The Significance of John Wesley's Abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles As Seen From His Deletions

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A LIST OF THE THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES WHICH INDICATES WESLEY'S MAJOR DELETIONS

I. Of Faith in the Holy Trinity. Retained whole by Wesley.
II. Of the Word, Or Son of God, which was made very Man. Retained with minor deletions.
III. Of the going down of Christ into Hell. Deleted entirely.
IV. Of the Resurrection of Christ. Retained with a minor deletion as #III.

V. Of the Holy Ghost. Retained whole as #IV.
VI. Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation. Retained as #V with the deletion of the last two paragraphs.
VII. Of the Old Testament. Retained whole as #VI.
VIII. Of the Three Creeds. Deleted entirely.
IX. Of Original or Birth Sin. Retained as #VII with the deletion of the last half.
X. Of Free Will. Retained whole as #VIII.
XI. Of the Justification of Man. Retained as #IX with one minor deletion.
XII. Of Good Works. Retained as #X with one minor deletion.
XIII. Of Works before Justification. Deleted entirely.
XIV. Of Works of Supererogation. Retained whole as #XI.
XV. Of Christ alone without Sin. Deleted entirely.
XVI. Of Sin after Baptism. Retained as #XII with minor changes.
XVII. Of Predestination and Election. Deleted entirely.
XVIII. Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ. Deleted entirely.
XIX. Of the Church. Retained as #XIII with the deletion of the last paragraph.
XX. Of the Authority of the Church. Deleted entirely.
XXI. Of the Authority of General Councils. Deleted entirely.
XXII. Of Purgatory. Retained whole as #XIV.
XXIII. Of Ministering in the Congregation. Deleted entirely.
XXIV. Of speaking in the Congregation in such a Tongue as the People Understandeth. Retained whole as #XV.
XXV. Of the Sacraments. Retained as #XVI with a minor deletion.
XXVI. Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament. Deleted entirely.
XXVII. Of Baptism. Retained as #XVII with deletion of the last half.

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XXVIII. Of the Lord’s Supper. Retained whole as #XVIII.
XXIX. Of the Wicked which eat not the Body of Christ in the use of the Lord’s Supper. Deleted entirely.
XXX. Of both Kinds. Retained as #XIX with minor changes.
XXXI. Of the one Oblation of Christ finished upon the Cross. Retained whole as #XX.
XXXII. Of the Marriage of Priests. Retained as #XXI with minor changes.
XXXIII. Of excommunicate Persons, how they are to be avoided. Deleted entirely.
XXXIV. Of the Traditions of the Church. Retained as #XXII with a few changes.
XXXV. Of the Homilies. Deleted entirely.
XXXVI. Of the Consecration of Bishops and Ministers. Deleted entirely.
XXXVII. Of the Civil Magistrates. Deleted entirely.
XXXVIII. Of Christian Men’s Goods, which are not in common. Retained as #XXIII with minor changes.
XXXIX. Of a Christian Man’s Oath. Retained whole as #XXIV.

(Note: The Thirty-Nine Articles and Twenty-Five Articles are printed in parallel columns in Wheeler’s History & Exposition of the Twenty-Five Articles, and in “John Wesley and the Articles of Religion” by Nolan B. Harmon and John W. Bardsley, Religion in Life, Spring 1953, pp. 281-291.)

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INTRODUCTION

Most Methodists know that the Twenty-Five Articles of Religion of The Methodist Church are a direct product of John Wesley’s abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, but few works of Wesley are shrouded with as much mystery as this abridgement. We know that in 1775 John Fletcher called for Wesley to make such an abridgement (as well as other changes). Furthermore, we know that his twenty-four-Article abridgement was included in the Sunday Service for Methodists in the United States of America which he sent to America by Thomas Coke in the Fall of 1784, since all of the known original copies of the Sunday Service contain the abridged Articles. However, Wesley gives no indication as to why he made this particular abridgement. In his “Letter to

Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and Our Brethren in North-America” (Sept. 10, 1784) he gives reasons for his recent ordinations, but does not mention his abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Likewise, in his Preface to the Sunday Service, he gives reasons for his deletions from the Book of Common Prayer but does not mention the abridged Articles which are included. Although Wesley lived six years after making the abridgement, he does not seem to have defended or explained this work during that time.

The writings of Wesley’s critics are also strangely silent concerning his abridgement of the Articles. In Richard Green’s bibliography of Anti-Methodist Publications there is no indication of a publication which attacks this abridgement. Since Wesley still had critics after 1784 and since a Sunday Service for Methodists in Great Britain (including the abridged Articles) was in use in England by 1786, it seems almost inconceivable that more attention was not given, both pro and con, to Wesley’s abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles.

We can only speculate about the reasons for Wesley’s and his contemporaries’ silence on this subject, and, consequently, his motivation for making this abridgement seems rather uncertain. In the same issue of the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Frederick Hunter and J. Ernest Rattenbury attempt to explain Wesley’s motive for revising the entire Book of Common Prayer. Hunter stresses Wesley’s sympathy with the revision of the Book of Common Prayer which was unsuccessfully demanded by the Savoy Conference of 1661, while Rattenbury stresses his “passion for abridgement” and his desire to speak to “Puritan-minded Americans.” Although these suggestions shed light on Wesley’s revision of the Prayer Book, neither of them seems applicable to his abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles which was included in the Prayer Book. It is very unlikely that this abridgement (especially the deletion of Article XVII. “Of Predestination and Election”) would have pleased either the Savoy Conference or “Puritan-minded Americans.” As far as Wesley’s “passion for abridgement” is concerned, we have his own word concerning his revision of the Prayer Book that he altered nothing “merely for altering’s

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4 Ibid., p. 317.
5 Green, Richard, Anti-Methodist Publications Issued During the 18th Century, London, 1902.
Therefore, we must take seriously his revision of the Book of Common Prayer including his abridgement of the Articles.

In his Preface to the Sunday Service, Wesley says that he has (1) omitted most of the holy days ("so called") because they presently answer no valuable end; (2) shortened the Service of the Lord's Day because of numerous complaints; (3) omitted some sentences in the offices of Baptism and for the Burial of the Dead; and (4) left out many Psalms and many parts of others because they are "highly improper for the mouths of a Christian congregation." We can also safely apply these principles for deletion to his abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles, but, in order to be more specific about the reasons for the abridgement, we must examine the Thirty-Nine Articles themselves and try to determine from a comparison with Wesley's writings why each deletion was made.

I. Deletions Occasioned by the New Situation in America.

In his "Letter to Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and Our Brethren in North-America," Wesley emphasizes the new situation of his American brethren in which "God has so strangely made them free" as the major reason for his ordinations and the revision of the Prayer Book. Since the Church of England is a national church and no longer has any jurisdiction in the United States, he feels justified in providing for a Church separate from the Church of England and says that the American Methodists are now at full liberty "simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church." In order to help his brethren in the new nation follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church, Wesley makes certain deletions from the Thirty-Nine Articles.

The Article which most obviously had to be deleted under these circumstances was XXXVII. "Of Civil Magistrates" which placed the Church squarely under the power of the ruler of England. Wesley provided no substitute for this Article, but the Christmas Conference inserted Article XXIII. "Of the Rulers of the United States of America" and thereby extended Wesley's twenty-four-Article abridgement to twenty-five. Another necessary deletion was Article XXI. "Of the Authority of General Councils" which began by saying that "General Councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of Princes." The remainder of the Article could have been retained since it declares

11 Ibid.
councils to be fallible and makes them subservient to Scripture. However, Wesley chose to delete it entirely.

Article XXIII. "Of Ministering in the Congregation" excluded Wesley's lay preachers as well as his ordinations and, therefore, could not be retained. Likewise, Article XXXVI. "Of Consecration of Bishops and Ministers" had already been by-passed when Wesley, under the influence of Lord King's book (Account of the Primitive Church), had ordained ministers apart from the prescribed rules of the Church of England. Furthermore, this Article was very impractical for the Methodists in America and was deleted entirely. Article XX. "On the Authority of the Church" which states that "The Church hath power to decree Rites and Ceremonies, and authority in controversies of Faith" and places the Church under Scripture was also deleted. The new situation in America and the identification of "the Church" with the Church of England evidently made this deletion necessary. However, as far as the content is concerned, Wesley should have been able to retain the whole Article by changing "the Church" to "the Conference." He managed to retain Article XXXIV. "Of the Traditions of the Church" (XXII. in Wesley's abridgement) by changing the title, using "rites" instead of "traditions," and omitting the words "or national" and the phrase "hurteth the authority of the magistrate."

Most of these Articles were clearly out of place in the new American situation and could be salvaged only by a thoroughgoing revision which Wesley did not choose to make. In addition, some of these Articles had already been superseded by Wesley's variation from the Church of England "in some points of doctrine and in some points of discipline" (i.e. itinerant preaching, extempore praying, forming societies, ordinations) which he admits to his brother Charles. But John insists that he has varied from his Anglican superiors "not an hair's breath further than I believe to be meet, right, and my bounden duty."

II. Deletions Which Reflect Possible Doctrinal Differences.

In a letter to "Mr. ———," dated Jan. 9, 1782, John Wesley tells of the Conference's decision to advise Methodists that when Anglican priests begin to preach absolute predestination or to ridicule Christian Perfection in their presence "they should quietly and silently go out of the church, yet attend it again the next opportunity." This advice reflects two of Wesley's major doctrinal concerns—for Christian Perfection and against Absolute Predestination—which are responsible for many of his deletions from specif-

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., vol. 8, p. 196.
ically doctrinal Articles. These Articles fall generally under Christology, Sin and Salvation and the Sacraments.

A. Christology. John Deschner lists as one of the problems of Wesleyan Christology “the lack of emphasis on the human nature of Jesus Christ.”\(^{16}\) He says that Wesley’s is not a docetic Christology, since there is a clear teaching about the human nature, but that there is more accent on the divine than the human nature of Christ.\(^{17}\) If this is true, and its sounds reasonable, three of Wesley’s deletions of and from Christological Articles can be interpreted as pointing up this lack of accent. In transmitting Article II. “Of the Word, or Son of God, which was made very Man,” Wesley changed the “which” in the title to “who” and deleted only the phrase “of her substance” concerning the Son and the Virgin Mary. Article III. “Of the going down of Christ into Hell” was omitted entirely. In Article IV. “Of the Resurrection of Christ” Wesley deleted only the words “flesh, bones, and” which refer to Christ’s resurrected body. The words deleted from Articles II and IV may have been considered to be superfluous by Wesley, since their absence does not deny Christ’s humanity. However, this amounts to a weakening of emphasis on his humanity. The omission of Article III seems to fall in line with this weakening of emphasis, although it may have been caused by a difference in biblical exegesis. The crucial text in this instance is Ephesians 4:9 and Wesley interprets “the lower parts of the earth” to mean the womb and/or the grave\(^{18}\) rather than Hell. Likewise, in interpreting I Peter 3:19, he says that Christ “preached to the spirits in prison” through the ministry of Noah and not directly.\(^{19}\) Then, in explaining Acts 2:27, he actually says that “it does not appear that ever our Lord went into hell”—preferring to believe that the soul of the Lord went directly to paradise at his death.\(^{20}\)

Wesley’s deletion of Article XV. “Of Christ Alone Without Sin” seems quite unnecessary, since he seems to teach the same thing in his interpretation of Hebrews 7:26 & 4:16, Romans 8:3, and II Cor. 5:21.\(^{21}\) However, he emphasizes the sinlessness of Christ without emphasizing that Christ alone was sinless. John Fletcher says that two of Wesley’s conspicuous critics, “Mr. Hill and Mr. Toplady,” used this Article and Article IX. “Of Original or Birth Sin” to argue against Christian Perfection.\(^{22}\) Therefore, it is possible that,

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 28.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 882.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., pages 830, 821, 546, and 658 respectively.

although Article XV did not really contradict Wesley’s idea of Christian Perfection, he deleted it to protect his American followers from the confusion brought on by the questionable criticism of Mr. Hill and Mr. Toplady.

Article XVIII. “Of obtaining eternal salvation only by the Name of Christ” was deleted by Wesley possibly because it seemed to rule out the salvation of the heathen who have not heard the name of Christ. In his sermon on “Salvation by Faith” Wesley defines the faith that God requires of the heathen for salvation and does not include explicit faith in Jesus Christ, because they have never heard his name. God’s prevenient grace which works through every man’s conscience and is made effective by the atoning work of Christ makes this salvation possible. However, for men who do know the name of Christ, explicit faith in Christ is essential for salvation. It seems that Wesley deleted Article XVIII to avoid confusion concerning the salvation of the primitive heathen of which there were plenty living in the forests of America.

B. Sin and Salvation. It has been mentioned above that Mr. Hill and Mr. Toplady used Article IX. “Of Original or Birth Sin” (as well as Article XV) to argue against Wesley’s idea of Christian Perfection. In making his abridgement, Wesley deleted the entire second half of this Article which emphasizes that this “infection of nature” remains in the regenerated and is never wholly subdued. Although Wesley admits that Original Sin remains in the regenerated, he also believes perfect love of God to be possible for Christians in this life. Thus, he deleted the portion of the Article that could be and had been construed as denying Christian Perfection.

One of the most controversial aspects of Wesley’s doctrine is pointed up by his deletion of Article XIII. “Of Good Works Before Justification” which declares that works done before the grace of Christ are not pleasant to God. Believing that all good works in all men are made possible by God’s grace (prevenient or otherwise) and being disturbed about the case of Cornelius whose prayers were answered before he believed in Christ, Wesley could not bring himself to simply condemn good works which were done before justification. In fact, he increasingly stressed repentance and works meet for repentance as the precondition for justifying faith. Finally, the Minutes of the Conference of 1770 were interpreted by his critics as endorsing justification by faith and works. Wesley

25 Wesley John, Forty-Four Sermons, p. 3.
27 Ibid.
denied this interpretation and rightly so, for, as Williams says, "repentance is a form of faith and its fruits are works of grace." Nevertheless, Wesley deleted the troublesome Article XIII evidently hoping to spare his followers much of the controversy that he had encountered.

The deletion of Article XVII. "Of Predestination and Election" probably came as no surprise to Wesley’s Calvinist critics. Augustus Toplady, until his death in 1778, was one of Wesley’s harshest critics on this point. Toplady’s chosen mission in life seems to have been to prove that the Church of England was officially Calvinist and to drive Arminians out of the Church. He claimed that it was impossible for an Arminian to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles and accused Wesley of trying to “leap over the 17th Article” by saying that this Article only defines the word “Predestination” and does not affirm the doctrine. Toplady concludes that “By this new rule all our positive articles are so many definitions of terms” to which a Jew or Turk or Papist could readily subscribe. If Toplady’s quotation of Wesley is accurate, it sheds new light on Wesley’s attitude toward the Thirty-Nine Articles. However, he gives no reference for the quotation and I have been unable to find it in Wesley’s writings. Furthermore, Toplady was evidently not beyond the finite errors of exaggeration and misquotation. Nevertheless, Wesley did not hesitate to say that he disliked and repudiated Absolute Predestination in favor of a Conditional Predestination based on the foreknowledge of God. Article XVII is not clear on just what kind of predestination it teaches, but it could be interpreted in terms of Wesley’s idea of Conditional Predestination. On the other hand, it could also be interpreted in terms of Absolute Predestination as is attested by the writings of Toplady. Wesley evidently chose to delete it because of its vagueness and because it allowed room for a doctrine that he considered unscriptural and unchristian.

C. The Sacraments. In revising Article XVI. “Of Sin After Baptism,” Wesley substituted “justification” for “baptism,” thereby indicating that regenerate people can sin and be forgiven and that justification is more decisive than baptism. His abridgement of Article XXVII. “On Baptism” likewise allows more room for justification by faith alone by deleting the sentences that could be interpreted in terms of infused grace or baptismal regeneration. Wesley himself is not clear on this subject since he allows for a kind of

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28 Ibid., p. 63 (note 17).
30 Ibid., p. 615.
31 Ibid.
infused baptismal grace in his treatise "On Baptism" \(^{33}\) and his sermon "The New Birth." \(^{34}\) At least, in the sermon he says that the Church of England teaches baptismal regeneration with regard to infants and does not himself object to it. \(^{35}\) However, he is sure that all people who are baptized as adults are not regenerated thereby \(^{36}\) and does not reconcile his observations about baptized adults with his implicit endorsement of baptismal regeneration in infants. His deletions from Article XXVII may have been an attempt to solve this problem by doing away with the words that left room for a general view of baptismal regeneration. Wesley's deletion of the words "sure witnesses, and effectual" from Article XXV. "Of the Sacraments" underscores his tendency to reject anything that sounded like a purely objective view of the Sacraments.

A deletion that seems to lean toward a purely objective view is Wesley's entire omission of Article XXIX. "Of the Wicked which eat not the Body of Christ in the use of the Lord's Supper." However, he teaches that the validity of the Lord's Supper depends upon the faith of the participant \(^{37}\) and would seem to be able to accept most of this Article. Henry Wheeler suggests that it may have been omitted because its language sounded too much like Roman Catholicism, \(^{38}\) but it is more likely that Wesley omitted it because it endangered his concept of the Lord's Supper as a converting ordinance. \(^{39}\) To condemn "such as be void of a lively faith" along with "the wicked" in this Article was probably too much for Wesley to accept.

Two other deletions have doctrinal significance apart from Christology, Sin and Salvation, and the Sacraments. They are Article VIII. "Of the Three Creeds" and the last paragraph of Article XIX. "Of the Church." The omission of Article VIII may have been in line with Wesley's announced intention to leave the American Methodists free "simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church." \(^{40}\) The paragraph deleted from Article XIX lists the Church of Alexandria along with Antioch, Jerusalem and Rome as having erred. It may have been deleted because of Wesley's respect for the Church of Alexandria and especially because he admired its mode of ordaining bishops. \(^{41}\)

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\(^{34}\) Wesley, John, Forty-Four Sermons, p. 523.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 150, "The Means of Grace."


III. Other Deletions for the Sake of Clarity and Preciseness.

By omitting the listing of the Old Testament Apocrypha from Article VI. "Of the Sufficiency of Holy Scripture for Salvation," Wesley clarified the canon of Scripture and guided his followers away from writings that did not directly bear on God's scheme of salvation in the Old and New Testaments. He evidently saw no good reason to include writings that could not be used to establish doctrine. In a similar manner, he deleted Article XXXV. "Of the Homilies" and the reference to the Homily on Justification in Article XX. "Of the Justification of Man." The Homilies had been published originally to provide basic sermons for Anglican priests, but Wesley's sermons evidently took the place of the Homilies for the Methodist preachers. Therefore, the Homilies were no longer necessary.

Two deletions which are rather difficult to understand are XXVI, "Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers" and XXXIII, "Of excommunicate persons." There seems to be no evidence that Wesley disagreed with Article XXVI and there is substantial evidence that he did agree with it.42 Perhaps he felt that the Article could easily be misinterpreted as condoning or encouraging moral laxity in the clergy. Perhaps he took for granted that the Methodists understood sacraments administered by unworthy ministers to be valid. Evidently the moral laxity of the clergy was more of a problem than the people's misgivings about receiving the sacraments from those who were unworthy. Thus, evidently to avoid misinterpretation, Wesley found it simpler to delete the whole article. Likewise, the deletion of Article XXXIII should not be understood to mean that Wesley wanted to do away with church discipline. His concern for enforcing the Rules of the Societies shows him to be quite strict in disciplinary matters. However, he evidently felt that the particular words and tone of this Article did not fit the purpose of the Methodists.

The few remaining deletions and changes in single words or phrases have little significance except that they give grammatical and linguistic clarity to Wesley's abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles.

CONCLUSION

1. Wesley's Twenty-Four Articles (made Twenty-Five by the Christmas Conference) are an abridgement rather than a revision. With very few exceptions the changes he made were deletions. Thus, he weeded out the Articles and paragraphs which he considered unnecessary or confusing without stating positively and more clearly

42 Wesley, John, Forty-Four Sermons, p. 307, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount" (Discourse XII).
what he thought should be believed about these deleted subjects. A revision would have given a more complete picture of Wesley’s doctrine and would have provided early as well as contemporary American Methodism with a more complete set of Articles. For instance, it would have been helpful to have Wesley’s clear distinction between absolute and conditional predestination included in the Articles. However, he chose to make an abridgement rather than a revision.

2. Wesley evidently did not consider the Twenty-Four Articles to be the only standard of doctrine for American Methodism. Perhaps this is why nothing more than an abridgement was thought by him to be necessary. He seems to have taken for granted that his sermons, Notes on the New Testament, and the Doctrinal Minutes would be used by American Methodists as they sought “simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church.” Consequently, the early American Methodists seem to have emphasized Wesley’s sermons and Notes as much as their Twenty-Five Articles.

3. Most of Wesley’s deletions are in line with his emphasis that all doctrine should be based on Scripture. In a few instances he deleted Articles which he believed to be scriptural, but only when their retention would give rise to more confusion than their deletion. Besides, each of these scriptural Articles were still valid for Wesley and his followers simply because they were scriptural.

4. Wesley’s abridgement of the Articles was probably no more radical than any other Anglican would make if he were fulfilling a similar purpose and tried to be honest and consistent. In Queen Elizabeth’s day the Thirty-Nine Articles were instituted as a doctrinal compromise which suited no one completely. Some of the Articles were left intentionally vague to allow for opposing interpretations. Wesley sought to banish this vagueness and largely succeeded.

5. The doctrinal significance of Wesley’s deletions does not incline him toward either Calvinism or Roman Catholicism. In fact, he left practically all of the anti-Catholic Articles intact and deleted Article XVII. “On Predestination,” the most Calvinistic Article of all.

6. Perhaps the greatest significance of Wesley’s abridgement is his breach of Church Order. Uniformity in Church Order (rather than doctrine) was the main point of Anglican orthodoxy and Wesley broke it by making an abridgement of the Articles (and the Book of Common Prayer) in the first place, and by proceeding to delete the Articles which would impose Anglican Church Order upon the Methodists in America. Such an abridgement was probably a comparatively easy step to take after he had decided to take the big step of ordaining ministers for work in America.
7. Lastly, Wesley's abridgement must be taken seriously. It cannot be explained by his "passion for abridgement" as Rattenbury has suggested. Wesley has assured us that he deleted only as much as he considered to be absolutely necessary, and, after examining his deletions, we can vouch for him. However, we ignore Wesley's intentions if we take the abridged Articles so seriously that we consider them to be the only standard of Methodist doctrine—as American Methodism has finally done. The abridged Articles are sufficient only when taken with Wesley's Standard Sermons and Notes on the New Testament. Otherwise, if American Methodism wishes to retain the Twenty-Five Articles as the single doctrinal standard (except for Scripture), they must be reworked and extended until they constitute the revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles that Wesley chose not to make.

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