

## JOHN WESLEY'S CRITIQUE OF MARTIN LUTHER

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The name of Martin Luther is prominently associated with the best known event of John Wesley's life. It was while listening to a reading of Luther's preface to Romans, at Aldersgate Street, on May 24, 1738 that Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed" and was given assurance of salvation.<sup>1</sup> In view of this highly publicized episode, it comes as something of a surprise to read Wesley's *Journal* entries of June 15-16, 1741, for on these pages he records his sharply negative reaction to Luther's *Lectures on Galatians*. The main purpose of this paper is to evaluate Wesley's criticism of these *Lectures*. I aim to discover not only what might have given rise to his criticisms, but also, to what extent they actually hold true. I also hope this study will shed some light on the difference between the Methodist and Lutheran traditions. I begin with an outline of Wesley's view of Luther in general, which will provide a context for the instance upon which we are focusing attention.

### I

So far as we know, Wesley had no direct knowledge of Luther's writings before Aldersgate. Indirectly, he may have known something of Luther's thought through his contact with the Moravians. They were on the same ship with Wesley when he sailed to America in 1735, and he was deeply impressed by their calm during Atlantic storms. On his return to England, he met Peter Bohler who instructed him in the doctrine of justification by faith. Nevertheless, "It can quite safely be said that until 1738, when Wesley was 35, he was not much interested (in) Luther and made no reference to any of his writings."<sup>2</sup>

After his experience at Aldersgate, Wesley shows increased awareness of Luther as a man to be reckoned with. On June 18, 1738 — within a month of Aldersgate — he preached a sermon on "Salvation by Faith" at St. Mary's, Oxford, in which he praised "that

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<sup>1</sup>*The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, n.d., reprint of the 1872 edition), Vol. I, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup>Leo G. Cox, "John Wesley's View of Martin Luther," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 84.

champion of the Lord of hosts, Martin Luther.”<sup>3</sup>

About a year later, April 4, 1739, Wesley recorded his first negative impression of Luther. He tells us about small groups of people who agreed to meet “To confess their faults one to another, and pray one for another, that they may be healed” (see James 5:16). He then asks: “How dare any man deny this to be (as to the substance of it) a means of grace, ordained by God? Unless he will affirm (with Luther in the fury of his Solifidianism) that St. James’s Epistle is an epistle of straw.”<sup>4</sup>

Wesley’s next reference to Luther is the one to be considered in detail in this paper. As noted above, it comes from his *Journal* entries of June 15-16, 1741. I quote in full.

I set out for London, and read over in the way, that celebrated book, Martin Luther’s “Comment on the Epistle to the Galatians.” I was utterly ashamed. How have I esteemed this book, only because I heard it so commended by others; or, at best, because I had read some excellent sentences occasionally quoted from it! But what shall I say, now I judge for myself? Now I see with my own eyes? Why, not only that the author makes nothing out, clears up not one considerable difficulty; that he is quite shallow in his remarks on many passages, and muddy and confused almost on all; but that he is deeply tinctured with Mysticism throughout, and hence often dangerously wrong. To instance only in one or two points: — How does he (almost in the words of Tauler) decry reason, right or wrong, as an irreconcilable enemy to the Gospel of Christ! Whereas, what is reason (the faculty so called) but the power of apprehending, judging, and discoursing? Which power is no more to be condemned in the gross, than seeing, hearing, or feeling. Again, how blasphemously does he speak of good works and of the Law of God; constantly coupling the Law with sin, death, hell, or the devil; and teaching, that Christ delivers us from them all alike. Whereas, it can no more be proved by Scripture that Christ delivers us from the Law of God, than that he delivers us from holiness or from heaven. Here (I apprehend) is the real spring of the grand error of the Moravians. They follow Luther, for better for worse. Hence their “No works; no Law; no commandments.” But who art thou that “speakest evil of the Law, and judgest the Law?” . . . In the evening I came to London, and preached on those words, (Gal. vi. 15,) “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.” After reading Luther’s miserable comment upon the text, I thought it my bounden duty openly to warn the congregation against that dangerous treatise; and to retract whatever recommendation I might ignorantly have given of it.<sup>5</sup>

It is unfortunate, for our purposes, that Wesley’s sermon on Galatians

<sup>3</sup>The phrase “that champion of the Lord of hosts” is omitted from the edition of the *Works* I am using. See Vol. V, p. 16. The phrase appears in the First American Edition (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1826), Vol. V, p. 16. Henry Carter also cites the phrase in *The Methodist Heritage* (London: The Epworth Press, 1951), p. 222.

<sup>4</sup>*Works*, I, 185-86.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 315-16.

6:15 is not among his published *Works*.<sup>6</sup> It would, presumably, be an invaluable resource for showing the exact nature of his disagreement with Luther.

Happily, this bitter denunciation of the *Lectures on Galatians* is not Wesley's last word on Luther. However, the remaining references to Luther are mixed. On July 19, 1749 he informs us:

I finished the translation of "Martin Luther's Life." Doubtless he was a man highly favoured of God, and a blessed instrument in his hand. But O! what pity that he had no faithful friend! None that would, at all hazards, rebuke him plainly and sharply, for his rough, untractable spirit, and bitter zeal for opinions, so greatly obstructive of the work of God!<sup>7</sup>

This quote reveals Wesley's deep ambivalence toward Luther. On the one hand, his admiration for him, and appreciation for his work, is evident in the fact that he translated an abridged version of "Martin Luther's Life" for inclusion in his *Christian Library* series. As for the other hand, Cox's comment is quite appropriate: "Apparently Wesley would like to have gotten Luther into one of his class meetings, and, applying St. James' admonition of 'confess your faults one to another', picked out some of the 'straw' in Luther's life!"<sup>8</sup>

One other statement of Wesley's in reference to Luther deserves quoting. This comes from his sermon "On God's Vineyard," written in or about 1787.

Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conceptions of it? In order to be thoroughly convinced of this, of his total ignorance with regard to sanctification, there needs no more than to read over, without prejudice, his celebrated comment on the Epistle to the Galatians.<sup>9</sup>

These lines are important since they represent Wesley's mature opinion of Luther.<sup>10</sup> They are also significant because Methodists have been inclined to accept his view on the matter as definitive.<sup>11</sup>

Wesley's other references to Luther are not as relevant to the topic at hand. I simply refer the interested reader to the other passages in which Wesley alludes to Luther's life, eulogizes him for his role in the Reformation and quotes him.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup>There is an interesting discrepancy concerning which verse Wesley preached on. In Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley, A Library of Protestant Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 367, the verse given as Wesley's text is Gal. 5:6. The First American Edition of *Works* quotes Gal. 5:6.

<sup>7</sup>*Works*, II, 142.

<sup>8</sup>Cox, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup>*Works*, VII, 204.

<sup>10</sup>Cox, p. 88. Albert Outler's comment is pertinent here: "Wesley nowhere acknowledges Luther as a principal theological influence," p. 107, note 6.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Philip Watson, *Let God Be God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, ?), p. 171.

<sup>12</sup>*Works*, V, 235; VI, 282; VII, 182; X, 391, 432-33; XII, 469; XIII, 265, 300; XIV, 238.

Before going on to deal with Wesley's specific criticisms of the *Lectures*, I wish to acknowledge an inevitable limitation we must face. This stems from the almost certain fact that his reading of the *Lectures* was by no means thorough. "The *Diary* shows that, before the journey to London ended, Luther had been set aside in favour of Ignatius."<sup>13</sup> Given this, along with the fact that his remarks are rather general to begin with, we must rely heavily on speculation. We cannot be certain which portions of the *Lectures* Wesley actually read, and this makes it even more difficult to guess which passages he had in mind when he penned his critique.

We proceed, nonetheless, to consider these three criticisms of the *Lectures*: 1) that they are deeply tinged with mysticism throughout; 2) that reason is decried as an enemy of the gospel; 3) that good works and the law are blasphemed. I will not bother to deal with the charge that Luther "makes nothing out," is "quite shallow" and "muddy and confused almost on all" passages. The quotation above from "On God's Vineyard" is enough evidence to throw that charge out of court.

## II

Of the three specific criticisms, we have the least data for dealing with the first. Wesley's remark "that he is deeply tinged with Mysticism throughout" would lead us to expect mystical language on every other page. But it is not the case.

However, there are a few passages in which Luther clearly employs mystical imagery. "Darkness" is a key word in these.

Therefore when your conscience is terrified by the Law and is wrestling with the judgment of God, do not consult either reason or the Law, but rely only on grace and the Word of comfort. . . . Ascend into the darkness, where neither the Law nor reason shines, but only the dimness of faith (I Cor. 13:12), which assures us that we are saved by Christ alone, without any Law. Thus the gospel leads us above and beyond the light of the Law and reason into the darkness of faith, where the Law and reason have no business.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere, faith is described as "a sort of knowledge or darkness that nothing can see."<sup>15</sup> In yet another passage, Luther casts the faith of Abraham in these terms.

Faith certainly had this struggle with reason in Abraham. But faith won the victory in him; it killed and sacrificed God's bitterest and most harmful enemy. Thus all devout people enter with Abraham into the darkness of faith, kill reason, and say: "Reason, you are foolish. You do not understand the things that belong to God (Matt. 16:23). Therefore do not speak against me, but keep quiet."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Carter, p. 225.

<sup>14</sup>Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians," *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), Vol. 26, pp. 113-14.

<sup>15</sup>*Luther's Works*, v. 26, pp. 129-30.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 228.

One of the stages of the mystical experience, the fourth, was known as the dark night of the soul. "Here, according to the mystic, God withdrew even the occasional comfort forcing the mystic to come to Him by naked faith."<sup>17</sup> Union with God was supposed to follow this stage.

Now granted that Luther's language in the above passages smacks of mysticism, a question yet remains: is he really espousing mysticism as Wesley knew it? To answer this, we need to be aware that Wesley himself was deeply influenced by mysticism, and struggled for much of his life to come to terms with it.<sup>18</sup> He earnestly sought union with God through mysticism, but when it did not deliver on its promise, he came to adopt a more critical stance toward it. The following quote from his sermon "The Wilderness State" is indicative of this shift in his thought.

"But is not darkness much more profitable for the soul than light? Is not the work of God in the heart most swiftly and effectually carried on during a state of inward suffering? Is not a believer more swiftly and thoroughly purified by sorrow, than by joy? — by anguish, and pain, and distress, and spiritual martyrdoms, than by continual peace?" So the Mystics teach; so it is written in their books; but not in the oracles of God. The Scripture nowhere says, that the absence of God best perfects his work in the heart! Rather, his presence, and a clear communion with the Father and the Son: A strong consciousness of this will do more in an hour, than his absence in an age.<sup>19</sup>

Now we are in a better position to judge Luther's alleged mysticism, for we have some idea of what mysticism represented for Wesley. The question is whether Luther's comments agree in substance with Wesley's description of the mystical experience, and the answer, I think, is rather plain.

For Luther, to ascend into the darkness of faith is to claim the Word of Comfort. This is far from Wesley's mystic who siezes onto "inward suffering," "anguish," and "distress" as means to grace. "Darkness" in Luther is not the absence of God. Rather, it is the opposite of the "light" of law and reason, which stands in the way of receiving grace. Luther is saying that the "darkness" of faith is superior to such "light," for by it we are assured of salvation by Christ. To be sure, Luther's comments have affinities with mystical language, but the thrust of what he is saying is decidedly different.

I am afraid that we must conclude that Wesley was the one in darkness on this point!

<sup>17</sup>Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *John Wesley, His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 107.

<sup>18</sup>Tuttle's biography gives considerable attention to this dimension of Wesley's experience. See especially pp. 330-45.

<sup>19</sup>*Works*, VI, 90.

## III

When we come to the second point, on Luther's view of reason, we have abundant material to work with. Indeed, the quotes from the preceding section on mysticism refer to reason, and are pertinent to our discussion here as well. We might, therefore, suspect that Luther's "mysticism" is closely related to his decrying of reason. Wesley certainly appears to make the connection. In fact, Wesley seems to be citing Luther's abuse of reason, and the Law and good works, as particular instances of his mysticism. So Luther's mysticism was the root of his other problems as Wesley saw it. If this is the case, Wesley's statement that Luther is "tinctured with mysticism throughout" makes more sense.

The quotation above shows that Luther did, indeed, describe reason as an enemy of God, even his bitterest and most harmful enemy. Further, it would be easy to trot out numerous similarly colorful passages in which reason is maligned.<sup>20</sup> So Wesley is not off target when he says Luther decries reason "as an irreconcilable enemy to the Gospel of Christ."

But now the question is whether Luther and Wesley meant the same thing by the word "reason." Wesley defined it, we recall, as "the power of apprehending, judging, and discoursing." We recall also that Wesley was living in an age which placed great confidence in the powers of reason. This was the century in which deism achieved its height. Now Wesley was no rationalist, but he did give reason its due.<sup>21</sup>

But what of Luther? Did he have no place for "the power of apprehending, judging, and discoursing"? Is this what he was attacking as the bitterest enemy of God? Consider the following:

Therefore the first thing to be done is that through faith we kill unbelief, contempt and hatred of God, and the murmuring against His wrath, His judgment, and all the words and deeds of God; for then we kill reason. It can be killed by nothing else but faith, which believes God and thus attributes His glory to Him. It does this in spite of the fact that He speaks what seems foolish, absurd, and impossible to reason, and in spite of the fact that God depicts Himself otherwise than reason can either judge or grasp, namely, this way: "If you wish to placate Me, do not offer Me your works and merits. But believe in Jesus Christ, My only Son, who was born, who suffered, who was crucified, and who died for your sins. Then I will accept you and pronounce you righteous. And whatever of your sin still remains in you I will not impute to you." If reason is not slaughtered, and if all the religions and forms of worship under heaven that have been thought up by men to obtain righteousness in the sight of God are not condemned, the righteousness of faith cannot stand.<sup>22</sup>

Does this passage constitute an attack on reason *per se*? Does anything here suggest that Luther is condemning, without qualification, "the power of apprehending, judging, and discoursing"? There is a clue

<sup>20</sup>Luther's Works, v. 26; see especially pp. 226-34.

<sup>21</sup>On Wesley's view of reason, see Laurence Wood, "Wesley's Epistemology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 10, pp. 51-53.

<sup>22</sup>Luther's Works, v. 26, pp. 230-31.

in his claim that what God speaks "seems foolish, absurd, and impossible to reason." The implication is that reason is inadequate for judging where divine truth is concerned. However, this tells us nothing about the use of reason otherwise.

Luther's attitude toward reason *per se* is suggested elsewhere in the Galatians Commentary. For instance, he claims to be able to prove that his doctrine is true and godly by "sound arguments."<sup>23</sup> He appeals to "logical consistency" in debating his opponents,<sup>24</sup> and reminds them of such things as, that "it is faulty dialectic or the fallacy of composition and division to attribute to one part what is said of the whole."<sup>25</sup>

Such statements as these make it apparent that Luther is not opposed to reason as it pertains to such things as consistency in argument and logical thinking. Moreover, we all exist in the "realm of reason,"<sup>26</sup> and employ it regularly in the affairs of everyday life. In its proper realm, it is a good gift of God. "About reason in this sense of the term, Luther can wax almost lyrical."<sup>27</sup>

It is when reason trespasses its legitimate realm that it becomes an enemy of God. More specifically, when it tries to step into the realm of grace and justification. "Reason thinks about the way to salvation in legalistic terms. The reason of sinful man is so corrupted and has become so blind through the fall that it simply cannot think of any other way of justification than the way of work righteousness."<sup>28</sup> Reason cannot grasp the fact that God will pronounce us righteous if we believe in Jesus. In the realm of everyday life, a person's works are all important for determining whether he is justified or guilty. A judge in an earthly court considers only the evidence of a man's actions in deciding his fate. And this is all reasonable and acceptable for this life. The problem is when we try to apply these standards to our relationship with God. It is absurd by this standard of reasoning that a guilty person should be accepted as justified. But if we are to be saved says Luther, we must ignore reason, and simply believe the Word of Grace.

Once again, I think we must conclude that Wesley misunderstood

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, v. 27, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, v. 26, p. 173.

<sup>27</sup>Watson, p. 86.

<sup>28</sup>Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 68. Wesley, in fact, agreed with this point which further indicates that he missed Luther's point. On May 14, 1738 — ten days before Aldersgate — he quoted with approval a letter from a friend to his brother which argued the following: ". . . how intolerable the doctrine of faith is to the mind of man; and how particularly intolerable to *religious* men. . . . This is more shocking to reason than transubstantiation. For reason had rather resign its pretensions to judge what is bread or flesh, than have this honor wrested from it — to be the architect of virtue and righteousness." *Works*, I, 95-96.

Luther, for he was defending a use of reason which Luther had not attacked. However, Wesley's mistake is quite understandable. "Luther speaks of 'reason' without defining it and without differentiating its various manifestations and possibilities. . . . In interpreting his statements however, we must make distinctions."<sup>29</sup> Is Wesley to be blamed for failing to make distinctions in Luther's thought which Luther himself failed to make explicit?

#### IV

The third criticism we are considering is probably the most significant in terms of Wesley's mature thought. This has to do with Luther's attitude toward the law and good works, and their relation to salvation. Or to put it another way, this has to do with the relation between justification and sanctification. It is on this point that Wesley repeated his criticism of Luther in his sermon "On God's Vineyard" (see quote above).

Moreover, he extended this criticism beyond Luther, to the Reformation as a whole. In his sermon, "Of Former Times," he remarks:

Was there more true religion in . . . the age of the Reformation? There was doubtless, in many countries, a considerable reformation of religious opinions; yea, and modes of worship, which were much changed for the better, both in Germany and several other places. But it is well known that Luther himself complained with his dying breath, "The people that are called by my name (though I wish they were called by the name of Christ) are reformed as to their opinions and modes of worship; but their tempers and lives are the same they were before."<sup>30</sup>

According to Wesley, then, Luther did not understand sanctification, nor did he exemplify it (because of his "rough, untractable spirit"). And the movement he led suffered — perhaps inevitably — from the same deficiency in that it did not produce thoroughly reformed lives.

But let us recall, for the moment, his original complaint that Luther constantly couples "the Law with sin, death, hell, or the devil" and teaches that "Christ delivers us from them all alike." Allowing for a bit of overstatement, we find that Wesley is a fairly accurate reporter, as the following indicates:

For we are involved, not with minor enemies but with strong and powerful ones, who battle against us continually, namely, our own flesh, all the dangers of the world, the Law, sin, death, the wrath and judgment of God, and the devil himself. . . .<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Althaus, p. 64.

<sup>30</sup>*Works*, VII, 163. In VI, 329, Wesley gives a slightly different account of Luther's dying words. In his *Luther and the Reformation* (London: Longman's Green & Co., 1930), James Mackinnon makes no mention of these words in his treatment of Luther's death. See Vol. IV, pp. 208-10. I would guess that Wesley's source for these alleged words of Luther was the "Martin Luther's Life" which he translated. I am grateful to Professor Roland H. Bainton for referring me to Mackinnon.

<sup>31</sup>*Luther's Works*, v. 26, p. 65, cf. also p. 72.

For to the extent that he is a Christian, he is above the Law and sin, because in his heart he has Christ, the Lord of the Law, as a ring has a gem. Therefore when the Law accuses and sin troubles, he looks to Christ; and when he has taken hold of Him by faith, he has present with him the Victor over the Law, sin, death and the devil — the Victor whose rule over all these prevents them from harming him.<sup>32</sup>

But once more we face the deeper question: was Luther really totally ignorant of sanctification? Does he recognize no positive value in good works? As we proceed to explore these questions, I wish to set before us two rather lengthy quotes, one each from Wesley and Luther. Both quotes purport to tell us the real essence of Christianity, and a careful comparison of the two will suggest points of agreement between Luther and Wesley as well as points of difference. The first quote is from Wesley's sermon "On God's Vineyard."

*Who then is a Christian*, according to the light which God hath vouchsafed to this people? He that, being "justified by faith, hath peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ;" and, at the same time, is "born again," "born from above," "born of the Spirit;" inwardly changed from the image of the devil, to that "image of God wherein he was created:" He that finds the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him; and whom this love sweetly constrains to love his neighbour, every man, as himself; He that has learned of his Lord to be meek and lowly in heart, and in every state to be content: He in whom is that whole mind, all those tempers, which were also in Christ Jesus: He that abstains from all appearance of evil in his actions, and that offends not with his tongue: He that walks in all the commandments of God, and in all his ordinances, blameless: He that, in all his intercourse with men, does to others as he would they should do to him; and in his whole life and conversation, whether he eats or drinks, or whatsoever he doeth, doeth all to the glory of God.<sup>33</sup>

Now here speaks Luther:

This is *the true meaning of Christianity*, that we are justified by faith in Christ, not by the works of the Law. Do not let yourself be swayed here by the wicked gloss of the sophists, who say that faith justifies only when love and good works are added to it. . . . We concede that good works and love must also be taught; but this must be in its proper time and place, that is, when the question has to do with works, apart from this chief doctrine. But here the point at issue is how we are justified and attain eternal life. To this we answer with Paul: We are pronounced righteous solely by faith in Christ, not by the works of the law or by love. This is not because we reject works or love, as our adversaries accuse us of doing, but because we refuse to let ourselves be distracted from the principal point at issue here, as Satan is trying to do. So since we are now dealing with the topic of justification, we reject and condemn works; for this topic will not allow of any discussion of good works.<sup>34</sup>

The words we have taken from Wesley's sermon provide a good description of what he meant by sanctification. (It was in this sermon, recall, that he had claimed Luther was totally ignorant of this.) The main

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>33</sup>*Works*, VII, 205-06. My emphasis.

<sup>34</sup>*Luther's Works*, v. 26, pp. 136-37. My emphasis.

thrust of the doctrine of sanctification is — as Wesley puts it elsewhere — that salvation produces a *real* as well as a *relative* change.<sup>35</sup> Not only is righteousness imputed, it is implanted and will show itself in good works. Or to put it yet another way, the effectual work of the Spirit is as important for salvation as the accomplished work of Christ on the cross.

So did Luther know nothing of this? To begin with, let us note his unequivocal claim, in the passage above, that those who accuse him of rejecting good works and love are misrepresenting his doctrine. Is there evidence elsewhere in the *Lectures* to substantiate this claim?

If we take Wesley's suggestion, to "read over, without prejudice" the *Lectures on Galatians*, I think we will find plenty of evidence to support Luther's claim. From the very beginning of his book, he complains of the papists who falsely accuse him of prohibiting good works, and makes it clear that is not his intention.<sup>36</sup> Quite to the contrary, he insists that "it has been a long time since anyone taught a more pious and sound doctrine of good works than we do today."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, "it is as necessary that faithful preachers urge good works as that they urge the doctrine of faith."<sup>38</sup> It would not be difficult to multiply such passages on Luther's behalf.

But what of the distinction between the *real* and *relative* change? Did Luther have a clear concept of both, or did he confuse the two? I let him speak for himself:

. . . Moses, together with Paul, necessarily drives us to Christ, through whom we become doers of the Law and are accounted guilty of no transgression. How? First, through the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness, on account of faith in Christ; secondly, through the gift and the Holy Spirit, who creates a new life and new impulses in us, so that we may keep the Law also in a formal sense. Whatever is not kept is forgiven for the sake of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

As for the importance of the effectual work of the Holy Spirit, how is this?

But after a man is justified by faith, now possesses Christ by faith, and knows that He is his righteousness and life, he will certainly not be idle but, like a sound tree, will bear good fruit (Matt. 7:17). For the believer has the Holy Spirit; and where He is, He does not permit a man to be idle but drives him to all the exercises of devotion, to the love of God, to patience in affliction, to prayer, to thanksgiving, and to the practice of love toward all men. Therefore, we, too, say that faith without works is worthless and useless.<sup>40</sup>

Luther was no friend of such worthless faith. He counted this "the worst of all the evils that Satan arouses against the teaching of faith: that in

<sup>35</sup>*Works*, VI, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup>*Luther's Works*, v. 26, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, v. 27, p. 53; cf. also p. 54.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, v. 26, p. 260.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 154-55. For other references to the work of the Spirit in sanctification, see pp. 215, 255, 274.

many people he soon transforms the freedom for which Christ has set us free into an opportunity for the flesh."<sup>41</sup> And Luther had little tolerance for such abuses: "This misbehavior often makes me so impatient that I would want such 'swine that trample pearls underfoot' (Matt. 7:6) still to be under the tyranny of the pope."<sup>42</sup> This problem, of course, is nothing new. Paul faced it before Luther (cf. Rom. 6:15) and Wesley had to deal with it after him.<sup>43</sup>

Now then, are we to conclude that Wesley and Luther actually agree on the doctrine of sanctification? While I think our examination of Luther indicates more affinities than Wesley realized, I also think there are significant differences to be recognized.

The first, and most important, I would put like this: for Wesley, sanctification is integral to salvation, while for Luther it tends to hold a position subordinate to justification. Luther subordinates love to faith, while for Wesley, faith "is only the handmaid of love."<sup>44</sup> This is suggested by a comparison of the two definitions of Christianity cited above. Justification by faith in Christ is the way to "attain eternal life" according to Luther. It is the "chief doctrine" and good works and love are incidental in comparison. For Wesley, being "born of the Spirit" and "inwardly changed" so that we love God and our neighbor is simultaneous with justification by faith, and cannot be given only secondary emphasis.

Luther regarded the doctrine of justification by faith as the doctrine by which a church stands or falls. All those who do not believe this doctrine, or who do not take hold of Christ by faith, are consequently damned.<sup>45</sup> Wesley, in his mature thought, came to reject this opinion. On December 1, 1767, he was alone in his coach, thinking, and came to these conclusions:

That a pious Churchman who has not clear conceptions even of Justification by Faith may be saved. Therefore, clear conceptions even of this are not necessary to salvation: That a Mystic, who denies Justification by Faith, (Mr. Law, for instance,) may be saved. But if so, what becomes of *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*? If so is it not high time for us *Projicere ampullas et sesquipedia verba*; and to return to

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, v. 27, p. 48.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Works*, V, p. 244.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 462. The phrase comes from Wesley's sermon, "The Law Established Through Faith," Discourse II, which was written, along with Discourse I, in opposition to antinomianism. One wonders whether Luther may have been in Wesley's mind, as well as his contemporary opponents, when he wrote this sermon. He goes on to say faith "loses all its excellence, when brought into a comparison with love," while complaining of those "who magnify faith beyond all proportion." Recall also Wesley's earlier complaint about Luther's "Solifidianism."

<sup>45</sup>*Luther's Works*, v. 26, p. 134.

the plain word, "He that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him?"<sup>46</sup>

For Wesley, a holy life (fearing God and working righteousness) was to become a far more reliable sign of salvation than believing in justification by faith.<sup>47</sup>

The second difference between Luther and Wesley concerns the extent to which we may achieve actual righteousness in this life. Even with the Holy Spirit, Luther assumed we will not keep the law perfectly. ("Whatever is not kept is forgiven for the sake of Christ.") In his greatest sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Wesley states his expectation of salvation from *all* sins in this life.

It is thus that we wait for entire sanctification; for a full salvation from all our sins, — from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief; or, as the Apostle expresses it, "go on unto perfection." But what is perfection? The word has various senses: Here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love "rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in every thing giving thanks."<sup>48</sup>

Wesley certainly missed Luther's emphasis on righteous living, but he was quite right in recognizing that his own doctrine of sanctification held higher expectations.

## CONCLUSION

We may still wonder why Wesley's understanding of Luther was so far off the mark. There is a significant historical point we have not yet mentioned. This point is raised by the following sentences from Wesley's critique: "Here (I apprehend) is the real spring of the grand error of the Moravians. They follow Luther, for better for worse."

These sentences take on real significance when we recall that Wesley was engaged in controversy with the Moravians in 1741, when he read Luther's *Lectures*.<sup>49</sup> Cox perceptively comments:

Luther's being "muddy," "confused," "shallow" and "dangerously wrong" can only be explained on one basis: Wesley was looking at one thing, namely Moravian errors. His quick scan of this commentary found the seeds of their errors. He saw Luther

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<sup>46</sup>*Works*, III, 308. The first Latin phrase means, "The grand doctrine by which a church stands or falls." The second, from Horace, means, "Reject bombast and words half a yard long." The scripture verse quoted is Acts 10:35.

<sup>47</sup>See Tuttle, pp. 312-18 for a discussion of this development in Wesley's thought. See also Wesley's sermon, "The Lord Our Righteousness," where he explicitly distinguishes his view from Luther's. *Works*, V, pp. 234-46. It is here that Wesley asks: "If there is a difference of opinion, where is our religion, if we cannot think and let think?" Recall the quote above in which Wesley criticized Luther for his "bitter zeal for opinions."

<sup>48</sup>*Works*, VI, p. 46.

<sup>49</sup>See the section entitled, "The Rift with the Moravians," in Outler, pp. 353-76. Wesley's critique of Luther is included here.

decrying reason; he had seen the Moravians unwilling to listen to reason. He found Luther speaking blasphemously of good works; he had seen the Moravians deny any value in works.<sup>50</sup>

This puts Wesley's remarks in a quite different light. Was his critique of Luther actually more a reaction to Moravian excesses than anything else? How would he have reacted to Luther had he read him under different circumstances or read him more thoroughly?

We cannot know the answer to this. But perhaps Wesley would understand if his words below remind us of the attack he leveled against Luther.

It would be a considerable step . . . if we could bring good men to understand one another. . . . Frequently neither of the contending parties understands what his opponent means; whence it follows, that each violently attacks the other, while there is no real difference between them.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Cox, p. 87.

<sup>51</sup>*Works*, V, p. 235.