

JOHN WESLEY AS A THEOLOGIAN AN INTRODUCTION

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Indisputably, John Wesley is one of the major figures of Christian history. Today, sixty million Methodists around the world, together with Salvationists, Nazarenes and other denominations in the World Methodist Council, regard themselves as standing in the ‘Wesleyan’ tradition. He is clearly one of the outstanding evangelists and apostles of the Christian faith, notable for his organizing genius in preserving the fruit of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival in his Methodist societies, notable for his publications, including his fascinating *Journal*, and notable too for his early opposition to the slave trade, his interest in modern science, and his concern for the poor. But is he a significant theologian?

The eighteenth century is not well-known for front-rank theologians. Jonathan Edwards possibly merits the accolade of the most creative theologian of the century. Schleiermacher is of course a major figure, but his contribution really came in the early nineteenth century. Generally we can say that the eighteenth century is not to be compared with the fourth century, or with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or with the nineteenth or twentieth century as a time of major creativity in Christian Theology. But even though he did not live at a time of theological ferment, and was not a great creative thinker, it may be argued that Wesley was at the very least formative and influential for his own followers and for the burgeoning evangelical Christianity which led to the modern missionary movement, which led in turn to the demographic revolution in world Christianity, that amazing growth of the Church in the two-thirds world which sees Christians today in the northern hemisphere in a minority. To him must go much of the credit that the majority of evangelical Christians around the world today consider themselves to be ‘Arminians’. Additionally the Pentecostal movement – from which the Charismatic movement has sprung – traces its origin back through the nineteenth-century holiness movement to John Wesley.

Even though he was not one of the outstanding creative thinkers of the Christian Church therefore, like Augustine or Luther, Wesley has been a very influential one. And no theologian in Christian history has united *theoria* and *praxis* more successfully as a true pastor and ‘bishop’, crafting his theological writings not for the academy, but for the thousands of converts to whom he gave personal guidance and spiritual direction.

The objective of this paper then will be to assess Wesley’s theology. Granted that he was such a towering figure as an evangelist, apostle, pastor, ‘bishop’, and writer, what is his status as a theologian? What were the major influences on him? What was the overall shape and character of his theology? What were the Methodist doctrines which he shaped? Was he coherent in this thinking? And was there any area of his thought where we may claim a degree of creativity?

I approach this paper not as expert on Wesley (a whole academic discipline has grown up in colleges and universities in the Wesleyan tradition), but as a theologian, educated moreover in Edinburgh, in a college and divinity faculty which stands historically not in the Wesleyan but in the Reformed tradition. What I wish to attempt therefore is an introduction to Wesley as a theologian for those who may approach him from the perspective of the Reformed tradition.

The Literature

As a preliminary task, let me attempt a brief introduction to some of the most significant major publications in the twentieth-century revival of interest in Wesley. Several books of note were published in the 1930s.¹ George Croft Cell, *The Re-Discovery of John Wesley* (1934), famously characterized Wesley theology as ‘an original and unique synthesis of the Protestant ethic of grace with the Catholic ethic of holiness’. Although that particular formulation has been criticized, it is generally accepted that Wesley’s theology is some kind of synthesis, or at least that it is eclectic, drawing from a wide range of traditions – the Greek Fathers, the medieval spiritual writers, the Reformers, the Pietists and Puritans and the seventeenth-century ‘holy living’ school of the Church of England – in a way which exhibits what Wesley himself called ‘the catholic spirit’.

Also during the 1930s, the Cambridge scholar, R. Newton Flew, published *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology* (1934) which traced the deep and wide roots which Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection had in the Great Tradition of the church catholic. Maximin Piette presented Wesley from a Roman Catholic perspective in *John Wesley and the Evolution of Protestantism* (1937).

During the 1940s and 1950s several books of note appeared. The London preacher, W.E. Sangster, attempted to re-formulate Wesley’s controversial doctrine of Christian Perfection in *The Path to Perfection* (1943), but the most scholarly study of this doctrine was published in 1946 by the Swedish scholar, Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*. William R. Cannon, in his book, *The Theology of John Wesley, with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (1946), presented a very Reformed Wesley. Franz Hildebrandt, the associate of Bonhoeffer and Niemöller who fled to Britain during the Second World War and became a Methodist minister there, highlighted the influence of Luther in *From Luther to Wesley* (1951).

In the 1960s interest widened to Wesley’s theology as a whole. John Deschner published his thesis on Wesley’s Christology, *Wesley’s Christology: an Interpretation* (1960) and John R. Renshaw completed a thesis on Wesley’s doctrine of the Atonement (Boston, 1965). Colin Williams published *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (1960), which, although it was an introductory work, was possibly the first comprehensive treatment of Wesley’s theology in a systematic rather than an historical way. Robert Monk and John Newton examined Wesley’s inheritance from the English Puritans.² Arthur Skevington Wood, who was himself both a historian and an evangelist, published a biography, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley – Evangelist* (1967).

But perhaps the most significant development of the 1960s was not a book, but the new interest of Albert Outler, the American Methodist patristic scholar, in Wesley as a theologian. In a landmark article in 1961, ‘Towards a Re-appraisal of John Wesley as a Theologian,’ Outler began to argue that Wesley should be re-evaluated as a major theologian.³ He was prepared to grant that Wesley was not a speculative systematic theologian in the academic sense, but a ‘folk theologian’ with the ability to ‘simplify, synthesize, and communicate the essential teachings of the Christian

¹ For bibliographical details of this secondary literature see the select bibliography.

² Robert C. Monk, *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage* (Abingdon, 1966) and John Newton. *Methodism and the Puritans* (Dr William’s Library Trust, 1964)

³ Albert Outler, ‘Towards a Re-appraisal of John Wesley as a Theologian,’ *The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, 14 (1961), 5-14, reprinted in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage*, ed. Oden & Longden, Zondervan, 1991, 40-54.

gospel to laity'.⁴ It was this recovery of Wesley's significance as a theologian which led to the launching of a project to produce a critical edition of *The Works of John Wesley*, published at first by Oxford and taken over by Abingdon, and still underway with eighteen volumes published. Outler and Frank Baker were the erudite editors of the earliest volumes. It was also Outler who suggested that Wesley's theological method could be described as 'quadrilateral' of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.⁵

The 1970s saw two biographies, the completion of Martin Schmidt's two volume work, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography* (Vol. I in 1962, Vol. II:1 in 1972 and Vol. II:2 in 1973), and Robert G. Tuttle's *John Wesley: His Life and Theology*. In the 1980s, Gordon Rupp wrote *John Wesley and Martin Luther* (1983), Philip Watson compared the thinking of Luther and Wesley on the authority of the Bible, and Henry Rack produced what remains the most highly regarded biography, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (1989). As both a biography and a history of early Methodism, this book succeeds in demonstrating the tension in Wesley's thought between 'reason' and 'experience' so making him not an 'enthusiast' (meaning 'fanatic') like the sects, but a 'reasonable enthusiast'.

The 1990s saw several works which attempted to present Wesley's theology systematically. Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (1994) is a work based on what appears to be a fairly exhaustive bibliography.⁶ Maddox draws on research into Wesley's indebtedness to the Greek fathers (including the research done by Dr McCormick) much of which had been collected by Ted Campbell in *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (1991). Kenneth J. Collins presented a somewhat different perspective in two books, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology* (1993) and *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (1997).

More recently Theodore H. Runyon presented his perspective in *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (1998), and Herbert B. McGonigle examined Wesley's Arminianism in *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism* (2001). Most recently, Kenneth J. Collins has produced a major work, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (2007).

Wesley as a Theologian

I recalled the fact that Albert Outler categorized Wesley as a 'folk theologian', but as Randy Maddox later pointed out, there has been something of a change in the way theology is viewed since Outler made that comment in the 1960s.⁷ Whereas it was common to view theology primarily as an academic pursuit concerned with the intellectual rigour and coherence of a system of ideas, it has become increasingly recognized that rather than an intellectual discipline whose context is the university – even the *secular* university, where it tries to present its credentials as

⁴ Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Kingswood, 1994). 16.

⁵ See T.A. Noble, 'Scripture and Experience,' *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite & David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), abbrev. version in *Themelios* 23 (1997), 30-39. For the place of experience in Calvin's theological method, see Judith Rossall, 'God's Activity and the Believer's Experience in the Theology of John Calvin' (PhD, Durham, 1991).

⁶ Maddox's book is recommended on the cover by Thomas A. Langford as 'the most comprehensive and thorough study available of John Wesley and interpretations of Wesley' and remains a standard work. My reservations about the wider background, particularly the way in which Wesley is said to draw on the 'therapeutic' approach of the East, are in T.A. Noble, 'East and West in the Theology of John Wesley,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 85: 2 & 3 (2003), 359-372.

⁷ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 15f.

akin to Religious Studies and so to be classed with Philosophy or Sociology of Religion -- Christian Theology is an intellectual and practical discipline which finds its primary context within the Christian Church. As *fides quaerens intellectum*, it traces its genesis to the early Christian fathers, among whom it is not Origen, the writer of what might be regarded as the first work of Systematic Theology, who is given the title, The Theologian, but the great preacher and bishop, Gregory of Nazianzus. John Wesley's theology, like that of Gregory the Theologian, is not formulated in a philosophico-theological treatise, but in sermons.

Wesley's *Sermons on Several Occasions*, eventually comprising fifty-three sermons published in volumes I to IV of the *Works*,⁸ were not the sermons he typically preached out in the highways and byways of Britain and Ireland, where he preached extemporaneously. These written sermons were selected to be a statement of his theology. No Methodist Systematic Theology in the typical scholastic form was published till after his death.⁹

That raises the question whether Wesley's theology should be presented in systematic, scholastic form. That can be done, of course. Maddox not only claims that Wesley wrote on all the main *loci* of traditional Systematic Theology, but proceeds to demonstrate that in *Responsible Grace*. After an introduction, he examines Wesley's epistemology, that is, the knowledge of God and the sources of Christian Theology. He then presents Wesley's doctrines of God, sinful humanity, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Salvation, the Christian Life, Sacraments and the Life of the Church, and Eschatology in that order. The result is a helpful compendium of Wesley's theology, laid out in traditional systematic order.

Thomas Oden also presents Wesley's thought as a kind of Systematic Theology in *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: a Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (1994). Oden's approach is somewhat different from that of Maddox. Maddox is out to show the coherence of Wesley's thought and finds that in what he calls an 'orienting concern'. This is not an architectonic Idea from which everything else is deduced (he explains), but is rather 'the abiding interest which influences the selection, interpretation, relative emphasis, and interweaving of theological affirmations and practices'.¹⁰ Maddox defines this 'orienting concern' in Wesley's theology as 'the abiding concern to preserve the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God's grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace-empowered but un-coerced) participation, God's grace *will not* save.' He designates this orienting concern by the phrase 'responsible grace' and a major goal of his book is 'to demonstrate the presence and function of this concern for "responsible grace" through the range of Wesley's work.'

Oden, by contrast, is not out to prove a thesis or present a view of an orienting concern. His intention is simply to give an objective account (by which I mean a 'faithful' account) of Wesley's theology with a compilation of quotations so that Wesley is allowed to speak for himself. And yet, like Maddox, he lays out Wesley's theology in a way Wesley never did, in the *loci* of scholastic Systematic Theology. He therefore presents quotations from Wesley under the following headings: God, the Attributes and the Trinity; Theological Method (which presents the so-called 'quadrilateral'); Creation, Providence and Theodicy; Human Existence – Created, Fallen, and Redeemed; Sin; The Incarnate Crucified Lord; The Holy Spirit; Grace and Predestination; Soteriology; Sanctification; and finally History and Eschatology.

⁸ Referring to the Jackson edition, available in several versions.

⁹ The first was Richard Watson's *Theological Institutes* (1823-29).

¹⁰ Maddox, 18

Kenneth Collins' earlier presentation of Wesley's theology, *A Faithful Witness*, also lays out the material in this scholastic, systematic fashion. Collins deals with The Doctrine of God, Christology, The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, The Doctrine of the Church, the Doctrine of Humanity, The Doctrine of Salvation, Personal and Social Ethics, and finally, Eschatology.

All of these works are valuable, but I wonder whether it might not be truer to Wesley himself to present his theology as he himself presented it, that is, according to the way he ordered his sermons in the *Sermons on Several Occasions*. I propose to attempt a first sketch of such an approach as we come now to look at Wesley's theology itself, and I believe that this will demonstrate how much Wesley's theology is first and foremost a pastoral theology. It is not a system of abstract speculation, or even logical but still abstract deductions: it is theology in which practical, spiritual matters such as assurance of God's acceptance, and spiritual realism, and growth in grace and holiness, and ethics are the concerns which drive the hermeneutic. We shall not be able to examine all the sermons, not even all of those which appear in the first volume, but although space dictates that we must be selective, it will still be possible to indicate the focus of Wesley's theology as he himself presents it.¹¹

An Evangelical Theology

What is immediately obvious when we approach Wesley's theology in this way is that it is an Evangelical Theology. That is to say both that it is the theology of one who is first and foremost an evangelist, and that it is a theology which arises out of the Evangelical theology of the Reformation. In the sermon he deliberately places first, 'Salvation by Faith', preached on Ephesians 2:8, 'By grace are ye saved through faith,' Wesley nails his colours to the Reformation mast. It was by grace that we were created, but our own works cannot atone for our sin and therefore we can only find favour with God by grace. He explicates first 'What faith it is through which we are saved': it is not the faith of a heathen, nor of a devil, nor even the faith of the apostles when Christ was on earth. It is a faith in Christ and in God through Christ, not speculative, but a disposition of the heart. It is a faith which acknowledges the merit of his death and the power of his resurrection. It is a sure confidence in the forgiveness of sins, a closing with him and a cleaving to him.

Wesley echoes here the reaction of Pietism against 'dead orthodoxy', but a reaction which was surely in continuity with the Reformers. It was the recovery of Luther's understanding of faith as not merely *assensus*, 'belief that there is a God,' but *fiducia*, 'faith in God.' Luther explained the latter:

This faith I possess when I not only hold that what is said about God is true, but when I put my whole trust in him, undertake to deal with him personally, and believe without doubt that I shall find him to be and do as I have been told.¹²

It was the recovery of Calvin's emphasis that it is not enough to have knowledge which 'flutters in the brain':

It is not enough then to have some vague knowledge of Christ, or to engage in airy speculations, as they say, and to be able to talk a lot about him, but he must have his seat in our hearts within, so that we are unfeignedly joined to him, and with true affection.¹³

¹¹ The sermons selected here are all from the first volume and may be regarded as giving us the leading emphases of his theology. They may be consulted in Volume 1 of the *Works* [Bicentennial Edition, hereafter BE].

¹² *Weimarer Ausgabe*, VII, 215, 1-22.

¹³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1973), 291f

Secondly, Wesley explains in Sermon 1, ‘What salvation it is through this faith’. Here the accent is on present salvation. It is a salvation from sin, from the guilt of all past sins (that is justification), from fear, and from the power as well as the guilt of sin. Here he takes his stand on I John 3:7-8, ‘He that is born of God sinneth not.’ It is not only justification (that is, pardon) but also regeneration. (We shall consider his understanding of these in the next two sections.) Wesley ends the sermon by answering objections. This doctrine, he claims, strikes at the root of all errors in the church, and, as proved in the time of Martin Luther, the adversary rages when this is preached.

Sermon 2 is on a standard evangelistic theme of the time, ‘The Almost Christian’, the words taken from Acts 26:28. George Whitefield also had a sermon on this text. Sermon 5, entitled ‘Justification by Faith’, was on Romans 4:5, ‘To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted to him for righteousness.’ This was the first sermon he preached on his ‘new’ soteriology of ‘faith alone’. In Sermon 6, ‘The Righteousness of Faith’ (on Romans 10:5-8), Wesley adopts the scheme of federal Calvinism, opposing the new covenant not with the covenant of Moses, but with the covenant of works with Adam. The covenant of works required perfect obedience, perfect outward and inward holiness as a condition of eternal holiness and happiness. He rams home the great folly of trusting to be saved by this in the light of our fallen, sinful condition, our corrupt nature. We must turn to the righteousness of faith. Sermon 9, ‘The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption’ (on Romans 8:15) is also a fairly standard evangelistic approach, differentiating different ‘states’. There is first the state of the ‘natural man’ ignorant of God, but blind to the coming judgment. Once awakened, he is ‘under the law’. God has shaken him out of his sleep and he sees that the loving God is also a just and terrible God, ‘of purer eyes than to look upon iniquity.’ But the ‘natural’ and ‘legal’ states should be followed by the ‘evangelical’ state when he knows that he is born of God.

Justification and Christ’s Atonement

For Wesley, as for the Reformers, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith was closely linked to the atonement. While all aspects of the atonement are there in Wesley, including the cross as the demonstration of God’s love and liberation from the powers of evil, it is the Anselmic view of the cross which is most closely linked with justification, pardon for our guilt and sin. But this was not a merely external, legal transaction. For Wesley our reconciliation was ‘in Christ’, and he insisted that his preachers should preach Christ ‘in all his offices’, as Prophet, Priest, and King. We never outgrow our need for Christ as our Priest, who died for us once-for-all, but who also now intercedes for us. He is also the Prophet who not only reveals God’s will for our lives, but who exemplifies that in his own earthly life. And He is the King whose law of love has a present validity for the Christian. Wesley refused to polarize grace and law as sometimes occurs in the Lutheran tradition, and like Calvin, emphasized the positive role of the law in the life of the Christian.¹⁴

Our justification then is ‘in Christ’ as Wesley affirmed by translating the great hymn of Zinzendorf:

Jesu, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed
With joy shall I life my head.

¹⁴ See Maddox’s exposition of this, 98-101.

Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame

This is directly the fruit of the atonement:

The holy, meek, unspotted Lamb,
Who from the Father's bosom came,
Who died for me, even me, to atone,
Now for my Lord and God I own.

Lord, I believe Thy precious blood,
Which at the mercy-seat of God,
For ever doth for sinners plead,
For me, even for my soul, was shed.¹⁵

Wesley outlined this connection more prosaically, but more fully in *The Principles of a Methodist*:

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 his body and shedding his blood, and 'fulfilling the law of God perfectly; and upon our part, true and living faith in the merits of Jesus Christ.¹⁶

Later in his ministry, Wesley became concerned that this doctrine was being used as a cover for antinomianism, and in the light of the use being made of the idea that Christ's righteousness covers our sin, he stopped teaching the imputation of Christ's active righteousness to the sinner. He did not find that explicitly in Scripture and so defined 'justification' simply as pardon.¹⁷

It was through his contact with the Moravians during his time in Georgia that Wesley came to understand the gospel of justification by faith. They persuaded him that faith was not only *assensus*, it was also *fiducia*. Indeed the influence of the Lutheran tradition through Pietism is also seen in that it was through a reading from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans in a religious society in Aldersgate Street in the old City of London on 24th May, 1738, that he found peace with God. The words from Wesley's Journal are so famous that they hardly need repeating:

At 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 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.

¹⁵ *Works* [BE], Vol. 7, 309f.

¹⁶ 'The Principles of a Methodist, 3, *Works* [BE], Vol. 9, 51

¹⁷ See Maddox, 194, with reference to Wesley's letter of 1756 to James Hervey, *Letters* 3:371-388.

The Holy Spirit: Assurance and Regeneration

The event of 24th May, 1738 is often referred to as Wesley's 'conversion', although Maddox points out that he stopped referring to it as such. Whereas he at first declared that he had not been a Christian before that moment, he was later to qualify that and say that before then he had 'the faith of a servant', and from that moment, 'the faith of a son.' But does that mean that one with the 'faith of a servant' is justified, or not? Wesleyan theologians disagree. What is clear from the famous words is that at that moment he *trusted* Christ as never before for salvation and that he had an *assurance* of sins forgiven.

The theme of assurance brings us directly to Wesley's doctrine of the Spirit, since in the next of the sermons to which I want to draw attention, Sermons 10 and 11, Wesley deals with 'The Witness of the Spirit'. In Sermon 10, preached on Romans 8:16, 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are children of God,' he asserts that, in the light of the use made of this by 'enthusiasts', we must carefully differentiate the witness of the Spirit from the witness of our own spirit. By 'our own spirit' he means the testimony of our own conscience, that is to say our own awareness whether we love God and our neighbour or not. The witness of the Spirit is different: it is 'an inward impression on the soul' whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses 'that I am a child of God', 'that Jesus Christ has loved me, and given himself for me, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.' He tackles the question how this is to be distinguished from the presumption of the natural mind and from delusion of the devil and deals with a series of objections. In Sermon 11, on the same text, preached some twenty-one years later, Wesley re-affirms his doctrine.¹⁸ But according to Rex Matthews, Wesley now spoke less of 'assurance' and had developed his concept of faith further. Now it was not only *trust* in God's love, but actual *spiritual experience* of God's love, coming to us objectively in the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Around the same time he also dropped the idea that assurance was essential to justifying faith and accepted that there are those who are justified yet who lacked assurance. But that is exceptional. The Christian normally expects to be able to sing in the words of Charles Wesley:

What we have felt and seen
With confidence we tell,
And publish to the sons of men
The signs infallible.

We who in Christ believe
That he for us hath died,
We all his unknown peace receive
And feel his blood applied.

Exults our rising soul,
Disburdened of her load,
And swells unutterable full
Of glory and of God.²⁰

¹⁸ Outler (in his notes in the *Works* [BE], Vol. 1, 267) dates Sermon 10 1746 and Sermon 11 1767.

¹⁹ Rex Matthews, 'Religion and Reason Joined: Spiritual Experience and the Knowledge of God in the Theology of John Wesley,' Harvard ThD thesis, 1986, 240ff; see also, "'With the Eyes of Faith": Spiritual Experience and the Knowledge of God in the Theology of John Wesley,' *Wesleyan Theology Today*, ed. Runyon (Kingswood, 1985).

²⁰ The first line of this hymn is, 'How can a sinner know': *Works* [BE], Vol. 7, 195.

This witness of the Spirit to our spirits begins at the New Birth, and here Wesley takes the metaphor of birth, being ‘born of the Spirit’, which was a common emphasis throughout the Great Awakening in the preaching of Whitefield and Edwards as well as Wesley, and extends it beautifully. In Sermon 19, ‘The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God,’ Wesley elaborates on the similarities between the circumstances of the natural birth and the spiritual birth. The child which is not yet born subsists by air, but does not yet *feel* it or anything (except in a very dull manner), *hears* little, *sees* nothing. It has no *senses* and no conception of the visible world. But no sooner is he born than he feels the air. So it is with him that is born of God. Although he subsists in God, he is not *sensible* of God: he does not *feel* his presence for he has no spiritual senses. But when he is ‘born of God’, his whole soul is now sensible of God. God breathes His Breath (Spirit) into him and he breathes back by love, prayer, praise and thanksgiving.

For Wesley therefore (as for all the Pietists and Evangelicals of the Great Awakening) justification, the ‘relative’ change in our relationship with God, is accompanied by regeneration, the ‘real’ change which is the beginning of sanctification. Sermon 19, from which we have been quoting, is on I John 3:9, ‘Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.’ And Wesley actually softens that terrifying text. If ‘to sin’ here meant ‘any lack or want of conformity’ to the perfect law of God, then none of us would be regenerate. So it is in connection with this text that Wesley refines the meaning of sin to ‘a voluntary transgression of a known law’. That well-known definition has been unfairly criticized. The first thing we must understand is that it is proposed in connection with this specific text. Wesley understands it to mean that Christians do not lie, cheat, steal, murder, blaspheme, or commit adultery, and who can disagree with that? Secondly, we must understand that this definition is not an *alternative* to the wider definition of ‘any lack or want of conformity’, but that *both* definitions are required to do justice to Wesley’s thought. Thirdly, we must see that part of the problem that some have with this definition is a matter of semantics. Where we use the word ‘sin’ to refer to the wider category, Wesley uses the word ‘transgression’. In the light of this text, he will only call outward, voluntary transgressions ‘sins’, but as we shall see, that does not mean that he is making light of involuntary transgressions. Quite the contrary, Christ died for all our transgressions, and we must confess our involuntary transgressions as well as our voluntary sins. No matter how far a man or woman grows in holiness, he or she must engage life-long in the discipline of confession.

Sanctification and Inbred Sin

That then brings us to consider Wesley’s doctrine of sanctification or growth in grace. In this matter he stands with Calvin over against Luther in his positive doctrine that Christians are to advance in holiness and that this takes discipline. It was the same Thomas à Kempis whose influence stands behind Calvin’s great chapters on regeneration and repentance (*Institutes* III, 3) and on self-denial (*Institutes*, III, 7) who influenced Wesley. This was why Wesley originally adopted that methodical style of life which earned him and his group at Oxford the nick-name of ‘Methodists’. Before 1738, Wesley had tried to gain assurance of acceptance with God through his ‘methodism’ or self-discipline. But having discovered that that was a false trail did not mean he no longer had *any* place for methodical living. His assurance of salvation was in Christ alone, but in order to follow and serve the master he gladly submitted to the disciple’s discipline.

This disciplined growth in grace was necessary because of ‘Inbred Sin’. This doctrine was developed in Sermon 13, ‘Sin in Believers’ and Sermon 14, ‘The Repentance of Believers’. Sermon 13, is in fact a sermon on the doctrine of Original Sin, and Wesley soon quotes the Ninth Article of the Church of England:

Original sin...is the corruption of the nature of every man...whereby man is ... in his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth contrary to the Spirit ... And this infection of nature doth remain, yea, in them that are regenerated... And although there is no condemnation for them that believe... yet this lust hath of itself the nature of sin.

Wesley takes up the argument that there is still sin in believers against some followers of Count Zinzendorf and alleges that this is the doctrine of every church in Christendom, Greek, Romish or Reformed. He was later to publish his longest treatise defending this doctrine against the deist, John Taylor of Norwich, and to summarize his argument in Sermon 44, 'Original Sin'.

He further explains the meaning of 'sin' here in Sermon 13. He makes it clear that we are not now referring to deliberate, outward acts of disobedience, but to 'any sinful temper, passion, or affection such as pride, self-will, love of the world, lust, anger, peevishness, any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ.' Even in believers then, there are two contrary principles, nature and grace, the flesh and the spirit. That grand point, he says, runs through all the epistles of St Paul, indeed, through all the Holy Scriptures. And believers are continually exhorted to fight and conquer.

In Sermon 14, 'The Repentance of Believers,' he distinguishes this repentance from that of the unregenerate. Believers no longer come into condemnation over their outward rebellious acts against the obvious and known commandments of God, and they know that they have peace with God. But they still are aware that sin is present within. It does not *reign*. They fight against pride and self-will, idolatry, the desire of the eye and the pride of life, covetousness. They are aware of, and confess, their sins of omission. They increasingly gain the victory in this fight so that they grow in grace, and the 'gradual work' of sanctification proceeds, but sin is still present within. They are still in that sense 'carnal'.

Perfection in Love

Wesley draws attention however (in Sermon 13, II, 2) to some hope which is given in this fight by the fact that, in writing to the 'those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus' at Corinth, Paul equates being 'carnal' with being 'babes in Christ'. The hope implied there is that babes grow to maturity. Perhaps this word 'mature' is the best translation of *teleios* we can begin with in approaching Wesley's controversial doctrine of Christian 'Perfection'. That word 'perfection' carries so much baggage in modern English that I believe we will be better able to get inside Wesley's mind here if we remember that *teleiosis* carries this meaning of 'maturity'. What Wesley is talking about here is a picture of Christian maturity.

The concept formed itself in his mind long before he grasped the gospel truth of justification by grace. It came to him from the writings of Thomas à Kempis, Bishop Jeremy Taylor and his own contemporary, the Non-Juror, William Law. It was the concept of '“simplicity of intention and purity of affection”, one design in all we speak or do, and one design ruling all our tempers.' These were '“the wings of the soul” without which she can never ascend to the mount of God.'²¹ It was the concept of that higher 'perfection' or maturity which Clement of Alexandria describes in the *Stromateis*, that 'purity of heart' which was the goal of Antony and the monastic movement, that love of God filling the heart which the Greek fathers set their hearts upon and which the medieval mystics envisaged to be further up the 'ladder of perfection', that lower level

²¹ Wesley tells us of his first encounters with this concept in these writers in the opening paragraphs of 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,' *Works*, Vol. 11, 366f.

of perfect love which Bernard and Aquinas thought possible within this life.²² Wesley was tapping a rich vein of spiritual writers from every era of the Church Catholic when he began to seek this ‘perfection’ or maturity. He failed to find it by his neurotic discipline at Oxford or in Georgia. He then thought that the instantaneous conversion of ‘justification by faith’ would bring it, and was sadly disillusioned. He placed it too high and thought for a time that it was only attainable just before death. But then he dared to believe and teach that the Christian could reach such a level of maturity, could advance so far in growth in grace, that the Great Commandments could be fulfilled in this life. He was somewhat surprised when some of his mature Methodists claimed to be filled with the love of God and carefully interviewed them to weed out any dangerously immature and overblown claims. One thing he did not do successfully in my view was to work out fully how this related to the doctrine of original sin.

*The ‘Sufficient, Sovereign, Saving Grace’ of the Triune God*²³

You may have observed that this rapid sketch of Wesley’s theology has already examined Justification in connection with Christ and the Atonement, and Sanctification in connection with the Holy Spirit, a structure which hints at the Trinitarian basis of Wesley’s theology. These ought not to be exclusive lines of connection of course. What Wesley did not achieve, and probably did not even conceive of, was to relate sanctification fully to Christology and the Atonement and justification fully to the Spirit. There are also other gaps in our survey, if not entirely in Wesley’s thought, including, for example, the place of ecclesiology. Wesley’s preaching was strongly individualistic, as Evangelical Protestantism tends to be, but his practice was strongly ecclesial. In his Methodist societies, classes and bands, which were in effect *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*, he provided the Christian community within which *catechesis* and spiritual direction took place, that mutual care which is the essence of what he called ‘social holiness’. Works of mercy as well as works of piety were part of the requirements of belonging to the society. So while the preaching was often individualistic, the practice was corporate. There are also gaps in his teaching in the sense that he took for granted the liturgical and dogmatic framework of the great Church. Methodism was not designed to be a Church, but a religious society within the Church. Consequently when Methodism was cast out by its Mother Church, the liturgical and dogmatic framework was weak and the integration of *praxis* and dogma was weaker than in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. This left the Methodist movement prey to theological Liberalism, with its apparently similar emphasis on ‘experience’, to pragmatism, to individualism, to ‘redemption and lift’, and to all the other temptations of the era of modernity.

Yet the Trinitarian substructure of doctrine was actually there, though not always evident, in Wesley’s sermons. We may argue indeed that it was in fact this Trinitarian doctrine of God which was the deep structure of Wesley’s understanding of ‘sovereign grace’. His theology was undoubtedly a theology of ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.’ Maddox is right, I believe, when he sees the ‘orienting concern’ of Wesley’s theology as the tension between those two truths: that without God’s grace we cannot be saved,

²² For the historical development see Mayeul de Dreuille, *Seeking the Absolute Love: The Founders of Christian Monasticism* (New York: Gracewing, 1999), Harriet A. Luckman and Linda Kulzer (eds), *Purity of Heart in the Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999); R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection* (OUP, 1934); P.M. Bassett & W.M. Greathouse, *Exploring Christian Holiness, Vol II, The Historical Development* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1985).

²³ This is a line from Charles Wesley’s hymn, ‘Father, whose everlasting love,’ which was not in the original *Hymns for the People Called Methodists*, but was inserted as No. 39 after Wesley’s death. It appears in *The Methodist Hymn-Book* (1933) as no. 75.

and that without our grace-empowered but un-coerced participation, God's grace *will not save*.²⁴ It was because Wesley believed in a God whose 'mercy was over all His works' that he believed that the grace of God came preveniently to all. This grace was not some kind of created substance, some kind of medicine or causal force. It was 'uncreated grace', that is to say, it was God Himself, God the Holy Spirit present to the creature to re-create that freedom to believe and trust and follow and obey that was lost in the Fall. What we are talking about is not an impersonal force or influence or cause, but the prevenient *personal* presence and action of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Liberty and Liberation.²⁵ God, for Wesley, was not a petty monarch who could only get his way through an irresistible force. Rather the omnipotent Creator was in Himself *Father*, long before He was our Creator. His holiness was His eternal, inexhaustible Love. We might add that it was His Love for the Son within the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And it was that Love, 'all loves excelling', that 'Joy of heaven' which came down to us in Jesus, 'all compassion', and which could 'fix in us his humble dwelling.' It was that Love which came to us as the Holy Spirit, in whose power alone we were re-made as *persons* able to respond freely in faith and obedience.

This, to Wesley, was what the 'sovereign grace' of God meant: not the sovereignty of a tyrant, but the sovereign grace of the One who is eternally within Himself the loving Father. It was no wonder that brother Charles became lyrical about this 'sovereign grace' of the Triune God:

What shall I do my God to love?
My loving God to praise?
The length, and breadth, and height to prove,
And depth of sovereign grace?

Thy sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined;
From age to age it never ends;
It reaches all mankind.

Throughout the world its breadth is known,
Wide as infinity!
So wide, it never pass'd by one.
Or it had passed by me.

My trespass was grown up to heaven;
But far above the skies,
In Christ abundantly forgiven,
I see thy mercies rise!

The depth of all-redeeming love,
What angel-tongue can tell?
O may I to the utmost prove
The gift unspeakable!

Deeper than hell, it pluck'd me thence:
Deeper than inbred sin,
Jesus's love my heart shall cleanse

²⁴ Maddox, 19

²⁵ Maddox, 84-87

When Jesus enters in.

Come quickly, gracious Lord, and take
Possession of thine own;
My longing heart vouchsafe to make
Thine everlasting throne!

Assert thy claim, maintain thy right,
Come quickly from above:
And sink me to perfection's height,
The depth of humble love.

Conclusion

What then shall we conclude? Was Wesley a significant theologian? May we claim for him any creativity in his thought?

We should first note that Wesley probably would not see 'creativity' as a theological aim for himself or anyone else. He was committed to 'primitive Christianity'. And we cannot claim that he shed any new light on the great central dogmas of the Christian faith, the doctrines of the Person of Christ and of the Holy Trinity. Nonetheless it is clear that these dogmas formed the deep structure of his theology, and it is doubtful whether any Protestant theologian up to his time had contributed any major, creative contribution to that dogmatic core of the Christian faith. Luther was indeed a prophetic voice who shed new light on Christian theology as a whole with his focus on justification by faith and on true Christian theology as a *theologia crucis*. Calvin is the most masterly, comprehensive theologian of the early Protestants, integrating the theology of the ancient catholic church with the insights of the Reformation. If Wesley can claim any creative theological contribution, we should look for it perhaps in the doctrine of the Christian Life. Along with the other leading figures of the Pietist and Evangelical movements, he put a new focus on the New Birth which was to be widely influential not only in his life-time, but, through the modern missionary movement which grew out of these awakenings, and in the fast-growing churches today in the two-thirds world. One might also consider his contribution to ecclesiology, not laid out as doctrine, but embodied in the structures of the Methodist societies.²⁶

Wesley himself was aware (according to Ted A. Campbell)²⁷ of two sets of 'essential doctrines'. First of all there were the essential doctrines of the Christian faith: the Trinity and the deity of Christ, the atonement, justification by faith alone and the work of the Holy Spirit. But there were also those doctrines distinctive of the Methodists or Evangelicals (the words were often used interchangeably in the eighteenth century), sometimes listed as 'repentance, faith and holiness'. It was this cluster of doctrines which gave the Evangelical movement and the modern missionary movement its distinctiveness and, in time, its global influence. It is unfortunate in my view that his doctrine of the Christian Life including his perspective on Christian holiness, particularly the ancient spirituality of Christian 'perfection', became associated with sectarian extremes. That, I believe, was his most creative contribution, but, as R.W. Dale, the nineteenth-century English Reformed theologian remarked, it was a doctrine in need of imaginative and creative development:

²⁶ See Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns of Church Renewal* (IVP, 1980)

²⁷ Ted A. Campbell, 'John Wesley and the Legacy of Methodist Theology,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 85: 2 & 3 (2003), 405-418.

There was one doctrine of John Wesley's – the doctrine of perfect sanctification – which ought to have led to a great and original ethical development; but the doctrine has not grown; it seems to remain just where John Wesley left it. There has been want of the genius or courage to attempt the solution of the immense practical questions which the doctrine suggests. The questions have not been raised – much less solved. To have raised them effectively, indeed, would have had a far deeper effect on the thought and life – first of England, and then of the rest of Christendom – than was produced by the Reformation of the sixteenth century.²⁸

I would add that it not only needs practical and ethical but also dogmatic development to safeguard it from individualism, romanticism, subjectivism and sectarianism. It needs to be developed in a fully Trinitarian way so that the living experience of 'real Christians' may be understood in a way fully integrated with Trinitarian doctrine.

Perhaps Charles Wesley was the greater theologian of the two brothers, for he indicates how this should be done in a paean of praise to the Trinity which is at the same time a Trinitarian understanding of the Christian life. Here are doxology and dogmatics intertwined:

Father of everlasting grace,
Thy goodness and Thy truth we praise;
Thy goodness and Thy truth we prove;
Thou hast, in honour of Thy Son,
The gift unspeakable sent down,
The Spirit of life, and power, and love.

Send us the Spirit of Thy Son,
To make the depths of Godhead known,
To make us share the life divine;
Send Him the sprinkled blood to apply,
Send him our souls to sanctify,
And show and seal us ever Thine.

So shall we pray, and never cease,
So shall we thankfully confess,
Thy wisdom, truth, and power, and love;
With joy unspeakable adore,
And bless and praise Thee evermore,
And serve Thee with Thy hosts above.

Till, added to that heavenly choir,
We raise our songs of triumph higher,
And praise Thee in a bolder strain,
Out-soar the first-born seraph's flight,
And sing, with all our friends in light,
Thy everlasting love to man.

²⁸ The quotation from Dale appears in W.E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection* (Epworth, 1957), 168, referencing R.W. Dale, *The Evangelical Revival and Other Sermons*, 39.

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