

JOHN WESLEY'S CONCEPT OF SIN

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A study of John Wesley's thought is always in order. W. E. Lecky in his history of England wrote that Wesley "has had a wider constructive influence in the sphere of practical religion than any other man who has appeared since the 16th century."¹ He joined the succession of the Reformers when he became convinced of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone. To Wesley in 1738, at the age of 35, this doctrine of justification was a new doctrine. He remained true to Luther's doctrine of justification by faith during the entirety of his life.

While Wesley learned of the doctrine of justification from the Reformers, his doctrine of Christian perfection came to him through the tradition of the Anglican church. He realized as much as anyone else the aroused opposition to his teaching of perfection. He wrote in his sermon on "Christian Perfection" the following words; "There is scarce any expression in holy writ which has given more offence than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them." In his defense of this doctrine of Christian perfection, Wesley did not diminish nor alter his views concerning the doctrine of justification by faith.²

It is very obvious that Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection would make it necessary for him to make very clear what was his doctrine of sin. He felt it very necessary to draw clear lines of distinction in his definitions. These distinctions especially show up in his discussion of the subject of sin. It is absolutely impossible to get any true concept of Wesley's doctrine of holiness without coming to a clear understanding of what he taught concerning sin. In this paper it is my purpose to clarify as much as possible, Wesley's concept of sin. For the purpose of this discussion, the following topics will be followed:

1. Original Sin or Inherited Depravity
2. The Fallen State of Present Man
3. The Act of Sin in the Unbeliever
4. The State of Sin in the Believer
5. The "Sins" of the Sanctified

1. Original Sin and Inherited Depravity

As far as can be determined, Wesley always painted a dark picture of sin. There is no evidence that he had to alter his view when he came to believe in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. His opinions concerning the sinfulness of man were well established by the time he began his evangelical revival.

For Wesley the Scriptures were always the final authority.³ He believed that man was placed in the garden of Eden in a primitive state of holiness and perfection. By his own free choice, through the allurements of Satan, man fell into sin. Adam as a representative of the race brought sin upon the entire race. Wesley did not have a speculative mind, and he himself was satisfied with the explanation that the origin of sin came when man exercised his power of choice and refused to follow the good. Holy man could do this because he was fallible.⁴

Wesley summed up the nature of the fall of Adam by pointing out that his sin was unbelief — he chose to believe Satan rather than God. It was pride. Even after Adam sinned he would not acknowledge his fault, but blamed Eve and Satan. He even blamed God when he said "the woman whom thou gavest to be with me". This first sin was revolt and rebellion.⁵

Because of his sin, Adam lost his likeness to God. He lost the whole moral image of God — righteousness and true holiness. In discussing the image of God in man, Wesley saw two kinds, which he called natural and moral. The moral image was the likeness to God which he called holiness. The natural image was the likeness in per-

sonality such as intellect, feelings, and will. Man completely in his sin lost the moral likeness to God but retained in part the natural image.⁶ Wesley believed that what came to Adam as a result of his sin was passed on to his posterity. Every child is born under the consequences of Adam's sin. He believed that Adam was in some sense federal head or representative of all mankind. In a certain sense, when Adam sinned, all his posterity sinned with him. Adam was on trial for all mankind. He as a single person was on trial for all of us. This does not mean that his posterity cannot also be placed on trial for themselves.⁷

It must be made clear, however, that Wesley made a distinction between personal sin and imputed guilt. Actually for Wesley there were two kinds of guilt, — guilt that is personal and accounted to the person who did the evil, and guilt in the sense of liability to punishment which may be imputed to another. Though Adam's posterity are not accounted guilty of his personal sin, yet they are so constituted sinners by Adam's sinning as to become liable to the punishment threatened to his transgression.⁸

Inherited depravity, then, must be defined as that moral condition with which all men are born. This depravity is spiritual death passed on to every child of Adam and includes a deep corruption of his nature. For Wesley, even the sufferings of infants were punishments in such a way that children cannot be considered innocent before God. "They suffer; therefore, they deserve to suffer." Wesley painted a very dark picture of man's fallen nature.⁹

2. The Fallen State of Present Man

When Wesley spoke of man's natural state, meaning what man is by nature, he always meant what man is in himself apart from any grace of God. When he is thinking in these terms, his picture of fallen man is very dark indeed. In fact, there would be no salvation and no recovery if man had been left to himself. Most people fail to grasp what Wesley meant by prevenient grace. He believed that the grace of God was extended to all men and that man's present state is not one of nature only, but of nature plus grace. This grace that comes to man does not come by way of nature, but directly from God through Christ. Wesley wrote,

For allowing that all the 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. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called *natural conscience*. But this is not natural: It is more properly named, preventing grace. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Everyone has, sooner or later, good desires; although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root, or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world . . . So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he has.¹⁰

It is easily seen from this quotation that Wesley did not hold to a grace limited only to those who will be saved. Nor did he believe that God's grace was irresistible. There was a universal remedy for a universal evil. It can thus be seen that all the blessings of mankind are a result of the atonement from which the free grace flows. These blessings are many and come automatically, although in various degrees, to every member of the race. H. Orton Wiley commented concerning this idea, "Whatsoever good is in man, or is done by man, God is the author and doer of it."¹¹

This prevenient grace removes for every man the guilt inherited from Adam for his sin. Wesley wrote "By the merits of Christ, all men are cleared from the guilt of Adam's actual sin."¹² Wesley taught that none will ever die eternally merely for the sin of Adam. All the imputed guilt of original sin is removed in Christ for every

man as far as eternal condemnation is concerned. No one actually exists with the guilt of Adam's sin hanging over his head, for it is removed in Christ. Wesley believed that all infants who die before accountability will be saved through Christ. Christ is the saviour of our children who die because they are guilty of Adam's sin. It is from that guilt that Christ becomes their saviour.¹³

It must also be held according to Wesley that in prevenient grace there is an enabling power for man. This is called empowering grace. By nature man is so depraved that he cannot even will what is pleasing to God. By nature his power of choosing right is gone. He cannot perform his duties in this fallen nature apart from grace. But the grace of God enables him to do his duty and to choose the right.¹⁴ Wesley wrote,

Natural free will in the present state of mankind I do not understand: I only assert these is a measure of free will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world.¹⁵

One can see, then, that in Wesley's view, man's present state is what he is by nature plus this prevenient grace. The very beginning of grace in man is in a sense a beginning of life. Though this initial life does not mean eternal life for every man — and this concept kept Wesley from falling into the error of universalism — it does mean that man has sufficient grace so that he can choose to go with God, and this choice is a responsible one.

Since Wesley ascribed to man a free will which co-operates with grace, can it truly be said then that he believed all is of grace? He thought so. The power to choose comes as a result of divine grace. Therefore, when that choice is made for God, the very act of choosing is of grace, and consequently, when salvation does come, it is totally of grace.

Furthermore, since man can resist this grace and quench it in his life, the grace itself is not irresistible. When a man fails to co-operate with the God-given grace, he is fully held responsible for it. This becomes his personal sin, and that which would make him liable to eternal punishment.

Are these works accomplished by grace in the sinner meritorious? Wesley definitely considered that they do not gain any merit. In fact, he denied that they can be called good works in the true sense of the word. Even though they may be charitable and have good qualities about them, these works, unless they are wrought in true saving faith, cannot be considered good.¹⁶ This is the reason why Wesley could teach justification by faith alone. Any works wrought by grace prior to saving faith do not bring about justification. Evangelical justification comes only by faith in the merits of Jesus Christ alone.

What becomes then of the natural man whose inherited depravity comes from fallen Adam? In reality he does not exist as a natural man only. Umphrey Lee thinks "that for Wesley the natural man is a logical abstraction."¹⁷ Wesley wrote, "There is no man that is in a mere state of nature."¹⁸

Thus Wesley preserved two important truths. First, he placed proper emphasis upon proneness to evil in man. Second, he safeguarded the initiative of God in the salvation of man. At the same time he preserved a third truth — man is considered able to co-operate with God in his own salvation. Because man is able to co-operate with God does not disprove the existence of the fallen nature in man. The two facts of grace and nature must be seen together. Man by nature and man by grace must go hand in hand.

3. Wilful Sin in the Unbeliever

In a letter in 1772 Wesley wrote, "Nothing is sin particularly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of the known law of God. Therefore, every voluntary breach of the law of love is sin; and nothing else, if we speak properly."¹⁹ Many times people

get the idea that Wesley had but this one definition of sin. That definition is given as "a voluntary transgression of a known law." It is true that Wesley gave this definition of sin and considered it to be the only proper one. For an act to be really a sin, then, in Wesley's mind, there must first be a knowledge of the law and second, the disobedience is wilful. Wesley defined this kind of sin in these following words,

By sin, I here understand outward sin, according to the plain, common acceptation of the word; an actual voluntary transgression of the law; of the revealed, written law of God; of any commandment of God, acknowledged to be such at the time it is transgressed.²⁰

One needs to understand clearly what Wesley is writing about when he made this definition. This was his understanding of I John 3:9 where the apostle declared that the believer who is born of God does not commit sin and that he cannot sin because he is born of God. It is the sin which the believer cannot commit. The voluntary transgression of a known law is the sin which only the unbeliever can commit. Since Wesley insisted on this definition for the unbeliever's sin, one must not make the mistake of concluding that it is the only kind of sin that Wesley wrote about.

Why did Wesley insist on this definition so strongly? Wesley wanted to make clear what that sin is which truly separates from God. In the light of divine grace he could not believe that Adam's sin can condemn a person eternally. Nor could he believe that those sins which are ignorantly committed, or come as a result of the weakness of human nature, can condemn one eternally. Only that is sin which is personal, and is "an act of the soul itself," and is a free act of the individual. Grace lifts man to the place that he can resist sin. Therefore, he is accountable when he neglects or resists that grace which is given to enable him to resist sin. Wesley believed that by grace man can avoid all sin of this kind.²¹

Would not then the moral depravity within the heart of a sinner make a man guilty? Wesley believed that the guilt of this depravity will not condemn one eternally until by his own free choice man makes that depravity his own. In a sense, when a man becomes accountable, he ratifies the inner nature of sin as his own and is therefore condemned for it. Any condemnation before this personal ratification is universally removed in Christ. When man chooses to follow the evil within him, he becomes a sinner, properly speaking. Wilful sin, therefore, is committed only by the unbeliever who is capable of free choice. An infant has not yet committed a sin. Their salvation consists in the salvation from the guilt of Adam's sin. No believer commits a wilful sin while he is a believer. Wilful sins are the only ones that can send a person to hell.²²

4. The State of Sin in the Believer

One must not fall into error of thinking that, because Wesley defined a proper sin as being the wilful one and only in the unbeliever, he had no other concept of sin. Wesley recognized that there is difficulty in defining sin. He did not maintain that it is easy to know when sin has been committed. He saw a degree of yielding to inner sin while one is yet a believer, but the commission of a full-grown, wilful sin cannot occur while faith and love are in the heart. Wesley did believe it was possible for a believer to lose his faith and love and again commit this kind of sin, but he insisted that this sin, which he called the properly defined one, cannot be attributed to the believer. It is a religious rather than speculative concept and fits the Pauline and Johannine instructions that Christians do not sin. Wesley wanted to chisel this definition to a sharp point and concluded that the believer does not willingly sin as does the unbeliever.

However, Wesley's definition of wilful sin should not blind one to the fact that he also had a definition of sin in believers. Many who have read Wesley casually often conclude that Wesley denied sin in the believer, but this denial results from a

careless reading of Wesley. The principle of sin does remain in those that are justified. Its power is broken, but it is not expelled from the heart. Sooner or later it will manifest itself and the believer will become conscious that his heart is still evil. However, this evil does not reign and the believer is able to be an overcomer.

A careful reading of Wesley's sermons "Sin in Believers" and "Repentance of Believers" ought to dispel any doubt concerning Wesley's concept of sinfulness in the believer. He defined this inward sin as follows,

By sin, I here understand inward sin; any sinful temper, passion, or affection; such as pride, self-will, love of the world, in any kind of degree; such as lust, anger, peevishness; any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ.²³

Wesley did call these remains of sin in the believer by the name of sin. He distinguished among the guilt, the power, and the being of sin. When one truly believes the guilt is gone, the power of sin is broken, but the being of sin remains. This "flesh has no dominion over us" but it still exists.²⁴

In describing the sin in the believer, Wesley insisted that the believer's heart needs to be unveiled. They should "be abased," "be humbled in the dust," see themselves as nothing and vanity while yet they trust their Christ. Believers can be deceived and imagine they are free from sin while evil is still there. Therefore, they need to be convinced of pride, self-will, and other sins. Without the clear light of God, one cannot possibly perceive "a propensity to pride, self-will, anger, revenge, love of the world, yea, and all evil; a root of bitterness, which if the restraint were taken off for a moment, would instantly spring up," and "such a depth of corruption" that dwell in the heart. The believer can be deceived about it for awhile, but is soon awakened to his evil.²⁵ William Sangster is wrong when he said Wesley rejected the idea of unconscious sin. Wesley knew that people have sin in them as believers even when they do not know it. One of Wesley's constant emphasis was that one should be fully awakened to his sinfulness.

In reality the picture Wesley drew of the carnal heart of the believer is not too different from that drawn by Luther, Calvin, and others in the Reformed tradition. This may be surprising to those who know that Wesley taught that no believer sins wilfully and that he can be cleansed from all sinfulness of heart in this life. Wesley did insist on a real and drastic change when a person is born of God and changes from the unbeliever to the believer, but the believer still experiences inward sin and he must fight against it until there comes to him a greater deliverance.

I will close this section by stating that Wesley did teach a deeper and fuller cleansing for this inward sin, even in this life. He held with the Reformers that this corruption of nature needs to be fully cleansed before one could enter Heaven. He also held that the believer who is walking in the light and following God will be so cleansed at the time of death, or just before, in order to enter Heaven. His teaching is distinct, however, in that he believed it is possible for a believer by faith to enter into this cleansing experience earlier in life. He called this work of grace in the heart entire sanctification and spoke of it as Christian perfection.

5. "Sins" of the Sanctified

Without taking time to discuss, define, or explain Wesley's teaching on entire sanctification as a present experience in the believer, I do want to point out his definition of sin as it relates to the sanctified life. When Wesley used the term "freedom from sin," he meant first that the believer is free from the committing of wilful sin, and second, that the entirely sanctified is free from the inner corruption of sin. The "sin in the believer," which is inherited from Adam and which remains in the heart after justification, is by the power of the Holy Spirit cleansed in the work of grace called entire sanctification.

In order not to be confused at this point, one must remember that Wesley did not include in his definition of sin in believers everything that might appear to be sin in the believer's life. He claimed that after a person is entirely sanctified, there still remains those shortcomings, failures, and mistakes, which are common to our fallen human nature. Wesley's doctrine of perfection does not say that the believer is perfected in every sense. He is perfected only in the sense that his heart or motives are purified, so that he is able to love God with all his heart.²⁶

For Wesley, there are the sins of ignorance found in the entirely sanctified. These wrongs may be hidden to the consciousness of the person. These sins of ignorance are not the malicious kind. The evil corruption of the heart may be cleansed by the Holy Spirit. Yet, because of a lack of knowledge, or because of poor judgment, a person can fall into wrong actions. One who is still deficient in knowledge may wrongly judge his path of duty and thus act in a wrong manner. Yet all the time he may believe he is doing the right thing, until new knowledge comes to him. This wrong because of ignorance may be serious and yet not be a defect in the pure love for God. In fact the faulty act itself may have been prompted by a perfect love, and by a pure heart that is ready and willing for more light. The only cure for this kind of wrong is an increase of knowledge. This comes about gradually as one learns more and more of the way he should walk.²⁷

Sins of infirmity are those defects that result from a weakness of body or mind. Wesley believed that there are irregular desires in our bodies. The body is liable to many evils every day and hour. Temptations will constantly beset a man who "dwells in this corruptible body". There will be grief, sorrow, and "heaviness connected with this earthly existence." There is a "degree of anger" which is not sinful anger, nor need it be an opposite of love and compassion.²⁸ This anger which is not sinful "is often attended with much commotion of the animal spirits." Only with God's light can it be well distinguished from sinful anger.²⁹ The "house of clay" has the power of "dulling or darkening the understanding" and of "damping and depressing the soul and sinking it into distress and heaviness." It is possible in this condition for "doubt and fear" to arise naturally and for Satan to disturb the cleansed heart, though he cannot pollute it.³⁰ To make perfection higher than a perfect love compatible with an earthly and corruptible body is to "sap the foundation of it and destroy it from the face of the earth."³¹

Should these failures of the entirely sanctified be called sins? Many have thought Wesley had a weak concept of sin because they believed he did not call infirmities and mistakes sins. Many, and especially those of the tradition of Wesley, have thought Wesley erred when he called them sins. What are the facts? Here is what Wesley wrote,

I still say, and without any self-contradiction, I know no persons living who are so deeply conscious of their needing Christ both as prophet, priest, and king as those who believe themselves and whom I believe to be cleansed from all sin; I mean, from all pride, anger, evil desire, idolatry, and unbelief. These very persons feel more than ever their own ignorance, littleness of grace, coming short of the full mind that was in Christ, and walking less accurately than they might have done under their divine pattern, are more convinced of the insufficiency of all they are, have, or do to bear the eye of God without a mediator; are more penetrated with a sense of the want of Him than ever they were before.

Here are persons exceedingly holy and happy; rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks; feeling the love of God and man every moment; feeling no pride or other evil temper . . . "But are they not sinners?" Explain the term one way and I say yes; another, and I say no.³²

Wesley, along with most leaders in the Christian church, taught that the holiest saint errs, falls short, and continues to need the atonement. Obviously, he is not a sinner in the same sense that he was before regeneration, nor even in the same sense as before entire sanctification. But because of his falling short, he still needs the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, and in humility abhors himself, is penitent, and seeks forgiveness. He feels more than anyone else his complete unworthiness before God.

Conclusion

Here is a summary of the five ideas about sin found in Wesley's writings.

1. Man fell in the Garden of Eden and became totally depraved and passed this depravity on to his descendants.
2. Though man as he is born into this world inherits the guilt of Adam and is under the curse of sin, yet God's grace is extended to him, removing the guilt of Adam's sin and extending power to lift him to the place of choice and redemption.
3. The only sin in man which will condemn him eternally is the personal, wilful choice rejecting the grace which God has given to him. This is what Wesley called wilful transgression of a known law.
4. Believers are sinners only in the sense that corruption still remains in them and they have to fight against this pride and jealousy, which keep exerting themselves in the believer's life.
5. Though there is cleansing from the corruption of the evil heart and the enablement to love God with all the heart in an experience of entire sanctification, there still remains in the life of the believer sins of ignorance and sins of infirmity. For these the person needs continual cleansing of the blood of Christ.

1. W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (London: D. Appleton and Company, 1879), p. 631.
2. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, comp. John Emory (8 vol.; 3rd. ed.; New York: The Methodist Concern, 1831), I, 355.
3. Works, VII, 140.
4. *Ibid.*, II, 31-32.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
7. *Ibid.*, V, 588.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 535.
9. *Ibid.*, 579, 647.
10. *Ibid.*, II, 237-238.
11. H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1941), II, 65.
12. Works, V, 196.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 647.
14. *Ibid.*, II, 547.
15. *Ibid.*, VI, 42.
16. *Ibid.*, I, 49.
17. Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), pp. 125-126.
18. Works, II, 238.
19. *Ibid.*, VII, 56.
20. *Ibid.*, I, 164.
21. *Ibid.*, V, 575, 593.
22. *Ibid.*, I, 65, 241.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-111.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-110.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
27. *Ibid.*, VI, 489; I, 417.
28. *Ibid.*, VI, 775.
29. *Ibid.*, VII, 53.
30. *Ibid.*, VI, 776.
31. *Ibid.*, VII, 259.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.