or full assurance, since it is frequently weakened, nay perhaps interrupted, by returns of doubt or fear) is the common privilege of Christians, fearing God and working righteousness."<sup>165</sup> Still others do have that "plerophory" or full assurance from God of everlasting salvation and of being now in the favour of God, an assurance which "excludes all doubt and fear."<sup>166</sup>

And just one year earlier than the year of his letter allowing for exceptions to the rule of assurance, Wesley wrote a sermon which indicated that the emphasis on this doctrine ought to be one of the main concerns of Methodism.

It more nearly concerns the Methodists, so called, clearly to understand, explain, and defend this doctrine; because it is one grand part of the testimony which God has given them to bear to all mankind. It is by his peculiar blessing upon them in searching the Scriptures, confirmed by the experience of his children, that this great evangelical truth has been recovered, which had been for many years well nigh lost and forgotten.<sup>167</sup>

Much earlier he had described the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit or "perceptible inspiration" as "the main doctrine of the Methodists. This is the substance of

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<sup>165</sup>Ibid.

<sup>166</sup>Ibid.

<sup>167</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 124. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XI, "The Witness of the Spirit," April 4, 1767.

what we all preach." He went further in this letter of 1745 than he was willing to go in 1768 and stated quite emphatically, "No one can be a true Christian without such an inspiration of the Holy Ghost as fills his heart with peace, and joy, and love; which he who perceives not, has it not." And he added, "This is the point for which alone I contend; and this I take to be the very foundation of Christianity."<sup>168</sup>

Two of his sermons on "The Witness of the Spirit" deal with Romans 8:16: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." In these discourses he enunciates the marks of the children of God as loving God and our neighbour and keeping God's commandments.<sup>169</sup> This is known by the inward witness of the child of God as he knows himself if he loves, rejoices, and delights in God. But antecedent to the testimony of our own spirit is that of the Spirit of God Himself relating to our repentance and pardon and new birth. "The Spirit of God does give a believer such a testimony of his adoption, that while it is present to the soul, he can no more doubt the reality of his sonship, than he can doubt of the shining of the sun, while he stands in the full blaze of his beams."<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup>Works, Vol. XII, pp. 70-71. "Letter to Mr. John Smith," December 30, 1745.

<sup>169</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 114. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon X, "The Witness of the Spirit."

<sup>170</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

The immediate result of the testimony of the Spirit of God with our spirit, the "inward impression of the soul,"<sup>171</sup> is the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. The direct witness of the Spirit within is not therefore just related to feelings, to emotions, but to a change in character and attitude. The sense of assurance is not merely psychological. The inward impression of the soul is to be linked to the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit for an awareness of full assurance.

Two inferences may be drawn from the whole: The First, let none ever presume to rest in any supposed testimony of the Spirit which is separate from the fruit of it. If the Spirit of God does really testify that we are the children of God, the immediate consequence will be the fruit of the Spirit....And however this fruit may be clouded for a while, during the time of strong temptation...yet the substantial part of it remains, even under the thickest cloud....

The Second inference is, let none rest in any supposed fruit of the Spirit without the witness....there may be a degree of long-suffering, of gentleness, of fidelity, meekness, temperance...before we "are accepted in the Beloved" and, consequently, before we have a testimony of our acceptance: But it is by no means advisable to rest here; it is at the peril of our souls if we do. If we are wise, we shall be continually crying to God, until his Spirit cry in our heart, "Abba, Father!"<sup>172</sup>

Thus we are guarded from two dangers in the matter of assurance. The emphasis on the direct witness of the Spirit with our spirits, that "inward impression of the soul,"

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<sup>171</sup>Ibid., p. 124, Sermon XI, "The Witness of the Spirit II".

<sup>172</sup>Ibid., pp. 133-134.

takes us beyond what Colin Williams terms "moralism" which turns us away from "the gospel's liberating trust in Christ's work for us" and focuses upon earning salvation by our own effort. But on the other hand, the emphasis on the fruit of the Spirit takes us beyond what Williams terms "psychologism, with its temptation to turn back in upon ourselves and the consequent spiritual paralysis caused by the awareness of our disordered spirits."<sup>173</sup>

That double assurance safeguard can aid towards the proper discernment as to what is the witness of the Spirit of God on the one hand or a delusion on the other. And it can help towards taking our assurance beyond feelings, feelings which are so easily affected by our disordered spirits. But still, doubts may arise even with that double assurance.

In a sermon entitled "Satan's Devices," Wesley deals with doubts which come to the soul sometimes in sickness and pain, sometimes simply through self-analysis. Satan may damage our joy or attack our peace,

Or, if we hold fast, "Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, even Jesus Christ;" and, "I am justified freely by God's grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus;" yet he will not cease to urge, "But the tree is known by its fruits; And have you the fruits of justification? Is that mind in you which was in Christ Jesus? Are you dead unto sin, and alive unto righteousness? Are you made conformable to the death of Christ, and do you know the power of his resurrection? And thus, comparing the small fruits we feel in our souls with the fullness of

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<sup>173</sup>Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 107.

the promises, we shall be ready to consider, "Surely God hath not said that my sins are forgiven me! Surely, I have not received the remission of my sins; for what lot have I among the sanctified?"<sup>174</sup>

Wesley suggested several retorts to such devices of Satan. But one of his retorts particularly stands out, a retort somewhat in line with Martin Luther's contention that "our feelings may say 'you are a sinner,' but we may reply, 'I know I am a sinner but Christ forgives sinners.'"<sup>175</sup> Wesley's retort even verges on the exhortation of the twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich, "Simply accept the fact that you are accepted."<sup>176</sup> Wesley's retort is more Christocentric and Scripture based than that of Tillich but its impact is similarly to chase away doubts which may arise in the mind of a believer as to his acceptance into the favour of God.

....hold fast that, "Not by works of righteousness which I have done, I am found in him; I am accepted in the Beloved; not having my own righteousness, (as the cause, either in whole or in part, of our justification before God), but that which is by faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." O bind this about your neck: Write it upon the table of thy heart. Wear it as a bracelet upon thy arm, as frontlets between thine eyes: "I am 'justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.'" Value

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<sup>174</sup>Works, Vol. VI, pp. 34-35. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLII, "Satan's Devices."

<sup>175</sup>Quoted by Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 106.

<sup>176</sup>Quoted by Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 49. Quotation from Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 162.

and esteem, more and more, that precious truth, "By grace we are saved through faith." Admire, more and more, the free grace of God, in so loving the world as to give "his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him might not perish, but have everlasting life." So shall the sense of the sinfulness you feel, on the one hand, and of the holiness you expect on the other, both contribute to establish your peace, and to make it flow as a river. So shall that peace flow on with an even stream, in spite of all those mountains of ungodliness, which shall become a plain in the day when the Lord cometh to take full possession of your heart. Neither will sickness, or pain, or the approach of death occasion any doubt or fear."<sup>177</sup>

This then is the faith assurance that we are born again of the Spirit of God, that we have received salvation through a trust in the atoning work of Christ on the cross. It is the confidence based upon our acceptance of the word of God Himself, that by grace through faith we can be sure of reconciliation with God, of His pardon, of being adopted as His children, of being released from needless fear. John Wesley's brother Charles summed up well what it means to be assured of salvation by faith:

My God is reconciled,  
His pard'ning voice I hear;  
He owns me for his child,  
I can no longer fear:  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And, Father, Abba, Father, cry!<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 40. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLII, "Satan's Devices."

<sup>178</sup>Charles Wesley, The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley, volume 7. "A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists" edited by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 325.

## CHAPTER V

## HOLINESS OF HEART AND LIFE (A)

The Order of Salvation

Concerning the doctrine of "holiness of heart and life,"<sup>179</sup> John Wesley said this in commenting in a letter on his gladness at hearing that a certain "brother" had "more light with regard to full sanctification.": "This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propogating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up."<sup>180</sup>

A similar purpose for Methodism was given in the "Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others." The question was asked, "What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?" And the assurance was given, "Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."<sup>181</sup>

The doctrine is variously termed "wholly

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<sup>179</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 341. "The Character of a Methodist."

<sup>180</sup>Works, Vol. XIII, p. 9. "Letters to Robert C. Brackenbury, Esq.," September 15, 1790.

<sup>181</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 299. From the year 1744, to the year 1789.

sanctified,"<sup>182</sup> "entire sanctification,"<sup>183</sup> "sanctified throughout," "cleansed from all pollution of the flesh and spirit," loving God "with all (the) heart, and mind, and soul, and strength," continually presenting soul and body "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God,"<sup>184</sup> "full salvation from all our sins", "perfection," "perfect love."<sup>185</sup> By such terminology Wesley thus presents the doctrine as distinguishable from other aspects of the doctrine of salvation.

It is important however not to see this doctrine as an appendage or as a doctrine to be isolated from other aspects of Wesleyan theology. It is one with the total process of salvation, part of the whole, and properly understood as an extension of the regeneration or new birth which takes place when a believer is justified by grace through faith:

From the time of our being born again, the gradual work of sanctification takes place. We are enabled "by the Spirit" to "mortify the deeds of the body," of our evil nature; and as we are more and more dead to sin, we are more and more alive to God. We go on from grace to grace, while we are careful to "abstain from all appearance of evil," and are "zealous of good works," as we have opportunity, doing good to all men; while we walk in all His ordinances blameless, therein worshipping Him in Spirit and in truth; while we

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<sup>182</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 294. Minutes of Some Late Conversations, Conversation V, June 17, 1747.

<sup>183</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>184</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 526. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon LXXXVI, "A Call to Backsliders."

<sup>185</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 46. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLIII, "The Scripture Way of Salvation."

take up our cross, and deny ourselves every pleasure that does not lead us to God.

It is thus that we wait for entire sanctification; for a full salvation from all our sins, - from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief; or, as the Apostle expresses it, "go on unto perfection."<sup>186</sup>

The place of the doctrine of holiness in the total salvation process may be more clearly understood by tracing what may be thought of as the "Order of Salvation" in Wesley's teaching. Colin Williams suggests that "sometimes Wesley gives his outline of the order of salvation in a short summary, as in his famous: 'Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, - that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.'"<sup>187</sup>

That order is established in more detail in Wesley's sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation." In that discourse the following is a summary of the order outlined, with numbering added for sake of clarity:

1. Preventing grace which includes the first wish to please God (prevenient or enabling grace).
2. Convincing grace which in Scripture is termed repentance.
3. Proper Christian salvation whereby "through grace" we are "saved by faith." (Saving grace). And this consists of two grand branches.
  - a) Justification by which we are saved from the guilt of sin and restored

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<sup>186</sup>Ibid.

<sup>187</sup>Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), pp. 39-40. Quotation from Works, Vol. VIII, p. 472. Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained.

- to the favour of God.
- b) Sanctification by which we are saved from the power and root of sin and restored to the image of God,
- (i) beginning the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man (regeneration or initial sanctification);
  - (ii) gradually increasing from that moment;
  - (iii) till in another instant the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man (entire sanctification);
  - (iv) and then that love increasing more and more (growth in grace).
4. Finally, till we "grow up in all things into Him that is our Head;" till we attain "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (glorification).<sup>1ee</sup>

Sanctification is thus seen as being a part of the complete order of salvation. Its particular beginning is in regeneration or the new birth which accompanies justification. From that instantaneous work it increases gradually until another instantaneous work in which the heart is cleansed from all sin. There is then further increase in the sanctifying process until its completion at the believer's death or glorification.

With some allowance for differences in interpretation and variety of approaches, probably little difficulty is encountered with the above order until one comes to the concept of "entire sanctification." With respect to that concept, two areas draw some confusion and disagreement

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<sup>1ee</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 509. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon LXXXV, "Working Out Our Own Salvation." (Bracketed words added as used in other of Wesley's writings).

amongst Wesleyan observers. Indeed, the writings of Wesley himself would suggest some lack of clarity even in his own thinking. Those two areas relate first to the nature of "entire" sanctification as a cleansing from "all sin," and elsewhere referred to as "perfection"; and secondly to the idea of "entire" sanctification having another "instantaneous" beginning point following regeneration, or involving what Wesley also terms a "second blessing."

### Perfection?

In a sermon entitled "Christian Perfection," Wesley struggles with the term perfection, indicating that he has been advised to lay aside the use of the term because of the offence it has caused. The text of that sermon is Philippians 3:12, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect." This is followed in verse 15 with the inference that there are those who may be thought of as perfect: "Let us, as many as be perfect be thus minded." Wesley comments as follows:

There is scarce any expression in holy writ, which has given more offence than this. The word perfect is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them; and whosoever preaches perfection, (as the phrase is,) that is, asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by those worse than a heathen man or a publican.

And hence some have advised, wholly to lay aside the use of those expressions; "because they have given so great offence." But are they not found in the oracles of God? If so, by what authority can any messenger of God lay

them aside, even though all men should be offended?"<sup>189</sup>

That offence continues to this day with reference to the use of the term "perfection" and the concept which it connotes as used in connection with the doctrine of holiness or entire sanctification. Gordon Harland suggests, "Clearly the doctrine of 'holiness' was central to Wesley's theology and vision of the Christian life, but for us it is, at best a large problem....This would seem to be true of evangelicals and liberals alike, and is no doubt due to many historical factors such as pervasive secularism, a different theological orientation and the self-righteous legalism and moralism that sometimes accompanied the holiness movements of nearly a century ago. The terms may well be beyond recovery. So be it. They probably obscure more than they reveal."<sup>190</sup>

In the course of his comments Dr. Harland refers to Professor Outler's critique and explanations concerning Wesleyan teaching. Professor Outler points out that a Methodist ordinand is still asked three questions which are real "stickers" for sensitive and knowledgeable candidates for the ministry: "Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you

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<sup>189</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 1. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon LX, "Christian Perfection."

<sup>190</sup>H. Gordon Harland, "John Wesley", Touchstone, October 1984, pp. 12-13.

earnestly striving for it? The requisite answer, in each case, is affirmative!"<sup>191</sup>

Outler says that the answers to these questions are given in keeping with the ordinands' individual interpretations and with a recognition of widespread confusion as to the meaning of the concept. That confusion relates to the way in which modern depth psychology would suggest a "psychotic delusion" on the part of anyone making a serious claim to achieving perfection in this life, and to the distortions and "holier-than-thou" claims of Wesley's followers in the nineteenth century and beyond. "That conflict and its abrasions had the effect of leaving the average Methodist (and many much above the average) alienated even by the bare terms - 'holiness,' 'Christian perfection,' 'sanctification,' - not to speak of an aversion toward those persons who actually profess such spiritual attainments."<sup>192</sup>

Professor Outler says however that the Methodist tradition ought not abandon the concept nor the terms too readily, but rather seek to understand more clearly what Wesley actually meant and how the doctrine of holiness in heart and life has applicability in our modern era. He suggests as a beginning to that understanding that part of the blame does lie with Wesley himself. "Somehow, he could never grasp the fact that people formed by the traditions of

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<sup>191</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), pp. 65-66.

<sup>192</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

Latin Christianity were bound to understand 'perfection' as 'perfectus' (perfected) - i.e., as a finished state of completed growth, ne plus ultra! For him, certainly since his own discoveries of the early fathers, 'perfection' meant 'perfecting' (teleiosis), with further horizons of love and participation in God always opening up beyond any given level of spiritual progress."<sup>193</sup>

The experience of sanctification or holiness ought not therefore be viewed in terms of a "static" or final or completed stage in Christian discipleship. There is always in view the possibility on one hand of lapsing through unbelief or wilful sin, and on the other of maturing further in one's relationship with God and his neighbour. In this connection, Outler indicates that this maturing is related to our development towards three particular objectives. "What mattered most was that 'going on to perfection' has a consistent and clear end in view: (1) love (of God and neighbor), (2) trust (in Christ and the sufficiency of his grace) and (3) joy (joy upwelling in the heart from the 'prevenience' of the indwelling Spirit). This is 'holy living': to love God [inward holiness] and neighbor [outward holiness] with all your heart, to trust securely in Christ's merits, and to live joyously 'in the Spirit'!"<sup>194</sup>

A careful comparative reading of Wesley's sermons and writings on Christian perfection or holiness or perfect love

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<sup>193</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>194</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

or entire sanctification is necessary to correct the misunderstanding and confusion which surround the terms themselves. This perhaps underlines Professor Harland's suggestion that the terms may be "beyond recovery" and "obscure more than they reveal."<sup>195</sup> New terminology may therefore be required to translate Wesley's intent into understandable language in order to communicate the relevance of one of the central doctrines of his theology to the modern era. One would still however be left with the same dilemma as Wesley himself encountered - a proper definition of terms which have a scriptural background.

Wesley does seek to make his intent clear in the course of an accumulation of his writings. In so doing he helps towards a proper interpretation of Scripture concerning the doctrine of holiness. In his sermon on "Christian Perfection" for example,<sup>196</sup> he maintains that the perfection or "teleiosis" of Scripture does not refer to freedom from ignorance or mistakes or infirmities or temptation. Nor does it connote an absolute perfection which does not admit of continual increase and the need daily to grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God. When however he seeks to deal more positively with what Christian perfection does mean, he is somewhat less helpful

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<sup>195</sup>H. Gordon Harland, "John Wesley", Touchstone, October 1984, p. 13.

<sup>196</sup>Works, Vol. VI, pp. 1-19. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XL, "Christian Perfection."

since a reading of this sermon would seem to suggest the concept of "sinless perfection."

It is necessary therefore to go to his other writings in order to get a proper perspective of his interpretation in this sermon of a passage such as Romans 6:11 which speaks of being "dead unto sin, and alive unto God." Without such clarification one would be caused to think that Wesley had indeed been unrealistic in assessing the negative possibilities of human nature. He says for example of Romans 6:1 and other verses that "The very best which can be implied in these words, is, that the persons spoken of therein, namely all real Christians, or believers in Christ, are made free from outward sin."<sup>197</sup>

#### Sin In Believers

Several points thus need to be drawn from Wesley's writings as a whole in order properly to understand his concept of the nature of holiness and perfection. First, it is necessary to note what he means by "outward sin," and that definition occurs in a number of his writings as "a voluntary transgression of a known law."<sup>198</sup> Such sin is a deliberate and wilful and rebellious flouting or premeditated disobedience of what one knows to be the law of God. It is thus related to the inbred sin in man: the sin of pride and rebellion which issues in the kind of deliberate disobedience engaged in by Adam. This is

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<sup>197</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>198</sup>Ibid., p. 417. Sermon LXXVI, "On Perfection."

distinguished from those wrong words or actions or affections which are involuntary to the extent that they arise from the infirmities of human nature rather than from a stubborn will.

The highest perfection which man can attain, while the soul dwells in the body, does not exclude ignorance, and error, and a thousand other infirmities. Now, from wrong judgements, wrong words and actions will often necessarily flow: And, in some cases, wrong affections also may spring from the same source. I may judge wrong of you; I may think more or less highly of you than I ought to think; and this mistake in my judgement may not only occasion something wrong in my behaviour, but it may have a still deeper effect; it may occasion something wrong in my affection. From a wrong apprehension, I may love and esteem you either more or less than I ought. Nor can I be freed from a liability to such a mistake, while I remain in a corruptible body. A thousand infirmities, in consequence of this, will attend my spirit, till it returns to God who gave it. And, in numberless instances, it comes short of doing the will of God, as Adam did in paradise. Hence the best of man may say from the heart, "Every moment, Lord, I need the merit of thy death, for immeasurable violations of the Adamic as well as the angelic law." It is well, therefore, for us, that we are not now under them, but under the law of love. "Love is" now "the fulfilling of the law," which is given to fallen man. This is now, with respect to us, "the perfect law." But even against this, through the present weakness of our understanding, we are continually liable to transgress. Therefore every man living needs the blood of atonement, or he could not stand before God.<sup>199</sup>

Wesley's exclusion of such involuntary transgressions from his definition of that which he feels is properly termed "sin" would appear to many to be scripturally unsound. The most common New Testament term for sin,

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<sup>199</sup>Ibid., pp. 412-413.

"hamartia," literally meaning "a missing of the mark,"<sup>200</sup> would seem to include involuntary as well as voluntary transgressions. Sins of omission or short-comings, and mistakes in judgement and practice would appear properly to be included in the New Testament concept of sin. Wesley realized that many of his own followers amongst the Methodists would consider as sin such involuntary transgressions of a divine law, known or unknown, even though they be natural consequences of the ignorance and mistakes of mortality. He admitted therefore in a Conference in the year 1759, "Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not..."<sup>201</sup>

Freedom from sin for Wesley had to do with purity of motivation or intent, sincerity of love, if by the word sincere meant "love filling the heart, expelling pride, anger, desires, self-will; rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing and in everything giving thanks."<sup>202</sup> It had to do with giving one's heart to God, with having a mind of love like unto that of Christ Jesus. To use another phrase of Wesley's which was interpretative of the term

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<sup>200</sup>W.E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1981), Vol. 4, p. 32.

<sup>201</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 396. Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

<sup>202</sup>Ibid., p. 418.

"perfection," freedom from sin means having a heart of "perfect love."<sup>203</sup>

What is then the perfection of which man is capable while he dwells in a corruptible body? It is the complying with that kind command, "My son, give me thy heart." It is the "loving the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind." This is the sum of Christian perfection: It is all comprised in that one word, Love. The first branch of it is the love of God: And as he that loves God loves his brother also, it is inseparably connected with the second: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself;" Thou shalt love every man as thy own soul, as Christ loved us. "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets;" These contain the whole of Christian perfection.

Another view of this is given us in those words of the great apostle: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."<sup>204</sup>

A second point helpful to understanding Wesley's concept of holiness or perfection is his contention that its attainment much before death is rare, even accepting his definition of sin as intentional. It is rare to find one who is wholly sanctified to the extent that his motivation and intent are so purified from the inward sin of self-centeredness that they always arise from a heart of love. In a record of a conversation of 1747 we have this word from Wesley: "We grant that many of those who have died in the faith, yea, the greater part of those we have known, were not sanctified throughout, not made perfect in love, till a little before their death."<sup>205</sup> This does not mean that

<sup>203</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 46. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLIII,, "The Scripture Way of Salvation."

<sup>204</sup>Ibid., p. 413. Sermon LXXVI, "On Perfection."

<sup>205</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 388. Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

believers should not expect to be wholly sanctified sooner. In fact, the lack of expectation may be a hindrance to the experience becoming actual in the life of the believer. Wesley suggested this in a Conference of 1747 in response to questions from his clergyman and lay preachers concerning the doctrine of sanctification or perfection.

- Q. Is this ordinarily given till a little before death?
- A. It is not, to those who expect it no sooner.
- Q. But may we expect it sooner?
- A. Why not? For although we grant, (1) That the generality of believers, whom we have hitherto known, were not so sanctified till near death; (2) That few of those to whom St. Paul wrote his Epistles were so at that time; nor, (3) He himself at the time of writing his former Epistles; yet all this does not prove, that we may not be so to-day.<sup>206</sup>

Wesley does not even apparently claim the experience he thinks of as entire sanctification for himself. Early after his conversion in the year 1739 he wrote a tract with the title of "The Character of a Methodist" dealing with perfect love. He placed in the front, "Not as though I had already attained."<sup>207</sup> Likely he would have been reluctant to make too loud a claim to having the experience even in later life. This is suggested in a 1759 tract entitled "Thoughts on Christian Perfection" which dealt with the subject in a question and answer fashion. He made a rather cautious response to the question, "Suppose one had attained

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<sup>206</sup>Ibid., p. 387.

<sup>207</sup>Ibid., p. 371.

to this (the pure love of God and man), would you advise him to speak of it?"

At first perhaps he would scarce be able to refrain, the fire would be so hot within him; his desire to declare the loving-kindness of the Lord carrying him away like a current. But afterwards he might; and then it would be advisable, not to speak of it to them that know not God; (it is most likely, it would only provoke them to contradict and blaspheme;) nor to others, without some particular reason, without some good in view. And then he should have special care to avoid all appearance of boasting; to speak with the deepest humility and reverence, giving all the glory to God.<sup>208</sup>

One is reminded of Charles Wesley's prayer:

O for a heart to praise my God,  
A heart from sin set free!  
A heart that always feels thy blood  
So freely spilt for me!

A heart resigned, submissive, meek,  
My great Redeemer's throne,  
Where only Christ is heard to speak,  
Where Jesus reigns alone.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup>Ibid., p. 397.

<sup>209</sup>Charles Wesley, The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley, volume 7. "A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People Called Methodists" edited by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 490.

CHAPTER VI  
HOLINESS OF HEART AND LIFE (B)

A Second Blessing?

Associated with Wesley's cautionary word concerning believers' boasting is a further point helpful to an understanding of his concept of perfection. This point is also related to another area of contention on the part of some Wesleyan observers, the idea of a "Second Blessing."

The point is this: it would appear that most often he thinks of perfect love as a goal towards which believers should constantly be aiming rather than an episode of "arrival". He asks his preachers to "strongly and explicitly exhort all believers to 'go on to perfection.'"<sup>210</sup>

First however it must be admitted that the "second blessing" concept is present in Wesley's writings. The term itself is used in a letter which Wesley wrote to Mrs. Jane Barton (nee Hilton) on October 8, 1774: "It is exceeding certain that God did give you the second blessing, properly so called. He delivered you from the root of bitterness, from inbred, as well as actual sin. And at that time you

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<sup>210</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 328. "Minutes of Several Conversations."

were enabled to give Him all your heart; to rejoice evermore, and to pray without ceasing."<sup>211</sup>

Elsewhere he refers to the blessing of being wholly sanctified as being an experience with an instantaneous beginning at a stage beyond that initial sanctification which is associated with regeneration. He distinguishes between the two stages of sanctification by first of all admitting, "That the term 'sanctified' is continually applied by St. Paul to all that were justified. That by this term alone, he rarely, if ever, means 'saved from all sin'. That, consequently, it is not proper to use it in that sense, without adding the word 'wholly, entirely,' or the like."<sup>212</sup> Inward sanctification thus begins "the moment man is justified....from that time a believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace."<sup>213</sup> "When we are born again, then our sanctification, our inward and outward holiness, begins; and thenceforward we are gradually to 'grow up in Him who is our Head.'"<sup>214</sup>

But Wesley also indicates that the "growing up" is not only gradual but may have an instantaneous stage to it following justification and regeneration and prior to the final perfection of the soul at death. In a summary of his

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<sup>211</sup>Works, Vol. XII, p. 378. "Letter to Mrs. Jane Barton."

<sup>212</sup>Ibid., p. 388.

<sup>213</sup>Ibid., p. 387.

<sup>214</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 74. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XLV, "The New Birth."

position on Christian Perfection he indicates that he believes the perfection of which he speaks is wrought "by a simple act of faith; consequently, in an instant.... I believe this instant generally is the instant of death, the moment before the soul leaves the body. But I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within five years or five months after it, I know no conclusive argument to the contrary."<sup>215</sup>

He would seem however to allow as well that the complete work of sanctification may be gradual. In a pamphlet on "Further Thoughts on Christian Perfection" he seems fairly generous in accepting a variety of interpretations as being scriptural with reference to when and how God may bring about His sanctifying work:

It need not, therefore, be affirmed over and over, and proved by forty texts of Scripture, either that most men are perfected in love at last, that there is a gradual work of God in the soul, or that, generally speaking, it is a long time, even many years, before sin is destroyed. All this we know; But we know likewise, that God may, with man's good leave, "cut short his work," in whatever degree he pleases, and do the usual work of many years in a moment. He does so in many instances; and yet there is a gradual work, both before and after that moment; so that one may affirm the work as gradual, another, it is instantaneous, without any manner of contradiction.<sup>216</sup>

But whether with reference to the gradual or instantaneous character of the work of sanctification, it is not our work but God's work, which we accept by faith.

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<sup>215</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 446. "Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection," January 27, 1767.

<sup>216</sup>Ibid., p. 423.

But however that question be decided, whether sanctification, in the full sense of the word be wrought instantaneously or gradually, how may we attain it?....In this, as in all other instances, "by grace we are saved through faith." Sanctification too is "not of works, lest any man should boast." "It is the gift of God," and is to be received by plain, simple faith. Suppose you are now labouring to "abstain from all appearance of evil," "zealous of good works," and walking diligently and carefully in all the ordinances of God; there is then only one point remaining: the voice of God to your soul is "Believe, and be saved."<sup>217</sup>

Having admitted the "second blessing" concept in Wesley's writings, it is necessary to return to Wesley's indication that the greater part of those he had known who had died in the faith were not sanctified throughout till a little before death.<sup>218</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that in most of his writings he assumes that his readers or hearers are pilgrims on the path towards the goal of holiness.

This is particularly evident in his sermon entitled "Sin in Believers."

There are in every person, even after he is justified, two contrary principles, nature and grace, termed by St. Paul, the flesh and the Spirit. Hence, although even babes in Christ are sanctified, yet it is only in part. In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are spiritual; yet, in a degree they are carnal. Accordingly, believers are continually exhorted to watch against the flesh, as well as the world and the devil. And to this agrees the constant experience of the children of God. While they feel this witness in themselves, they feel a will not wholly resigned to the will of God. They know they are in him; and yet find a heart ready to

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<sup>217</sup>Works, Vol. VI, pp. 491-492. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon LXXXVI, "On Perfection."

<sup>218</sup>Ibid., p. 388, Sermon LXXXVI, "On Perfection."

depart from him, a proneness of evil in many instances, and a backwardness to that which is good....

Although we are renewed, cleansed, purified, sanctified the moment we truly believe in Christ, yet we are not then renewed, cleansed, purified altogether; but the flesh, the evil nature, still remains, (though subdued) and wars against the Spirit. So much the more let us use all diligence in "fighting the good fight of faith." So much the more earnestly let us "watch and pray" against the enemy within. The more carefully let us take to ourselves, and "put on, the whole armour of God;" that, although "we wrestle" both "with flesh and blood, and with principalities, and powers, and wicked spirits in high places,," we "may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."<sup>219</sup>

Even if a believer should have the assurance of being "wholly sanctified" in the sense of having a heart of love and purity of motive, he still needs to be aware of the possibility of falling and failing.

They who are sanctified, yet may fall and perish. (Heb.X.29) Even fathers in Christ need that warning: "Love not the world." (1 John ii.15) They who "rejoice, pray," and "give thanks without ceasing," may, nevertheless, "quench the Spirit." (1 Thess.v.16 etc.) Nay, even they who are "sealed unto the day of redemption," may yet "grieve the Holy Spirit of God." (Ephesians iv.30)<sup>220</sup>

In some of his writings Wesley is more positive about the numbers of people who have come into the experience of entire sanctification early in this life rather than just a little before death. For example, in his journal entry of November 15, 1763 he reflected first on the number of persons who had separated from Methodism. But then he

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<sup>219</sup>Works, Vol. V, pp. 155-156, Sermons on Several Occasions "Sin in Believers."

<sup>220</sup>Works, Vol. XI, p. 422. Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

speaks of conversions and the healing of backsliders which had occurred during the year, and adds that it had been a season especially significant for the numbers of persons who had come to know what Paul meant when he spoke of the "perfecting of the saints."

But the peculiar work of this season has been, what St. Paul calls "the perfecting of the saints." Many persons in London, Bristol, in York, and in various parts, both in England and Ireland, have experienced so deep and universal a change, as it had not before entered into their hearts to conceive. After a deep conviction of inbred sin, of their total fall from God, they have been so filled with faith and love, (and generally in a moment,) that sin vanished, and they found from that time, no pride, anger, desire, or unbelief. They could rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks. Now, whether we call this the destruction or suspension of sin, it is a glorious work of God: Such a work as, considering both the depth and extent of it, we never saw in the kingdom before.<sup>221</sup>

The allowance in that entry, that the experience might be said to relate to the "suspension" of sin rather than its destruction, is of significance. That allowance is further support for the contention that Wesley thought of the sanctified as pilgrims on the path towards the goal of holiness rather than those who had securely "arrived" at an absolute goal. It is only a continued and conscious relationship with God and dependency on his ongoing "glorious work" that results in continued resistance to sin and its destructiveness to the life of perfect love.

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<sup>221</sup>Works, Vol. III, p. 156. Journal, November 15, 1763.

### Bearing One Another's Burdens

Sanctification is thus seen by Wesley to be by faith in the continued work of the Spirit of God in the life of the believer. But Wesley was no individualist and recognized that it was not enough for each Christian to rely on his own solitary faith in God for his development in holiness of heart and life. "Christianity," he said, "is essentially a social religion; and...to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it."<sup>222</sup> He was referring in that sermon to the Christian's contact as salt and light with society as a whole. But he was also careful to see that the Methodists for whom he had responsibility had the opportunity of the kind of Christian fellowship or Christian society which was necessary to sustain their spiritual life. Without such support, their Christianity was in danger of destruction. To this end he set up three such support groups for his converts - the Society, the Band, and the Class Meeting.

These new groups were not to replace membership in the established Church of England. Wesley retained his loyalty to that Church and exhorted his preachers to be similarly loyal. In 1758 he wrote a tract entitled "Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England" in which he indicated that the prayers of the Church "are substantial food for any who are alive to God," the Lord's Supper of the Church is

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<sup>222</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 296. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XXIV, "Sermon on the Mount - IV"

"pure and wholesome for all who receive it with upright hearts," and the Church's sermons contain "many great and important truths."<sup>223</sup> The Church's instruction and sacraments and fellowship were therefore considered by Wesley to be an important contribution to spiritual growth.

But he sensed that something more was needed, nurturing fellowships which could more closely monitor spiritual development and aid new converts in their pilgrimage towards holiness in heart and life. Wesley tells how these came into being in a letter of 1748 entitled "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists."<sup>224</sup>

As a result of the preaching of Charles and John Wesley in many parts of London there were many converts who were determined to follow "Jesus Christ, and him crucified." But they were surrounded with difficulties in following through with that determination and so came to Wesley asking what they could do to be strengthened in their relationship with God. Wesley advised them, "Strengthen you one another. Talk together as often as you can. And pray earnestly with and for one another, that you may 'endure to the end, and be saved.'"<sup>225</sup> Their reply was that they wanted Wesley himself to talk with them often, and pray with them, as well as for them. Since there were too many for this to happen on an individual basis, Wesley told them, "If you will all of you

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<sup>223</sup>Works, Vol. XIII, p. 230.

<sup>224</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 248-268.

<sup>225</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

come together every Thursday, in the evening, I will gladly spend some time with you in prayer, and give you the best advice I can."<sup>226</sup>

This was the beginning of what later came to be known as a "Society", a term in common use in London "for any number of people associating themselves together."<sup>227</sup> They agreed to meet over the dinner hour Fridays as well, to pray for each other and for all mankind. The purpose of the Society was thus "in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation."<sup>228</sup> Howard Snyder suggests that Wesley viewed Methodist Societies as "ecclesiolae" or "little churches" within the "ecclesia," the larger Church including the Church of England.<sup>229</sup> Their purpose was clearly that of adding to the support of the larger Church in contributing to the spiritual development of their members.

But still there were converts who "grew cold, and gave way to the sins which had long easily beset them."<sup>230</sup> Wesley could not keep track of the behaviour of the converts himself since they were scattered in all parts of the city.

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<sup>226</sup>Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>227</sup>Ibid.

<sup>228</sup>Ibid.

<sup>229</sup>Howard A. Snyder, The Radical Wesley (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), p. 128.

<sup>230</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, p. 252. "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists."

He then came upon a method which first of all was directed towards financial support of the Society in Bristol. A group of that Society decided to call weekly on eleven of their neighbours who were members of the Society, for each to give a penny a week as they were able until the debts were paid. Those making the calls found during their visits that certain of the members were not living as they should. It struck Wesley that this was a way of making particular inquiry into members' behaviour in order to provide individual exhortation and help. The plan was extended to other Societies.

Soon however it became too much of a burden to make a weekly house visit. Wesley therefore instructed the leaders to call together their classes of eleven or so members on a weekly basis to meet all together, with those meetings involving a full inquiry into the behaviour of every person. Thus arose the "Class Meetings" of "an hour or two spent in this labour of love"<sup>231</sup> each week. Wesley says of this innovation:

It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experience Christian Fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to "bear one another's burdens," and naturally to "care for each other." As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other. And "speaking the truth in love, they grew up into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the measure

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<sup>231</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love."<sup>232</sup>

But even more intimate gatherings were found to be necessary as the converts were faced with "temptations of such a kind, as they knew not how to speak in a class; in which persons of every sort, young and old, men and women, met together."<sup>233</sup> This need was answered by smaller companies called "Bands" which were made up of six or so persons of the same sex who were also to meet on a weekly basis. These were particularly designed for the confession of faults one to the other. Wesley's rules for the Bands were as follows:

In order to "confess our faults one to another," and pray one for another that we may be healed, we intend, (1) To meet once a week, at the least. (2) To come punctually at the home appointed. (3) To begin with singing or prayer. (4) To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our soul, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting. (5) To desire some person among us (thence called a Leader) to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.<sup>234</sup>

A long list of possible questions was designed for Band members to ask each other, but four in particular were to be asked at every meeting:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?

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<sup>232</sup>Ibid.

<sup>233</sup>Ibid., pp. 257-258.

<sup>234</sup>Ibid. p. 258.

3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?<sup>235</sup>

It would actually appear that the Bands may have met on a less organized basis in London even before the Class Meetings, as part of the early Moravian influence on Wesley shortly after his conversion. Howard Snyder points this out in indicating that "of all Wesley's innovations, the bands are most directly traceable to Moravian influence. Wesley had found numerous bands functioning at Hernhuth and as Baker notes, on his return he 'enthusiastically advocated the system of bands for all the religious societies in London, including that in Fetter Lane.'"<sup>236</sup>

It would seem that the Bands of 1738 or 1739 were still necessary as a supplement to the Class Meetings which date about 1742 because of the possibility of more detailed scrutiny of temptations which may have been particularly faced by women converts on the one hand or men converts on the other.

Wesley gave guidance to the Bands by meeting with the men-Bands on a Wednesday evening and the women-Bands on a Sunday evening to provide instructions and exhortations as from time to time might appear needful. Once a quarter he would also meet with those groups for the purpose of "love-

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<sup>235</sup>Ibid. p. 273. "Rules of the Band - Societies," Drawn up December 25, 1738.

<sup>236</sup>Howard A. Snyder, The Radical Wesley (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), p. 35. Quoting from Frank Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England (Nashville: Abindgdon, 1970), p. 141.

feasts." Wesley distinguished the love-feasts from the Sacrament of Holy Communion in the established Church as follows:

In order to increase in them a grateful sense of all his mercies, I desired that, one evening in a quarter, all the men in band, on a second, all the women, would meet; and on a third, both men and women together; that we might together "eat bread," as the ancient Christians did, "with gladness and singleness of heart." At those love-feasts (so we termed them, retaining the name, as well as the thing, which was in use from the beginning) our food is only a little plain cake and water. But we seldom return from them without being fed, not only with the "meat which perisheth," but with "that which endureth to everlasting life."<sup>237</sup>

While the setting up of those fellowship groups did not solve all the problems of the early Methodist converts, they apparently did generally aid the pilgrimage which had to do with going on to perfection, the pilgrimage of holiness. Wesley says this of their influence:

Great and many are the advantages which have ever since flowed from this closer union of the believers with each other. They prayed for one another, that they might be healed of the faults they had confessed; and it was so. The chains were broken, the bands were burst in sunder, and sin had no more dominion over them. Many were delivered from the temptations out of which, till then, they found no way to escape. They were built up in our most holy faith. They rejoiced in the Lord more abundantly. They were strengthened in love, and more effectually provoked to abound in every good work.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup>Works, Vol. VIII, pp. 258-259. "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists."

<sup>238</sup>Ibid., 259.

Through the setting up of such groups Wesley was thus providing a practical aid to the life of holiness for his followers. Those groups met a profound pastoral need in the England of his day. And in addition, he was developing a tremendous reservoir of lay leadership which was to be of significance for the future of the church and was to contribute to leadership in the nation as a whole. In comparing the ministries of Wesley and Whitefield, G.R. Cragg concludes that "Wherever Whitefield went he left an overwhelming impression of impassioned eloquence; wherever Wesley went he left a company of men and women closely knit together in a common life."<sup>239</sup> And that lasting legacy was due in large part to the organization of societies and bands and class meetings.

### Happiness

Wesley's support groups were clearly of significance to the building up of new converts into "the most holy faith." Wesley was not content to preach salvation and sanctification and leave converts to struggle as solitary Christians without the nurture of a close Christian fellowship. However, in reading the rules and regulations associated with the support groups one does get the impression that there might be little joy associated with the pilgrimage of going on to perfection.

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<sup>239</sup>G.R. Cragg, The Church and the Age of Reason (1648-1789) (Harmendsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Inc., 1960), p. 145.

Professor Outler suggests that, "what seems obvious to everyone is that Wesley was obsessed with ideas about Christian discipline and duty. His wide assortment of 'rules,' together with his incessant exhortations to Christian morality all combine to give us a picture of the prototypical Methodist moralist and legalist that we all know too well and have become ourselves, all too often."<sup>240</sup>

However, Professor Outler goes on to say that what is not as obvious to everyone is that,

All his emphasis on duty and discipline are auxiliary to his main concern for human happiness....He believed...that all our truly human aspirations are oriented toward happiness....The human tragedy, therefore, is that persons seek happiness (as they must) but in false values that leave them unhappy, in earthly quests that leave them frustrated if unattained or unsatisfied when attained. Wesley uses a wealth of illustrations and allusions to make this crucial point over and over again - that only misery follows false loves and false values. The world is awash with unhappiness, but always this is the effect of misplaced affections, misconceived goals, the tragic futility of self-love curving back upon itself.<sup>241</sup>

The concept of going on towards perfect love - love of God and love of neighbours - was therefore a concept whose goal was to allow the grace of God to deliver the believer from the futility of self-centredness to the joy of outgoing love. The disciplines and duties which at first seem so antithetical to happiness are really part of the process of that pilgrimage to holy joy.

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<sup>240</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 81.

<sup>241</sup>Ibid., pp. 81-82.

Professor Outler has researched "fifty-four quotes where Wesley explicitly pairs off 'happy and holy' (or vice versa)." He claims that this formula of "holiness and happiness" was constant throughout Wesley's works and career, with the love of God and neighbour bringing "happiness and joy...the truest and most enduring joy we ever know."<sup>242</sup>

In his sermon entitled "The Way of the Kingdom" Wesley says,

But true religion, or a heart right toward God and man, implies happiness as well as holiness. For it is not only "righteousness," but also "peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost"...that even, solid joy, which arises from the testimony of the Spirit that he is a child of God; and that gives him to "rejoice with joy unspeakable, in hope of the glory of God;" hope both of the glorious image of God, which is in part and shall be fully, "revealed in him;" and of that crown of glory which fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for him.<sup>243</sup>

Wesley knew such holy happiness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost himself. Professor Outler suggests that he was apparently not an exuberant type, "And yet, there is this strange, insistent reality of cheerfulness and high spirits that keeps breaking through his knit-browed earnestness. He was...a happy man, in his own sense of 'happiness': the human effects of loving God and serving others."<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup>Ibid., pp. 83.

<sup>243</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 80. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon VI, "The Way to the Kingdom."

<sup>244</sup>Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 87.

In a sermon on "The Wedding Garment" preached a few months before his death, Wesley exhorts all who would have that same happiness to choose the holiness that is its only source. The God of love says, "Choose holiness, by my grace: which is the way, the only way, to everlasting life. He cries aloud, Be holy, and be happy; happy in this world, and happy in the world to come....This is the wedding garment of all that are called to 'the marriage of the Lamb.' Clothed in this, they will not be found naked: 'They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"<sup>245</sup>

That is going on to perfection! That is the fruit of the Spirit which is love and joy and peace!<sup>246</sup> That is the joyous bell ringing inscription of which the prophet Zechariah speaks: "In that day shall there be on the bells of the horses, HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD!"<sup>247</sup> That is the rejoicing of worship which arises from holiness of heart and life!

Rejoice, the Lord is King!  
 Your Lord and King adore,  
 Mortals, give thanks, and sing,  
 And triumph evermore;  
 Lift up your heart, lift up your voice,  
 Rejoice, again I say, rejoice.

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<sup>245</sup>Works, Vol VII, p. 317. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon CXX, "The Wedding Garment."

<sup>246</sup>Galatians 5:22.

<sup>247</sup>Zechariah 14:20.

Jesus the Saviour reigns,  
The God of truth and love;  
When he had purged our stains,  
He took his seat above;  
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice,  
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup>Charles Wesley from John Wesley, A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People Called Methodists (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1876), pp. 666-667.

## CHAPTER VII

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD

To Be Enjoyed on Earth

Wesley's reference in his "Wedding Garment" sermon to being "happy in this world, and happy in the world to come"<sup>249</sup> forms a summary of his eschatology concerning the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God has to do with God's reign in this present world, and in the world to come. In his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, he comments as follows on Matthew 3:2 concerning the words of John the Baptist, "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom of God, are but two phrases for the same thing. They mean, not barely a future happy state in heaven, but a state to be enjoyed on earth; the proper disposition for the glory of heaven, rather than the possession of it....It properly signifies here, the gospel dispensation, in which subjects were to be gathered to God by his Son and a society to be formed, which was to subsist first on earth, and afterwards with God in glory. In some places of Scripture, the phrase more particularly denotes the state of it on earth; in others, it signifies only the state of glory; but it generally includes both.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup>Works, Vol. VII, p. 317. Sermons on Several Occasions Sermon CXX, "The Wedding Garment."

<sup>250</sup>Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, Vol. I, Matthew 3:2.

Wesley was concerned as an evangelist for the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth as he preached the gospel of salvation by faith. It was as individual lives were transformed by the grace of God that they would experience the life of the kingdom in the now. And that included going on to perfection, willingly and continually and perfectly seeking to do the will of God.

In a sermon on the Lord's Prayer, Wesley comments on the phrase of Matthew 6:10, "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." He says that this petition is often taken as an expression of resignation, a readiness to accept God's will whatever suffering might be involved. But he suggests that the primary sense of the prayer is not so much for a passive as for an active conformity to the will of God, as God dwells in the soul by faith and Christ reigns in the heart by love. And that active conformity to God's will is to be enabled, by God's grace, to follow His purposes on earth even as the angels do in heaven.

When therefore we pray, that the will of God may "be done in earth as it is in heaven," the meaning is, that all the inhabitants of the earth, even the whole race of mankind, may do the will of their Father which is in heaven, as willingly as the holy angels; that these may do it continually, even as they, without any interruption of their willing service; yea, and that they may do it perfectly, - that "the God of grace, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, may make them perfect in every good work to do his will, and work in them" all "which is well-pleasing in his sight."<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup>Works, Vol. V, pp. 337-338. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XXVI, "Sermon on the Mount - VI."

But in Wesley's view the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth went beyond the internal religion of those who accepted His kingship and rule in their hearts. That acceptance entailed an outward expression of love which would have an impact on the world at large as followers of Christ fulfilled His ideal for them to be the "salt of the earth." In commenting on that phrase of Matthew 5:13, Wesley suggests that we are not really Christians unless we have such commerce with the world as will allow us to season that world with the religious experience which God has wrought in our hearts:

It is your very nature to season whatever is round about you. It is the nature of the divine savour which is in you, to spread to whatsoever you touch; to diffuse itself, on every side, to all those among whom you are. This is the great reason why the providence of God has so mingled you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others; that every holy temper and word and work of yours may have an influence on them also. By this means a check will, in some measure, be given to the corruption which is in the world; and a small part at least, saved from the general infection, and rendered holy and pure before God.<sup>252</sup>

The Christian is to have an impact on society at large and thus contribute to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth beyond that reign of God which is inward in his own relationship with the divine. Wesley therefore includes the social dimension of the gospel of grace and the teaching of perfect love in his preaching and practice. Social action and social reform become essential to his evangelism, for in

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<sup>252</sup>Ibid., p. 299. Sermon XXIV, "Sermon on the Mount - IV."

his view, solitary religion is not to be found in the gospel of Christ, nor is there a solitary holiness that excludes the social dimension.

"Holy solitaries" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. "Faith working by love" is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. "This commandment have we from Christ that he who loves God, love his brother also;" and that we manifest our love "by doing good unto all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith." And in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren, not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be "zealous of good works." He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them. "My Father," will he say, "worketh hitherto, and I work." And at all possible opportunities he is like the Master, "going about doing good."<sup>253</sup>

Wesley the evangelist thus becomes Wesley the social reformer as he accepts for himself his own exhortations to others. In his book, England: Before and After Wesley, J. Wesley Bready lists a number of areas of social action and social reform which were particularly addressed by Wesley.

In 1774 he published a tract, Thoughts Upon Slavery, in which he attacked slave merchants and exclaimed, "You are the spring that puts all the rest in motion - captains, slave owners, kidnappers, murderers.... 'Thy brother's blood crieth unto thee'.... Thy hands, thy bed, thy furniture, thy house, thy lands are at present stained with blood.... Whether you are a Christian or not, show yourself a

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<sup>253</sup>Works, Vol. XIV, pp. 321-322. "Hymns and Sacred Poems," 1739, Preface.

man; be not more savage than a lion or a bear."<sup>254</sup> And in that same tract he taught his followers to regard the negro slave as a "brother in Christ."<sup>255</sup>

While he was not a classical pacifist, Wesley nevertheless attacked war as "a horrid reproach to the Christian name, yea, to the name of man, to all reason and humanity."<sup>256</sup>

Concerning the use and abuse of money and privilege he indicated that "no more than sex appetites, should the acquisitive economic appetites be stimulated or pampered: rather should they be curbed, and sublimated to social and spiritual ends."<sup>257</sup> As with all his teaching for others, this principle was clearly related to Wesley's own lifestyle. Although he had significant income from the sale of his writings, his own practice was to live modestly and return that income to God its owner "through his brethren, the poor."<sup>258</sup> In 1743 he wrote: "If I leave behind me 10 pounds...you and all mankind bear witness against me that I lived and died a thief and a robber."<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>254</sup>J. Wesley Bready, England: Before and After Wesley (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938), p. 227.

<sup>255</sup>Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>256</sup>Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>257</sup>Ibid., pp. 234-235.

<sup>258</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>259</sup>Ibid.

He openly attacked the liquor traffic of his day, writing to Prime Minister William Pitt in 1784, "Suppose your influence could prevent distilling by making it a felony, you would do more service to your country than any Prime Minister has done these 100 years."<sup>260</sup> To emphasize his abhorrence of what he considered a serious social evil, Wesley exhorted his Methodist followers not to drink liquor "unless in cases of extreme necessity," and instructed his lay preachers to taste intoxicating liquors "on no pretext whatever."<sup>261</sup>

He spoke against legislation which he believed perverted equity and embezzled the poor or in other ways was contrary to Christian principles.<sup>262</sup> He even suggested an economic proposal of limiting income from great estates to one hundred pounds a year in order that the soil might be used to provide wholesome food inexpensively for all people.<sup>263</sup>

His particular concern was for the poor, and he sought constantly for their improvement. Some of this improvement occurred as a byproduct of Methodist structures, such as the Class Meetings. These encouraged democracy and leadership development and literacy by a circle of labourers or

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<sup>260</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>261</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>262</sup>Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>263</sup>Ibid., p. 250.

mechanics being led in worship by one of their own rank.<sup>264</sup> Other programs for the poor were more specific - setting up day schools, conducting Sunday Schools eleven years before Robert Raikes began his world Sunday School movement, founding the first free medical dispensary in England,<sup>265</sup> setting up a Benevolent Loan Fund for the poor,<sup>266</sup> and a Strangers' Friend Society instituted for the relief of poor, sick, friendless strangers,<sup>267</sup> feeding from one hundred to one hundred and fifty persons a day in a single place,<sup>268</sup> raising money to clothe and to buy food and medicine and fuel and tools for the prisoners and sick and poor and elderly.<sup>269</sup>

Wesley exhorted his helpers to be "servants of all,<sup>270</sup> as defined by one of his articles of faith which formed the basis of his ethical and social teaching.

In a really Christian society, men will recognize that they are stewards of God, the Creator and Owner of all: human "possessions" accordingly, are a self-acquired delusion, and private "riches" a subtly dangerous snare. Service, not national acquisitions, being the real standard of human attainment, fellowship, co-operation, and a truly equalitarian spirit, are the genuine marks of a Christian society; wherein the

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<sup>264</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>265</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>266</sup>Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>267</sup>Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>268</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>269</sup>Ibid.

<sup>270</sup>Ibid., p. 253.

strong, motivated by sympathy and love, will rejoice to assist their weaker brethren, even as parents rejoice to assist their children.<sup>271</sup>

Through such social reform and social action as an extension of evangelism, Wesley and his followers became co-workers with God in the mission of seeing elements of the kingdom of God being established on earth. And while many of the above references may suggest attacks on evil in a negative sense, the negative is simply a preliminary stage to the positive impact of bringing about the enjoyment of the kingdom of God on earth through love. This is parallel to Wesley's theology of Christian perfection as not being primarily the absence of sin but the presence of that perfect love which provides for human happiness. Theodore Runyon in his essay on "Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation," supports this emphasis in saying that "Sanctification - or Christian perfection - is not in the final analysis to be defined negatively, as the absence of sin, but positively, as the active presence of love expressed not only in word but in deed: from God to humanity, from humanity to God; from God through human beings, to their fellow human beings. This is the power of the Kingdom that begins to exercise its humanizing impact in the present age."<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup>Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>272</sup>Theodore Runyon, "Introduction: Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation," Sanctification and Liberation ed. by Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 34.

Wesley's impact on the structures of the society of his day was so revolutionary that he is considered by some to be a forerunner of the Liberation Theology of the late twentieth century.<sup>273</sup> Methodism has even been credited by some scholars with preventing a violent style of revolution in England similar to that which occurred in France. That observation has become known as the Halévy thesis because of what the French historian Elie Halévy claimed for the influence of Wesleyan Methodism on the political life of England. "It is generally agreed," Halévy stated, "that the influence of Methodism contributed a great deal, during the last several years of the eighteenth century, to preventing the French Revolution from having an English counterpart."<sup>274</sup> He further states the following.

Just at the time when the religious revolution led by Wesley and Whitefield was beginning, a political revolution was underway in England. The simultaneous character of the two events is not, nor could it be, a pure coincidence; it seems that one must have been the effect of the other, or both the effect of an identical cause.<sup>275</sup>

Theodore Runyon suggests however that the Halévy thesis is ambiguous, with two possible interpretations.

Does it mean that Wesleyan doctrine and practice instigated profound socio-economic changes, which in other societies have been accomplished only by prolonged violence and bloody revolution? If so,

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<sup>273</sup>See Kenneth Collins, "John Wesley and Liberation Theology: A Closer Look," The Asbury Theological Journal Vol. 42, No. 1, 1987, pp. 85-90.

<sup>274</sup>Elie Halévy, The Birth of Methodism in England (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 51.

<sup>275</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

Wesleyan doctrine conceivably could be touted as the answer to the third world's search for ideological alternatives to both capitalism and communism. Or does it mean that Methodism's effect was to dampen the fires of revolution by redirecting discontent toward spiritual preoccupations, which would have left the external world unaffected, had it not been for other forces for change at work? Historians of a more critical and Marxist persuasion are inclined toward the latter theory.<sup>276</sup>

José Míguez Bonino would seem to support the latter view as he suggests that Wesley's individualistic and primarily spiritual approach tended to reinforce the domestication of the working class in Britain. He claims that Wesleyan Methodism "was unable to disclose for them the reality of their condition as a class, but rather led them to accept their role in society and to improve their lot without challenging the rules of the game..."<sup>277</sup>

Bernard Semmel in the introduction to his translation of the Halévy work quotes a friend of Methodism writing in 1815 as to Methodism's impact on England's social and political life. That friend concluded that "the ultimate 'usefulness' of the Methodists 'in preventing the spread of French principles both political and religious, is only

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<sup>276</sup>Theodore Runyon, "Introduction: Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation," Sanctification and Liberation ed. by Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 16.

<sup>277</sup>José Míguez Bonino, "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification From a Liberationist Perspective," Sanctification and Liberation ed. by Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 59.

fully known to God'." Semmel says "It would be difficult for a responsible historian to fault this judgement."<sup>278</sup>

That judgment is a wise and cautionary one as to the extent of the impact of the Wesleyan revivalist reform on England. The matter cannot for example be properly assessed without setting it in the wider social and political development of England, specifically the development of parliament. Such qualifications do not however negate the thesis that Wesleyan influence on reform was significant. Bready expresses that effectiveness when he says that "England, without the moral cleansing, the mental stimulus, the spiritual vision, which this mighty Spiritual Awakening brought to her, was ripe for social disintegration and soulless chaos; with them she began gradually - if all too falteringly - to lead the world in humanitarian achievement."<sup>279</sup> And because of Wesley, certain elements of what he would have regarded as the kingdom of God on earth have been enjoyed in the centuries and lands beyond his own.

#### A Future Happy State

Other elements of the bringing in of the kingdom of God will have to await the future age, and that too was a

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<sup>278</sup>Bernard Semmel, "Introduction: Elie Halévy, Methodism and Revolution," Elie Halevy, The Birth of Methodism in England (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 29.

<sup>279</sup>J. Wesley Bready, England: Before and After Wesley (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938), pp. 273-274.

vital part of Wesley's interpretation of eschatology. Colin Williams suggests that,

...for Wesley, the Christian's faith does not depend upon the success of his efforts for social reform, nor should we think of social reform as building the kingdom of God, for such reforms as attend our obedience to God's will are at best but temporary victories. The forces of evil are still at loose so that victory can easily be followed by defeat. Social holiness like holiness in the believer, must be seen as being received moment by moment, and as being preserved only by the constant renewal of obedience and by constant repentance. The life of the kingdom that is ours now is an eschatological gift which is but a foretaste of the final kingdom and is subject to the vagaries of our unceasing conflict with the evil of this present world.<sup>280</sup>

We await then that final kingdom when we will hear the loud voice from the throne of God saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."<sup>281</sup> Wesley says of that promise from the Revelation, "Nay, but there will be no more sin. And, to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, and uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!"<sup>282</sup>

<sup>280</sup>Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), p. 196.

<sup>281</sup>Revelation 21:3-4, N.I.V.

<sup>282</sup>Works, Vol. VI, p. 296. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon LXIV, "The New Creation."

There is of course another aspect to that great and final age - the judgement and wrath of God. Wesley is clear in his teaching and preaching in this regard throughout his ministry, but perhaps most definitely documents final events in his sermon entitled "The Great Assize"<sup>283</sup> preached on Romans 14:10 - "We shall all stand before the judgement seat of Christ."

He speaks of signs of the last days such as earthquakes and storms and darkness. There will be the resurrection of the dead and rapture of the living. And then will come the judgement when every man will give an account of his own works, and when "shall be discovered every inward working of every human soul."<sup>284</sup> And then the Lord, the Judge, will speak:

"Come, ye blessed of my Father! inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world." Joyful sound! How widely different from that voice which echoes through the expanse of heaven, "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!"

...."Wherefore, beloved, seeing ye look for these things," seeing ye know He will come and will not tarry, "be diligent, that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless." Why should ye not? Why should one of you be found on the left hand at his appearing? He willeth not that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance; by repentance, to faith, to spotless love, to the full image of God renewed in the heart, and producing all holiness of conversation. Can you doubt of this, when you remember the Judge of all is likewise the Saviour of all? Hath he not bought you with his own blood, that ye might not perish, but have everlasting life? O make proof of

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<sup>283</sup>Works, Vol V, pp. 171-185. Sermons on Several Occasions, Sermon XV, "The Great Assize."

<sup>284</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

his mercy, rather than his justice; of his love, rather than the thunder of his power! He is not far from everyone of us; and he is now come, not to condemn, but to save the world.<sup>285</sup>

And so it is that those who have been justified by grace through faith in Christ and to whom have been imparted the righteousness of Christ Himself - they shall know their salvation reaching final completion as they see the new heaven and the new earth in God's perfect heavenly kingdom.

#### God Is With Us

John Wesley rested fully in that assurance himself. Born on June 17th, 1703. Born again on May 24th, 1738. And after more than five decades of going on to perfection as a servant of Christ and Christian theologian and evangelist and reformer, on the second of March 1791, at nearly eighty-eight years of age, "he was heard to articulate, 'Farewell!'" This was the last word he uttered; and while several of his friends were kneeling around his bed, he passed without a groan or struggle into the joyful presence of his Lord."<sup>286</sup>

On the day previous to his passing he tried to speak to one who entered his room, but could not at first be heard. He paused, and then, "with all the remaining strength he had, cried out, 'The best of all is, God is with us'; and soon after, lifting up his dying arm in token of victory, and raising his feeble voice with a holy triumph

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<sup>285</sup>Ibid., p. 184-185.

<sup>286</sup>Ibid., p. 44. "The Life of the Rev. John Wesley" by Dr. Beecham.

not to be described, he again repeated the heart-reviving words, 'The best of all, God is with us.'<sup>287</sup>

God had been with him through life in that kingdom of God which he had enjoyed on earth. And God would be with him in that new world, in that heavenly kingdom. And God would be with those who in the centuries to follow would be instructed by Wesley and his message and doctrine and discipline and evangelism and reforms.

Albert Outler voices the hopes and prayers of those particularly in the Wesleyan tradition for that same presence of "God with us" and that same spirit to be part of the church of today - "that strange miracle that turned a censorious zealot into a herald of grace, that fusion of mind and heart and muscle in joyful service, that move from passion to compassion, that linkage of revival and reform, that stress on local initiative within a connexional system - that actual willingness to live in and to be led by the Spirit of God in faith and hope and love."<sup>288</sup>

John Wesley left the pattern for such prayer to become fulfilled as he was able to sing that hymn which was his favorite, and which he tried to sing as his commitment to his God the night before he went to be with his Lord:

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<sup>287</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>288</sup>Albert C. Outler, Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1997), p. 33.

I'll praise my maker while I've breath;  
And when my voice is lost in death,  
Praise shall employ my nobler powers,  
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,  
While life and thought and being last,  
Or immortality endures.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>289</sup>Works, Vol. V, p. 43. "The Life of the Rev. John Wesley" by Dr. Beecham. Hymn by Isaac Watts.

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