

A Study in Transitions: Wesley's Soteriology

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A Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to delineate the theological shifts that occurred in Wesley's post-Aldersgate soteriology. To realize this purpose, three distinct soteriological shifts in his thought will be examined. These shifts involve changes in how he understood the following: the conditions of redemption, the state of humanity and the scope of salvation. Through an examination of these shifts, three distinct phases (early, middle and late) were detected. In the early phase there appears to be a distinct Reformed bias; fallen human beings are totally depraved and can be redeemed only through explicit faith in Christ's atonement. In the two subsequent phases, an increasing emphasis is given to Arminian distinctives. Particular emphasis is given to the Arminian understanding of prevenient grace. In the middle phase, the Reformed and Arminian elements appear to co-exist within the same soteriological framework--reconciled through a tenuous and at times tortuous dialectic. This dialectic seems to crumble in the late phase. The Reformed elements are quietly dismissed; the Arminian elements dominate.

ABSTRAIT

L'objet de cette thèse est de faire ressortir les variations d'ordre théologique survenues dans la soteriologie de Wesley de la période post-Aldersgate. Pour ce faire, seront examinés ici trois points tournants soteriologiques de sa pensée. Ces points relèvent aux modifications de sa compréhension des aspects suivants: les conditions à la rédemption, l'état de déchéance des êtres humains et l'étendue du salut. Après examen de ces changements, trois périodes distinctes ressortent. La période initiale est empreinte de l'influence réformiste; les êtres humains déchus sont totalement corrompus et ne peuvent être rachetés que par la foi explicite au sacrifice du Christ. Dans les deux périodes subséquentes, une importance grandissante est donnée aux caractéristiques arminiennes. Nous trouvons une emphase particulière sur la perspective arminienne de la grâce a priori. Dans la période médiane, les éléments réformistes et arminiens semblent co-exister à l'intérieur du même cadre soteriologique--réconciliés à travers une dialectique mince et parfois tortueuse. Cette dialectique paraît s'émietter durant la dernière période. Les éléments réformistes sont tranquillement mis de côté, tandis que la tendance arminienne domine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of a Masters Thesis can be an exercise in frustration and grief. I mercifully was spared such an ordeal. That I was can largely be attributed to the ready encouragement and helpful assistance of faculty and friends. I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Edward J. Furcha, for his steady direction during the preparation of this thesis. I also wish to thank the staff of the McGill Religious Studies Library for their helpfulness in obtaining books and copies of materials from other libraries. And finally I need to express my appreciation to Greta for her faith and encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.		1
CHAPTER ONE	The Early Phase 1738-1744.	3
	I The Condition of Acceptance	5
	II The State of Humanity	12
	III The Scope of Salvation	18
CHAPTER TWO:	The Middle Phase 1744-1767	21
	I The Conditions of Acceptance	21
	II The State of Humanity	26
	III The Scope of Salvation	30
CHAPTER THREE	The Late Phase 1767-1791	37
	I The Condition of Acceptance	37
	II The State of Humanity	43
	III The Scope of Salvation	47
CONCLUSION		56
BIBLIOGRAPHY		59

A Study in Transitions. Wesley's Soteriology.

Introduction

Wesley scholars are now recognizing that there is a need to define and categorize, more than has hitherto been done, the distinct phases of Wesley's theology. Traditionally, John Wesley was thought to have undergone one major transition in his theological thought. The shift is traced to Wesley's "conversion" in 1738, when he gained insight into "justification by faith apart from works".¹ John Wesley, himself, bears some responsibility for this traditional interpretation. The father of Methodism consistently rejected insinuations that his teachings--his teachings following the "conversion" in 1738--had undergone significant transitions. Defending his teachings, Wesley said,

Such has been my judgment for these threescore years, without any material alteration. Only about fifty years I had a clearer view than before of justification by faith: and in this from that very hour I never varied, no not an hair's breath. Nevertheless an ingenious man has publicly accused me of a thousand variations. I pray God not to lay this to his charge.²

And again.

Is it not strange if among inaccurate expressions there are some seeming contradictions, especially considering I was answering so many different objectors, frequently attacking me all at once, and pushing this way, another that with all the violence they were able. Nevertheless, I believe there will be found few, if any real, contradictions for nearly thirty years.³

In the past, scholars have echoed Wesley's boast; his teachings were treated as if they had been given an immutable form following his "conversion" in 1738.⁴ More recently, however,

¹ Albert Outler commenting on this transition says, "His basic shift in 1738 prompted drastic alterations in his understanding of the order of salvation (from his earlier view of progression from holy living to justifying faith to direct reversal of that order)." Outler in *The Works of John Wesley*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, {hereafter referred to as *Works (O)* }, I, p. 63

² *Works (O)*, IV, pp 147-48.

³ Quoted in George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1938), p. 135

⁴ George C. Croft (*The Rediscovery of John Wesley*) and William Ragsdale Cannon, (*The*

scholars have begun to acknowledge distinct phases in Wesley's post conversion teachings. Commenting on these phases, Albert C. Outler says, "He (Wesley) denied that he ever changed his theological position after 1738, partly because his basic intentions had never changed. But the nuances and equilibria of the position did change."⁵ In another place, commenting on the possibility of reading Wesley's sermons chronologically, Outler says, "the clear advantage here would be the exhibition of Wesley's thought in its successive stages of development. Read in this light, the sermons would shatter most of the conventional views of constancy of his theological course after his conversion on the 24th of May, 1738."

With the recognition of the existence of distinctive phases has also come the corresponding recognition that these phases must be carefully defined if Wesley's theology is to be rightly interpreted. Broad generalizations invite distortion. Based on the research undertaken for this thesis, the present writer agrees with scholars like Outler who believe that our understanding of Wesley the theologian will continue to be hindered until such time as the distinctive phases of his thought are given better definition. In an effort to foster a deeper understanding of Wesley's thought, my thesis will take one distinctive element in his teaching, his soteriology--and examine the transitions that it undergoes throughout the duration of his long career as a pastor-teacher.

To facilitate the delineation of the phases which characterize his soteriological thought, three distinct shifts related to his soteriology will be examined. These shifts involve changes in how he understood the following, the conditions of redemption, the state of humanity and the scope of salvation.

Theology of John Wesley, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1946) are two prominent scholars who have assumed that Wesley's theology took on an immutable form following the experience at Aldersgate.

⁵ Albert C. Outler, "Wesley in the Christian Tradition", *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Kenneth F. Rowe (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1976), pp. 14-15.

The Early Phase: 1738-1744.

There has been great controversy on how Wesley's thought is best defined. Some have argued he is best understood as an Anglican Arminian; others consider him a Reformed Calvinist.⁶ It is the latter view, we shall see, that best describes Wesley in the years immediately following Aldersgate. On more than one occasion Wesley claimed to have come within a "hair's breath" of Calvinism.⁷ We shall see that his boast was valid. In the matters of justification by faith and original sin, Wesley and the Calvinists were in essential agreement. They commonly agreed that human beings were depraved and void of redemptive potential. The only hope of fallen human beings was their appropriation of Christ's atoning work through faith. All who lacked such faith were viewed as rebels against God and consequently under divine wrath.

Wesley's decision to work within a Reformed framework appears to have been intimately related to his missionary endeavours in Georgia. There were two elements connected with his trip to Georgia which greatly influenced his shift of thought in 1738. The first element concerned Wesley's introduction to a group of zealous Moravian missionaries. Their fearlessness in the face of death and irenic disposition through severe trials made deep imprints on his impressionable mind. The other element providing a catalyst for change was the utter failure of his missionary endeavours. Circumstances had confined his work to the English speaking members of the colony. Those he did have to work with, he ruled with an iron hand enforcing the strictest of discipline. The local leaders chafed under the restrictions and Wesley resigned his position with libel charges pending. Thus after two years of tireless labour, Wesley left America in despair. A journal entry from this time, records

⁶ For an excellent treatment of the different lines of interpretation see H. Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification* (London: The Epworth Press, 1956), pp. 6-14.

⁷ See *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Kansas City, Missouri: Nazarene Publishing House, 1872, {hereafter cited as *Works*}), VIII, p. 284-85 and *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Fellord, 8 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931, {hereafter referred to as *Letters*}), II, p. 134.

his despondency "I went to America to convert the Indians, but, O, who will convert me?"

Back in England on February 1, 1738, Wesley was introduced to the Moravian Peter Bohler. Bohler was German and had studied theology at the University of Jena. Between the dates of February 7th and May 4th, the two men had many conversations and debates. These encounters resulted in Wesley forsaking his previous conviction that salvation was by works. He adopted instead the Reformed position that salvation was by faith alone.

That Bohler was influential in this transition can be established through a careful reading of Wesley's journal between February 7th and May 24th. Of his first meeting with Bohler, Wesley wrote in his journal: "A day much to be remembered." On February 18th, he wrote, "All this time I conversed much with Peter Bohler, but I understood him not." On May 4th, after talking with Bohler, Wesley was convinced "of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved." Their discussion of March 23rd, led Wesley to scrutinize his Greek New Testament to see if the Reformed⁹ doctrine of faith was scriptural. Within the month, Wesley accepted Bohler's doctrine of faith, but was uncertain as to the instantaneous nature of such a work. Further searchings of the scripture vindicated Bohler. Wesley's had one final reservation. While the doctrine may have expressed an authentic experience in the apostolic era, such an experience might be limited to that era and not valid in 18th century England. Bohler countered by presenting Wesley with a string of living witnesses who testified that they indeed had experienced instantaneous saving faith. Having no more lines of defense, Wesley fully embraced the Reformed doctrine of "Justification by Faith alone" and preached it for the first time on April 25, 1738.

One month later on May 24th, Wesley was initiated into the very thing he had been

⁸ *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols. (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1909, {hereafter referred to as the *Journal*}), I, p. 465.

⁹ It should be noted that strictly speaking the teaching Wesley received at this time was Lutheran and not Reformed. However it seems clear that Wesley chose to interpret the teaching within a Reformed soteriological framework. This was not difficult to do as the Reformed position on justification by faith is essentially the same as the Lutheran position. See Robert Monk, *John Wesley His Puritan Heritage*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 15.

preaching. Describing this *experience*, he said,

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation: and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even mine, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.¹⁰

As Luther had opened his heart to justification by faith, Wesley developed a special respect for the German Reformer. Writing of Luther's life, he noted: "Doubtless he was a man highly favoured of God, and a blessed instrument in his hand."¹¹ Admiring the reformer's courage he wrote,

When iniquity had overspread the church as a flood, the Spirit of the Lord lifted up a standard against it. He raised up a poor monk, without wealth, without power, and at that time, without friends to declare war, as it were, against all the world; against the bishop of Rome and all his adherents. But this little stone being chosen of God, soon grew into a considerable mountain and increased more and more till it had covered a considerable part of Europe.¹²

The experience of Aldersgate caused Wesley to forsake his earlier fundamental Romanism and to take his stand at the side of the Reformers. Seeking to establish a firmer appreciation of the Reformed position, Wesley spent the summer of 1738 with the Moravians in Germany. This trip provided the opportunity to study the practical outworking of this "new doctrine". In the Moravian community, he met with many preachers and teachers who grounded him in the fundamental doctrine of the Reformation. Wesley returned to England impressed with what he had witnessed--eager to preach the doctrine of justification by faith *alone*.

I. The Condition of Acceptance

Recognizing there were many theories concerning the meaning of justification, Wesley

¹⁰ Works, I, p. 103

¹¹ Works, II, p. 142

¹² Quoted by Leo G. Cox, "John Wesley's View of Martin Luther", in the *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 5 (1962): 88

was careful to define both its nature and its attending conditions. Justification was the act whereby a person was justified before God. It did not mean a person was actually righteous or just, though such a condition might be the fruit or result of justification.¹³ Neither did it involve the paying of ransom to Satan on the false assumption that he had some legal rights over individuals;¹⁴ nor did it involve the removal of legal indictments imposed by divine law as this was possible only through the death of the offender;¹⁵ nor did it mean, God was deceived in believing that sinners were in one state (i.e. righteous) while they were actually in another (i.e. sinful).

In a word, Wesley understood justification to mean *forgiveness*, the pardon of sins.¹⁶ God saw individuals as they were--fallen and depraved--yet with no threat either to his omniscience or to his holiness. Penitent sinners were pardoned for the sake of Jesus Christ his Son. Pardon connoted the negative element in the transaction--the forgiveness of sins through vicarious atonement. There was also the positive element of acceptance. Acceptance connoted the positive relationship of restoration to favour with God.¹⁷ These two elements--pardon and acceptance--were always distinguished in Wesley's thought yet the two were invariably linked together in the one act of justification.¹⁸

In the early phase there was one necessary condition for justification: the condition of

¹³ *Works (O)*, I, p. 186.

¹⁴ *Works (O)*, I, pp. 187-88

¹⁵ *Works (O)*, I, p. 194.

¹⁶ *Works*, VIII, p. 194, cf. VIII, pp. 275, 281-82, 290.

¹⁷ *Works*, VIII, p. 427.

¹⁸ *Works*, V, p. 57. X, pp. 323-24. Wesley summarized his position in the following statement: "Justification is another word for pardon. It is the forgiveness of all our sins; and, what is necessarily implied therein, our acceptance with God. The price whereby this hath been procured for us (commonly termed 'the meritorious cause of our justification'), is the blood and righteousness of Christ, or, to express it a little more clearly, all that Christ has done and suffered for us, till He 'poured out His soul for the transgressors.' The immediate effects of justification are, the peace of God 'a peace that passeth all understanding', and a 'rejoicing in hope of the glory of God' 'with joy unspeakable and full of glory.'" *Works*, VI, pp. 44-45.

faith. Bernard Holland, in his article, "The Conversion of John and Charles Wesley", noted that Wesley's concept of faith contained two prominent features: "a feeling of reliance upon Christ", and "a sense of God's pardon".¹⁹ These two elements were eventually to become distinct tenets in Wesley theology but initially they were linked closely together within on gift of saving faith. It was Peter Bohler who taught Wesley that reliance upon Christ and a sense of pardon were given in the same moment.²⁰ The other major influence came from the Homily *On Salvation* where true faith was defined as a "sure trust and confidence that, by the merits of Christ, (a person's) sins are forgiven and he is reconciled to the favour of God".²¹ For Wesley, the faith that saved encompassed the following elements:

A full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death and resurrection; a recumbency upon him as our atonement and our life, as given for us and living in us. It is a sure confidence which man hath in God, that through the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven, and he is reconciled to the favour of God; and in consequence here of closing with him and cleaving to him as our 'wisdom, righteousness and sanctification and redemption' or in a word, our salvation.²²

Wesley showed his Reformed bias in refusing to recognize saving faith as a human work.²³ He made this clear in a letter to Josiah Tucker:

In strictness, therefore neither our faith nor our works justify us, i.e., deserve the remission of our sins. But God himself justifies us, of his own mercy, through the merits of his Son only. Nevertheless, because by faith we embrace the promise of God's mercy and the remission of our sins, therefore the Scripture says that *faith does justify yea, faith without works*.²⁴

As Cell noted, "So radical and strong was Wesley's reaction against the reference of saving

¹⁹ Holland, "The Conversion of John and Charles Wesley and Their Place in the Methodist Tradition", *Wesley Historical Society Proceedings*, 38 (1971-72): 47.

²⁰ *Journal*, II, p. 13 ff

²¹ *Journal*, ii, p. 101; cf. Outler (ed.), *John Wesley*, p. 128.

²² *Works (O)*, I, p. 121

²³ One at least one occasion Wesley boasted, "It is the faith of our first reformers which I by the grace of God preach". *Letters*, II, p. 134.

²⁴ *Works (O)*, IX, p. 52

faith to human activity or the description of it as the human-side of salvation, that he confessed to a scruple at first to recognize faith--going at this point and at this time beyond both Luther and Calvin--as the condition of salvation"²⁵

Wesley was also consistent with the Reformed position when he argued that good works were the result and not the cause of justification. Prior to justification no good works were possible. Wesley granted that feeding the poor, clothing the naked, and sheltering the destitute, were works that in one sense could be reckoned as good as these were indeed profitable acts. Yet, such works could not be defined as good in a theological sense as they were unacceptable to God. In attacking the concept of good works prior to justification, Wesley appealed to the thirty-nine articles:

All truly 'good works' (to use the words of our Church) 'follow after justification', and are therefore 'good and acceptable to God in Christ', because they 'spring out of a true and living faith'. By parity of reason all 'works done before justification are not good', in the Christian sense, 'for as much as they spring not of a faith in Jesus Christ' (though from some kind of faith in God they may spring), 'yea, rather for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not' how strange forever it may appear to some, 'but they have the nature of sin'.²⁶

Wesley sought to clarify the logic of the 13th article-- the article on the nature of works prior to justification-- with the following syllogism:

1. No works are good which God has not commanded.
2. No works before justification are done as God commanded.
3. *Ergo*, no works done before justification are good.²⁷

From the above principle it followed that works were irrelevant for justification, no works of love or mercy could merit or earn the pardon and forgiveness of God. Justification was the work of the Redeemer not the redeemed.²⁸

²⁵ Cell, p. 247.

²⁶ *Works (O)*, I, pp. 192-93

²⁷ *Works (O)*, I, p. 193.

²⁸ Wesley makes this distinction clearly in the following statement: "In this all believers are forgiven and accepted, not for the sake of anything in them, or of anything that ever

Wesley's critique on good works enabled him to maintain justification and sanctification as distinctly separate doctrines. He saw sanctification in "some degree as the immediate fruit of justification," but also as "a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature." Justification was defined as "what God does for us through His Son"; sanctification was "what He works in us by His spirit."²⁹ Thus the single term of justification was faith and that alone

In rejecting good works prior to justification, Wesley established a principle: God justifies sinners; he does not justify the righteous. Only those who are self-acknowledged sinners were candidates for God's pardon. "God justifieth", said Wesley, "not the godly, but the ungodly; not those that are holy already, but the unholy."³⁰ For those who argued that good works precede justification, Wesley countered that their assertions were absurd:

So far from it that the very supposition is not only flatly impossible (for where there is no love of God, there is no holiness, and there is no love of God but from a sense of His loving us), but also grossly, intrinsically *absurd*, contradictory to itself. For it is not a saint but a sinner that is forgiven, and under the notion of a sinner.³¹

It was impossible to believe that God justifies the righteous, as this would imply that God takes away the sins which were previously taken away.

In dismissing the possibility of good works prior to justification, Wesley found himself

was, that is, or ever can be done by them, but wholly and solely for the sake of what Christ hath done and suffered for them. I say again, not for the sake of what Christ hath done and suffered for them. I say again, not for the sake of anything in them, or done by them, of their own righteousness or works: 'Not for works of righteousness which we have done, but of His mercy He saved us'. 'By grace ye are saved through faith;...not of works, lest any man should boast'; but wholly and solely for the sake of what Christ hath done and suffered for us. We are 'justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'." *Works*, V, p. 58.

²⁹ Wesley says, "although some rare instances may be found, wherein the term *justified* or *justification* is used in so wide a sense as to include *sanctification* also; yet, in general use, they are sufficiently distinguished from each other, both by St. Paul and the other writers." *Works*, V, p. 56.

³⁰ *Works* V, p. 58

³¹ *Works*, V, p. 58 (Italics mine)

alienated from many, if not most, of his Anglican contemporaries. The sheer bulk of polemical material that Wesley wrote defending his position are testimony to the intensity of the conflict.³² The eminent Lord Bishop of Gloucester said that Wesley had confounded grace and perdition,³³ while Dr. Horne said that he had resurrected the heresy of antinomianism and unleashed it on an unsuspecting English audience.³⁴ The general consensus among leaders in the church of England was that Wesley was an outcast; his teachings were alien to their own. Thus he found himself barred from many Anglican Churches, even the church at Epworth--his Father's former parish.

Wesley anticipated the hostility knowing that his teachings on justification were contrary to the teachings of 18th century Anglicanism. But knowledge of such hostility did not hinder him from launching his own counter-attack. He charged his contemporaries with adulterating God's Word and with failing to provide spiritual nourishment for those entrusted to their care.³⁵ Further the willingness of his contemporaries to give the Articles and Homilies "lip service" and yet not to teach them from the pulpit was seen as both hypocritical and contemptuous. This made it difficult for Wesley to respect their leadership.³⁶ Where the Articles and Homilies clearly taught a justification by faith, Wesley understood his contemporaries to teach a justification by works. Wesley's expressed his concerns in the caustic sermon: "Hypocrisy in Oxford"--one of the sharpest attacks Wesley ever directed towards 18th century Anglican teachers. The sermon was written to serve two purposes: to deal with his own academic arrears respecting a deferred B. D. and also, as Outler noted,

³² The bulk of Wesley's polemics is all the more amazing when one considers that he apologized often for addressing only the most significant treatises of his opponents. See *Works*, V, p. 12; VII, p. 454; VIII, pp. 50-58, 275, 281, 291, 361-63, 366-69, 387-89, 402, 428-30, 508; IX, pp. 110-17; X, pp. 179, 349, 390, 432, 447 and XIII, pp. 499-500.

³³ *Works*, IX, p. 121.

³⁴ *Works*, IX, p. 110.

³⁵ *Works (O)*, IV, p. 394. Rather than providing nourishment, Anglican teachers were thought to be feeding the flock "with an abundance of poison"

³⁶ *Works*, XII, p. 64.

“.. to deliver a long-considered diatribe against the university as a whole, on the charge of its moral lapses in doctrine and discipline.”³⁷

The focus of his attack centered on the doctrines held by Bishop George Bull. Wesley defined Bull's position on justification as follows:

A man is said.. ‘to be justified by works’, because good works are the condition, according to the divine appointment, established in the gospel covenant, requisite and necessary to a man's justification; that is, to his obtaining remission of sins through Christ.³⁸

The wide-spread acceptance of Bull's view confirmed Wesley's conviction that few knew (and fewer preached) “the genuine gospel of Christ in that simplicity and purity wherewith it is set forth in the venerable records of our Church (i.e. the church articles)!”³⁹ The Arminian tradition of Bishop Bull was the same tradition that Wesley, himself, endorsed in those years prior to Aldersgate. But following Aldersgate, this tradition was bitterly renounced. He scorned those like Bull who contended “that man must be sanctified, that is, holy, before he can be justified” and who affirmed that “universal holiness and obedience must precede justification”.⁴⁰ Wesley throughout the early phase expressed his conviction that, “It is not a *saint* but a *sinner* that is *forgiven*, and under the notion of sinner. God *justifieth* not the godly, but the *ungodly*; not those that are holy already, but the unholy.”⁴¹

Given the sharp contention between Wesley and his fellow Anglicans, it may appear puzzling that Wesley regarded himself a loyal Anglican both ecclesiastically and theologically. Wesley was heavily influenced by Reformed doctrine (particularly in his view on

³⁷ Outler, “An Introductory Comment”, *Works (O)*, IV, p. 390.

³⁸ *Works (O)*, IV, p. 397. Cannon notes that *Harmonium Apostolica*, the book from which the above quotation was taken, “represents better than any other single work the normative Anglican position on the doctrine of justification during this period (i.e. the eighteenth century)”. Cannon, p. 86.

³⁹ *Works (O)*, IV, p. 394.

⁴⁰ *Works (O)*, I, p. 191.

⁴¹ *Works (O)*, I, p. 191.

justification).⁴² The 18th century Anglicans, by contrast, endorsed a liberalized form of Arminianism. The puzzle resolves itself, when one recognizes that Wesley considered the Thirty-nine Articles and the Homilies to be the authoritative, foundational doctrines of the Church. The Thirty-nine Articles and the Homilies were known to have been significantly molded by a strong Calvinistic influence that had captured English theological thought at the time of their composition. Therefore, Wesley believed the founding documents of his church firmly supported his Reformed soteriology.⁴³

As we have seen, Wesley defined the conditions of a person's acceptance before God in terms that were thoroughly Reformed. One was accepted by faith alone; good works had no part in reconciliation and redemption.

II. The Condition of Humanity:

Wesley supported his Reformed understanding of justification by faith with a Reformed understanding of original sin. Determining Wesley's view on original sin is a rather simple task. For one, he wrote extensively on the subject. His longest individual work was devoted to this very topic--the laboured reply ran into two hundred and sixty two pages. The work came in response to John Taylor of Norwich reckoned by George Croft Cell to be "one of the ablest expounders of a humanistic Christianity in Wesley's time".⁴⁴ Taylor, believing that the traditional Christian teaching on original sin was too pessimistic for a progressive age, attacked and dismissed the doctrine. According to Wesley, the attack was the greatest "wound to Christianity since Mahomet," affecting "many of the clergy and even the fountains themselves-- the universities in England, Scotland, Holland and Germany".⁴⁵ Wesley took the

⁴² Cannon comments, "To be sure, Wesley stands shoulder to shoulder with Whitefield and Reformers in his conviction that man is justified by grace through faith and not by works, and it is interesting to note that in answering objections to his doctrine he follows Calvin almost exactly in his replies to similar objections in his *Institutes*", Cannon, p. 89.

⁴³ *Works*, XII, p. 65

⁴⁴ Cell, p. 278.

threat posed by Taylor's work seriously but waited a full five years before actually publishing his reply.⁴⁶ Wesley had hoped that others with more time and perhaps talent would repudiate Taylor's works. As a teacher, a preacher and a pastor, Wesley had vast multitudes demanding more of his time than he was able to give. His reluctance may also reflect his professed aversion to controversial matters. Yet, when no person arose to defend the cause, he engaged his pen against Taylor's "old Deism in a new dress" and launched a counter-attack in the name of orthodoxy.

The purpose of the treatise was to discredit Taylor's optimistic view of human nature. To achieve this end, the worst elements--"the brute forces of animalism"--were unveiled. The violence and the superstition which marred human existence became the focus of his work. War was seen as a stark reminder of human depravity and was offered as an authoritative witness to the cracked foundations undergirding the human project.⁴⁷ While the bodies of men had been destroyed by War, another enemy-- superstition--had ravaged their heart, soul and mind. It had done so under the guise of religion which was corrupted through the corrosive influences of idolatry and bigotry. These destructive influences were seen clearly among the pagans: the "Mussulmen" sought to convert people with the sword and murdered rather than tolerate a difference of opinion;⁴⁸ the Chinese had no more conception of God than the Hottentots, for they worshipped the souls of their ancestors.⁴⁹ Even the Christian religion was corrupt. Rome, driven by blind and bitter zeal, had a long history of mercilessly persecuting Protestants--even to the stake.⁵⁰

Turning to his immediate environment, Wesley attacked the corrupt practices of the

⁴⁵ *Letters*, IV, p. 48.

⁴⁶ See *Journal*, III, p. 520.

⁴⁷ *Works*, IX, p. 211.

⁴⁸ *Works*, IX, p. 216.

⁴⁹ *Works*, IX, pp. 214-15.

⁵⁰ *Works*, IX, pp. 217-19.

English merchants who ruthlessly suppressed their social conscience in pursuit of the elusive pound.⁵¹ He saw the trade world to be corrupt; singularly void of those committed to honesty and to righteousness in their business dealings.⁵² The justice upheld in English courts was said to be corrupt (“purely mercenary”); attorneys were employed to thwart rather than to promote righteousness.⁵³ Wesley’s overview of history—secular and sacred—made plain the condition of human kind: humanity was fallen (more akin to the snarling beast than to the angelic beings). Wesley’s pessimistic survey of human history was summarized well by Cell who wrote:

we turn from the mighty flood of human wickedness to the trickling stream of human goodness, we are instantly thrown into consternation by the appalling percentage of the myriad millions of our race whose feet have trod this loath stool without attaining in their total experience of life to any consideration hitherto in the things of the mind and of the spirit.⁵⁴

In the above-mentioned treatise and in other works, Wesley sought to explain original sin in ways that were consistent with the opening chapters of Genesis. Using this narrative, Wesley contrasted the differences between humanity in its pristine state and humanity after the Fall. Before the Fall, the human creature (Adam) was perfect.⁵⁵ Adam was formed in the image of God that he might enjoy fellowship with his creator. The *imago Dei* was threefold. The *natural image* was seen in Adam’s possession of immortality, understanding, free will and “various affections”;⁵⁶ the *political image* was reflected in Adam’s capacity to govern himself and creatures lower in the created order; and the *moral image* which was manifest in Adam’s righteousness and true holiness.⁵⁷ It was in his moral likeness that Adam

⁵¹ *Works*, IX, p. 228.

⁵² *Works*, IX, pp. 234-235

⁵³ *Works*, IX, pp. 228-29.

⁵⁴ Cell, p. 287.

⁵⁵ *Works*, V, p. 54; cf. IX, p. 293

⁵⁶ *Works*, VI, p. 66

most resembled his maker. The attributes of mercy, truth and purity were predicated of both creature and Creator. In possessing these unique characteristics, Adam was capable of "knowing, loving and obeying" God.⁵⁸ This capacity for divine fellowship set the human creature above inferior species, placing him at the pinnacle of the created order.

The blessed state of primordial humanity (the golden age) came to a sudden and tragic conclusion with Adam's first transgression against God. The transgression resulted from the conscious and deliberate abuse of Adam's liberty in making moral decisions. Unlike his blighted offspring, Adam was originally endowed with the power to choose the good and, conversely, to choose the evil.⁵⁹ In abusing his liberty, seeking happiness in things temporal not eternal, Adam suffered spiritual, temporal and eternal death.⁶⁰ Divine favour was lost and the divine image marred: the moral image totally, the natural and political, in part.⁶¹

The consequences of Adam's sin were to effect all of his offspring. These consequences were two-fold: judicial and medical.⁶² The judicial consequences were understood in terms of forensic guilt. In harmony with the Reformed position, Wesley believed that original sin involves liability to punishment, (*reatus*), understood as damnation. Humanity's corruption brought upon itself condemnation; the fallen nature was inherently guilty. Adam's descendents were born in sin being by *nature* children of wrath.⁶³ As a result of being sinful, human existence was characterized by suffering; suffering was interpreted as divine punishment.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Works, V, p. 54

⁵⁸ Works, VI, p. 244.

⁵⁹ Works, IX, p. 291

⁶⁰ Works, IX, p. 67

⁶¹ Works, VI, p. 223.

⁶² The *medical* consequences refers to the corruption that has *infected* all human faculties as a result of the Fall

⁶³ Works, IX, p. 243.

In explaining how Adam's offspring incurred the guilt of original sin, Wesley showed an affinity with Calvinist federalism. Adam was the representative of humanity--our federal head; his decisions were made on behalf of those represented.⁶⁵ Wesley, however, was not dogmatic on this point. As the terms "representative" and "federal head" were not strictly scriptural, he refused to earnestly vindicate them⁶⁶ but did insist on the biblical teaching to which they pointed.⁶⁷

The extent to which humanity has incurred punishment from Adam's sin has been a source of controversy. Wesley scholars agree that original sin inflicts divine punishment upon humanity, that this punishment involves physical and spiritual death and that all infants go to heaven because of the universal benefits of the atonement. The point of contention arises over the question: can original sin condemn a person eternally? Certain scholars, like Chiles,⁶⁸ say Wesley has no consistent answer to this question. Logically, Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace should cancel any guilt imputed through original sin, yet Wesley insists that such guilt remains a reality. Chiles may be simplistic in relating prevenient grace to original sin in terms that are absolute rather than relative. A nuanced reading of these two doctrines and their interrelationship, like that given by Lindstrom,⁶⁹ might be more inclined

⁶⁴ *Works*, IX, pp. 243, 319, 242 f.

⁶⁵ *Works*, IX, p. 332.

⁶⁶ Writing to a correspondent who asserted there were "but three opinions" concerning the transmission of original sin, Wesley comments: "I care not if there were none. The fact I know, both by Scripture and by experience. I know it is transmitted; but how it is transmitted I neither know nor desire to know", see *Letters*, III, p. 107.

⁶⁷ Romans 5:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 expressly state "all men die in Adam" and that "by his offense, judgment is come upon all men to condemnation", cf. *The Explanatory Notes of the New Testament*, (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1758), pp. 538-39, 634.

⁶⁸ Robert Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism 1790-1935* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 120; see also David C. Shipley, "Methodist Arminianism in the Theology of John Fletcher" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale, 1942), pp. 176-98.

⁶⁹ Rather than setting prevenient grace against original sin, and charging Wesley with "inconsistency", Lindstrom argues that prevenient grace modifies the full severity of guilt imputed from Adam's sin. Lindstrom, p. 36.

to draw the following conclusion: prevenient grace *lessens* but does not *remove* the effects of guilt. Thus individuals are guilty of original sin and consequently receive divine retribution in this life, yet because of prevenient grace the guilt of original sin is incapable of condemning an individual eternally.

Wesley's conviction that there were two types of guilt--that which does and that which does not condemn eternally--is grounded in the distinction which was made between imputed and personal guilt. The guilt Adam felt on account of his sin differed from the guilt fallen humanity felt from his sin. Adam's guilt was personal (guilt in the fullest sense); humanity's guilt was imputed (guilt in a relative sense).⁷⁰ Consequently, with each level of guilt there was a corresponding level of punishment. Only personal guilt could incur the judgment of eternal death; the guilt of original sin could not. No one was damned but by their personal choice to be so.⁷¹ At this point Wesley veered from the Reformed position which stated that the sin of Adam was sufficient to damn his offspring eternally.

The other consequence of the Fall involved the corruption of human nature and was explained through use of the *medical* model. With the Fall, a certain depravity infected all of Adam's faculties--a depravity which came to define his very nature. Being of Adam's essence, this depravity was necessarily passed on to all his descendents such that "the loathsome leprosy of sin, which he (Adam's descendent) brought with him from his mother's womb,...overspreads his whole soul, and totally corrupts every power and faculty thereof".⁷² Having defined sin in these terms, Wesley referred to salvation--or more specifically,

⁷⁰ See *Works*, IX, pp. 243, 317, 326, 420.

⁷¹ *Works*, IX, p. 315, Wesley writes. 'But with regard to parents and their posterity, God assures us, children 'shall not die for the iniquity of their fathers.' No, not eternally. I believe none ever did, or ever will, die eternally, merely for the sin of our first father."

⁷² *Works* V, p. 253. See also *Works*, IX, pp. 275-82, 378, and 427 f. In this understanding of original sin, Wesley shows himself to be a disciple of Augustine. There is widespread agreement on this point. Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr., *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 124ff; Cell, pp. 25, 272; Cannon, p. 200 and Lundstrom, p. 12.

sanctification--as a means of healing the soul.⁷³

Since sin was depicted as sickness, some think Wesley understood sin to be a quantum, hypostatis or substance. It is true that on occasion sin was referred to as a "root of bitterness", "thing", or "old man" and that Wesley talked of "erasing", "extinguishing", "extracting" or "rooting it out".⁷⁴ But, as Peters points out, reading Wesley in this manner fails in two ways: the assumption is incongruous "with a teaching which calls for a sense of momentary reliance" in salvation. Further it does not give sufficient consideration to "the possibility of backsliding and restoration", which Wesley upheld.⁷⁵ Sin was not located in a person's physical nature; rather, it was an infection of the soul.

Thus Wesley's rigid doctrine of original sin provided the needed rationale for why good works could not be a condition of justification. Human beings were so depraved by nature that good works would have been an impossibility for the unjustified. Because of its depravity, human beings could be reconciled to God only through faith. Not a faith that resulted from human resources, but a faith that was, itself, a gift of grace.

III. The Scope of Salvation.

In the early phase, Wesley had a very narrow scope of salvation, it was limited to those with a faith experience similar to his own. All without this experience were thought to be objects of God's wrath and condemnation. This narrow view led Wesley to believe that prior to Aldersgate, he was at best an *almost Christian*. That he had been a zealous priest made little difference to the assessment. The earlier zeal may have produced many good works but it did not produce salvation. Wesley spoke of the futility of these works in the sermon entitled *The Almost Christian*.

I did go far many years, as many of this place can testify using diligence to

⁷³ See *Works*, IX, p. 194

⁷⁴ See John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 37

⁷⁵ Peters, pp. 39 ff

eschew all evil, and to have a conscience void of offense; redeeming the time, buying up every opportunity of doing all good to all men, constantly and carefully endeavouring after a steady seriousness of behaviour at all times and in all places. And God is my record, before whom I stand, doing this in sincerity; having a real design to serve God, a hearty desire to do his will in all things, to please him who called me to 'fight the good fight' and to 'lay hold of eternal life'. Yet my own conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost that all this time I was but 'almost a Christian'.⁷⁶

As an *almost Christian*, he believed that he had been yet under God's wrath.⁷⁷

Wesley's claim, that prior to Aldersgate he had not been a Christian, created a considerable stir amongst his friends, family and associates. Shortly after Aldersgate, he testified to the change God had wrought in his heart before a group gathered at the home of John Hutton in Westminster. On this occasion Wesley was "roughly attacked in a large company as an enthusiast, a seducer and a setter-forth of new doctrines".⁷⁸ Mrs. Hutton, wrote to Wesley's older brother, Samuel, and described the evening scene to him:

Mr. John got up and told us that five days before he was not a Christian, and this he was well assured of as that five days before he was not in that room, and the way for them all to be Christians was to believe, and own that they were not now Christians. Mr. Hutton was much surprised at this unexpected, injudicious speech; but only said, 'Have a care, Mr. Wesley, how you despise the benefits received by the two sacraments.'⁷⁹

Later in the narrative, Mrs. Hutton goes on to say how during supper, Wesley "made the same wild speech," to which she replied, "If you were not a Christian ever since I knew you, you were a great hypocrite, for you made us all believe you were one". She pleaded with Wesley's brother "to confine or convert Mr. John while he is with you. For after his behaviour on Sunday, May 28th, when you hear it, you will think him not a quite right man"⁸⁰

⁷⁶ *Works (O)*, I, pp 136-37.

⁷⁷ *Journal*, I, p 465.

⁷⁸ *Journal*, I, p 476

⁷⁹ *Journal*, I, p 479, n 2

⁸⁰ *Journal*, I, p 479, n 2

Thus the boundary lines of salvation were clearly marked. Those who possessed that unique experience of saving faith had passed from death to life. All others, regardless of sincerity or good intentions, were yet under God's wrath and destined for a Christless eternity.

IV Conclusion:

The opening chapter has sought to establish the Reformed orientation of Wesley's soteriology during the early phase of his thought. We have seen that humanity was understood to be radically alienated from its creator; an alienation that was believed to be the consequence of human rebellion and original sin. Defining human alienation in thoroughly Augustinian terms, Wesley placed himself directly in line with the early reformers Luther and Calvin. Wesley was also to endorse the method championed by the Reformers for alleviating the alienation of the human condition. He like they believed this alienation could never be bridged through human effort (good works). Rather human alienation was surmounted through an act of faith which appeased divine wrath. Such faith involved the conscious acceptance of Christ's atoning work. Those exercising such faith were justified before God, those without this faith were yet under God's wrath. The Reformed doctrine of justification by faith was recognized as the *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*

The Middle Phase: 1744-1767.

The Reformed orientation of Wesley's early soteriology is obvious. His gospel was patterned after the gospel preached by Luther and Calvin. This gospel was that God saved sinners through faith in Christ's sacrifice. Wesley maintained this conviction in the middle phase but felt the need to make certain modifications. These modifications were reactions to the perceived elements of antinomianism and bigotry in the "traditional" Reformed position. The antinomian element related to the claim that no good works were possible prior to justification. This conviction, it was feared, had been abused by the unconverted to defend their lawless behaviour. To counter act this tendency, works of repentance were given a greater emphasis: they were classified as a necessary condition of justification. The bigoted element related to the narrow confines that had been placed on the justified state. As the doctrine of prevenient was worked out in greater detail, it became evident that God's redemptive activity had universal implications: Grace was given to all and all could be saved. The redemptive potentiality present in prevenient grace pushed God's saving activity beyond the boundaries of those within the Reformed tradition. This realization sparked ecumenical endeavours

I. The Conditions of Acceptance:

The middle phase began with a shift in Wesley's understanding of repentance. To appreciate this shift, we must recognize that two modes of repentance were spoken of. One mode involved repentance as a state where persons felt void of virtue and riddled with vice.⁸¹ The effects of this mode were concerned primarily with ones self-understanding and thus were largely cognitive. The other mode referred to repentance as works.⁸² Such works involved the responsible use of all available means of grace which included prayer, Bible reading and

⁸¹ *Works*, V, p. 59. See also *Works*, V, p. 253.

⁸² *Works*, VIII, p. 47.

church attendance.⁸³ These modes were differentiated by defining one as repentance proper (the state) and the other as the fruit of repentance (the works).

In the early phase, repentance as a state was emphasized almost to the exclusion of repentance as a work. The former mode was inculcated in persons through the repeated assertion that human nature was depraved and without virtue. This was stated in a manner that tended to make works of repentance either futile or dangerous. Futile because such works would necessarily be void of virtue--these works would incur God's wrath and not his mercy. Dangerous because they, and not Christ, might be trusted as the means of salvation. Salvation by works reflected the heart's natural bent.

Wesley's crusade against good works (repentant or otherwise) took on a severity that was virtually without precedent. Sinners were given no means of actualizing their salvation. All works were vain, even the work of faith.⁸⁴ God alone could save the sinner.

Persons, hearing this message, were driven to despair. All tokens of hope were purposely withheld from them. Rather than offer comfort, Wesley sought to drive these persons into a state of "madness". In *A Farther Appeal*, Wesley candidly admitted that "it is my endeavour to drive all I can into what you may term another species of 'madness',... which I term 'repentance' or 'conviction'" as a preparatory gift of faith.⁸⁵ Given the severity of Wesley's Gospel,⁸⁶ mass hysteria often attended his early preaching engagements. On June 12, 1742, Wesley wrote in his journal of having preached on "the righteousness of faith" from his father's tombstone at Epworth: "While I was speaking several dropped down as dead, and among the rest such a cry was heard of sinners groaning for the righteousness of faith as

⁸³ *Works*, VIII, p. 47.

⁸⁴ See *Works (O)*, IX, p. 52; cf. with Cell's comment, Cell, p. 247.

⁸⁵ *Works*, XI, pp. 196-99

⁸⁶ Noting the severe element in Wesley's preaching, Melville Horne, Fletcher's curate at Madeley, remarked that while Charles Wesley "comforted them (i.e. the penitent) by insinuating that they were in a salvable state. To the best of my knowledge, Mr John Wesley did not admit this distinction into his pulpit." Quoted by Outler in "An Introductory Comment", *Works (O)*, I, p. 200

almost drowned my voice." Similar results were seen during Wesley's preaching at Wapping where there was an even greater outburst of hysteria.⁸⁷ These unusual occurrences persisted until 1744. As Outler noted, "Hysterical phenomena, as side-effects of his preaching, receive an occasional mention in the *Journal* from 1739 through 1744. They seem to have tapered off thereafter."⁸⁸

The decrease in "hysterical phenomena" may have been the result of Wesley's decision to give works of repentance a greater emphasis in his preaching. At the Conference of 1744, faith remained the condition of justification but the following amendments were included: "repentance should precede justifying faith and it should produce a conviction of sin and the following works: obeying God as far as we can, forgiving our brother, leaving off from evil, doing good, and using his ordinances, according to the power we have received."⁸⁹ While suggesting such acts were both important and necessary, Wesley continued to believe the ultimate condition of justification was faith.

Later that same year, Wesley again attempted to clarify the relation between repentance and justification.⁹⁰ While repentance was necessary, its necessity was of a different degree than that of faith. Repentance did not have "so direct, immediate a relation to justification as faith". Faith was "absolutely" necessary, whereas repentance was *only* "remotely" necessary (i.e. "necessary to the increase or continuance of faith"). Wesley also allowed that repentance--or at least its fruits--may in certain instances be omitted where there was neither time nor opportunity. During these rare instances God shortened his work causing faith to precede the fruits of repentance.⁹¹ At the next conference, similar sentiments were

⁸⁷ See *Journal*, II, p. 221.

⁸⁸ *Works (O)*, I, p. 200.

⁸⁹ *Works*, VIII, p. 275 f.

⁹⁰ *Works*, VIII, p. 56 f.

⁹¹ *Works*, VIII, p. 281 f.

expressed, but a greater emphasis was given to works of repentance.⁹²

This increased emphasis on works of repentance was concurrent with Wesley's increased willingness to treat these works as a means of justification. At the Conference of 1746, the question was asked: "But can it be conceived that God has any regard to the *sincerity* of an unbeliever?" Wesley answered, "Yes; so much that if he persevere therein, God will infallibly give him faith."⁹³ Sincerity, which is an work of repentance, became a means that would necessarily lead the penitent into a justified state. This was a modification of Wesley's earlier contention that the penitent could do nothing to actualize their salvation.

While Reformed in his understanding of faith, Wesley parted with the Reformers in his understanding of repentance. As Colin Williams observed, "Wesley shows a distinct variation from the main Reformers, Luther and Calvin", in viewing the condition of repentance as distinct from the condition of justifying faith.⁹⁴ The Reformers included in one act of justifying faith two distinct movements: repentance from sins and trust in Christ. Wesley understood justifying faith solely as trust in Christ.

There were at least two reasons why Wesley choose to give works of repentance a greater emphasis. The first involved his re-evaluation of the Reformed view of total depravity. He began to fear that talk of a person's inability to do good works prior to justification would encourage antinomianism.⁹⁵ The second reason involved certain

⁹² *Works*, VIII, p. 281 f. Here Wesley spoke more highly of good works than he had in the past: "Q.7. Have we duly considered the case of Corneilus? Was he not in the favour of God, when his 'prayers and alms came up for a memorial before God?' that is, before he believed in Christ? A. It does seem that he was, in some degree. But we speak not of those who have not heard the gospel. Q.8. But were those works of his 'splendid sins'? A. No; nor were they done without the grace of Christ. Q.9. How then can we maintain, that all works done before a sense of the pardoning love of God are sin, and as such, an abomination to Him? A. The works of him who has heard the gospel, and does not believe, are not done as God hath 'willed and commanded them to be done'. And yet we know not how to say that they are an abomination to the Lord in him who feareth God, and, from that principle does the best he can." *Works*, VIII, p. 283.

⁹³ *Works*, VIII, p. 288.

⁹⁴ Colin Wilbur Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 59.

inconsistencies that arose from his monergistic view of justifying faith. Cell noted that, "The Wesleyan doctrine of saving faith...is a complete renewal of the Luther-Calvin thesis that in the thought of salvation God is everything, man is nothing."⁹⁶ Here a problem arose. If faith was all of grace and grace was given to all, then all should have faith. This obviously was not the case. Therefore, either God's grace was not given to all or God's grace was not the sole factor in acquiring justifying faith. Wesley flatly rejected the former possibility as it ran contrary to his conviction concerning universal salvation. Thus with no alternative, he was slowly forced to modify his rigid monergism: persons were given an active role in actualizing their justification. Repentance became a means of entering into the justified state. With this concession, there was a move from a monergistic to a synergistic understanding of grace.

Wesley also shifted his views on how assurance was related to justifying faith. Earlier in his career, he taught that the assurance of pardon was an essential component of justifying faith. At the 1744 Conference, the question is asked "What is faith?" Wesley responded,

Faith in general is a divine, supernatural...(elenchos) of things not seen; that is, of past, future, or spiritual things: It is a spiritual sight of God and the things of God. First. A sinner is convinced by the Holy Ghost, 'Christ loved me, and gave himself for me'. This is that faith by which he is justified, or pardoned, the moment he receives it. Immediately the same Spirit bears witness, 'Thou art pardoned; thou hast redemption in his blood'. And this is saving faith, whereby the love of God is shed abroad in his heart.⁹⁷

The distinction is made between justifying faith (a recognition that "Christ died for me, and gave himself for me") and assurance (a conviction that "God has forgiven my sins"). In theory, the two followed one another in the order of salvation. In practice, however, the two were inseparable components of one act whereby a person entered the justified state.

A letter addressed to Charles, dated July 31, 1747, marked a significant shift in Wesley's understanding of assurance. No longer did he believe assurance was a necessary condition of

⁹⁵ Works, VIII, p. 278.

⁹⁶ Cell, p. 271.

⁹⁷ Works, VIII, p. 276.

justification. The relevant part of the letter read as follows.

I cannot allow that justifying faith is...such an explicit assurance of pardon, that every one who has it not, is under the wrath and the curse of God. But this is a supposition contrary to Scripture as well as to experience...Again the assertion that justifying faith is a sense of pardon is contrary to reason, it is flatly *absurd*. For how can a sense of *having received pardon* be the condition of our receiving it?⁹⁸

After this date, assurance was no longer viewed as a necessary condition of acceptance. Many years later (1768), Wesley wrote to Dr. Rutherford and made reference to this shift in his understanding of assurance:

I believe a consciousness of being in the favour of God (which I do not term plerophory or full assurance, since it is frequently weakened, nay perhaps interrupted, by returns of doubt or fear) is the common privilege of Christians fearing God and working righteousness.

Yet I do not affirm there are no exemptions to this general rule. Possibly some may be in the favour of God and yet go mourning all the day long. But I believe this is usually owing either to disorder of body or ignorance of the gospel promises.

Therefore *I have not for many years* thought a consciousness of pardon to be essential to justifying faith.⁹⁹

In the following years there was little change in his position. Late in his career (1781), Wesley acknowledged that assurance was neither the essence nor a suitable substitute for justifying faith.¹⁰⁰

II. The State of Humanity:

Another shift that took place in the middle phase involved Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. Modern Methodists have distinguished two types of prevenient grace, the one being a universal human endowment given to all persons and the other being the passing power of God.¹⁰¹ Dorr says, "The best interpretation of Wesley's references to prevenient

⁹⁸ *Letters*, II, pp. 107-8; cf. IV, p. 144

⁹⁹ *Letters*, V, pp. 358-359. Italics mine.

¹⁰⁰ *Letters*, VII, p. 61.

¹⁰¹ Cf. G. C. Henry, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Free Will", in *Lond. Quart. and Holb. Rev.*, 185 (1960): 203.

grace seems to involve distinguishing between the passing helps from God to which he most frequently refers, and the abiding grace which operates all the time, restoring to fallen man an ability which his corrupt nature has lost."¹⁰² Grace understood as a "passing" help was reckoned as the property of the Spirit; grace as an "abiding" quality was reckoned as the property of human beings.

Throughout the entirety of his ministry, Wesley understood prevenient grace to include the passing helps of the Spirit. The Spirit was responsible for stirring the conscience and provoking acts of contrition.¹⁰³ In bringing about conviction, the Holy Spirit worked without means, or through whatever means which pleased Him.¹⁰⁴ At times He brought conviction by an awakening sermon, by some awful providence, by an application of the Word, or by a confrontation with the Law.¹⁰⁵ At other times the Spirit by-passed outward means and communicated directly to the human heart.¹⁰⁶

The other form of prevenient grace (grace as an "abiding" quality) was a latter development in Wesley's thought. As Lindstrom notes, "It (prevenient grace) is a doctrine that appears only in passing and seldom in the years immediately after 1738....With time, however, prevenient grace acquires increasing importance."¹⁰⁷ Prior to 1744, all unredeemed persons were believed to be void of grace and therefore unable to actualize their salvation.

¹⁰² Donal Dorr, "Total Corruption and the Wesleyan Tradition; Prevenient Grace", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 31 (1964): 312.

¹⁰³ *Works*, VI, p. 509.

¹⁰⁴ *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, ed. Edward H. Sudgen, 2 vols. (Nashville Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1921), (hereafter referred to as *Sermons*), II, p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ *Sermons*, I, p. 185.

¹⁰⁶ *Works*, VI, p. 512.

¹⁰⁷ Lindstrom, p. 45. Lindstrom's statement is potentially misleading in that he fails to distinguish between the passing and the abiding forms of prevenient grace. It is the latter form that "acquires increasing importance" in Wesley's soteriology. Prevenient grace as the work of the Spirit was an element dominant even in those "years immediately after 1738."

So intense was Wesley's concern with the doctrines of total corruption and instantaneous salvation by faith, that as Dorr notes, "he found little room in his system for a doctrine that might suggest a compromise between these two extremes"--i.e. a doctrine like prevenient grace.¹⁰⁸

Wesley's decision to develop prevenient grace as an abiding quality comecided with his decision to make repentance a condition of justification. These two shifts were intimately connected. When repentance was made a condition of justification, the following problem arose: how can a person "dead in sin" engage in works that were pleasing to God? If human beings were *totally* depraved then no pleasing works were possible. Wesley overcame this dilemma with the concept of abiding grace. This form of prevenient grace ensured that all persons *at all times* had the ability of doing works that pleased God. No longer could an antinomian excuse his unlawful behaviour on the grounds that human depravity made good works prior to justification an impossibility.

On most occasions, Wesley defined abiding grace in terms of the conscience. In doing so, he forged a theological construct that was unique to his thought.¹⁰⁹ Addressing a perceived misconception of the conscience, Wesley said, "This faculty seems to be what is meant by those who speak of 'natural conscience'; an expression frequently found in some of our best authors, but yet is not strictly just."¹¹⁰ Wesley granted that conscience might be considered natural in one sense "because it is found in all men", but argued that it was better understood as a "supernatural gift of God"¹¹¹ Sometimes the conscience was seen as the work of Christ: "it (conscience) is not nature but the *Son of God* that is *the true light, which*

¹⁰⁸ Dorr, p. 308.

¹⁰⁹ Wesley's doctrine of the conscience, Outler notes, is "not strikingly different from the 'numerous treatises' of Richard Baxter, Jeremy Taylor, Dean Swift, the Danish bishop J. R. Brochmand, Robert South, *et al*, save on the particular point of prevenience and, therefore supernatural." *Works(O)*, III, p. 480.

¹¹⁰ *Works (O)*, III, p. 480.

¹¹¹ *Works (O)*, III, p. 482

enlighteneth every man which cometh into the world (cf. John 1:19)"; and sometimes the work of the Spirit: "His Spirit... giveth thee an inward check, who causeth thee to feel uneasy, when thou walkest in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given thee."¹¹² In both cases the grace manifest rested on the basis of Christ's atoning work.¹¹³

Wesley suggested that the conscience had three functions: witnessing, judging and executing. In witnessing it testified, "what we have done, in thought or word or action." The conscience has "knowledge of words and actions and their corresponding moral qualities--their goodness and their badness. This self-knowledge is actualized through the "assistance of the assistance of the Spirit of God". Without such assistance, "Self-love, and indeed every other irregular passion, would disguise and wholly conceal him from himself." In terms of judging, the conscience was capable of "passing sentence on what we have done, that it is good or evil". In terms of executing, the conscience enforced "the sentence, by occasioning a degree of complacency in him that does well, and a degree of uneasiness in him that does evil."¹¹⁴

Abiding grace was also thought to restore a measure of freedom to the human will.

Commenting on this Wesley said,

Although I have not an absolute power over my mind, because of the corruption of my own nature; yet through the grace of God assisting me, I have power to choose and do good as well as evil. I am free to choose whom I will serve...¹¹⁵

And again,

Natural free will, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand: I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every

¹¹² *Works (O)*, III, p. 482.

¹¹³ *Works*, VIII, p. 277 f. In passing, it should be noted, that the late Wesley seemed almost indifferent as to the supernatural or natural origins of the conscience. Wesley said, "Certainly, *whether this (the conscience) is natural or super added by the grace of God*, it is found in some small degree, in every child of man." *Works (O)*, III, p. 482.

¹¹⁴ *Works (O)*, III, p. 481-85.

¹¹⁵ *Works*, VII, pp 228-29.

man.¹¹⁶

The relationship between abiding and passing grace has been a source of some controversy. Interpreters who emphasize the Reformed elements in Wesley argue that abiding grace gave individuals the power to resist the advances of the Spirit.¹¹⁷ Beyond this, abiding grace resided with individuals as unrealized, redemptive potentiality. Such potential was actualized only when stimulated by the passing graces of the Spirit. This monergistic reading of Wesley would do justice to his early phase but not to later developments in his thought. With later developments, the Spirit's assisting work was not negated but was understood as an assumed constant. Thus the possibility of abiding grace existing as unrealized redemptive potentiality was no longer conceivable. This shift was to undergird the synergistic orientation of Wesley's middle phase of thought.

In granting that prevenient grace was the property of fallen human beings, Wesley threatened his earlier understanding of human depravity. These two concepts, total depravity and prevenient grace, remained in dialectical (we are tempted to say "unresolved") tension throughout the middle phase. Wesley continued to preach that human beings in themselves could not come to God because they were totally depraved. He also insisted, however, that all persons, being recipients of prevenient grace, possessed a redemptive potential that must be exercised. Most times he appeared blissfully unaware of the incompatibility of the two doctrines. The tension between the concepts of total depravity and prevenient grace remained unresolved until, in the late phase of his thought, he modified his view on human depravity. This modification will be examined in the next chapter.

III. The Scope of Salvation.

As noted previously, Wesley initially had a narrow view of salvation. It was restricted to

¹¹⁶ *Works*, X, pp. 229-30; cf. *Notes*, pp. 329-330.

¹¹⁷ A clear example of this perspective is found in J. Weldon Smith's article, "Some Notes on Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace" *Religion in Life*, 34, (1964) 68-80.

those endorsing a Reformed understanding of justification by faith. This view was later seen as bigoted; God's redemptive activity would not be limited to one religious tradition (i.e. the Reformed). To assume such a limitation would deny the existence of prevenient grace: If grace was given to all, then all could be saved. Thus in gaining a deeper appreciation for the doctrine of prevenient grace, he also developed a deeper appreciation for God's work in diverse religious traditions. Such an appreciation made him sensitive to the ecumenical concerns of his day.

In adding an ecumenical dimension to his thought, Wesley merged his thinking with that of a wider movement in Europe. Many in Europe were weary of the strife over religious opinions believing that these opinions were largely responsible for the endless spilling of blood on their soil. Longing for a cease-fire, many religious minds came to adopt the celebrated formula of toleration: *In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas*.¹¹⁸ According to Norman Sykes, the prevailing *Zeitgeist* that breezed through the late seventeenth century stirred a concern for ecclesiastical reunion. This resulted in "the enunciation of certain fundamentals of belief, upon which agreement was already present and from which further advances might be made."¹¹⁹ The English philosophers of that period--particularly Locke through his writings on tolerance--were to raise the nation's consciousness; the liberty of tender consciences became a central plank in the nation's reform program.¹²⁰

Wesley supported this prevailing *Zeitgeist* by opposing those who caused unnecessary divisions through their rigid adherence to opinions. Throughout his middle and late phase, he argued the basis of fellowship among the redeemed was better served if *orthopraxis* (right

¹¹⁸ Attributed to the Lutheran theologian Petrus Meiderlinus.

¹¹⁹ N. Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker: aspects of English Church History 1600-1768* (Cambridge: University Press, 1959), p. 114.

¹²⁰ Taking in a broader sweep of history, Roland Bainton traces the tradition of trying to "segregate the fundamentals from the non-essentials in the interest of liberty, back to the pre-Reformation era and forward into the eighteenth century. Among the champions of tolerance were listed the likes of Wessel Gansfort, Erasmus, Acontius, Castellio, Meiderlinus and as already mentioned John Locke. R. H. Bainton, *Studies of the Reformation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 220

actions)¹²¹ rather than *orthodoxy* (right opinions)¹²² was the condition for unity. He made *orthopraxis* the basis of fellowship among his followers. Writing in 1745, Wesley commented,

It is a poor excuse to say, 'O, but the people are brought into several erroneous opinions!' It matters not a straw, whether they are or no, (I speak of such opinions as do not touch the foundation); it is scarce worth while to spend ten words about it. Whether they embrace this religious opinion or that, it is no concern to me, than whether they embrace this or that system of astronomy. Are they brought to holy tempers and holy lives? ..Are they brought to the love of God and the love of their neighbours.¹²³

Wesley made it clear that Methodists took opinions very lightly. In *The Character of a Methodist* (1742), Wesley wrote,

The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His accenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point.¹²⁴

It is also clear from Wesley's other writings that Methodist admission requirements were not narrowly confessional:

'Is a man a believer in Jesus Christ and is his life suitable to his profession?' are not only the *man*, but the *sole* inquiries I make in order to his admission to our Society. If he is a Dissenter, he may be a Dissenter still; but if he is a Churchman I advise him to continue so. .¹²⁵

True religion was defined in terms of ethics not in terms of dogma. "I am sick," said

¹²¹ *Orthopraxis*, for the purpose of this thesis, is a term used to designate a theological orientation where true religion is defined in terms of practice rather than opinion.

¹²² *Orthodoxy*, while normally implying more than good opinions, will be a term used to define a theological orientation which makes right beliefs the standard of true religion.

¹²³ *Works*, VIII, pp. 245-46. Cf. *Works*, VIII, pp. 242-43, for his strictures on Quakers, Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists for exaggerating the importance of "opinions and externals".

¹²⁴ *Works*, VIII, p. 340. In that same work, he stated a principle that would be repeated with unflinching regularity throughout the revival: "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think." "We think and let think" was a catch phrase that framed most of Wesley's ecumenical endeavours. *Works*, VIII, p. 340.

¹²⁵ *Letters* IV, p. 297.

Wesley, "of opinions: I am weary to bear them. My soul loathes this frothy food. Give me solid and substantial religion, give me an humble, gentle lover of God and man;...Let my soul be with these Christians, wheresoever they are, and whatsoever opinion they are of."¹²⁶

The other important reason why opinions were not unduly emphasized was Wesley's distaste of bigotry in all its forms. Wesley took pride in the belief that his followers had kept themselves from this particular vice. Writing to and in defense of "Men of Reason and Religion", he said of the Methodists:

It may be further observed, the religion of those we now speak of is entirely clear from bigotry.. They are in no wise bigoted to opinions. They do indeed hold right opinions; but they are peculiarly cautious not to rest the weight of Christianity there. They have no such overgrown fondness for any opinions, as to think these alone will make them Christians, or to confine their affection and esteem to those who agree with them therein.¹²⁷

Wesley feared, that while the Methodists had avoided the evils of bigotry, others like the Calvinists had not been as circumspect. On more than one occasion, Wesley warned his Calvinist opponents not to set their hope of salvation merely in their opinions. "As to you," warned Wesley, "who believe yourselves the elect of God, what is your happiness? I hope, not in a notion, a speculative belief, a bare opinion of any kind; but a feeling possession of God in your heart, wrought by the Holy Ghost."¹²⁸ Wesley feared that fierce partisanship had been nurtured in the Calvinist camp through enshrining a "particular set of phrases". The phrase "the imputed righteousness of Christ" was thought to be particularly destructive in creating divisions. Thus the Calvinist, James Hervey, was warned not to, "...dispute for that *particular phrase* 'the imputed righteousness of Christ.' It is not scriptural; it is not necessary ..But it has done immense hurt."¹²⁹ The "immense hurt" was its promotion of

¹²⁶ Works, VIII, p. 224.

¹²⁷ Quoted by John Newton in "The Ecumenical Wesley", *The Ecumenical Review* 24 (1972) 167

¹²⁸ Works, VII, p. 377

¹²⁹ *Letters*, Works, VII, p. 377.

antinomianism, divisions, and bigotry.

It was not only the Calvinists that were charged with bigotry; some of the greatest churchmen were held up for criticism--Augustine, Luther and Calvin among them. Augustine was censored for his "pride, passion, bitterness, (and) censoriousness".¹³⁰ Luther, while praised for his reforming labours, was criticized for "his rough intractable spirit and bitter zeal for opinions, so greatly obstructive of the work of God."¹³¹ Both Luther and Calvin were denounced for the "vehement tenaciousness of their own opinions; their bitterness toward all who differed from them; (and) their impatience of contradiction."¹³²

Wesley's aversion to bigotry may have accounted for his willingness to champion the cause of those whom history has classified as heretics and deviants. Among those he favoured were the following: Montanus,¹³³ Pelagius,¹³⁴ Huss,¹³⁵ Servetus,¹³⁶ Joan Bocher,¹³⁷ and Castellio.¹³⁸

Wesley's seeming disregard for opinions might be misleading. It might be thought that he endorsed a position of doctrinal indifferentism. This seeming indifference can be seen in

¹³⁰ *Works*, VI, p. 328; cf. *Works* VIII, pp. 206-7.

¹³¹ *Journal*, III, p. 409.

¹³² *Works* VIII, p. 242.

¹³³ *Works*, XI, p. 485. Montanus is described as "one of the best men then on the earth", and as innocent of any "strange and monstrous opinions". Cf. *Journal*, III, p. 490, where the Montanists were described as "real, scriptural Christians", through mocked by "dry, formal, orthodox men". See also *Works*, X, pp. 47, 50.

¹³⁴ *Works*, XII, p. 240; cf. *Works*, VI, p. 328 where Pelagius was reckoned by Wesley to have been "a wise and holy man".

¹³⁵ *Works*, X, pp. 166-73.

¹³⁶ The charge that Servetus was an Antitrinitarian was dismissed by Wesley: "Calvin was a wise and pious man: But I cannot but advise those who love his memory to let Servetus alone." *Works*, X, pp. 340-51. "Calvin...confesses that he procured the burning to death of Michael Servetus, purely for differing from him in opinion in matters of religion" *Works*, X, p. 266 Cf. *Journal*, II, p. 474

¹³⁷ Bocher was convicted on the charge that she denied the humanity of Christ and was thus burned at the stake during the reign of Edward VI. Crammer, Ridley and Latimer, according to Wesley, were to be partially held responsible for this act of persecution

the work: "A Plain Account of the People called Methodists' (1748) where Wesley contends: "Orthodoxy, or right opinions, is, at best, but a slender part of religion, *if it can be allowed to be any part of it at all.*"¹³⁹

While Wesley may have on occasion made statements that seemed to imply doctrinal indifferentism, he would on other occasions make clear his views on the fundamentals of the faith. His *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, according to Outler, contained a "summary of the doctrines common to all Christians—a sort of ready *regula fidei*. Nothing quite like this appears anywhere else in his writings."¹⁴⁰ The summary bore striking similarity to the Apostolic Creed. Another doctrinal summary is given in the Preface to his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1756). There students of Wesley are given the following advice: "Have a constant eye to the analogy of faith, the connection and harmony there is between those grand, fundamental doctrines, original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, inward and outward holiness."¹⁴¹

That Wesley repudiated all doctrinal indifferentism can be seen in the following quote:

We may learn, first, that a catholic spirit is not *speculative* latitudinarianism. It is not an indifference to *all* opinions. This is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven . . . an irreconcilable enemy, not a friend, to true catholicism. A man of a true, catholic spirit has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine. It is true he is always ready to hear and weigh whatsoever can be offered against his principles. But as this does not show any wavering in his own mind, so neither does it occasion any.¹⁴²

Works, VIII, p. 207 f.

¹³⁸ Sebastian Castello (1515-63), was an early champion of religious tolerance. He felt that neither the trinity nor Calvin's doctrine of predestination could be reckoned as belonging to the fundamentals of the faith. Wesley urged his preachers to read Castello's works (Outler, *John Wesley*, p. 146).

¹³⁹ *Works* VIII, p. 249. Italics mine.

¹⁴⁰ Outler, *John Wesley*, p. 351.

¹⁴¹ *Works*, XVI, p. 253, cf. IX, p. 193.

¹⁴² Outler, *John Wesley*, p. 102

Newton rightly notes that, "The disavowal could hardly be more complete".¹⁴³ Wesley did remain concerned about right doctrine through out the entirety of his career. He had convictions, but would not use them to define the boundary lines of redemption.

IV. Conclusion:

The shifts of the middle phase reflect a move away from the Reformed, soteriological position. The basic tenet of this position continued to be embraced. God saved sinners through faith in Christ's sacrifice. But modifications were introduced. These modifications were reactions to perceived, undesirable elements in the traditional, Reformed position: elements like antinomianism. The antinomian element was thought to be present in the claim that good works, prior to justification, were without value. Attempting to modify this claim, Wesley made works of repentance a condition of justification.

In treating works of repentance as he did, Wesley strained to the limit the concept of total depravity. If persons were totally depraved, how could they produce works with a positive redemptive quality: works that could assist in actualizing one's salvation? This dilemma was overcome through a more, fully developed concept of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace became the common property of fallen human beings (such grace had been the exclusive property of the Spirit). Being recipients of grace, persons, in what ever state, could perform works pleasing to God (i.e. works of repentance).

Wesley also shifted away from was the perceived bigotry in the Reformed position. This perceived bigotry involved the claim that God's redemptive activity could be limited to those within the Reformed tradition. While formerly believing this, he came to believe that redemption was of universal proportions: all persons have been given a measure of prevenient grace. This broader view of redemption provided the means whereby an ecumenical dimension was added to his thought.

¹⁴³ Newton, "The Ecumenical Wesley", p. 171

The Late Phase: 1767-1791.

Wesley, in the middle phase, became increasingly dissatisfied with his Reformed position on soteriology. Its perceived flaws became increasingly evident. Attempts were made to address these flaws: his soteriology was modified accordingly. Wesley, however, remained dissatisfied. This led to an important shift in his late phase of thought; a shift that seems to have been largely neglected by Wesley scholars.¹⁴⁴ The Reformed position, as we shall see, was given up. In its place, he re-appropriated the Arminian Anglicanism of his youth—in some ways Wesley's soteriology had come full circle.

I. The Condition of Acceptance:

Prior to the late phase, the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith was regarded as the *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*. Admittance into the redeemed state depended on one ascribing to this doctrine. There was a shift in the later years away from this position: justification by faith became an unessential—its endorsement being no longer necessary for salvation. This *startling* transition was first recorded in a journal entry dated December 1, 1767. Sitting alone in his carriage, Wesley concluded to himself:

That a man may be saved *who cannot express himself properly* concerning Imputed Righteousness. Therefore, to do this is not necessary to salvation.

That a man may be saved *who has no clear conceptions* of it. (Yea, that never have heard the phrase.) Therefore, clear conceptions of it 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* (the article by which a church stands or falls)?¹⁴⁵

The above journal entry stood as a sign post marking an important change in Wesley's thought. The Calvinist Richard Hill noticed this change and charged Wesley with theological

¹⁴⁴ Wesley's late phase has generally been neglected by Wesley scholars. Recognizing this neglect, Outler says, that the "late" Wesley deserves so much more study than it ever had". (Outler in the introduction to *Works (O)*, I, p 66.) Its obscurity is surprising when one considers that more than half of all his published sermons came from this phase.

¹⁴⁵ *Journal*, V, pp. 243 f. Italics mine

inconsistency. While denying the charge of inconsistency, Wesley conceded that his soteriological position had been modified. He no longer held that a clear belief in the Reformed doctrine of justification was necessary for redemption. Rather he believed that, "A man may be saved, who is not *clear* in judgment concerning it (justification by faith)".¹⁴⁶ As Alexander Knox¹⁴⁷ has commented,

Though he (Wesley) himself had uniformly rejected the peculiarities of Calvin, he for a time was imbued with the doctrines of Luther, on those points in which especially the German and Swiss reformers were agreed: but Mr. Wesley came at length to see that the view of *justification* maintained by the one, was as *unessential* as that of predestination maintained by the other, was inadmissible.¹⁴⁸

The Reformed doctrine of Justification by faith became an *unessential* because Wesley shifted his view on the conditions whereby one entered the justified state. Initially, the condition of justification had been faith defined in terms of Christ's atoning sacrifice. This restricted the justified state to those with a conscious knowledge of Christ's work. Later, this view was modified: possibly because it limited God's redemptive activity. Wesley became convinced that "a pious churchman who has no clear conceptions of justification by faith may be saved." If that was so, He felt it "high time...to return to the plain word, 'He that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him'"¹⁴⁹ The later condition of justification was a faith defined in terms of repentance. This later understanding of saving faith was present in the sermon: "On Faith". The question was asked, "What is the faith which is properly saving?" The response was informative. No mention was made of trusting in the sacrificial work of Christ. Rather saving faith was described as "such a divine conviction of God and of the things of God as even in its infant state enables every one that

¹⁴⁶ *Works*, X, p. 388.

¹⁴⁷ Outler said of Knox that he gave "...one of the most probing of all theological appraisals of Wesley by any of his contemporaries, and probably one of the most unjustly neglected". *Works (O)*, I, p. 62, fn. 28.

¹⁴⁸ Knox in Robert Southey's *The Life of Wesley and Rise and Progress of Methodism*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1858), p. 339

¹⁴⁹ *Journal*, V, pp. 243 f

possesses it to *fear God and work righteously*".¹⁵⁰ Again saving faith was defined in terms of repentance.

Having made repentance the condition of justification, Wesley drastically modified his earlier conviction that God saves sinners. He came to believe that God saved those who feared Him and worked righteousness. To think that God saved persons while they were yet sinners was a mistake. And what of the saint who claimed this kind of testimony? Wesley asked how we could be "sure that the person in question never did fear God and work righteousness? His own thinking so is no proof. For we know how all that are convinced of sin undervalue themselves in every respect."¹⁵¹ God saved the saint and not the sinner. This belief, while foreign to a Reformed soteriology, was quite compatible within the Arminian Anglicanism of his youth.

This is not to say he completely abandoned the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith—he did not. Throughout the late phase, Wesley insisted that his views on justification remained unchanged. In this regard, Wesley said,

Such has been my judgment for these threescore years, without any material alteration. Only about fifty years ago I had a clearer view than before of justification by faith: and from that very hour I never varied, no not an hair's breath.¹⁵²

To say his view varied "not an hair's breath" may be overstating the case. On occasion Wesley, himself, conceded there were modifications in his position; modifications that were necessary because of earlier, flawed, soteriological assumptions. Drawing attention to one such flaw, Wesley wrote,

Indeed nearly fifty years ago, when the preachers commonly called Methodists began to preach that grand scriptural doctrine, salvation by faith...They did not clearly understand that even one 'who feared God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him'. In consequence of this they were apt to make sad the hearts

¹⁵⁰ *Works (O)*, III, p. 497

¹⁵¹ *Works*, VIII, pp. 337-38

¹⁵² *Works (O)*, IV, pp. 147-48

of those whom God had not made sad.¹⁵³

While modifying the doctrine of justification by faith, Wesley never purged it entirely from his thought. He never lost the conviction that faith in Christ's atoning work had immense spiritual value. Its value, however, lay not in rescuing a person from divine wrath--"fearing God and working righteousness" accomplished this. Rather, faith in the atonement provided the means whereby one could climb to a higher, spiritual plateau. Put in Wesleyan language it meant a person who was a *servant of God* would rise to become a *son of God*.¹⁵⁴

Having modified the conditions of divine acceptance, Wesley felt compelled to revise his earlier self-understanding--particularly in regard to his spiritual state during those years prior to Aldersgate. Thus when a new edition of his works was published in 1771, significant additions were made to the Savannah Journal. In the introduction to the 1771 edition, Wesley explained the need for that particular publication. He first mentioned the need to remove typographical and grammatical errors which might have previously confused the meaning of the text. Then he included a paragraph, which Lee says, "should long ago have given students a key to *one of the most important changes* in his thought."¹⁵⁵ The paragraph reads as follows:

In revising what I wrote on so many various subjects and occasions, and for so long a course of years, I found cause for not only rational or verbal corrections, but frequently for *correcting the sense* also....Accordingly I have altered many words or sentences; nay others I have omitted, and in various parts I added more or less as I judged the subject required.¹⁵⁶

The new alterations were particularly striking in the Savannah Journal. These

¹⁵³ *Works (O)*, III, p. 497.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. *Works (O)*, III, p. 497.

¹⁵⁵ Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), pp. 96-97. Italics mine.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted by Lee, pp. 96-97.

alterations show Wesley *correcting the sense* of his self-understanding in the years prior to Aldersgate. The Journal, as it was originally penned, revealed Wesley in a state of spiritual despondency; convinced that despite his zeal and abundant “good works” he was yet under the wrath of God and thus severed from his grace. This evaluation, seemed to Wesley in his more mature years, to be excessively harsh—even erroneous. Thus he revised the Journal, including strategic additions so as to blunt and modify the pessimistic conclusions recorded in the document. The following examples will illustrate the nature of these revisions:

(1) Wesley had initially written in his Journal that all his works had to that point been vain and futile. Wesley believed that even though he had “delivered his body to be devoured by the deep, parched with heat, consumed by toil and weariness, or whatever God should please to bring, all such works were no more than dung and dross.” An apologetic footnote is later appended: “I had even then the faith of a *servant*, though not of a *son*.”¹⁵⁷

(2) In the first edition of the Journal, Wesley, reflecting on the lessons learned during the Georgia experiment, wrote: “But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why that which I least of all suspected, that I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.” In the later edition, this statement is amended with the gloss, “I am not sure.”¹⁵⁸

(3) In one of the Journal entries, immediately prior to Aldersgate, Wesley writes, “Oh, let no one deceive us by vain words, as if we had already attained this faith (i.e. saving faith)!”; to which was later added—“That is, the proper *Christian* faith.”¹⁵⁹

(4) One of the most forceful and pessimistic entries in the Journal read:

This then, I have learned in the ends of the earth,—that I ‘am fallen short of the glory of God’: that my whole heart is ‘altogether corrupt and abominable; and consequently my whole life (seeing it cannot be that an ‘evil tree’ should ‘bring forth good fruit’): that, ‘alienated’ as I am from the life of God, I am ‘a child of wrath’, an heir of hell.

¹⁵⁷ *Journal*, I, p 423.

¹⁵⁸ *Journal*, I, p 422, ln. 2

¹⁵⁹ *Journal* I, p 465, ln 1; italics his

This evaluation, Wesley, in the later edition, flatly rejected with the words: "I believe not".¹⁶⁰

As changes in the Savannah Journal suggest, Wesley gained a new appreciation the Arminian Anglicanism of his youth. This new appreciation is also detectable in Wesley's revised soteriology. The claim that only those who feared God and worked righteously could be saved harmonized well with the soteriology of Bishop Bull. This was the Bishop that earlier had been denounced for making works of repentance a condition of justification. In the late phase, however, the Bishop was viewed as a potential ally and hailed as "that great light of the Christian Church".¹⁶¹ This new appreciation for the Anglicanism of his youth can also be gleaned from a letter written in 1772. Wesley lamented, "Let me be again an Oxford Methodist! I am often in doubt whether it would not be best for me to resume all my Oxford rules, great and small. I did then walk closely with God and redeem the time."¹⁶²

Thus in a certain way, Wesley's theological development came full circle. In moving away from a Reformed soteriology, he found himself viewing Arminian Anglicanism in an

¹⁶⁰ *Journal*, I, p. 423. The later editions of the Savannah Journal have been a source of controversy among Wesley scholars. The cause of the controversy can be traced to the fact that the additions were not to be found in the body of any collection of Wesley's works, until Thomas Jackson's edition (1829-31). The reason for the late appearance of the additions is largely the fault of Wesley's publisher, William Pine of Bristol—reputed to be the "world's worst printer". Pine, in the 1771 edition, had been extremely careless with the text that had been given to him; entire pages were omitted and textual errors were legion. Making the necessary repairs, Wesley added a page of *errata* to each volume in the edition. It was among these *errata* pages that the above mentioned additions were to be found. These *errata* were not incorporated into the official text until Jackson published his edition. In recent years George C. Cell has argued that Jackson was mistaken in including these additions as they lacked the authorized approval of Wesley himself (Cell, pp. 179-80). Cell's claim is difficult to substantiate when one considers that two of Wesley's finest biographers, Whitehead (1793) and Tyerman (1870), make direct references to above mentioned *errata* (see also Lee, p. 99). Lee suggests that in evaluating the late additions we have two options, either Wesley "suffered a retrogression of spirit and became a man unable to understand his own spiritual history, or that his later views represent his mature judgment, that they are the Wesleyan interpretation" (Lee p. 62; see also Frank Baker, "Aldersgate and Wesley's Editors," *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, 35 (1966) 310-19).

¹⁶¹ *Letters*, V, p. 264

¹⁶² *Journal*, III, p. 320

increasingly favourable light. Gone were the days when he launched diatribes at those within the tradition who demanded good works as a condition of saving faith. Rather, Wesley came to believe something he had endorsed prior to Aldergate: the redeemed were those that feared God and worked righteousness.

II. The State of Humanity:

After 1744, Wesley remained constant in his view of the human condition for the next thirty years. But in the late phase, the concept of prevenient grace was allowed to dominate and even exclude the concept of total depravity. The totally depraved person--the "natural man"--was reclassified as a logical fiction. While in earlier phases the "natural man" was thought to be a concrete, historical entity, he was later transformed into an abstract, theoretical construct. Thus the dialectical relationship that had existed between the concepts of prevenient grace and total depravity was dissolved. Prevenient grace came to dominate the manner in which human beings were defined.

The exact date that the dialectic dissolved is difficult to determine. Clearly, it was no later than 1784. In that year, he penned the sermon: "On Working Out Your Salvation".¹⁶³ The sermon contained the following passage (a passage which openly disavowed the concept of the "natural man"):

For allowing that all souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere *nature*; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God.¹⁶⁴

The natural man, as Lee observed, became "...a logical abstraction...(that) does not exist."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Introducing the Sermon, Outler remarks that "This must be considered as a landmark sermon, for it stands as the late Wesley's most complete and careful exposition of the mystery of divine-human interaction, his subtle probing of the paradox of prevenient grace and human agency....In any dozen of his sermons most crucial for an accurate assessment of Wesley's theology this one would certainly deserve inclusion." *Works (O)*, III, p. 199

¹⁶⁴ *Works (O)*, III, p. 208.

¹⁶⁵ Lee, p. 224

Each person was a mixture of grace and nature. The grace element was "as much a part of him (a fallen human being) as if it were his inalienable birthright."¹⁶⁶ A claim that Wesley maintained his belief in total depravity would rely more on semantics than on facts. As was conceded by one Methodist writer:

Our theological coat was cut for the figure of Total Depravity, but when it was tried on, it was found not to fit any kind of human nature. Accordingly we let out a seam in the back, as far as it would go, and the margin thus gained, with the stitches still showing, we called prevenient grace.¹⁶⁷

There is another indicator that total depravity was discarded in the later years: human beings were invested with an innate, natural ability which enabled them to choose the good. This modified Wesley's earlier position. The fallen will had been defined as debauched and depraved. Virtue was an impossibility—persons sinned of necessity. The concept of the depraved will was taken to extremes; extremes that even the Calvinists felt uncomfortable with. Referring to the Calvinists, Wesley said,

Many of the greatest maintainers of election...assert, that every man living has a measure of natural free-will. So the *Assembly of Divines*, (and therein the body of Calvinists both in England and Scotland), 'God hath endued the will of man with that *natural liberty*, that is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to do good or evil.' chap. ix. And this they assert of man in his fallen state, even before he receives the grace of God.

But I do not carry free-will so far; (I mean in moral things), *natural free will*, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand..¹⁶⁸

This pessimistic view was considerably softened in the late phase of his thought.

In the late phase, Wesley argued that the human will was free because such freedom was an *essential* quality in all sentient beings. He believed that after the Fall, human beings retained a measure of the image of God. With the Fall, Adam lost "the moral image of God, and *in part*, the natural".¹⁶⁹ The moral image was that dynamic image that resulted as

¹⁶⁶ Cannon, p. 101.

¹⁶⁷ Dr. Maltby in an article in *The Methodist Recorder* 1916 quoted by L.C.C., U., in *John Wesley and Modern Religion*, Nashville 1936

¹⁶⁸ Quoted by Henry, p. 202

the human will patterned itself on the divine will. This image was totally lost in the Fall. The *natural* image was more static in form and consisted of properties or capacities that could be predicated of both creator and creature. These capacities include the *understanding* which provided the human spirit with the means to discern knowledge; the *will* which enabled a person to "love, desire, and delight in that which is good"; and *liberty*, "a power of choosing what was good, and refusing what was not so".¹⁷⁰ This image was lost only *in part*. Wesley went on to argue that the natural image could not be lost in its totality as this would have destroyed the very essence of a person's humanity. Wesley said,

It seems, therefore, that every spirit in the universe, as such, is endued with *understanding*, and, in consequence, with a *will*, and with a measure of *liberty*; and these three are inseparably united in every intelligent nature. And observe: *Liberty necessitated*, or over ruled, is really no liberty at all. It is a contradiction in terms. It is the same as *unfree freedom*; that is downright nonsense.¹⁷¹

Fallen human beings, *by nature*, were thought to have retained a measure of liberty which enabled them to choose the good.¹⁷² Thus while for the greater part of his career, Wesley argued that the will was totally corrupt (in bondage to sin) apart from prevenient grace, this position was modified in the late phase. As Knight observed, "Wesley began saying that man is free by virtue of the fact that he is a man, made in God's image according to *Scripture*, and that man by nature is free to choose the good."¹⁷³

The will was said to possess a natural freedom: Did this make Wesley a Pelagian? It was true the founding father of Pelagianism was treated with unusual respect. To the question, "Who was Pelagius?", Wesley answered, "By all I can pick up from ancient authors, I guess

¹⁶⁹ *Works*, VI, p. 223.

¹⁷⁰ *Works*, VI, pp. 270-71.

¹⁷¹ *Works*, VI, p. 270. Wesley asked, "...are not these understanding, will and liberty, essential to, if not the essence of a spirit?" *Works*, VI, p. 362.

¹⁷² *Works*, VI, p. 242; see also *Works*, VI, p. 427.

¹⁷³ John Allen Knight, "Aspects of Wesley's Theology after 1770" *Methodist History* 6 no.3 (1968) 35

he was both a wise and an holy man."¹⁷⁴ On another occasion (1781), he said, "I doubt whether he (Pelagius) was more an Heretic than Castello, or Arminius."¹⁷⁵ Writing to Fletcher, Wesley remarked that the supposed arch-heretic, "very probably held no heresy than you and I do now."¹⁷⁶

While supportive of Pelagius, in so far as he upheld the ideal of holy living, Wesley did remain critical of the Pelagian view on original sin.¹⁷⁷ This critical perspective is clearly evidenced in Wesley's abridgement of the thirty-nine articles--prepared for the American Methodists in 1784. In the abridgement of the article on original sin, a great deal was omitted. What was left reads as follows:

Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is *very far gone* from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.¹⁷⁸

The article on free will would also have distanced Wesley from the Pelagian position

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.¹⁷⁹

As the above abridgement suggests, Wesley never abandoned the doctrine of original

¹⁷⁴ Wesley, *Letters*, IV (July 7, 1761), p. 158.

¹⁷⁵ Wesley quoted by Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate*, (Kentucky: Wesley Heritage Press, 1987), p. 267.

¹⁷⁶ *Letters*, VI, p. 175.

¹⁷⁷ Pelagius view of original sin is expounded in his exegesis of Romans 5: 12-20. Rather than corrupting human nature directly, original sin was described in terms of *exemplum uel forma*. Adam was the *forma* for sin whereby those imitating his example experienced spiritual death. Adam's sin effected all persons, but the effect was restricted to that of a poor example. See Theodore De Bruyn, "Pelagius' Interpretation of Rom. 5: 12-21" *Toronto Journal of Theology* (Spring, 1988) 32-33

¹⁷⁸ See Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1988), pp. 114-15

¹⁷⁹ Oden, pp. 115-116

sin, but rather modified it, allowing prevenient grace and natural ability to soften its initial, pessimistic emphasis. In the process a significant shift took place: there was a move away from the Reformed understanding of total depravity. Further evidence for this shift is found in the above abridgement, where the following statement is allowed to stand: "*man is very far gone from original righteousness*". This statement would be difficult to harmonize with the Reformed position on total depravity.¹⁸⁰ Rather than defining human nature as the Reformers had, Wesley, through the moderating influences of prevenient grace and natural ability, came to speak of the human condition in terms that are best described as *depravatio naturae*. Such an understanding of original sin brought Wesley squarely in line with the general position endorsed by 18th century Anglicanism.

III. The Scope of Salvation:

The above section suggests that Wesley's late view of the human state was essentially optimistic--human beings possessed redemptive potential. This optimistic view can also be seen in the broad boundaries that are placed on God's redemptive activity. With a boldness rarely displayed in early Protestant thought, Wesley asserted that persons could be saved without hearing the Christian Gospel. He said as much in the following passage taken from the 1770 Minutes.

(1) Who of us is now accepted of God? He that now believes in Christ with a loving and obedient heart

(2) But who among those that never heard of Christ? He that, according to the light he has, "feareth God and worketh righteousness."¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ See F. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, (London, 1919), p. 230 f. According Bicknell, the statement represents a mediating position: "On the one side it clearly takes a gloomier view of man's present position than the Council of Trent....It definitely repudiates the Pelagian idea that the 'Fall' had no effect on man at all. On the other side it carefully avoids the Calvinistic extravagance of saying 'tota depravatio'."

¹⁸¹ *Works*, III, p. 296. In the earlier phases of his thought, Wesley remained vague and indefinite on the state of those who had not heard the Gospel. Discussing the question in 1745, Wesley made a non-committal reference to the mysterious providence of God, which no man can fathom, *Works*, VIII, p. 283.

All persons--Christian or non-Christian--would be saved if they *feared God and worked righteousness*.

Wesley no longer believed that Christians should condemn unconverted gentiles. He felt it better to leave them to the Father of all flesh, "who is not the God of the Christians only, but the God of the heathen also". As He was their God, the heathen could be sure that He would be "rich in mercy to all that call upon him". They could take comfort in knowing that in every nation: "he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him".¹⁸² The Gentiles were seen as those needing consolation rather than condemnation. The penitent ones were consoled with the claim that they were already servants of God. As such they were told, "Hitherto you...have already great reason to praise God that he has called you to his honourable service. Fear not. Continue crying unto him: 'and you shall see greater things than these'."¹⁸³ The Muslims were consoled being told that "the narrowness of their faith" deserved pity and not wrath. And that "their not believing the whole truth is not owing to want of sincerity, but merely to want of light."¹⁸⁴ Their plea of ignorance would be accepted on the day of judgment, for to whom little was given, little would be expected.¹⁸⁵

The universality of Wesley's view of salvation has been a disputed point among Wesley scholars. Starkey argues, "Wesley stands over against Zwingli and the humanists of his own day who claimed extraordinary modes of salvation, specifically prior to and outside the

¹⁸² *Works (O)*, III, p. 296.

¹⁸³ *Works (O)*, III, p. 497.

¹⁸⁴ *Works (O)*, III, p. 492. Wesley believed the Indians of North America were also in darkness through no fault of their own as is seen in his following account of an incident that took place during his stay in Georgia. "When we asked Chicadi, an old Indian Chief, 'why do not you *red* men know as much as *white* men?' he readily answered, 'Because you have the *the Great Word*, and we have not.'" *Works (O)*, III, p. 492.

¹⁸⁵ *Works (O)*, III, p. 492. While admitting some were trapped in gross ignorance, Wesley adds there were other Gentiles to whom God had given considerable light. According to him, there were "civilized gentiles" "being taught God's word, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion." *Works (O)*, III, p. 494.

Christian dispensation".¹⁸⁶ Starkey, however, is willing to grant a certain ambiguity in Wesley's statements, as some of them, he concedes, do seem to allow for the possibility of extra-scriptural redemption.¹⁸⁷ What remains ambiguous for Starkey, is stated with clarity by Williams--those outside the Christian dispensation can be saved. The possibility of their salvation was said to rest on three assumptions: (1) Christ is at work in those who haven't heard the gospel in this life.¹⁸⁸ (2) The gentiles will be judged in relation to how they responded to Christ who was secretly manifest to them.¹⁸⁹ (3) There is an intermediate state where individuals are given a second change.¹⁹⁰

Wesley's conviction that penitent gentiles were accepted of God received much opposition. The Calvinists were particularly offended and opposed his position with vigorous and lengthy polemical works.¹⁹¹ These polemical works demanded a response. Wesley would have defended himself but his administrative responsibilities made this impossible. The task was given to John Fletcher who accepted--bound by duty both to God and to "his honoured father in Christ, Mr. Wesley".¹⁹² Fletcher was given the task because he was respected both as a saint and a theologian. At the Conference of 1786, Fletcher was said to be "a pattern of holiness, scarce to be paralleled in a century."¹⁹³ Commenting on Fletcher's theological

¹⁸⁶ Starkey, p. 41.

¹⁸⁷ Starkey, p. 43.

¹⁸⁸ See *Works* VII, p. 188.

¹⁸⁹ See *Works* VI, p. 206 and *Letters* II, p. 118.

¹⁹⁰ See *Letters*, VI, p. 214.

¹⁹¹ See Augusta Toplady, *More Work for Mr. John Wesley* (London: Printed for James Mathews, No. 18, in the Strand, near Hungerford Street, 1772); Sir Richard Hill, *A Review of All the Doctrines Taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley* (London: Printed for E. & C. Dilly, in the Poultry, 1772) and *Logica Wesleyensis: or the Farrago Double Distilled*, (London: Printed for E. & C. Dilly, in the Poultry, 1773).

¹⁹² Fletcher quoted by John Allen Knight, "John Fletcher's Influence on the Development of Wesleyan Theology in America", *The Wesleyan Theological Journal* 13 (Spring 1978): 15.

¹⁹³ Quoted by Knight, "John Fletcher's Influence": 15.

abilities, Outler observed that,

(Wesley)...not only admired Fletcher more unreservedly than any other of his associates; he stood in his debt. Fletcher had been the ablest apologist for Wesley's views in their protracted struggle with the Calvinists; of all the technically competent theologians in the 18th century (with the possible exception of Alexander Knox), Fletcher understood Wesley's vision of the Christian life most clearly and took him most seriously as a theologian ¹⁹⁴

Fletcher was responsible for giving a reply to those who feared that Wesley's view on salvation was a threat to the the Christian Gospel, the Anglican Articles and the Athanasian Creed. The threat to the Christian Gospel was obvious: If the heathen could be saved without the Christian message what need was there of such a message. Fletcher responded that the need remained as the heathen would experience full salvation only in accepting the Christian message. It was necessary that the heathen be saved though not necessarily from God's wrath. Those without the Christian Gospel remained locked in darkness, bondage and tormenting fears; they knew little of liberty, power and glorious joy. As Fletcher noted,

a heathen may be saved in his low dispensation, and attain unto a low degree of glory...('for in my Father's house,' says Christ, 'there are *many mansions*'), yet it is an unspeakable advantage to be saved from the darkness attending his uncomfortable dispensation, into the full enjoyment of the life and immortality brought to light by the *explicit* Gospel ¹⁹⁵

There were also those who feared that Wesley's position violated at least two of the thirty-nine articles. The claim that certain gentiles were accepted of God implied that their works were also accepted. This seemed a clear violation of article thirteen which stated, "works done before justification, or before the grace of Christ and the inspiration of his

¹⁹⁴ *Works (O)*, III, p. 610. Of Fletcher, Luke Tyerman, his biographer, has said. "Among the Wesleyan Methodists, he settled forever all the questions of the Calvinian controversy. For many a long year, Methodist preachers drew their arguments and illustrations from his invaluable *Checks*... He did for Wesley's theology what no other man than himself at that period could have done. John Wesley traveled, formed societies, governed them; Charles Wesley composed hymns for the Methodists to sing, and John Fletcher, a native of Calvinian Switzerland, explained, elaborated, and defended the doctrines they heartily believed." Luke Tyerman, *Wesley's Designated Successor*, (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1886), p. 346

¹⁹⁵ *The Works of John Fletcher*, 4 vols. (New York: Carlton and Philips, 1854), (hereafter referred to as *JFW*), I, p. 41.

Spirit, forasmuch as they proceed not from faith in Christ, are not pleasant to God, yea, have the nature of sin." Rather than conceding that the article had been violated, Fletcher unveiled Wesley's rather unique understanding of justification. Justification was a blessing received at birth rather than at the time of ones conversion.¹⁹⁶ On the basis of this universal justification, all persons, regardless of their race, nationality or religion, were thought to be initially accepted of God.¹⁹⁷ As Fletcher noted,

If the works of a Melchisedec, a Job, a Plato, a Corneilus, are acceptable, it is only because they follow the general justification...(which is possibly what St. Paul calls the 'free gift that comes upon all men to justification of life' Rom. v. 18.) and because they proceed FROM 'the grace of Christ, and the inspiration of his Spirit'.¹⁹⁸

Thus the claim that no good works were possible prior to justification seemed self-evident: no works of any kind were possible prior to ones birth. Understandably, this rather twisted interpretation convinced few of Wesley's opponents.

Wesley was also charged with violating the eighteenth article which stated that no heathen, "can be saved by the law or sect that he professes, if he frames his life according to the light of nature". Fletcher, again, pleaded Wesley's orthodoxy. The article was said to teach the very thing that Wesley believed: salvation is the product of grace and not of nature. Making this point, Fletcher said,

Heathens who are saved, attain salvation through the name, that is, through the merits and Spirit of Christ; by framing their life; not according to I know not what light naturally received from fallen Adam, but according to the supernatural light which Christ graciously affords them in the dispensation they are under.¹⁹⁹

The supernatural light possessed by the heathen was thought to include the light of the law, "which is nothing less than the remains of the Creator's image in the human heart", and the

¹⁹⁶ *JFW*, I, p 160.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. *JFW*, I, p 164

¹⁹⁸ *JFW*, I, pp 40-41

¹⁹⁹ *JFW*, I, p 40

gracious promise, "which was made with Adam and confirmed to Noah" This light allowed pious Gentiles "to discover, to love and to obey their celestial Parent".²⁰⁰ It provided the means whereby "Jews, Mohammedans, and Pagans, whose hearts are principled with humility, candor, and the fear of God, have been, and still continue to be, saved in every part of the world."²⁰¹ While it was conceded that the light of the Gentiles was dimmer than that in the church, Fletcher remained convinced that,

The Father of mercies, who knoweth whereof we are made, will no more absolutely condemn such worshipers, on account of the extraordinary respect they have discovered for Moses, Mohammed, and Confucius, than he will finally reject some pious Christians, for the sake of that excessive veneration which they manifest for particular saints and reformers. Nor will he punish either because their guides have mingled prejudice with truth, and legendary fables with the doctrines of theology.²⁰²

While insisting that Wesley had remained faithful to the Anglican Articles, Fletcher would not make the same claim in regard to the Athanasian Creed. Wesley and the Creed espoused different views. True, there were certain views held in common: their Trinitarian and Christological perspectives were identical. But Wesley differed with the Creed in its statement that, "except one keep the (Christian) faith...whole and undefiled-- he cannot be saved; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly." Such a clause would have seemed narrow and bigoted. While this fate might be just for "proud, ungodly infidels", it was not conceivable that "the fearful punishment of damnation shall...be inflicted upon every Unitarian, Arian, Jew, Turk, and heathen, 'that fears God and works righteousness',. (just because) he does not hold the faith of the Athanasian creed whole."²⁰³

Fletcher was convinced that an endorsement of Wesley's liberal and tolerant position

²⁰⁰ *JFW*, III, p. 175.

²⁰¹ *JFW*, III, p. 176.

²⁰² *JFW*, III, p. 177.

²⁰³ *JFW*, I, p. 591. Given the choice between St Athanasius' damatory clauses and St. Peter's endorsement of God fearers (Acts 15:30), it was thought, "more reasonable that Athanasius should bow to Peter, warmed by the Spirit of love, than Peter should bow to Athanasius, heated by controversial opposition." *JFW*, I, p. 591

would bring many benefits. Positively, his position was seen as a means of fostering true unity among the sincerely religious. Its endorsement would mean that orthodox professors would cease to offend "either virtuous Deists or pious Socinians" with their "furious anathemas". Rather, such professors would reflect the model behaviour reflected in St. Peter's benevolence towards Cornelius and Aquila's kindness towards Apollos.²⁰⁴ Negatively, its neglect would foster continued bigotry and strife. In this regard, Fletcher argued,

So long as this glorious light (i.e. Wesley's position)...shall continue in obscurity, so long may we expect to observe among Christians the most unfriendly disputes: and though they never again may kindle blazing piles for their mutual destruction, yet bitter words, interchanged among them, like so many envenomed shafts, will continue sternly to declare that war is in their hearts.²⁰⁵

With a universal view of God's redemptive activity, Wesley had the freedom to define true religion without restrictions posed by church boundaries. True religion was greater than the conscious endorsement of certain Christian tenets; true religion was defined in terms of good works. There was clear shift towards the moral and away from the doctrinal. Knox believed this later shift coincided with the journal entry of December 1, 1767. On this date Wesley was thought to have thrown off "all the trammels of dogmatical theology" ("in a somewhat revolutionary way"), and afterwards "rose to that cloudless expanse of Christian liberality from which he never again consciously receded".²⁰⁶ This shift towards a moralistic emphasis in defining true religion was evident in the sermon, "On Living Without God" (1790). Introducing the sermon, Outler notes that the "primacy of holy living above orthodox opinions is more boldly stated" here than in any other of Wesley's writings.²⁰⁷ Wesley knew there were many Christians who believed that,

²⁰⁴ See *JFW*, III, p. 193.

²⁰⁵ *JFW*, III, p. 194.

²⁰⁶ Knox, p. 342

²⁰⁷ *Works (O)*, IV, p. 168.

Whatever change is wrought in men, whether in their hearts or lives, yet if they have not clear views of those capital doctrines, the fall of man, justification by faith, and of the atonement made by the death of Christ, and of his righteousness transferred to them, they can have no benefit from his death²⁰⁸

Of this view, Wesley remarked, "I dare in no wise affirm this. Indeed I do not believe it."

His own, more liberal views were stated as follows:

(1) I believe the merciful God regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas.

(2) I believe he respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head; and that if the heart of a man be filled (by the grace of God, and the power of the Spirit) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, God will not cast him into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused. Without holiness, I own, no man shall see the Lord, but I dare not add, or clear ideas.²⁰⁹

True religion was defined in terms of "gratitude and benevolence: gratitude to our Creator and supreme Benefactor; and benevolence to our fellow creatures: in other words the loving of God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves."²¹⁰

IV. Conclusion:

In the late phase, the Arminian concept of prevenient grace came to dominate Wesley's soteriology. It dominated his understanding of how fallen individuals were redeemed by God. Redeemed individuals were those that received prevenient grace through an act of repentance. Repentance of sins and not faith in Christ became the established means whereby sinners

²⁰⁸ *Works (O)*, III, p. 175.

²⁰⁹ These convictions support Knox contention that in Wesley's late definition of the Christian faith, "...there is nothing whatever to perplex the weak, to afford matter of cavil to the sceptic, or of apparent triumph to the infidel. Whatever mysteries may be necessarily inherent in the comprehensiveness of the Christian dispensation, nothing, in John Wesley's view is demanded from our understandings, or our hearts, but what corresponds to our moral circumstances, and is conducive to our moral happiness." Knox, p. 340

²¹⁰ *Works (O)*, IV, p. 66

escaped divine wrath. Prevenient grace also dominated his understanding of the human state. This domination dissolved the dialectical relationship that had existed between prevenient grace and total depravity. The totally depraved individual--the *natural man*-- became an abstract entity existing only in the realm of theoretical constructs. This new understanding of the natural man occurred because the concept of prevenient grace reigned in the realm of the concrete and the historical. Individuals, as they existed in the world, were recipients of a grace which endowed them with redemptive potentiality. No person could claim a depravity that was total. Prevenient grace also dominated Wesley's view of God's redemptive activity. It was logically concluded that if grace were given to all than all could be saved. In earlier phases, Wesley qualified this statement within the boundaries of the church. In the late phase, the salvific potentiality of prevenient grace broke all boundaries. All persons, irrespective of creed or religion, could be saved if they were faithful to the measure of grace given to them. Salvation hinged not on the things one believed (orthodoxy) but on the things one did (orthopraxis).

CONCLUSION:

The purpose of this thesis has been to delineate the theological shifts that occurred in Wesley's post-Aldersgate soteriology. To realize this purpose, three distinct soteriological shifts in his thought were examined. One of these shifts involved the change in Wesley's understanding of the conditions necessary for redemption. Initially, the sole, necessary condition for justification was faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice. But with passing years another condition was added--the condition of repentance. Persons exercising both faith and repentance were assured of entering into a justified state. Repentance was viewed with increasing importance such that in later years it alone became the necessary condition of redemption. Rather than being justified by faith, persons were justified by repentance.

Another shift was observed in Wesley's understanding of the human condition. Initially, he believed that human beings were totally depraved and void of saving graces. The extreme pessimism of this position was gradually modified as the concept of prevenient grace came to dominate his thought. For a time, the concept of prevenient grace and total depravity co-existed within the same soteriological framework, reconciled through a tenuous and at times tortuous dialectic. This dialectic was eventually dissolved. Prevenient grace was allowed to dominate in the realm of the concrete and the historical. The *natural man*, a specimen of total depravity, became an abstract entity little more than a theoretical construct. This shift marked a move away from the Reformed concept of *tota depravatio* and a move towards the Arminian concept of *depravatio naturae*.

A third shift was observed in Wesley's view concerning the scope of salvation. Initially, the scope of salvation was reckoned to be extremely narrow. None but those who endorsed a Reformed understanding of justification by faith were accepted of God. This view was later dismissed as bigoted. It was seen as incompatible with a proper understanding of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace witnessed to the universal dimensions of God's redemptive activity. All could be saved as all were given grace. For many years this universal offer was thought valid only within the boundaries of the church. Later, however,

these boundaries were dissolved. As a result, it was believed that all persons could be saved if they proved faithful stewards of the grace given to them. Salvation rested on the things one practiced (orthopraxis) not on the things one believed (orthodoxy).

Through an examination of these soteriological shifts, three distinct phases (early, middle and late) were detected. In the early phase, there appeared to be a distinct Reformed bias; human beings were totally depraved and could be redeemed only through explicit faith in Christ's atonement. In the two subsequent phases, an increasing emphasis was given to Arminian distinctives. Particular emphasis was given to the Arminian understanding of prevenient grace. In the middle phase, the Reformed elements appeared to co-exist within the same soteriological framework--reconciled through a tenuous dialectic. This dialectic seemed to crumble in the late phase. The Reformed elements were quietly dismissed; the Arminian elements dominated.

A deeper appreciation of these phases would greatly facilitate efforts to reconcile the Reformed and Arminian interpreters of Wesley.²¹¹ For years, these Reformed and Arminian interpreters have viewed one another as rivals; each seeking to dominate the other. That such domination has not occurred is, from the perspective of this thesis, to be expected. As often happens in scholarly disputes, both sides have had important insights--both sides witness to important elements in Wesley's thought. The Reformed interpreters accurately define Wesley's earlier thought; the Arminian interpreters do the same with his later reflections. Thus it is possible and indeed necessary that these two perspectives work together in giving us a fuller and richer appreciation of Wesley's thought than has hitherto been done.

The above-mentioned shifts in Wesley's soteriology appear to have been ignored or trivialized by a majority of Wesley scholars. As a result, it seems to this writer, that the significant soteriological transissions present in Wesley's thought after Aldersgate have been

²¹¹ Lindstrom notes that "In modern Wesley scholarship the great problem has been to reconcile the Reformed and Arminian element." Lindstrom, p. 7.

inadvertently flattened or misconstrued. This has led to the mistaken assumption that Wesley's soteriological thought can be viewed as a monolithic form, cast in 1738 and there after undergoing no significant transformation. While receiving widespread support, this assumption is clearly contradicted by the finding of this thesis. Wesley's soteriology does shift after 1738 and the shifts are significant.

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