

SALVATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN WESLEY

by William R. Cannon

The doctrine of salvation is the central concern in the theology of John Wesley. What man must do, or rather, correctly put, allow to be done to him, to win the initial approval of God was the question which led Wesley to become a theologian in the first place; and how constantly thereafter to maintain the divine approval, that is, to keep, to improve, and to perfect the gift of salvation, was an issue of such burning interest and crucial importance to him that it exercised his theological talents to the end.

John Wesley was primarily an evangelist and only secondarily a theologian. But, since he was not content just to evangelize but always subjected both the methods and message of his evangelistic mission to self criticism and evaluation and gave the basic reasons for what he said and did, he was really a theological evangelist, even an evangelistic theologian; for, after all, a man must think about God and all that relates to God, that is, be a theologian, before the precise expressions of what he thinks, that is, the utterance of his message, can ever take shape.

Most evangelists are not theologians in any original or creative sense. They take without question or debate the basic ideas of their proclamation from others. George Whitefield, for example, Wesley's younger contemporary, was a successful evangelist. He does not merit the appellation of theologian. John Wesley, in contrast, thought long and hard about everything he said. He required a reason of his own for all things. When John was less than ten years old, his father complained to his mother about him: "I profess, sweetheart, I think our Jack would not attend to the most pressing necessities of nature, unless he could give a reason for it."¹ What John Wesley said was true about himself in 1725 remained his intellectual habit to the end: He said then that he could not understand anything, even faith itself, except on rational grounds. Therefore he would not consider anything which contradicted reason.² Indeed, so far as I have been able to determine, in the entire range of historical theology, there has never been a more orderly, well-arranged, and consistent theologian than John Wesley. Others have been more profound than he. He has lacked the encyclopaedic breadth of Aquinas and Calvin. The range of his explorations was limited. But given what he tried to accomplish theologically, no one, so far as I can tell, essayed his task more clear-headedly or brought off his work more consistently than did the Founder of Methodism.

¹ Clarke, Adam: *Memoirs of the Wesley Family, Collected from Original Documents* (J. Haddon, London, 1834), Vol. II, p. 321.

² Wesley, John: *Letters* (ed. John Telford, Epworth Press, London, 1931), Vol. I, p. 23.

He was always the people's theologian. His sole purpose in thinking theologically at all was to help them. Their salvation was the burden of his preaching. Consequently what salvation is was the theme of his theology. For him the question of how a sinner may be justified before God was the basic theological issue simply because it was the basic issue of human existence.³ Wesley said that it is a "question of no common importance to every child of man."⁴

I.

This is true because every person stands in need of salvation, and salvation is readily available to every person who will have it. Therefore, the universal sinfulness of mankind, original sin, if we dare today to use that term, and prevenient grace are inseparable and complementary concepts in Wesleyan theology. Neither has any meaning whatever without the other. Both together form the basic understanding Wesley had of the human subject of salvation.

John Wesley was thoroughly Augustinian in his view of the scope and destructiveness of sin and in man's inability through his own resources to cope with it. But Wesley, optimistic Englishman that he was, was not a disciple of either Augustine or Calvin in the ruthless way in which each of them carried out the implications of that concept, making salvation itself limited and restricted in its outreach and circumscribing the redemptive interests of God himself to a favored few. Indeed, Wesley's position on sin and grace is the position of the Synod of Orange of A.D. 529. He, too, affirms the Fall as over against Pelagianism and insists with Augustine that not only death fell on the human race as a result of Adam's disobedience but that a bent toward evil, sin itself, was transmitted by Adam to his posterity. He accepts the dictates of Orange, which were those of Augustine as well, that grace is the necessary antecedent to salvation, that it prepares the will and causes us to seek, to ask, and to knock, and that our nature is so weak and wounded by the Fall that it can do nothing unaided by divine grace. Thus man's spiritual activity, always and invincibly, depends on God's grace to originate it, to assist it, and to sustain it to the very end.⁵

Wesley, like the Synod of Orange, went all the way with Augustine on sin and grace just short of predestination. He could not accept this, harsh and forbidding to him as it was and as it had been to the Ancient and Medieval Church as well. The evaluation of B. J. Kidd, the historian, on the Augustinian position is in keeping with Wesley's reaction to that position. "And thus the church adopted the funda-

³ Cannon, William R.: *The Theology of John Wesley* (Abingdon, N.Y.-Nashville, 1946), p. 49.

⁴ Sermon V, Introduction, section 1. The Sermons are carried in Vols. V, VI, and VII of *Works* (ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. in 14 vols., Wesleyan-Methodist Book Room, London, 1831).

⁵ The Canons of the Synod of Orange are in Mansi, J. D.: *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nove et Amplissima Collectio* (Florence, 1759-98), Vol. VI, cols. 433-452. Wesley's "Original Sin," *Works*, Vol. IX, pp. 191-464.

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mental position of Augustine but dismissed his speculations. The doctrine of Grace is the doctrine of the Church. But thanks to its enemies who put in a plea for Nature it is a doctrine freed from the ruthlessness with which Augustine caused it to be associated and so rendered at last broadly human."⁶

But how can one maintain the total depravity of man and yet man's ability either to accept or to reject divine grace? Augustine felt it was not possible to do so, and therefore he left man's salvation or damnation entirely at the disposal of God. Calvin did the same.

Wesley, however, both accepted human depravity and yet relieved it of its natural consequence of predestination by his concept of prevenient grace—surrounding man in his sinfulness is God in his love and relieving mercy.⁷ This divine help is available to every man, no matter who he is and when and where he lives. God will not permit him to be damned unless he damns himself.⁸ This prevenient grace is like the sunshine which enables us to see, the air which we breathe, and the water which we drink. It is everywhere available to everybody, and it is entirely free.⁹ "By the free Grace of God given to all men alike at the very moment of birth, they are able to turn again unto their Heavenly Father and to regain the privilege of which by nature they have been deprived."¹⁰

Natural man therefore for John Wesley is a logical abstraction.¹¹ He does not really exist, since always and without exception his mere naturalness is supplemented and complemented by the supernatural grace of Almighty God.

II.

Though salvation is available for everybody, only particular people actually are saved. The grace of God is universal. However, the operative effects of grace are less inclusive than the term ordinarily seems to imply. What by divine design is all-embracing, nothing withholding, and free comes down in concrete instances to be the most precious and particular possession any person can obtain because it is so sparse and so few people ever come to own it. The variable factor in this situation is not God but man. What God intends for all, man by his recalcitrance limits to a few.

The first expression of salvation, in Wesleyan theology, is justification or regeneration. The two words are not synonymous, that is to say, they cannot properly be used interchangeably, so that one can be correctly substituted for the other. Yet each is essential to the other, so that the happening which both characterize cannot take place

⁶ Kidd, B. J.: *A History of the Church to A.D. 461* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1922), Vol. III, p. 161.

⁷ Wesley, John: *Works*, Vol. X, pp. 473-474.

⁸ Sermon LIX, sec. 14.

⁹ Sermon XLIII, part 1, sec. 2.

¹⁰ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, p. 200.

¹¹ Lee, U.: *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Cokesbury, Nashville, 1936), p. 124.

when either is absent. Justification is the objective act of God in which a sinner is absolved of his sin and is pronounced to be righteous and upright before his divine Judge.¹² Regeneration is the subjective experience in which the man himself knows that he is justified, feels cleansed of his sin, and by divine grace is really made righteous by the transformation of his life.¹³ Justification and regeneration are concomitants. They take place simultaneously.

In the twin acts of justification and regeneration, both the divine bestowal of grace and the human reception of what is bestowed are present and are equally effective. Indeed, this initial act of salvation cannot come about without man's willingness to take what God gives. This does not mean that faith, according to Wesley, is the human response to the divine initiative in salvation, as we are accustomed to think. This is not the case at all. Faith belongs as much to the divine side of the process as does grace, for the trust man has in God is inspired by the Divine Spirit and given as a result of divine love. Indeed, all faith is—that splendid confidence and unqualified trust which the believer has—comes down from above and therefore is but the deposit, or individuation, of grace itself in a particular human life. Grace may be characterized as the big, broad ocean of God's mercy, while faith is the refreshing wave, from that ocean that washes up on one, particular, desolate human shore to quicken it and make it productive and capable of Christian growth.

"Of yourselves," writes Mr. Wesley, "cometh neither your faith nor your salvation: 'it is the gift of God,' the free undeserved gift; the faith through which ye are saved, as well as the salvation which he of his own good pleasure, his mere favour annexes thereto. That ye believe is one instance of his grace: that believing ye are saved, another."¹⁴

If faith is the gift of God as well as grace, what part then does man have in the initial act of his own salvation? Wesley is enough of a disciple of the Reformation to want to avoid any of the righteousness by works of Roman Catholicism. He repudiates the teachings of the Council of Trent that man is saved by his own works as well as by the grace of God.¹⁵ Yet Wesley is equally dissatisfied with the doctrine of election, taught by Luther and Calvin as they inherited it from Augustine. Such a doctrine was so repugnant to Wesley that he went so far as to style Calvin's God his devil.¹⁶

The part man has in his salvation is his human strength not to resist the grace of God when that grace is offered to him. Even his ability is in reality not his own but the power of God working in him. However, the strength to resist the divine will in salvation is man's

¹² Sermon V, part I, sections 5-6. Cannon, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-85.

¹³ Sermon XLV, part 2, section 2.

¹⁴ Sermon I, part 3, section 3.

¹⁵ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (ed. H. J. Schroeder, B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, 1941), pp. 29-45.

¹⁶ Sermon CXXVIII, section 24.

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and man's alone. That means that man can deny himself the privilege of salvation but that he cannot actually accept it without the aid of God. But, if God offers his saving grace to everyone and with the offer gives the strength to accept it, and some people reject what God offers, that means that the decisive factor in personal salvation is the human individual himself. If he can and does reject God's grace, then he is responsible. If he does not reject it and comes into possession of it because he sincerely wants it, then it seems to me he is to a degree responsible for receiving grace as well. In contrast to Luther and Calvin, who believed that in the act of salvation God is everything and man is nothing, Wesley taught that man himself is the sole determinative factor in his own salvation.¹⁷

III.

The first act of salvation is not the sum and substance of what Wesley understood salvation in its entirety to mean, though perhaps it comes nearer to being so than in any other man's system of theology. This is because Wesley stressed the instantaneous nature of the twin acts of justification and regeneration and viewed the latter as a radical and complete transformation of both the thought and behavior of the believer. Conversion, or the New Birth, was what he sought to bring about in the lives of the people to whom he preached. He was an evangelist. He preached to the "unsaved," seeking always a verdict, a decision which once it was made would effect immediately a new creature in Christ Jesus.

Wesley was profoundly optimistic in his expectations of the immediate work of grace. Since it is God who does the work and effects the change, that work, like creation itself, must reflect the power and the greatness of him who does it. Therefore, as soon as a person is converted, he is given by God the power not to commit consciously or intentionally an act of sin.¹⁸ "An immediate and constant fruit of his faith whereby we are born of God, a fruit which in no way can be separated from it, no, not for one hour, is power over sin;—power over outward sin of every kind; over every evil word and work; for wheresoever the blood of Christ is thus applied, 'it purgeth the conscience of dead works';—and over inward sin; for it purifieth the heart from every unholy desire and temper."¹⁹

Though sin, according to Wesley, has no power to affect adversely the behavior of the true Christian, still there does exist in him a tendency to lapse back into his old way of life, or, more accurately put, there is always the possibility of sinning. The Christian is constantly haunted by the possibility that sin may ever again "creep to ascendancy and regain the mastery of his life."²⁰ "The supposing sin is in us," writes Mr. Wesley, "does not imply that it has the possession of our strength, no more than a man crucified has the possession of

¹⁷ Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁸ Sermon VIII, part 1.

¹⁹ Sermon XVIII, part 1, section 4.

²⁰ Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

those who crucify him. As little does it imply that sin maintains its usurpation of our hearts. The usurper is dethroned. He remains, indeed, where he once reigned; but remains in chains. So that he does, in some sense prosecute the war yet he grows weaker and weaker; while the believer goes on from strength to strength, conquering and to conquer."²¹

This point of view seems hardly realistic to us. There are grave faults in Christian people. Those who appear most dedicated at times say things and do things that are contrary to the purpose to which they are dedicated. More often than we like to think, the best of men leave undone those things which they ought to have done. Christians are not always in the best of spiritual health.

John Wesley was a man of amazing, even inordinate, common sense. He saw this just as we do. Even Peter, he admitted, "the aged, the zealous, the first of the apostles, one of the three most highly favored by his Lord," after God had told him that Gentiles are as precious to him as Jews, none the less segregated himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of criticism which James and his followers might inflict upon him.²² Even after we are converted we are still free, responsible persons. God will help us if we will let him. If, however, we either forget or fail to call for that help, we are apt to misbehave and to commit a sin. We can and often do transgress and violate a known law of God. "Regenerative grace keeps man so long as man keeps it."²³ "I answer," writes Mr. Wesley, "What has been long observed is this: so long as 'he that is born of God keepeth himself,' (which he is able to do by the Grace of God) the wicked one troubleth him not; but if he keepeth not himself, if he abideth not in faith, he may commit sin even as another man."²⁴

This realization causes every believer to be apprehensive. He should constantly guard against pride and in humility recognize his utter dependence upon the grace of God. In himself he can still do nothing. Therefore he must rely on God for everything.²⁵ Since man is a free creature after his conversion just as he was before his conversion, the possibility of falling from grace accompanies him to his grave. Indeed, without constant repentance and total reliance on divine help, the Christian runs the risk of losing entirely his Christianity and falling back into a state of open sin more deplorable than that out of which he was first saved.²⁶ "God is the Father of them that believe so long as they believe. But the devil is the father of them that believe not, whether they did once believe or no."²⁷

²¹ Sermon XIII, part 4, section 11.

²² Sermon XIX, part 2, section 6.

²³ Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

²⁴ Sermon XIX, part 2, section 7.

²⁵ Cannon, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-145.

²⁷ *Works*, Vol. X, p. 298.

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IV.

Salvation always and invariably is characterized by moral behavior. Wesley never substituted spirituality for morality. In his opinion, an immoral person had not been saved. The Lutheran concept of the mantle of Christ's righteousness covering the leprosy of our sin had no place whatever as Luther meant it in the theology of John Wesley.

Wesley used the Sermon on the Mount as the scriptural content of his ethical system. Indeed, his beautiful and inspiring exposition of these three chapters in Saint Matthew forms, in my opinion, one of the most exalted treatises on Christian ethics to be found in the whole range of historical theology. Neither Joseph Butler, his contemporary, nor Albrecth Ritschl, who came after him, has surpassed his work in this field. His exposition of the Sermon on the Mount is comparable to that of Saint Augustine.

John Wesley's system of ethics is an ethics of Christian self-realization. The Christian for Luther was righteous, not in reality, but only in hope. Therefore he thought of the Christian life as one long quest or striving, a continuous struggle for a goal that lies beyond the reach of temporal attainment.²⁸ Calvin affirmed that in the best deeds of the holiest people there is the taint of corruption and sin.²⁹ The moral precepts of the law and the gospel are for Wesley "not only the disclosure of God's holiness but the pattern which we observe and the duty which we fulfill."³⁰ Consequently the Sermon on the Mount is not just a blue print of life as it is to be lived in heaven but rather of life as it must be lived on this earth in order to get to heaven.

The first part of this Sermon by Jesus deals with the personal situation, what happens in the life of each Christian that gives him positive righteousness. True religion begins as a state of being. It is the inward state of man marked by purity of heart, singleness of purpose, integrity of spirit in which a man is poor to everything else but God that forms the Christian character. But true religion is not alone a state of being; it is a state of doing also. The persons fortified inwardly by God's grace act outwardly and become peacemakers and are those whose lives attract others to God.

Therefore in the exposition of the second part of the Sermon on the Mount Mr. Wesley gives practical application to the ethical principles, while in the third part he shows us how to overcome hindrances to holiness.

Wesley's social theories must be obtained by implication. He did stand against the social evils of his day, and he sought constantly to improve the lot of the unfortunate. But his basic concept of the good and just society rested on the proposition that you cannot attain a Christian social order until you have as its subjects, or citizens, individual persons who are themselves Christian. His social teachings can

²⁸ Luther, Martin: *Werke* (Weimar Edition, 1884), II, 495-497.

²⁹ Calvin, John: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John Allen, Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, Philadelphia, 1937), III, xiv, 9.

³⁰ Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

be reduced to a single sentence: Society can be transformed only by the transformation of all its members individually and personally by the grace of God. The Christian whole is but the sum of its parts.³¹

Mr. Wesley made demands of his people. The discipline of his societies was strict and rigid. He expected his followers to exemplify what he preached. If a member failed in this, John Wesley had this to say about him: "We will admonish him of the error of his ways; we will bear with him for a season: But then if he repents not, he hath no place among us. We have delivered our own soul."³²

The climax of Wesley's concept of salvation is his teaching of Christian perfection. Though a converted person is given immediately with his conversion the power to resist evil and to do good, still the longer he lives with God and the more he enjoys the divine fellowship the better he will become. Action springs from motives. Deeds register the character of him who performs them. Perfection is "that habitual disposition of the soul which, in sacred writing, is termed holiness, and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin, 'from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit; and by consequence the being endowed with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus; the being so 'renewed in the spirit of our mind,' as to be 'perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect'."³³ This means that one motive dominates a person's entire life, and that motive is love; everything the person is and does is the expression of unselfish love. This state is available by faith to all Christians in life. Indeed, it must come to each of us before he dies else he cannot enter heaven. Only the holy can see God. That means that God gives it to all sincere Christians, if not sooner, at least on their deathbed. It may come gradually or instantaneously. But there must be some definite time when it is reached. "And if ever sin ceases, there must be a last moment of its existence and a first moment of our deliverance from it."³⁴

Wesley felt Christian perfection was the cardinal doctrine of his theology. He called it "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodist; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up."³⁵

V.

The salvation of man is the act of God. Though it never takes place without man's will and consent, still it is the Almighty who effects, and of his own infinite love, this deed of mercy for him who will allow it. Therefore, we must consider in the end "the provision which God has made for the bestowal of his mercy in a manner consistent with his justice."³⁶ The salvation God works in us is the effect of his great and wonderful act of redemption which he wrought for

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 227-239.

³² *Works*, VIII, 271.

³³ Sermon VII, part 1, section 1.

³⁴ *Works*, IX, 442.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 485.

³⁶ Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

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³⁷ Wesley, I
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⁴⁴ Sermon I

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all mankind. Wesley sets in juxtaposition to the fall of man in Adam the redemption of man in Jesus Christ.

There is nothing original at all in Wesley's doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ. He accepts without modification Chalcedonian Christology, and his view of the atonement is that of Anselm, who contends that the death of the God-man on the cross satisfied entirely the justice and righteousness of God the Father. The reason each sin we commit is not punished is that the debt of all sin has been paid by Jesus Christ and "the part of equity is to cancel the bond and to consign, over the purchased possession."³⁷

Though Wesley adds nothing to the satisfactory theory of the atonement in his delineation of its objective nature, still he does provide a fresh and profound insight into its operative effects in man. His understanding of redemption is related directly to his doctrine of creation. Whatever God does for any of his creatures he must do in a manner consistent with the way in which he made them in the beginning. The lower animals he made without freedom. Therefore, the benefits of redemption are applied automatically to them.³⁸ He thought, for example, he would meet his favorite horse again in heaven. But man was made originally free. Freedom is a part of his basic nature. Therefore God will not violate that freedom; he will not tamper with or destroy the nature of anything he has made. Consequently man cannot be saved without his own consent.³⁹

The Holy Spirit is he who applies the benefits of Christ's redemption to the souls of individuals who believe. By his power Christ is formed in our hearts⁴⁰ and our lives are made consistent with the life of Jesus.⁴¹ Thus Christ's righteousness ceases to be a substitute for ours but instead ours mirrors his.⁴² The Holy Spirit is God in his immanence. He continues in the world by daily effecting in the lives of men the work of Christ.⁴³ "But I think," said Mr. Wesley, "that the true nature of the Spirit is, that it is some portion of, as well as preparation for, a life in God."⁴⁴

As the Holy Spirit infuses the righteousness of Christ within the personal life of the believer, so that Christ is alive in him, he also "becomes the voice of divine assurance within him and generates that confidence whereby he knows that he is a child of God."⁴⁵ This testimony of the Spirit, which is direct, is accompanied by tangible fruits—love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, fidelity,

³⁷ Wesley, John: *Notes on the New Testament* (Lane and Tippet, N.Y., 1847), p. 631.

³⁸ Sermon LIX, part 1, sections 15-16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, sections 1-12; *Works*, VIII, 342.

⁴⁰ Sermon I, part 2, section 7.

⁴¹ Sermon XX, part 2, section 12.

⁴² *Works*, X, 315.

⁴³ Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

⁴⁴ Sermon CXLI, part 3.

⁴⁵ Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

and temperance.⁴⁶ The two are inseparable. Experiential religion is the only religion Wesley knew. The last testimony he ever made on earth was the testimony: "God is with us."⁴⁷

The experience of salvation is constant and continuous from the time a person is converted until he reaches the end of his earthly life. Indeed, the full effects of it in Christian perfection belong to the here and now. In this Wesley departs radically from the Reformation teaching of Luther and Calvin where a person is not fully saved until he is glorified in heaven. None the less heaven is Wesley's goal just as it is theirs. All that is accomplished through salvation on earth is in anticipation of final acceptance in the everlasting Kingdom of God. "Remember!" admonishes Mr. Wesley, "You were born for nothing else. You live for nothing else. Your life is continued to you upon earth, for no other purpose than this, that you may know, love, and serve God on earth, and enjoy him to all eternity. . . . You were created for this, and for no other purpose, by seeking and finding happiness in God on earth to secure the glory of God in heaven."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Sermon XI, part 5, section 3.

⁴⁷ Tyerman, Luke: *Life and Times of John Wesley* (Harper and Brothers, N.Y., 1872). III, 652-653.

⁴⁸ *Works*, VI, 230.

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