

## DOCTRINE OF FAITH

Initially, Wesley was raised with the Anglican belief that salvation was by faith alone. The trouble was, the Anglican definition of faith had regressed to being dependent on one's own good works. Before his heart-warming experience at Aldersgate, he had been attempting to "save his own soul" by preaching to others. He was told by the leader of the Moravians to preach it until he had it, and once he got it, preach it all the more. So he set off on a journey all the way to the New World, seeking a preaching engagement with the Indians which never came. On the way over, he felt in fear for his life because of a storm, though he himself had often put to others the question "Do you fear death?" Upon realizing this fear in his own heart, he began to doubt the assurance of his own salvation.

He later said that this was a time in his life in which he was "almost Christian" – doing all the good works without actually having a relationship with Christ. He later preached a sermon by this name at his alma mater of Oxford, challenging them to live lives of spiritual vitality and not bleak legalism. He said that one could not be without some positive virtues, despite one's lack of true saving faith. Among these he listed: heathen honesty, including justice, truth and love; the form of godliness in abstaining from outward sins, doing good even to labor and suffering, and using the means of grace in public and private; a sincere desire to love serve God. The difference, he said, was between wanting to serve, and a genuine love for God. The almost Christian does all of the outward things that a Christian should do, and yet lacks the love and trust in Christ alone for salvation.

In contrast to this, Wesley held the view of the “altogether Christian.” The marks of an altogether Christian were: loving God, loving one’s neighbor, and a faith that assures forgiveness of sins, and is followed by a loving heart to obey God’s commandments. It is interesting to note here that in both cases, antinomianism is far from Wesley’s thinking. In his opinion, even those with a false form of religion should have been doing good deeds. This falls in a stark contrast to the Calvinistic view of predestination. If one is predestined, then one should be able to sin all the more without fear of losing salvation. And if one is not, then why waste the time in trying to be holy, when you’re already damned? So for Methodists today that claim they are somehow exempt from helping in issues of social justice, or other forms of giving of themselves, they don’t really have a leg to stand on. For Wesley, being Methodist, or a true Christian, good works are implied. It is the motivation of the heart that distinguishes an almost from an altogether Christian: legalism or love.

After his Aldersgate experience, Wesley preached on Salvation by Faith, the first in the volume of his 52 classics. Here, he methodically lined out what exactly it meant to be saved by faith, and what type of faith this entailed. It was not merely the faith of a heathen, he said, viewing God as a moral governor. Nor was it intellectual faith – it was not enough to believe God exists, for even the devil knows this and the scriptures. Neither, and this is interesting, is it the faith of the disciples/apostles before the resurrection of Jesus; for whether or not they professed him as the Christ before his crucifixion, they definitely believed after he reappeared to them. No, none of those would suffice as true saving faith, no faith that leaves Christ in the grave is sufficient. It was only the faith in Christ from the heart, faith of the atonement.

Now that we've looked at what real faith is, what exactly does this saving faith do? Wesley held that it is: 1. a present salvation, 2. salvation from sin, 3. freedom from guilt, 4. freedom from fear, 5. freedom from the *power* of sin. "He that is born of God sinneth not by habitual sin, nor by willful sin, nor by sinful desire, nor by infirmities." It was this view that would get Wesley into hot water with his constituents later on in his life. They neither agreed nor believed it possible to be free from the power of sin in this lifetime. While yes, they knew that Jesus' salvation did all of the above, they did not agree with Wesley on his radical view of sanctification. To them, it just was not feasible that one could be entirely perfected in love during this life. His critics pointed out that one was not omniscient after salvation, and was bound to make mistakes – asking therefore how Wesley could claim that perfection was attainable. Wesley conceded this fact that people after salvation continue to make mistakes. His definition of perfection though, was not a legalistic definition. Rather, it was a family definition, that judged by the intentions of the heart. What Wesley meant by perfection is that one born of the Spirit, who has been perfected in love, would not willfully sin. To Wesley, the command "Be holy as the Lord your God is holy" was not a hypothetical suggestion, but with God's power was a very real possibility.

## DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION / NEW BIRTH

For the time in which he lived, Wesley also held a somewhat unique doctrine of justification. Before getting into that, first one must look at what the definition of justification is. Mankind was made in the image of God, but Adam & Eve marred that image by refusing to follow God's command, and now all mankind is bearing the consequences of that choice. Thus, in order to be reconciled unto God, or set right and *justified*, an unmerited pardon from God must be accepted by the sinner who has inherited a sinful nature. Wesley's view differed from that of his constituencies because they believe justification came not from accepting this free gift, but from accumulating enough good works, in order to entice God to extend an offer of salvation. In Wesley's view, good works should stem from the gratitude of a grateful heart, for the free gift of salvation by grace through faith.

After justification, when one becomes a believer, thus begins the process of sanctification. Wesley saw this process as analogous to the natural progression of the physical life stages. When one is forgiven and pardoned from sins, one begins afresh in a new relationship with God. This childlike faith is the beginning of a spiritual maturation process called sanctification, also termed regeneration. Wesley described this moment of justification as new birth, thus the new believer was "born of the Spirit" as referred to throughout Pauline writings. His critics said that this could not be true, for after the moment of justification is was often a considerable amount of time before people started exhibiting the qualities of one born of God/the Spirit. Wesley argued that justification and birth by the Spirit are indeed the same thing, but that there was of course a natural

maturation process involved, as with any birth. As a man is not born a man but a child, so is the process of sanctification/regeneration after justification.

Collins points out that although Wesley did not make a temporal distinction between justification and new birth, he did make a logical one. In the order of thinking, justification precedes new birth. We first conceive his wrath to be turned away, and then his Spirit works in our hearts. For all intensive purposes, the two are inseparable, and so it is best when dealing with new believers to explain that while there may be different terminology, both happen pretty much simultaneously. That is, when someone comes to salvation, we should encourage them to expect God to begin to work on transforming their lives immediately, not thinking that this sanctification will happen only sometime immediately before death, as was the view held by most of Wesley's contemporaries.

Therefore, Wesley urged people to use all the means of grace that were available to them, saying that man did not sin because he was without grace, but because he was not exercising/using the grace that had been given to him. Wesley also talked about justification as being on the porch of religion, whereas ongoing sanctification meant actually entering the house. The largely prevalent view of justification during his time saw justification as the primary goal of religion, and then the rest of one's life was spent waiting for the moment of sanctification at death. Either that or they paid lip-service to sanctification by saying it happened simultaneously with justification, but had no real effect in helping that person reach perfection in love during this lifetime. Wesley of course, believed that after entering through the porch of justification, there were still many facets of the house/relationship with God to explore.

I think that this view is right-on. I grew up hearing phrases like “I’m only human, nobody’s perfect, and just a sinner saved by grace.” I always thought, if the church does not affirm that it is actually possible to be perfected by the grace of God, then why do we talk so much about “getting saved” if it is not supposed to make that much of a difference? It is sad to see how this key doctrine of Wesley has been undermined by the encroachment of liberalism and relativism into United Methodism today. In the churches I grew up in, there was little talk of “going on to perfection” and little emphasis on the importance of small groups and accountability. When I got to college, this is what made a big impact on my life, having small groups and an atmosphere where you were expected and encouraged to be making regular, forward progress in your walk with Christ. It was not until later on that I learned this ideal actually stems from Wesleyan theology, because I had never experienced it in a Methodist church.

This is one of the key distinctions that are supposed apart Methodism from other so-called evangelical and protestant denominations. Yet I fear today there are many United Methodist churches with the “form of religion, but lacking its power.” If we are to get back to the roots of where Wesley originally intended his reform efforts, we must get back to this concept of rebirth and regeneration through grace and sanctification. Otherwise, the schisms in the church will continue to grow, as the misconstrued concept of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral keeps setting experience at the same level as scripture. The future lies then, not so much in innovation, as in getting back to basics.

## WITNESS OF SPIRIT / ASSURANCE

Wesley held that one could be assured of salvation through what is called the witness of the spirit. This can be broken down into two categories: 1. Witness of our own spirit. 2. Witness of God's spirit. The testimony of God's spirit was said to come before that of our own, because it is by his grace that we are able to use free will to accept salvation in the first place. Wesley described it as a testimony given by the Spirit to the fact of our sonship, which then further exhibits itself through the display of the fruits of the Spirit. The exact method is a bit obscure as to how the Spirit would give such witness, because Wesley referenced each of the following ways, yet in no way made any of them definitive: An outward voice, an inward voice, a passage of Scripture at a key moment. He did stress however, that the witness never was without fruits. The witness then, was for the individual and the fruits were the way of discerning that said individual had indeed undergone a conversion experience.

A particular point of contention arose over this doctrine. Some were insisting that this assurance of the spirit *must* necessarily happen at the moment, simultaneously with salvation. While Wesley did not deny that this was a possibility, he in no wise shared in the assertion that this was the only time it could happen. Rather, he said that it was usually after learned study and the beginnings of sanctification that one began to feel an assurance of salvation. I would liken it to after the dust of the salvation experience settles, the new believer begins to see that he is in fact standing on solid ground, and the overwhelming emotions that may have accompanied his salvation begin to subside, and he feels instead a calm confidence that he is indeed a son of God.

The following list of four points helps to clarify this process of the witness of the Spirit: 1. Faith has in it divine assurance, and all assurance springs from God-given faith. 2. Justifying faith is a person divine assurance of the provision of salvation in Christ for me. 3. The witness is person divine assurance of the *possession* of that salvation by me. 4. Abiding saving faith grows out of and includes the witness, as the justifying act of faith preceded it. Wesley also cited Romans 8:16, “The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.”

Again, I would use an analogy here to further help clarify it for one I was trying to explain it to. One could say that the witness of God’s Spirit could be compared with meeting one’s favorite role-model, a movie star for example. One could spend a full day out on the town with this person, sort of a little brother tag-along to this person of great social stature. Upon waking up the next day, because the experience was so ideal and yet so outlandish, one might wonder, “Could such a person really call me friend?” The celebrity would then acknowledge publicly being the friend to the everyday guy, affirming to him that yes – you do have a friend in high places. Such is the way that God speaks to our spirit, calmly reassuring us that he has taken us in adoption, and that he doesn’t mind at all that we call him friend and father.

This is as best as I understand it, Wesley himself having said that the actual concept was something of a divine mystery even to him. I would say that I have experienced this in my own life, though I do not think it was until my college years that I really began to have a full sensing or understanding of this witness of the Spirit. Growing up, though I grew up in the United Methodist Church, I would not say that I had a real knowledge of how the true Wesleyan tradition worked. I thought that one just went

through life, continually stumbling and then getting back up again, never really knowing for sure that you were saved. Perhaps a better way to put it is that I was not aware of the Wesleyan notion of going on to perfection, in that it is actually possible in this lifetime. Even those influential in my understanding of God, such as pastors and lay leaders, would affirm the notion that we are all destined to just go through life screwing things up, and that eventually we would fumble our way through the Pearly Gates. It was not until college, when going to a non-denominational church that I really started to see otherwise.

My decision to try a new church was largely because I was tired of the Pacific Northwest UMC conference and its watered down version of church doctrine. I didn't know a lot, but I at least knew enough to know that the Bible is true, and should not be called into question from the pulpit. I then realized there are Christians who not only think that perfection in this lifetime is possible, but are actually expecting to see it done in their lives. And mine. I had heard rumor that this perhaps had begun with a certain John Wesley, but that somehow the denomination he had founded had lost his original vision, and thus it had been picked up by others outside of Methodism. I was astounded, literally taken aback, upon coming to seminary that this was true. Since coming to seminary, I have further felt this witness of the spirit, so much so that I feel able to say with a bold confidence that God has the power to perfect us in love.

The flip-side of the witness of the Spirit, is of course conviction that one feels when contemplating turning away from their decision to follow God. As I begin to have a wider sphere of influence, I want to make sure that people know fully about the witness of the Spirit, that they would be more confident in going on to perfection, knowing full well the fellowship they have now and can still expect to gain more of in heaven.

## TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE OF GOD

Wesley believed, like so many of the church fathers before him, that God is triune and that all these parts are equally God. One of the biggest debates that arose in the history of the church was over the term *homoousia*. *Homoousia* means “of the same substance.” While it may seem a simple enough term, it had great theological significance, and was well-argued during the era of the Nicene fathers. They penned the Nicene Creed to help combat the heresies of the day. Their main problem was dealing with the false teachings of the Arians, who held that “there was a time when Christ was not.”

In other words, their assertion was that Christ was a created being, having a beginning, and by implication, perhaps an end. Rather than affirming his deity, they over-emphasized his humanity, due to false assumptions, stemming from inaccurate views of God. They held that God could not suffer, and that because Jesus visibly suffered on the cross, he must not have been God. Yet the Bible clearly says otherwise, and gives many other accounts of when the heart of God was grieved. These Arian notions are then, not so much scripturally based as they are steeped in a more Gnostic philosophical bend. The Arians were more eclectic than Christian, and this is why those who convened at Nicea sought to speak against them, thus adopting the term *homoousia*. The Arians countered by modifying this affirmation to read *homoiousia*, or “like substance,” and so the debate and controversy continued.

Wesley would have cast his lot on the side of all parts of God being equally un-made, and thus having existed even before the creation of all space-time. He also placed a greater emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit as sanctifier than did most of his

contemporaries. He held that Jesus had been begotten, not made by the father, and that through his redeeming sacrifice, mankind could be reconciled to the father. Additionally, as mentioned previously, he saw that the Holy Spirit had been sent to mankind after the ascension of Jesus, though there were a select few in the Old and New Testament who had a foretaste of this awesome abiding power. John the Baptist was one such individual. We know from the gospels that he was filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth, that he may know and proclaim the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. He even leaped in his mother's womb when Mary, also with child at the time, approached. Because of the Holy Spirit, he had begun to fulfill his ministry purpose even before he was born.

Wesley's view of the Trinity also carried over into his view of eschatology. He preached a sermon entitled *The Great Assize*, in which he talked about that great and terrible day, the imminently upcoming Day of the Lord. He explained to his listeners that we are presently living in the days of men, in which mankind has been given reign over the earth. Therefore, Wesley said, we should be doing good works and fulfilling the universal call of God upon our lives to be good stewards of the richness we have been loaned. For there will come a day of reckoning, when the Lord Jesus will return not as sacrificial lamb, but as holy judge, and will separate the sheep from the goats, the weeds from the wheat, and all will know and acknowledge God by bowing before the throne.

Wesley emphasized such passages as the opening of the gospel of John, in which it says that in the beginning the word was with God and the word was God, and that through this all things came into being. Jesus therefore could not have been a created being, coming into existence when he came into this world. David himself called the

Jesus as the Messiah his own Lord, yet this coming king was to be a descendant of the Davidic dynasty several generations later.

One way of thinking of the trinity would be a ray of light, which though we cannot tell at first glance, contains a full spectrum of colors. It is not until viewed through a prism that we can see the colors separated into their unique hues. Likewise, it is not until we view God through the lens of the Trinity that we can see how the three parts of the Godhead coexist and interact. This is the perfect model of self-giving love. Another analogy that has been used is that of a family, in which one member cares about the well-being of the other two. This is not to suggest that there are male or female roles within the trinity, but is simply another model by which self-giving love can be viewed. The trinity is of course a derived concept, from taking the whole of the scriptural canon into account. Where people fell into heresy in the past is when they focused in too narrowly on one aspect of God, to the exclusion of the others. Yet, we do find even biblical evidence of Jesus speaking indirectly about the concept of Trinity. Matthew 28 is one such example, where he tells his disciples to baptize in the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” If Christ himself thought it important to give reverence to all three of the personas of the Trinity, then we well should too.

## SIN AND PREVENIENT GRACE

Wesley was a firm believer in the idea of total depravity and original sin. He saw mankind as inheriting Adam's original sin, and therefore totally and utterly unable to do any good in and of itself. This, he believed, is the doctrine that set Christianity apart from that of heathens, for if a man believes himself not fallen, then he has no need of the redemptive work of a savior. Yet, to Wesley's critics, this reasoning begged the question, was not man totally off the hook for his own behavior, being that he was totally reprobate? Wesley would say no on this account, because he believed that God had extended prevenient grace to all mankind, by the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. That is how Paul could say that Abraham shares in our salvation, and that his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. Wesley believed that this prevenient grace is what allowed man to be able to exercise some measure of free will, to accept salvation. Again, Wesley's critics accused him of being a heretic like Pelagius, and attributing salvation to the merits of the works done by man. Wesley retorted that if someone was to offer them a large sum of money, why no doubt would gladly have done the "work" of extending their hand to receive it. Therefore, exercising free will to accept salvation was nothing more than operating by prevenient grace and saying yes to the unmerited gift.

Wesley was in this respect neither Augustinian, as many of his Calvinist contemporaries were, bordering sometimes on the edges of antinomianism. Neither, as was mentioned, was Wesley a subscriber to the Pelagian school of thought, attributing salvation entirely to the logical choices of mankind. No, Wesley can only be truly understood in his Armenian middle-ground, which was not so much a compromise between the other two as it is a true, correct, and balanced view of the real nature of

prevenient grace, a doctrine which the other two views lack and are therefore incomplete as correct views of the sinfulness of mankind.

Wesley affirmed the following key points in his arguments about original sin and prevenient grace: 1. The absolute universality of sin. 2. That this universality arises from heart-sin, or sinfulness in nature or character. 3. That this heart-sin is birth-sin; not acquired, but inherited, born with us. 4. That this birth-sin is derived from Adam, and comes by a natural law. 5. That it originated in the first transgression. 6. He states that this entire sin exposes man justly to the wrath of God, yet the Lord in his graciousness extends enough prevenient grace to turn to him for salvation. Such is an amazing paradox, that though deserving of the punishment merited by the fall of all of Adam's seed, God acts in his own sovereignty and allows mankind a slight amount of regeneration before salvation, enough freedom from the bondage of sin to realize that there is freedom to be had by responding to grace.

Wesley also affirms that were it not for God's gracious desire to make himself known, we would have no knowledge of him. This is not to say that we could not conceive logically of his existence, but we would know him no better than the emperor of China, who though we know exists, we have no relationship with or real knowledge about. "We could no more perceive him by our natural understanding, than we could see him with our own eyes. For 'no one knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son willeth to reveal him. And no one knoweth the Son but the Father, and he to whom the Father revealeth him.'" Again, this is a strange paradox that the Trinity would remain mutually and exclusively hidden, if it were not for the love of God for his creation and the longing for man to know and be in fellowship with him.

This is something I struggled with in my own life. I grew up with the misconception that in order to be a good Christian, you just had to try your best to be holy, through behavioral micromanagement. Yes, Jesus had died for my sins, but that just meant I was given a clean slate, and it was up to me to keep it from getting dirty again. I had a very legalistic view of God the Father, that he was this judge and that any little thing I did wrong merited a sentencing. Yet, strangely and perhaps sadistically, he had sent his Son who for some reason was willing to die for me, in order to save me from the wrath of his Father. It was not until I began to get my theology of the Trinity straight that I realized this sending of Jesus was not some odd child sacrifice, but a self-sacrificing love of a Triune God.

Additionally, I realized that being a good Christian was not up to me at all. Because I now bore the name of Christ, it was not me who had the power to keep myself holy, no matter how hard I tried. For holiness apart from God is no holiness at all, but mere legalism. It is by yielding to the Holy Spirit, after using the prevenient grace allotted to me to accept Christ that I can start to become more sanctified. Wesley himself had gone through this struggle, thinking that this saved by faith notion meant that he must first muster up enough good works to trade in for an invitation to salvation. He thought that if he went to preach to the Indians in Georgia that somehow he would score enough tally points to save his own soul. But alas, he returned from the New World just as empty and searching as he was when he left, only now realizing that he feared for his own life, something a *real* Christian was not supposed to do. After all, Paul had said “to die is gain,” so there should be no fear of death, save for a Christian that is not really relying on salvation by faith, but only by dead works.

## SANCTIFICATION

According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.” Wesley therefore, had to address the fact that clearly and experientially, believers still are able to sin after their conversion. This has always been a tough theological question to answer, but Wesley does well in his theology surrounding this question. Wesley likened a new convert to one who had just been born. While yes, to some degree they were sanctified during conversion, they were by no means a fully mature, spiritual adult. Such maturity could, in Wesley’s view, be reached only through an ongoing walk with the Lord and gradual spiritual maturation, at the end of which one could be made perfect in love. In the interim time, the believer continued to struggle with, and yet have victory over, sin by the power of the Holy Spirit. Again, he emphasized that any good and redemptive qualities one may exhibit stemmed only from God and he alone.

Wesley acknowledged the scriptural basis for this view of struggling Christians, that until they are “strong in the Lord and in the power of his might” need to keep wrestling against flesh and blood, powers and principalities. Wesley had debated much with Count Zinzendorf over the nature of how sin still affects the believer. Originally, the stance was made by Zinzendorf that after salvation, sin was nowhere to be found in the heart of the believer. But, after Wesley backed up his view with scriptural evidence, as well as experiential examples from their own encounters, Zinzendorf conceded that possibly sin remained in the body of the believer, but not in the soul. Wesley made no such distinction, instead saying that our fallen nature gravitates naturally towards sin, and that it is only through an ongoing reliance on the power of God for sanctification and renewal that we can eventually conquer.

Wesley cites the writings of Paul as evidence for his understanding of sin in believers, “Now here the apostle speaks unto those who were unquestionably believers, - whom in the same breath he styles his brethren in Christ, - as being still, in a measure, carnal. He affirms, there was envying, (an evil temper,) occasioning strife among them and yet does not give the least intimation that they had lost their faith. [No] he manifestly declares they had not; for then they would have not been babes in Christ. And (what is most remarkable of all) he speaks of being carnal, and babes in Christ, as one and the same thing; plainly showing that every believer is (in a degree) carnal, while he is only a babe in Christ.” Residing sinfulness then was not an indication that one had not actually experienced salvation; rather that one was still spiritually immature. Paul does not call into question their sincerity at a past moment of justification, rather their behavior in light of calling themselves Christian. Paul urges them to put away childish things, and go on after the nobler goal of perfection in Christ.

Wesley also raised the question: Since God is absolutely holy and cannot look upon sin; can Christ really reside in the heart of a believer in which sin still exists? Obviously this must be possible, Wesley says, for otherwise Christ could not enter into that believer’s heart in the first place. So then, it is not sin in the heart of man that keeps God out, but rather the entry of the divine that flushes out the darkness. Just as shadow cannot exist but in the absence of light, so too, the ongoing presence of Jesus in the believer’s heart causes the believer to become righteous and sanctified, albeit over time. This gradual work is not due to the lack of effectiveness of God, but the stubborn heart of the new believer. These babes in Christ have to be weaned from their dependence on sin and taught to depend on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Like a recovering drug

addict or a tree after a storm, it takes time and gradual forward progress to get the new believer back into the shape and image in which they were intended to grow.

I had a pastor in college that would liken this to changing either the fruit or the root of a tree. If one had a crab-apple tree, one could trim the bad apples from its branches, and give the appearance of a good, healthy tree. However, all other factors remaining the same, in due time the tree would again start to bear bad fruit. Such was an analogy of the believer trying to overcome the power of sin on their own, and label themselves a Christian for their efforts. The alternative then, is to let God as only he can, transform the very being of the tree itself, causing it therefore, to grow and bear good fruit, something no amount of pruning a bad tree could do.

This is what the process of sanctification is all about, letting God get into your heart and change it, and quitting the vain façade that asserts that I can do it myself, or that humankind is naturally good. It is only when one admits there is an infirmity that the doctor can actually work, and it is only when one lays still, albeit nervously, that the dentist can work on an abscessed tooth. Unattended, the infection continues to spread, causing more pain, and eventually can even threaten the person's life. Yet, recognized early, sicknesses, cavities, and even turning back down that sinful road, can be corrected. The believer can be reminded that he has been down that dead-end road before, and it was only after Christ illuminated the way that he realized there was no way out to be found, save heading towards that marvelous light that enabled him to see his own lostness. Sanctification truly is a beautiful thing, not that we can do, but that we can allow God to do in and through us.

## CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

This was one of the key tenets that Wesley and his more Calvinistic brethren disagreed about. On the one hand, Wesley believed that Christian, scriptural holiness was not only decreed by God, but was also attainable in this lifetime, and not only in the instantaneous passing over into death. The Calvinists, on the other hand, accused Wesley of being arrogant, attributing a nearly Pelagian emphasis on the moral resolve of mankind. Wesley argued that he was not a Pelagian, but would not agree with the Calvinists on the concept of the eternal and absolute security of the believer. Wesley believed that after the fall, mankind by default was in a state of total depravity. Yet, Wesley also believed in the concept of prevenient grace, one which the Calvinists glossed past, instead focusing on the *irresistible* grace given to believers. In this regard, Wesley believed prevenient grace to be irresistible, in that you could not cause God not to give it to you, and yet Wesley also believed that *saving* grace was resistible, to the point that you refused to respond to God's prevenient grace in your life.

Another terminology that has been used to describe Christian perfection is Entire Sanctification. This concept is one that he fully developed and fleshed out, summarizing it in his sermon "The Circumcision of the Heart." It is what Wesley deemed to be a "habitual disposition of the soul" in which the believer had so frequently and regularly walked with God that it became second nature for him to choose the right and godly path through everyday life. It is the embodiment of the characteristics of holy love reigning in the human heart, which not only loves God, but loves him to the exclusion of all sinfulness.

In 1766, Wesley produced his treatise on entire sanctification entitled *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Since he knew his doctrine could possibly be misconstrued by Moravians, Calvinists and others, he took great care in this writing to state in what sense Christians should and should not hope to be perfected. He said firstly that Christians are not perfect in knowledge. Omniscience and freedom from ignorance are not promised who any Christian, even those who are earnestly seeking God with a pure heart. Our temporal mortality is not design to hold such power.

Wesley affirmed instead, that those of true faith must continue to study and learn and develop their minds, in order not to fall into enthusiasm or fanaticism. Even after whole lifetimes of study, full comprehension of the mysteries of God, such as the Trinity and Incarnation, would still remain beyond their minds. Since those who are perfected in love are not perfected in knowledge, they are still susceptible to the fault of ignorance. One could then promise something, which may prove not to be possible due to circumstances out of this person's control. The person would not then be held liable for lying, because he would have made his oath in good faith. The believer is still fallible in areas of the mind, in making everyday honest mistakes.

Wesley also said that a believer could be perfected in love, and yet still be under the influence of infirmities. This could range through everything from simple weakness or frailty of the body to a slow understanding of a particular topic. In other words, all the normal human hang-ups and shortcoming would still apply. A believer may even experience temptation from time to time. Jesus would have set the believer free from his past sinfulness, and absolved all his guilt, but since the evil one will not be finally

vanquished until the end of this age, he would still persist in trying to make the Christian fall into sin.

Therefore, Wesley said that a believer should remain strong, and true in the faith. He should rely on God to continue to sanctify him, gradually moving him towards perfect love. In this state, the believer would be so habitually conditioned to run to God during times of temptation, that the wiles of the devil would ultimately prove ineffective. Such a one would be considered to be spiritually mature, and perfect in love. Wesley's definition of perfection, then, is to be understood not in legal terms or categories, as one would measure violations of a law. Rather, perfection should be viewed in family terminology, in which one wrong does not cause a man to lose the sonship of his father. Or, to use another analogy, Michael Jordan has been quoted as saying "You miss 100% of the shots you never take." The reason Jordan was such a good basketball player is not because he never missed a shot, but because he made so many – a feat he never would have accomplished without risking to miss the mark. He missed many more shots than most human beings ever dare to take, and will be remembered as one of the greatest players to ever live.

I am also reminded of a part of a movie I saw not too long ago. It is *Troy*, the retelling of Homer's famous Odyssey story. In it, a young boy comes to get Achilles, and let him know that he must go fight against a giant of a man. The little boy expresses his reserve and doubts that anyone can beat this foe, saying to Achilles "I would not want to fight him." Achilles replies, "That is why no one will remember your name." That stuck with me as a great example of the timid Christian life. Does one who believes in Jesus and sits idly by still go to heaven? Yes, undoubtedly if his faith is true. Yet, that is not

the point, for a Christian who does nothing to affect things in this life makes no lasting impact for future generations.

If we are to live this faith in action, we too must approach life with the same vitality and zeal. We must take to the arena, and not sit on the sidelines, afraid to get in the game for fear of injury or embarrassment. We need to rely on the coaching of the Holy Spirit to guide us that we may continue to grow through our mistakes, and get past them, remembering them as to not make them again in the future. Gradually, and perhaps even slowly, but inevitably for the true seeker, God is able to bring them to entire sanctification, this Christian perfection in love.

## PASTORAL THEOLOGY

In Wesley's pastoral theology, he was amazingly pragmatic. Yes, he preached the doctrine of entire sanctification and perfection in Christian love. Yet, he was also a realist, and foresaw and witnessed the backsliding of many who called themselves Christians. He addressed this as a wilderness experience, and likened it to the children of God, whom, though they had been redeemed and brought out of Israel and freed from Egyptian bondage, fell back into rebellion and sinfulness in their wilderness wanderings. In his sermon entitled *The Wilderness State*, Wesley describes the plaguing condemnation and self-doubt that the back-sliding Christian feels, wondering and questioning if he ever did believe, and if in fact he is still a believer. Gradually, this self-doubt gives way to resolve, that either he is unforgivable, or that he rationalized a need for God and the divine does not indeed exist. Continuing in this state, the person would become in Wesley's words, reprobate. The Bible describes this as a hardness of heart, and a searing of the conscience, that throughout habitually turning to sin, one's spiritual arteries become completely blocked off, and they are in a worst state than before they accepted initial saving grace. These are the people that the Bible speaks of when it says it is better to be hot or cold than lukewarm. For those who are hot are on fire for God, and those who are cold still have a chance to become hot. Yet, those who are lukewarm have touched the intense cleansing heat of God, and have decided to go back out into the loneliness of the cold, opting for sin over holiness, though holiness was within their grasp.

Wesley called these temptations Satan's Devices, because they cause Christians to stray from God's intended path of holiness for their lives. This produced a state of heaviness, due to manifold temptations. He talked of these topics often in his sermons,

making listeners aware of the very real danger of sin, not rationalizing it away as something that election would allow them to endure and even indulge in. To do such was error according to Wesley, and fell into the decadent heresy of antinomian Calvinism. To pad their opinions, Calvinistic preachers would often misinform entire congregations, telling them that the Bible says absolutely that though believers, they must necessarily endure and stay caught in the mire of sin during this lifetime. To aspire to do otherwise, in their opinion, was to place in too high esteem the virtue of free choice. To them, it put in danger the sovereignty of God, which was their presiding presupposition. To Wesley, the sovereignty of God could remain intact, with the correct view of God. If one saw God as a loving and forgiving father, instead of one who arbitrarily predestines to either heaven or damnation, the believer could be confident that God would perfect him. Even though the believer may inevitably fall, it is through the process of getting up that God often brings sanctification anyways.

Those who chose to remain in darkness were simply refusing to step out in the power that God had given them. A man sinned not because he hath not grace, Wesley contended, but because he refused to use the sanctifying grace he had. With believers that fell back into sin, Wesley would handle things in small groups and band meetings. If this sinfulness became habitual, he would exclude them from such meetings, not dissimilarly from the way ancient Israel dealt with its dissenters to holiness. Such “tough love” was used only as a last resort, but it was still used. This makes me wonder where the church lost its commitment to holiness, and instead reprioritized to make social acceptance the primary virtue. Week after week, we allow ourselves, our brothers, and sisters in the faith to go unchecked, unconvicted, and uncared for, continually mired by

the sin that they should have long since been able to overcome. I think this problem stems partially from bad theology; misunderstanding God as a saving deity but not a redemptive Lord. He is left on the mantle of our lives, shown off with due attention, but left to collect dust while we live our lives the way we choose. Oswald said it best, "The goal of salvation is not that people should be free of physical and spiritual bondage in order to live as they choose. The goal of salvation is fellowship with God within the parameters of his character and nature. This has been God's goal since the tragedy of Genesis 3 and it remains to in the Christian era. The thought that the primary purpose of the Cross is forgiveness is misguided at best."

I think that if more of our United Methodist churches were to do some digging, they would unearth a tradition which has too long gone forgotten and unpronounced. Wesley would have been irate if he would have seen the darkness that has encroached and poisoned the minds of our churchgoers. In this uncertain age of moral relativism, we need a church that is strong, merciful, and yet altogether unwavering on the subject of sin vs. holiness. A homosexual pastor should be removed from the pulpit, and lose the charge that was given, if one refuses to reform. This is not to say we victimize those who struggle with homosexuality. This is to say we raise the bar on all moral behavior for those that are to be the models of holiness. Instead, said pastor is allowed not only to keep the church charge, but is also affirmed for being so post-modern and embracing a lifestyle that will help facilitate church outreach to those that are homosexual. What a perverse way of looking at life. Jesus fellowshiped with sinners yes, but did not engage in stealing with the tax collector, nor visit brothels with the intent of hiring a prostitute. There's a line between loving sinners and indulging in sin, and it has been crossed.

## CHURCH AND MINISTRY

When Wesley originally started preaching salvation by faith alone, and began evangelizing with the idea of entire sanctification during this lifetime, he had no intentions of challenging the authority or splitting away from the Anglican Church. It was with great reluctance that he commissioned pastors to do their work in the New World independently from Anglicanism. He did this only in response to the Revolutionary War, while he himself remained in England and remained an Anglican even until his death. Others called into question his intentions, and even his brother Charles had issue with the commissioning of pastors for America. Yet, Wesley claimed sola scriptura for his authority in doing so, like so many reformers before him. Dire situations required dire measures, and created sometimes dire consequences.

Wesley was willing to take this risk. He believed the gospel so fervently that to sit idly by and let the New World lose out on its opportunity for ministry would have been a great grievance to him. When he was bed ridden and ill Wesley still managed to write several theological works. Though doctors advised against his self-taxing preaching schedule, Wesley outlived even Fletcher, whom he had so hoped would serve as his successor. He attributed his lasting health to his regular regimen of exercise, diet, and sleeping habits. He was a man who was early to bed and early to rise, exercising moderation even in the preaching act itself. To those of his circuit riders who were in the habit of yelling when they preached, Wesley made accusations of attempted vocal suicide. His attitude was that if you so strain and overwork your vocal chords, it would not be long until you would do no further good with them, for your voice would give out.

Wesley also spoke to his congregations as to what it meant to be under the covenant authority of God. Though Methodism was seen as a rebellion of sorts against the authority of the Anglican Church, Wesley wanted to make sure that his parishioners had ample respect for the church from which they sprang. Despite differing doctrinal views, he still tried to keep small group and camp meetings from convening on or near the time of Anglican mass. Wesley also refused to fully ordain any preachers whose congregants were within serving range of the local church. This meant that while they could go to Wesley or his circuit riders for spiritual nurture, it was to the Anglican mass that they had to flock in order to receive the sacraments, such as baptism, communion, marriage, and the like.

Concerning the Eucharist, Wesley disagreed with the more Roman Catholic and traditional Anglican view of things. They would hold that the priest serving communion would pray over the elements of bread and wine, and these each would in turn become the physical body and blood of Jesus. Yet the Lord Jesus, when commanding his disciples to remember him in this way, simply said give thanks for bread and wine as often as you eat and drink it. Assuming that Jesus wanted believers to remember him at every meal, why then did the church reduce it to a small portion of bread and wine, once every few months? I would contend that they ritualized it, because thankfulness is such a key issue to being an altogether Christian. Such practice often leads to being a different person, and marching to the tune of a drum that might not follow the beat of the church. The cadence then, might be of the rhythm of God's grace calling us to deeper relationship with him, and not necessarily a deeper allegiance to church structure.

By doing this, it was Wesley's hope that these people might have transformed lives, but also that they would rub off on those with whom they made contact while at Anglican services. To separate completely would be to live a pious, but ultimately useless religious life, isolated from anyone in real need. Wesley wanted believers to remain among other, marginal believers and for them to help each other's faith. One of the key problems plaguing Wesley's time was that of poverty. During an exploding time of alcoholism, Wesley claimed that one of the main problems was that much of the grain that would have otherwise been made into bread and sold to feed the poor was now being changed into grain alcohol and being consumed both locally and abroad. In his opinion, this was a social evil that was far more reaching than most people wanted to admit.

Wesley wanted his believers in Christ to follow Christ's example, and be good stewards of what they had been given. For instance, he exhorted them to save all that they could, and also to give all that they could. He commented that the Methodists had become exceptionally adept at the first, yet somewhat forgetful in the latter. I would say that this is another area that Methodism needs to re-educate itself. Most churches follow the 80/20 model, in which 80% of the people are giving 20% of the money, and only the faithful 20% of those who are left are stuck picking up the slack. Let us not be any more dead weight. I would advise churchgoers not to rely too heavily on their own abilities, but once again, give what they work so hard for, and let God have the final authority. For as we well know everything belongs to him anyways.

## PREDESTINATION AND AUTHORITY

As fiercely as the Nicene fathers dealt with the heresies of their day, Wesley also had to struggle with dissenters to the truth in his day. Starting with the presupposition of omniscience, and holding that as the absolute standard by which to judge the world, rather than looking at God from a holistically biblical view, Calvinists began to cook up some pretty radical notions about God. Wesley saw this as potentially dangerous, giving way to antinomianism all the while paying lip service to the awesome power of Grace in the believer's life. The Calvinists outlined their Five Points by which they interpreted all the rest of the world as well as scripture. These were: 1. Total Depravity, 2. Unconditional Election, 3. Limited Atonement, 4. Irresistible Grace, and 5. Perseverance of Saints: Unconditional.

They believed that man was utterly powerless to save himself, and that any salvation that was offered to humans was to be seen as a divine gift. Therefore, God was completely just in his unconditional election of some people to the exclusion of others, since all necessarily were deserving of death anyways. Following this logic, they thought that the Bible was not to be taken literally when it says that Jesus died for the sin of all mankind. Logically, this would make God wasteful, since he had only elected a select group of people. Therefore, they read such passages to mean that Jesus died for all of the *elect* of mankind. In this case, the elect can do nothing to stop their destiny, and ultimately end up in heaven with God despite themselves. This was the concept of irresistible grace. For if God could be resisted then it stands to reason that he must not be all powerful. So, the perseverance of saints was a natural concept that sprung forth from

this doctrine that no matter their lifestyle and choices, all elected believers would go to heaven.

While at first glance, this may all sound well and good, it also meant that antinomianism was not far behind. If, as one of the elect, what I do has no bearing on the life to come, and I will exist in the everlasting bliss of heaven no matter what, then there is no incentive to live a righteous and holy life. Instead, I should just indulge in whatever ways I see fit, because God favors me over others, and I can do whatever I want without fear of his wrath. In fact, since I am one of the elect, and there are clearly others on earth whom are not, then I should be able to treat them in whatever way I want. Things like slavery, which may seem cruel and unjust are in fact justifiable because I am just giving the non-elect a taste of things to come, and if they serve my purposes and actually do something good on earth before their sentencing to damnation, then all the better for me.

Taken full through, the logic also says that if I am not one of the elect, then I too should also do whatever I want, because that cruel tyrant of a God has already decided beforehand that I am to be damned. I should do all the self-indulgent and possibly even evil things I want to while I still have life to live, if only to spite a God that so arbitrarily (read: blindly) assigns people to one of two categories. As a non-elect person, and feeling that I was being treated unfairly, I would want to lash out and revenge my future punishment by causing as many of the elect to suffer as I could.

What Calvinists do not realize, or choose to ignore, is that if their doctrine ever really did catch on, there would be absolute chaos on the earth. Wesley instead, adhered to the classic Armenian teachings. He held to the idea of the total depravity of mankind, yet believed that each person was afforded a certain amount of prevenient grace, which

when exercised would eventually lead to saving grace, and a gradual sanctification. If he was pushed on the topic of election, Wesley would say that the *method* of salvation was pre-ordained, but not the recipients. This can be taken to mean that God had decided that coming to faith in Jesus would be the only way one could experience salvation, there is no way to the Father but through the Son. In this case, the way by which one comes to salvation is inflexible, yet still merciful. Salvation then, is conditional on the person's willingness to yield humbly and asked to be saved by Jesus.

Rightfully so, Wesley also believed in universal atonement. This means that when he saw written in the Bible that Jesus died for all mankind, he believed it. Again, whether one was to accept such self-sacrificing love was entirely up to the individual. Jesus may come knocking gently at the door, but he certainly will not break it down. I have heard it said that there are no heel-marks on the road that leads to heaven, meaning that nobody will be dragged kicking and screaming through the pearly gates. You only arrive there if you choose to ask for forgiveness and salvation in your life, and stick to a process of daily walking with the Lord. You then walk through, following his footsteps. In this way, Grace is resistible and not irresistible as the Calvinists would have us believe.

Necessarily then, the Calvinists pushed Wesley on the issue of Eternal Security, saying that he was a proponent of Eternal Insecurity. He responded by saying that as long as one is a believer, one is eternal secure, turning the argument not on security, but as to whether one could stop believing. Backslidden Christians were those who had come to faith, yet then put their faith back in themselves rather than God, and gave a curt "no thanks" to the Lord's offer of grace. They wanted the forgiveness, but not the sanctification, seeking instead a blessing on their own sinfulness (that Calvinism offered).

## PLURALISM / DOCTRINAL STANDARDS

Throughout his lifetime Wesley was called many things, an Anglican, a Methodist, a pastoral leader, a heretic. He combated the neo-heresies of his day, and the antinomianism of Calvinistic teachings. He set up small group and band meetings which met outside of the Anglican Church, and yet set their meeting times in such a way as to not conflict with the schedule of mass. Wesley did not stand for pluralism, and held that doctrinal standards were of utmost importance. If one was to say “I believe” then Wesley believed such a person should not go on in their faith uninformed, but should strive daily to learn more of the God they serve. If one is to properly evangelize and describe to non-believers the goodness of God, one should be well educated as to how this goodness manifests itself through grace.

Wesley did what Whitfield did not, educating his followers and having regular group meetings to follow up through accountability and exhortation. Whitfield retrospectively commented on how invaluable this was to Wesley’s movement, saying of his own people “They are like a rope of sand... I fear that in preaching to them I was only begetting children for the murderer.” Wesley did quite the opposite, even training up lay preachers and dispatching them on circuit riding assignments in America. He wrote numerous works exhorting people to guard themselves against doctrinal pluralism, many of which have been touched upon in the duration of these notes.

Yet, he also preached a sermon in which he coined the term *Catholic Spirit*, one which asked not, “What do you believe?” but instead “Is your heart right with my heart?” This question was not one concerned with opinions, but was focused on the inward being of one’s own heart. It was not asking the person to be in agreement with oneself, nor was

it giving implications that one would cross over into their point of view. Rather, the proposition was to simply coexist, mutually serving and loving God, albeit in perhaps different fashions. Wesley described it as nothing more than the royal law, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” and pray for one’s own enemies.

Wesley cited the biblical story of Jehu, who posed the question, “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? If it be, give me thine hand.” Wesley expounded upon this tenet throughout his sermon on the Catholic spirit. Jehu had made an invitation of friendship to Jehonadab, without conditions. Wesley himself said in this sermon, “It is very possible, that many good men now also may entertain peculiar opinions; and some of them may be as singular herein, as even Jehonadab was. And it is certain, so long as we know but *in part*, that the present weakness and shortness of human understanding, that several men will be of several minds in religion as well as in common life. So it has been from the beginning of the world, and so it will be “till the restitution of all things.”

Wesley’s point was not that we just let false teaching go unchecked; surely he would have objected to such a reductionistic summary of his works. Rather, he is saying that after having argued one’s point for true, sound doctrine, if a sincere believer still disagrees, then there is not much else that can be done. For to try to force such a person to come over to our way of thinking would be coercion, hardly becoming of someone who wants to share the mercy and grace of Christ. Wesley’s point was that not everyone will agree, and while we think they should, though they stay of another opinion, this is okay. We must agree to disagree agreeably.

The question to ask then, is not what are your beliefs regarding the sacrament, liturgy, or even doctrine, but “Do you love God and proclaim Jesus as your savior?” If so,

then we can work through the other details. Wesley himself said it best, “We must both act, as each is fully persuaded in his own mind. Hold fast to what you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same. I believe the Episcopal form of church government to be scriptural and apostolical. If you think the Presbyterian or Independent is better, think so still, and act accordingly. I believe infants ought to be baptized; and that this may be done either by dipping or sprinkling. If you are otherwise persuaded, be so still, and follow your own persuasion...”

So, while Wesley holds his own beliefs to be the right way of doing things, he is not so prideful as to think that he may possibly be the one in error. Yet he says, may each believer continue to serve God faithfully according to what he feels the Lord had put upon his heart. I consider myself a Methodist, though I would have to agree with Wesley on the act of infant baptism. I have heard the argument that the whole house of Cornelius was baptized when he was saved. And yet, the logic here is self-contradictory, for many scholars will tell you that people below a certain age were not yet considered ready for all the rites and responsibilities of adults.

I know the church in Estonia does not baptize infants, but will still have “baby dedications” in which the parents can bring the child forth in the worship service and request prayer, and publicly dedicate themselves to raise the child in the admonition of the Lord. I think that this is closer to both scriptural and earlier church tradition. I also believe that those who are to be baptized should be catechized, and at an age of accountability, in which they know the purpose and symbolism of their baptism. There are other ways to show infants means of grace, and I am glad that Wesley as our denominational father, left a little flex room for disagreement.