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# Atonement, Justification, and Apostasy in the Thought of John Wesley

## INTRODUCTION

Free Will Baptists are indebted to John Wesley for his dedication to Christ and an extension of a Kingdom mentality in the Church and society. We are also heirs to a wonderful tradition of Scriptural exposition that eschews a predestinarian Calvinism that was strong in Wesley's day and is reasserting itself in our own day. Charles Wesley, John's brother, beautifully represents a broadly Arminian theological tradition in his hymns. If it is true that people learn their theology from hymns, we do well to sing Charles Wesley's hymns.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite the affinities we have with John Wesley, Free Will Baptists differ strongly with Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition on some important points regarding salvation and the Christian life. This is because we are *pre-Wesleyan Arminians*. Our Arminianism goes back to the theology of Thomas Helwys (1550-1616), the first Baptist who was a General or Arminian Baptist, influenced by the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609).<sup>2</sup> This pre-Wesleyan stream of Arminianism retains much in Reformed theology and spirituality that the later Wesleyan movement would discard. As I have said elsewhere, while Arminius "veered from Calvinism on the question of how one *comes to be* in a state of grace (predestination, free will, and grace) he retained Reformed categories on the *meaning* of sin and redemption."<sup>3</sup> The same can be said of

1. As this paper will note, there is often tension in early Wesleyan thought between a more grace-oriented Arminianism and a semi-Pelagian approach, but John Wesley in the end comes out on the more semi-Pelagian side of things rather than the grace-oriented side that Arminius and Helwys represent. Yet the hymns of Charles Wesley emphasize the grace-oriented side and are usually very amenable to a more classical, Reformational Arminianism.

2. See J. Matthew Pinson, "Sin and Redemption in the Theology of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys" (presented at the Free Will Baptist Theological Symposium, October 2004) and J. Matthew Pinson, "Will the Real Arminius Please Stand Up? A Study of the Theology of Jacobus Arminius in Light of His Interpreters," *Integrity: A Journal of Christian Thought* 2 (2003): 121-39.

3. J. Matthew Pinson, "Introduction," in J. Matthew Pinson, ed., *Four Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 14-15.

his, and Helwys's, views on sanctification and Christian spirituality, although Helwys emphasized the baptism of disciples and the importance of Christian conversion more than Arminius.

In our view of sanctification and Christian spirituality, for example, Free Will Baptists have typically sympathized more with the practical, warm-hearted Puritan piety of a John Bunyan than the crisis-oriented, higher-life spirituality of Wesleyanism. The Wesleyan movement has emphasized a second work of grace and Christian perfection, which non-Wesleyan Arminians have avoided. Yet these views are in harmony with other Wesleyan beliefs about salvation which this essay will explore. In the traditional Wesleyan view, Christ did not pay the penalty for sins but only pardoned sinners as a governor pardons a guilty criminal. Or he paid the penalty only for past sins and not for sin in general. If this is true, and if Christ's righteousness is not "imputed to all believers for their eternal acceptance with God,"<sup>4</sup> then it makes sense that we have no assurance of salvation until we have reached a state of entire sanctification or perfection, and that we must be "re-justified" every time we sin. Free Will Baptists differ with doctrines such as these.<sup>5</sup>

A thoroughgoing understanding of Wesley's soteriology will help to engender a clearer understanding of Biblical and historic Free Will Baptist understandings of salvation. This essay will do that by examining Wesley's views on atonement, justification, and apostasy, with special attention to the historical context of his thought.

John Wesley's understanding of atonement and justification and the implications of these doctrines for his view of continuance in the Christian life are indicative of the eclectic nature of his theology. Modern scholars have variously attempted to place Wesley firmly within certain streams of the Christian theological tradition. This resulted in such

4. This phrase is from the *1812 Abstract*, which says, "We believe that no man has any warrant before God through his own works, power, or ability which he has in and of himself, only as he by Grace is made able to come to God, through Jesus Christ; believing the righteousness of Jesus Christ to be imputed to all believers for their eternal acceptance before God." The *1812 Abstract* is the earliest Southern Free Will Baptist confession of faith, which was an abstract of the 1660 *Standard Confession* of the English General Baptists, which the early Southern Free Will Baptists brought with them from England. It is reprinted in J. Matthew Pinson, *A Free Will Baptist Handbook: Heritage, Beliefs, and Ministries* (Nashville: Randall House, 1998), 142-47.

5. For contemporary treatments from this perspective, see the following: F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest for Truth* (Nashville: Randall House, 2000); Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002); Stephen M. Ashby, "Reformed Arminianism," in J. Matthew Pinson, ed., *Four Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

designations as “the Calvinist Wesley,” “the Anglican Wesley,” and “the Catholic Wesley.” Such classifications, however, fail to grasp the complexity of Wesley’s theology and the diversity of influences brought to bear on Wesley’s intellectual development.

By examining Wesley’s doctrines of atonement and justification and the ramifications of these concepts for Wesley’s view of perseverance in the Christian life, one recognizes that Wesley cannot be forced into a particular mold. On the contrary, Wesley’s theology will be seen as a symbiotic blending of diverse elements in his own background which aided in shaping his theological perspectives. Such a study must begin with a discussion of the perspectives on Wesley’s theology in modern scholarship<sup>6</sup> and proceed to consider the various people and schools of thought that influenced Wesley’s theology. After this background has been laid, an analysis of Wesley’s views on the nature of atonement, justification, and continuance in the Christian life will be undertaken.

#### INTERPRETATIONS OF WESLEY’S INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Twentieth-century Wesley scholarship has produced disparate opinions on Wesley’s place in the Christian tradition. Four main schools of thought have developed in Wesley studies: one highlights the Catholic elements in Wesley’s theology, the second stresses his Calvinist or “Reformation” tone, while the third emphasizes Wesley as Anglican. A fourth school consists of those scholars who have recognized the eclecticism of Wesley’s theology.

##### *The “Calvinist Wesley”*

Certain scholars have emphasized Wesley’s indebtedness to Reformation theology and the Reformed tradition as mediated through the Anglican Church. These scholars have characterized Wesley as “the Calvinist Wesley,” emphasizing Wesley’s statement that he was within “a hairsbreadth of Calvinism.” George Croft Cell was the first twentieth-century scholar to advance this interpretation of Wesley. Cell argued that, despite Wesley’s divergence from Calvin on the doctrine of predestination, he was in complete agreement with Calvin on original sin and on justification.<sup>7</sup> Since Wesley emphasized the priority of God’s grace over

6. This initial historiographical discussion will lay out the general understandings of where Wesley fits in the Christian tradition. Historiographical analysis with specific regard to Wesley’s doctrines of justification and the nature of atonement will be reserved for the section of the essay which explicates these doctrines.

7. George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: University Press of America, 1983. First edition, 1935), 19.

against a Pelagian anthropocentrism, Cell lumps Wesley into the Reformation camp. Thus he highlights Wesley's similarities rather than his differences with Luther, Calvin, and the other Magisterial Reformers.<sup>8</sup> Many subsequent Wesley scholars, such as William R. Cannon, Martin Schmidt, and Colin W. Williams, have followed Cell in stressing Wesley's dependence on Reformation theology and downplaying his differences with Luther, Calvin, and the English Puritans on atonement and justification.<sup>9</sup>

### *The "Catholic Wesley"*

Ironically, the person who opened Wesley studies to new considerations of Wesley's place in the Christian tradition was the Catholic scholar Maximin Piette, whose influential revisionist work *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* broke with the older view of Wesley as essentially anti-Catholic. Piette emphasized Wesley's benefit from the Catholic tradition by both his high esteem for patristic theology and his use of the Catholic tradition as mediated through the Anglican church.<sup>10</sup> Piette's basic understanding of "the Catholic Wesley" has been shared by such scholars as Jean Orcibal.<sup>11</sup> These scholars tend to deemphasize the importance of Wesley's Aldersgate experience—a theme highlighted by the "Calvinist Wesley" advocates. They also offer a lower estimate of the influence of the Reformers on Wesley's doctrines of grace, justification, and the nature of atonement.<sup>12</sup>

### *The "Anglican Wesley"*

Some scholars have asserted that Wesley's theological orientation owes itself primarily to his Anglican<sup>13</sup> heritage. Scholars like C. F. Allison,

8. *Ibid.*, 243-45.

9. William R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley, with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (New York: Abingdon, 1946); Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972-73. First German edition, 1967); Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon, 1960).

10. Maximin Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1937). Though this work was first published in 1925, it still figures greatly into the discussion, and is referred to by most scholars of Wesley's theology.

11. Jean Orcibal, "The Theological Originality of John Wesley and Continental Spirituality," trans. J. A. Sharp. In *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol. 1, eds. Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth, 1965), 102-10.

12. See also U. Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (New York, 1936).

13. The term "Anglican" in this essay, while anachronistic, is employed for purposes of convenience. It is used here to denote the non-Puritan wing of the Church of England in the seventeenth century.

Richard P. Heitzenrater, John English, and David Eaton have pointed to the influence of seventeenth-century Anglican Arminianism as assimilated through Wesley's parents. These authors have also emphasized his reading of Jeremy Taylor and other representatives of the Anglican "Holy Living School."<sup>14</sup> H. R. McAdoo characterizes Wesley's theology as Anglican in "spirit" or method rather than in content.<sup>15</sup>

*The Eclectic Wesley*

David Hempton is representative of an approach to Wesley's intellectual influences that emphasizes their eclectic nature. He remarks that Wesley was influenced by

a bewildering array of Christian traditions: the church fathers, monastic piety, and ancient liturgies; continental mystics such as Jeanne-Marie Guyon ... ; Byzantine traditions of spirituality approached through Macarius and Gregory of Nyssa; the English and Scottish Puritan divines; the Moravians and other channels of European Pietism; his mother and through her to Pascal; classics of devotional spirituality including Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law; and the canon of Anglican writers from Hooker to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century High Churchmen. Writers on each of these traditions are prone to compete for the preeminent influence over Wesley, but the truth of the matter is that Wesley's eclecticism is itself preeminent.<sup>16</sup>

Albert Outler, though sometimes classified within the "Wesley as Calvinist" school, has come closer than most scholars to recognizing the eclectic nature of Wesley's theology. Thus he has emphasized Wesley as a "folk theologian" whose pastoral and homiletic aims, together with his diverse influences, uniquely shaped his theological views. Despite this

14. C. F. Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (New York: Seabury, 1966); Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and the Oxford Methodists, 1725-1735" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1972); John C. English, *The Heart Renewed: John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Initiation* (Macon, GA: Wesleyan College, 1967); David E. Eaton, "Arminianism in the Theology of John Wesley" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1988).

15. Henry R. McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 1.

16. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 714.

characterization, however, Outler tends to place great emphasis on the Reformation tributaries (particularly within the Church of England) which flowed into the Wesleyan stream.<sup>17</sup>

The first three approaches to Wesley's theology are unsatisfactory because they overemphasize one current of the diversity of influences on Wesley's thought. These perspectives employ a synchronic method of understanding Wesley's theology that has Wesley choosing between polarities in his theological experience. Only Hempton's and Outler's diachronic or symbiotic approach, which understands Wesley as absorbing and synthesizing several influences from a spectrum of theological expressions in his own intellectual development, is adequate to explain the uniqueness of Wesley's theology. This approach is borne out in an examination of Wesley's doctrines of justification, the nature of atonement, and continuance in the Christian life, as will be demonstrated in the course of this essay.

#### WESLEY'S INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Wesley did not selectively choose between Reformation and Anglican Arminian theological expressions of these doctrines. Rather he, seemingly unconsciously, absorbed central motifs from both traditions and amalgamated them into a unique theology which differed substantially from both systems. A comprehension of Wesley's doctrines of justification, atonement, and continuance in the Christian life can be gained only by understanding the variant intellectual influences on Wesley's thought in the context of his intellectual development.

##### *Anglican Arminianism*

Of the two most significant and broad influences on Wesley's theology, the Reformation and Anglican Arminianism, the latter is more basic. The most formative of influences was that of Wesley's parents, who were steeped in Anglican Arminianism. Both Samuel and Susanna Wesley had converted to Anglicanism from Nonconformity and had reacted vehemently against their own dissenting backgrounds. Their resistance to the rigid predestinarianism of their upbringings precipitated a vigorous acceptance of seventeenth-century Anglican Arminianism.<sup>18</sup> Samuel

17. Albert C. Outler, "The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition," in *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Kenneth E. Rowe (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1976), 11-38.

18. Adam Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family Collected Principally from Original Documents*, 2nd ed. (New York: Lane and Tippett, 1848), 89.

Wesley credited William Cave's *Primitive Christianity*, in which Cave sought to demonstrate Anglican Arminianism's consistency with patristic theology, with his own decision to convert to Anglicanism.<sup>19</sup> Wesley's parents immersed him in Anglican Arminianism, as is evidenced in numerous letters and discussions between Wesley and his parents. His father had recommended Hugo Grotius as the best Biblical commentator he knew of, and Susanna Wesley had encouraged Wesley's reading of Jeremy Taylor.<sup>20</sup> Wesley's Anglican Arminian rearing was confirmed as he came into contact with the works of the most distinguished Arminian writers. Wesley began reading Jeremy Taylor in 1725, and he spoke of Taylor's inestimable influence on him. Indeed, Taylor can be said to have been the vehicle through which Wesley was introduced to the Anglican Arminianism of the seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup> In addition to Taylor, Wesley was greatly influenced by William Law's *Christian Perfection* and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* as well as by the works of Thomas à Kempis.<sup>22</sup> Wesley's circle at Oxford was saturated in both Dutch and English Arminian sources.<sup>23</sup> For example, Wesley's close friend at Oxford, Benjamin Ingham, recorded eleven separate readings of Hugo Grotius in his diary in the year 1733.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to his connection with the Moravians, Wesley's primary influences were from Anglican Arminianism. As C. F. Allison has persuasively argued, seventeenth-century Anglican Arminianism was thoroughly imbued with moralism, diverging from the *sola fide* emphasis of the Reformation. This perspective stressed the ethical example of Christ's atonement. It neglected the atonement's juridical aspects and tended toward semi-Pelagianism in its doctrine of justification and the relation of faith and works, and the resultant doctrines of sanctification and the Christian life.<sup>25</sup>

19. Schmidt, vol. 1, part 1, 44.

20. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), vol. 2, 23.

21. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London: Wesley Methodist Book Room, 1872; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), XI, 366; John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960, 1985), 197.

22. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 7.

23. Eaton, 255-70.

24. See Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed., *Diary of an Oxford Methodist: Benjamin Ingham, 1733-34* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985).

25. See Allison, 65-70.

*Reformation Theology*

The Anglican Arminians of the seventeenth century were exceedingly influential on Wesley's theology. However, Reformation theology as mediated through the Moravians, the Reformation Anglicanism of thinkers like Thomas Cranmer, and Wesley's reading of the continental Reformers themselves, was also influential. There has been scholarly disagreement on the nature and extent of the influence of Reformation thought on Wesley. G. C. Cell, Colin Williams, and others have painted Wesley as an heir of the continental reformers. Yet Outler has stated that it is "misleading" to speak of Wesley as the "conscious debtor" of Luther and Calvin, and that Wesley would have been "astonished" at Cell and Williams's assessment of him.<sup>26</sup> Part of this debate arises from the problem of identifying Wesley's influences, since he rarely documented his sources.

Though it is difficult to assess the extent of Wesley's indebtedness to the continental Reformers, his absorption of certain aspects of Reformation theology through the Moravians, the doctrinal standards of the Church of England, and Thomas Cranmer is indubitable.<sup>27</sup> Outler states that Wesley's investigation of the Homilies of the Church of England during his controversy with the Moravians "marked the final stage of Wesley's maturation as a theologian ... . Now at last—with his 'Moravian' conversion at Aldersgate, followed by his disenchantments with Moravianism in Germany and Fetter Lane, his encounter with Edwards and his vital reappropriation of his Anglican heritage—the frame of Wesley's theology was finally set, and would so remain thereafter."<sup>28</sup>

*John Goodwin and Richard Baxter*

In addition to the Anglican Arminianism of the seventeenth century and Reformation thought, Wesley was enormously influenced by two non-Anglican theologians, the Independents John Goodwin and Richard Baxter. Affirmative quotations of Goodwin and Baxter abound in Wesley's writings. In 1745 he reprinted an extract of Baxter's *Aphorisms of Justification*, which had originally been published in 1649. Wesley's *Predestination Calmly Considered* bears striking resemblance to numbers XIX-XLV of Baxter's *Aphorisms*, and Wesley's doctrine of justification reveals Baxter's influence.<sup>29</sup> Despite the numerous positive references to

26. Outler, ed., *John Wesley*, 119-20.

27. *Ibid.*, 121-33.

28. *Ibid.*, 16.

29. *Ibid.*, 148-49.



Goodwin in Wesley's works and Wesley's 1765 republication of Goodwin's *Imputatio Fidei, or A Treatise of Justification* (1642), scholars have largely ignored Goodwin's influence on Wesley. However, Goodwin had perhaps more influence on Wesley's doctrine of justification in the last thirty years of his life than any other single thinker, as is evidenced by his preface to Goodwin's treatise.

This short summary of Wesley's intellectual influences argues that Wesley's early theological development was shaped primarily by the Anglican Arminianism of the seventeenth century. It was offset, however, by the Reformation theology he imbibed from the Moravians, his reading of the continental Reformers, and more directly from Thomas Cranmer and the doctrinal standards of the Church of England. This amalgamation was in turn augmented by the influence of two seventeenth-century Nonconformists, Richard Baxter and John Goodwin.

#### INTERPRETATIONS OF WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

The scholarship on Wesley's view of atonement, justification, and continuance in the Christian life has been diverse. Of these three doctrines, Wesley's understanding of justification has been studied the most, but it has not been analyzed in the context of his doctrines of the nature of atonement and perseverance in the Christian life. The difficulty with many of the studies of Wesley's doctrine of justification, however, is the gross lack of theological competence that often accompanies them.

While much has been written on Wesley's view of the *extent* of atonement, precious little has been done on his understanding of the *nature* of atonement. The three principal scholars who have deliberated it are Williams, Renshaw, and Deschner. In his brief treatment on the nature of atonement, Williams fails to see the strong juridical overtones in Wesley's doctrine of atonement. He mistakenly asserts that "Wesley does not put the penal substitutionary element of his teaching inside a legal framework in which God is made subject to an eternal unchangeable order of justice."<sup>30</sup> Renshaw, while understanding Wesley's emphasis on God as judge, is simplistic in characterizing Wesley's view of atonement as a mix between Reformational and Grotian categories.<sup>31</sup> Deschner is more sophisticated in his view of Wesley's doctrine of atonement, seeing it essentially as a modified penal satisfaction theory. He fails, however, to

30. Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 84.

31. John Rutherford Renshaw, "The Atonement in the Theology of John and Charles Wesley" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1965), 126.

ground Wesley's doctrine of the nature of atonement in its historical or theological contexts.<sup>32</sup>

Scholars have deliberated Wesley's doctrine of justification considerably. While some scholars have noted Catholic overtones in Wesley (Piette, Orbical, Lee), most (Cannon, Cell, Schmidt, Skevington Wood, Williams) have seen Wesley's doctrine of justification as basically similar to that of the continental reformers. The latter, however, have failed to unveil the complex distinctions between the Catholic and Reformation influences with regard to the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Furthermore, they missed the significance of Baxter's and Goodwin's influence on Wesley. A few scholars (Clifford, Lindstrom, Outler) correctly interpret Wesley's doctrine of justification but fail to tie it in any significant way to his doctrine of the nature of atonement. Only Deschner succeeds in this regard, but his study of these doctrines, limited to Wesley's Christology, is brief and fails to understand how these doctrines shaped Wesley's view of continuance in the Christian life.<sup>33</sup>

#### WESLEY'S VIEW OF THE NATURE OF ATONEMENT

In his doctrine of the nature of atonement, Wesley betrays the clear influence of the Reformers and Reformation Anglicanism in his retention of a basic, though modified, penal satisfaction theory of atonement. The Reformers' view of atonement had been rejected by the seventeenth-century Anglican Arminians such as Jeremy Taylor as well as by Richard Baxter and John Goodwin. Despite Wesley's acknowledged debt to these thinkers, he diverged from them in his doctrine of atonement. Though he failed to reveal the sources for his penal satisfaction doctrine of atonement, it is safe to assume that Cranmer, the Homilies of the Church of England, and the Reformers themselves influenced Wesley to maintain central elements of the Reformation doctrine of the nature of atonement.<sup>34</sup>

Wesley maintained the Reformation understanding of God as judge and humanity as the violator of divine justice. The sins of humanity have

32. Deschner, 152-57.

33. Few scholars have sought to extend their studies to encompass an understanding of Wesley's view of continuance in the Christian life. The closest most writers come to this is to study Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification, which is logically and theologically distinct from his understanding of continuance in the Christian life. Some scholars make reference to Wesley's view of "backsliding," but fail to understand how crucial his view of atonement and justification is to his larger understanding of Christian perseverance.

34. I am indebted to John Deschner's *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* for his insights on Wesley's doctrine of atonement, which have been helpful to me.

accrued the penalty of the wrath of God which is eternal death.<sup>35</sup> The only way for individuals to escape the wrath of God is for Christ to bear the penalty for sin, which He does on the cross. In explaining this concept, Wesley retained the Reformation language of passive obedience. In His passive obedience, Christ voluntarily submitted to the wrath of God and took humanity's punishment for sin, thus averting the wrath of God. Christ's death is a "propitiation—to appease an offended God. But if, as some teach, God was never offended, there was no need of this propitiation."<sup>36</sup> Thus the divine penalty for sin, meted out by God, is satisfied by Christ's passive obedience on the cross.

Wesley here aligned himself with the satisfaction tradition of Anselm of Canterbury, which found its fullest expression in Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer. Despite his basic reliance on the seventeenth-century Anglican Arminians, and on Baxter and Goodwin, his doctrine of atonement was radically distinct from theirs. These thinkers relied on Hugo Grotius's governmental theory of atonement, which held that God could freely pardon or forgive sinners without any satisfaction for the violation of divine justice. In the governmental view, the death of Christ is accepted by God as governor or ruler rather than as judge. Christ's death is a symbol of the punishment of sin rather than punishment itself. The penalty for sin, rather than being fulfilled or satisfied, is set aside, and the believing sinner is pardoned as a governor would pardon a guilty criminal. Goodwin's statement of this theory in his *Imputatio Fidei* (1642) is especially relevant in view of the fact that Wesley republished this work in 1765: "The sentence or curse of the Law, was not properly executed upon Christ in his death, but this death of Christ was a ground or consideration unto God, whereupon to dispence with his Law, and to let fall or suspend the execution of the penalty or curse therein threatened."<sup>37</sup> Goodwin's statement contrasts sharply with Wesley's comment on Romans 3:26, where he speaks of God "showing justice on his own Son" so that God "might evidence himself to be strictly and inviolably righteous in the administration of his government, even while he is the merciful justifier of the sinner that believeth in Jesus. The attribute of justice must be preserved inviolate; and inviolate it is preserved, *if there was a real infliction of punishment on our Saviour.*"<sup>38</sup> Thus Wesley was at great pains to affirm a retributive or penal satisfaction view of atonement over against

35. *Works*, IX, 481-82; "Of Hell," *Works*, VI, intro, 4; II, 2.

36. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), Romans 3:25.

37. John Goodwin, *Imputatio Fidei. Or A Treatise of Justification* (London, 1642), Part II, 13.

38. *Notes*, Romans 3:26. Italics added.

a governmental view. In this view, Wesley was in complete agreement with article thirty-one of the Thirty-nine Articles, which says that Christ made “perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction” for sin and that “there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone.” Unlike the governmentals in his Anglican Arminian background, Wesley believed, with the Reformers, that the penalty for sin must be paid and that it has been satisfied by Christ in His passive obedience on the cross.

However, before one thinks the case is tied up for Wesley’s absolute reliance on Reformation categories, it must be emphasized that, while Wesley stressed the penal satisfaction nature of Christ’s atonement, he modified it. Yet his modification of this theory was unique in that it avoided the governmentalist overtones of much of early English Arminianism. In much Reformation theology, the atonement of Christ included not only passive obedience but also active obedience.<sup>39</sup> Active obedience consisted of Christ’s perfect righteousness and his complete obedience to and fulfillment of divine law. The Reformers held that both aspects of Christ’s obedience go together in satisfying the just demands of the divine law. Divine justice requires absolute righteousness on the part of human beings for their acceptance before God, and human beings cannot themselves provide such absolute righteousness. Hence, Christ’s absolute righteousness must be imputed or credited to them for their justification. Here Wesley diverged from the penal satisfaction theory of atonement, insisting that the efficacy of Christ’s atonement subsists primarily in his passive obedience, or his bearing the divine penalty for sin, rather than in his positive fulfillment of the law. In his preface to John Goodwin’s *Imputatio Fidei*, which he retitled “A Treatise on Justification,” Wesley stated that Christ’s death is “certainly the chief part, if not the whole” of the atonement.<sup>40</sup> “Although I believe Christ fulfilled God’s law, yet I do not affirm he did this to purchase redemption for us. This was done by his dying in our stead.”<sup>41</sup> Christ’s active obedience, for Wesley, was coincidental, not formally essential, to the atonement. Thus, though Wesley affirmed the reality of Christ’s active obedience, he denied its salvific efficacy.

39. Some Reformed thinkers, such as John Owen, did not insist that one affirm the active obedience of Christ to hold a satisfaction view of atonement. Wesley’s view, while different from most Protestant satisfaction theories, still meets the rigorous demands of a more general penal substitutionary understanding of atonement.

40. *Works*, X, 331.

41. *Works*, X, 386.

Wesley further modified the penal satisfaction view of atonement with his distinction between past and future sins. Whereas Reformation Anglicanism insisted that Christ's oblation for the sins of humanity was for all sins, original and actual (Thirty-nine Articles, article thirty-one), Wesley asserted that Christ atoned only for the believer's past sins. Christ's atonement was not for the *condition* of sin, nor was it to remove the curse of original sin, but it was a "propitiation" for "the remission of past sins."<sup>42</sup> Neither sin in general nor the sinner, but only past sins are forgiven, for God cannot forgive sins before they happen. This concept is borne out in "A Dialogue between an Antinomian and His Friend," in which the Antinomian says Christ "did then 'heal, take away, put an end to, and utterly destroy, all our sins.'" Then his friend replies, "Did he then heal the wound before it was made, and put an end to our sins before they had a beginning? This is so glaring, palpable an absurdity, that I cannot conceive how you can swallow it."<sup>43</sup> Wesley's conception that Christ atoned only for past sins, rather than for sin generally, exerted great influence on his view of justification and continuance in the Christian life.

It has been argued here that Wesley's doctrine of the nature of atonement was firmly based on the penal satisfaction categories of Reformation theology and was theologically distinct from the governmental theory of Grotius which was employed by the Anglican Arminians as well as Baxter and Goodwin. Yet Wesley modified this penal satisfactionism in his disavowal of Christ's active obedience in the atonement as well as his notion that Christ atoned only for past sins. This theory of atonement relies on the logic of penal satisfaction but on the spirit of governmentalism. It is an unambiguous example of the creative amalgamation that makes Wesley's theology truly unique among theologians.<sup>44</sup>

#### WESLEY'S VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION

Wesley's doctrine of justification betrays his reliance on his Anglican Arminian heritage and his appreciation for John Goodwin and Richard Baxter as well as a total divergence from Reformation categories. "The plain scriptural notion of justification," asserted Wesley, "is pardon, the forgiveness of sins. It is the act of God the father, whereby, for the sake of

42. *Notes*, Romans 3:25. Wesley defines "past sins" here as "all the sins antecedent to their believing."

43. *Works*, X, 267.

44. It may be stated as a sidelight (though it is beyond the scope of this paper) that Wesleyan theologians after the first generation jettisoned Wesley's eclectic view of atonement for the more logically consistent Grotian theory.

the propitiation made by the blood of his Son, he 'showeth forth his righteousness (or mercy) by the remission of sins that are past.'"<sup>45</sup> The above statement reveals Wesley's notion that justification is "the atonement of Christ actually applied to the soul of the sinner now believing on him."<sup>46</sup> Wesley's theory of atonement is brought directly to bear on his view of justification. As was seen above, the principal aspect of atonement is Christ's passive obedience. The believing sinner is justified because of or *for the sake of* the "propitiation made by the blood" of Christ, that is, the punishment of Christ for the sake of sinful humanity. This propitiation is applied to the sinner, the result of which is remission of sins, that is, pardon or forgiveness.

Wesley believed that Christ's passive obedience only and not his active obedience is applied to the sinner in justification. Therefore, Christ has borne the believer's punishment and deflected the wrath of God from him or her, but has not provided a positive righteousness for the believing sinner. Wesley veered from the Reformation doctrine of justification which insisted on a forensic justification—a divinely provided righteousness which is imputed to the believer for his or her eternal acceptance with God. The English General Baptist Thomas Grantham was exemplary of this forensic view of justification:

That God imputes Righeousness to Men without Works, is so plain, that it can never be denied. What is thus imputed, is not acted by us, but expressly reckoned as a matter of free Gift, or Grace; and this can be the Righteousness of none but Christ ... because no other way can the Righteousness of God be made ours ... there is none righteous, no not one. Except therefore the Righteousness of Christ be laid hold on, there is no Righteousness to be imputed to Sinners.<sup>47</sup>

Wesley differed strongly from such a view. Far from believing that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers so that they are (forensically) accounted righteous in God's sight, Wesley asserted that justification

45. "Justification by Faith," *Works*, V, II, 5.

46. "Salvation by Faith," *Works*, V, II, 7.

47. Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus, or The Ancient Christian Religion* (London, 1678), book II, chapter 3, 67.

does by no means imply that God judges concerning us contrary to the real nature of things, that he esteems us better than we really are, or believes us righteous when we are unrighteous. Surely no. The judgment of the all-wise God is always according to truth. Neither can it ever consist with his unerring wisdom to think that I am innocent, to judge that I am righteous or holy, because another is so. He can no more, in this manner, confound me with Christ than with David or Abraham.<sup>48</sup>

Wesley has no use for forensic justification or the imputed righteousness of Christ. Such language, warned Wesley, is too often used as “a cover for unrighteousness.”<sup>49</sup> He found it difficult to conceive of a gospel that would allow a believer to commit sin with impunity because he has been imputed with the righteousness of Christ:

A man has been reprov'd, suppose for drunkenness: “O,” said he, “I pretend to no righteousness of my own; Christ is my righteousness.” Another has been told, that “the extortioner, the unjust, shall not inherit the kingdom of God:” He replies, with all assurance, “I am unjust in myself, but I have a spotless righteousness in Christ.” And thus, though a man be as far from the practice as from the tempers of a Christian; though he neither has the mind which was in Christ, nor in any respect walks as he walked; yet he has armour of proof against all conviction, in what he calls “the righteousness of Christ.”<sup>50</sup>

Wesley’s view of forensic justification has been debated because of his use of the word “imputed” in speaking of righteousness in the believer. Yet his dismissal of the idea of the active obedience of Christ as an efficacious component of the atonement demonstrates his rejection of any forensic conception of justification. However, to clear up any lingering misconceptions, Wesley stated in his 1773 writing entitled, “Remarks on Mr. Hill’s Farrago Double-Distilled,” that “that phrase, *the imputed righteousness of Christ*, I never did use,” and he advised everyone “to lay aside that ambiguous, unscriptural phrase.”<sup>51</sup>

48. “Justification by Faith,” *Works*, V, II, 4.

49. “The Lord Our Righteousness,” *Works*, V, II, 19.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Works*, X, 430.

Wesley's notion that Christ's death atoned only for sins committed prior to conversion applies to his idea of justification. If atonement is only for past sins, then justification is only for past sins. Thus Wesley can equate justification merely with pardon or forgiveness—remission of past sins—without any recourse to a doctrine of imputation. This formulation of the doctrine of justification deviated from Reformation theology and aligned with Goodwin, Baxter, and the seventeenth-century Anglican Arminians, with their reliance on Grotius's governmentalism. Wesley, however, arrived at the same position in a different way. He did not assert, like the governmentalists, that Christ's righteousness is not imputed to the believer because the penalty for sin has been set aside and God has freely forgiven the sinner. Rather, Wesley averred that the penalty for sin has been satisfied in Christ's death and that this satisfaction is appropriated to the believer, but that this justifies the believer only from past sins. Thus the governmentalists worked from the perspective of God's free pardon of the sinner based on the sweeping aside of the law, whereas Wesley held that the believer's past sins are remitted because of Christ's oblation. But with regard to the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the end result is identical: righteousness in the believer is purely practical; it is inherent and not forensic.

#### WESLEY'S VIEW OF PERSEVERANCE

Wesley's doctrine of justification is enormously crucial for his doctrine of perseverance in the Christian life. Wesley agreed with his Arminian forebears that it is possible for a believer to fall from grace, to apostatize from the Christian life. For Wesley, this possibility manifests itself in two ways: the first is through irremediable apostasy; the second is through willful sin.

#### *Irremediable Apostasy*

Wesley found examples of irremediable apostasy in such Scriptural passages as 1 Timothy 1:19-20 and Hebrews 6:4-6. In 1 Timothy 1, Paul states that some have "made shipwreck of their faith." Wesley viewed this condition as irremediable, "for ships once wrecked cannot be afterwards saved."<sup>52</sup> His exegesis of Hebrews 6:4-6 fell in line with the standard Arminian exposition: "The apostle here describes the case of those who have cast away both the power and the form of godliness ... . Of these wilful total apostates he declares, *it is impossible to renew them again*

52. Notes, 1 Timothy 1:20.



to repentance (though they were renewed once).<sup>53</sup> This “total” or “final” apostasy, Wesley contended, is a result of defection from faith—the renunciation of the atonement of Christ—and hence cannot be remedied.<sup>54</sup>

However, while Wesley affirms repeatedly in a number of writings that shipwreck of faith constitutes final, irremediable apostasy, in a few instances he struggles with the concept. For example, in his sermon, “A Call to Backsliders,” he indicates that even those guilty of the kind of apostasy described in 1 Timothy 1:19-20 and Hebrews 6:4-6 can still be restored:

If it be asked, “Do any real apostates find mercy from God? Do any that have ‘made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience,’ recover what they have lost? Do you know, have you seen, any instance of persons who found redemption in the blood of Jesus, and afterwards fell away, and yet were restored,—‘renewed again unto repentance?’” yea, verily and not one or an hundred only, but, I am persuaded several thousands . . . . Indeed, it is so far from being an uncommon thing for a believer to fall and be restored, that it is rather uncommon to find any believers who are not conscious of having been backsliders from God, in a higher or lower degree, and perhaps more than once, before they were established in faith.<sup>55</sup>

#### *Apostasy through Willful Sin*

The second avenue of apostasy, Wesley taught, is willful sin. Whereas the first type of apostasy, total apostasy, logically follows from Wesley’s doctrine of the resistibility of divine salvific grace, the second ensues from his view of justification. Because only past sins are atoned for and forgiven in justification, future sins must likewise be forgiven. One must remember Wesley’s assertion that it is absurd to say that God can forgive sins that have not yet occurred. Just as God pardoned the believer for past sins, so the believer’s future sins must be pardoned.<sup>56</sup> Failure to receive pardon for post-conversion sins results in apostasy.

53. *Notes*, Hebrews 6:6.

54. “Serious Thoughts on the Perseverance of the Saints,” *Works*, X, 284-298.

55. “A Call to Backsliders,” *Works*, VI, 525.

56. *Notes*, 1 John 1:9.

Wesley believed that sin in itself brings about apostasy, thereby breaking one's relationship with God. Wesley uses King David as an example of the pattern of apostasy through willful sin:

To explain this by a particular instance: David was born of God, and saw God by faith. He loved God in sincerity. He could truly say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth," neither person nor thing, "that I desire in comparison of thee." But still there remained in his heart that corruption of nature, which is the seed of all evil.

"He was walking upon the roof of his house," (2 Sam. 11:2) probably praising the God whom his soul loved, when he looked down, and saw Bathsheba. He felt a temptation; a thought which tended to evil. The Spirit of God did not fail to convince him of this. He doubtless heard and knew the warning voice; but he yielded in some measure to the thought, and the temptation began to prevail over him. Hereby his spirit was sullied; he saw God still; but it was more dimly than before. He loved God still; but not in the same degree; not with the same strength and ardour of affection. Yet God checked him again, though his spirit was grieved; and his voice, though fainter and fainter, still whispered, "Sin lieth at the door; look unto me, and be thou saved." But he would not hear: He looked again, not unto God, but unto the forbidden object, till nature was superior to grace, and kindled lust in his soul.

The eye of his mind was now closed again, and God vanished out of his sight. Faith, the divine, supernatural intercourse with God, and the love of God, ceased together: He then rushed on as a horse into the battle, and knowingly committed the outward sin.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike total apostasy, this second type of apostasy is remediable. Wesley termed this kind of apostasy "backsliding." In his *Journals*, he offered several examples of people he believed had apostatized and been restored to salvation.<sup>58</sup> In his sermon "A Call to Backsliders," Wesley

57. "The Great Privilege of Those Who Are Born of God," *Works*, V, 230.

58. *Works*, II, 33, 278, 337, 361; III, 21.

described believers who think they can never fall from grace, but nonetheless “have utterly lost the life of God, and sin hath regained dominion over them.”<sup>59</sup> “It is remarkable,” declared Wesley, “that many who had fallen either from justifying or sanctifying grace ... have been restored ... and that very frequently in an instant, to all that they had lost ... . In one moment they received anew both remission of sins, and a lot among them that were sanctified.”<sup>60</sup>

This semi-Pelagian view of continuance in the Christian life emanates naturally from Wesley’s doctrine of justification. If only past sins are remitted, then the believer is “left on his own” with regard to future sins:

Wilt thou say, “But I have again committed sin, since I had redemption through his blood?” ... . It is meet that thou shouldst abhor thyself ... . But, dost thou now believe? ... . At whatsoever time thou truly believest in the name of the Son of God, all thy sins antecedent to that hour vanish away ... . And think not to say, “I was justified once; my sins were once forgiven me:” ... “He that committeth sin is of the devil.” Therefore, thou art of thy father the devil. It cannot be denied: For the works of thy father thou doest ... . Beware thou suffer thy soul to take no rest, till his pardoning love be again revealed; till he “heal thy backslidings,” and fill thee again with the “faith that worketh by love.”<sup>61</sup>

Thus Wesley emphasized the necessity of personal holiness and continual penitence for continuance in the Christian life, insisting that the believer must continue to be pardoned to remain a Christian. It is important to note the striking similarity between Wesley and John Goodwin. In his 1651 work, *Redemption Redeemed*, Goodwin offered the same two-fold analysis of apostasy that Wesley later proposed.<sup>62</sup> Wesley revealed his appreciation for *Redemption Redeemed* in a July, 1768, letter to Walter Sellon, who was embarking on a reprinting of the work: “I am glad you have undertaken the ‘Redemption Redeemed.’ But you must nowise forget Dr. Owen’s answer to it: Otherwise you will leave a loophole for all the Calvinists to creep out. The Doctor’s evasions you must needs cut in

59. *Works*, VI, 526.

60. *Ibid.*

61. “The First Fruits of the Spirit,” *Works*, V, 95-96.

62. John Goodwin, *Redemption Redeemed* (London, 1651), 345-48.

pieces, either interweaving your answers with the body of the work, under each head, or adding them in marginal notes.”<sup>63</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Wesley’s understanding of the nature of atonement, justification, and continuance in the Christian life are unique in Christian theology. His modified penal satisfaction theory of atonement, which entails that Christ atoned only for the believer’s past sins, is his own peculiar contribution to Western Christian thought. His view results in a notion of justification and the Christian life which has the inherent holiness of the individual believer at its core. These doctrines in turn lay the foundation for an understanding of sanctification—Christian perfection—which is also unique.

Wesley’s theological originality makes him difficult to assess. Those who attempt, however, to pigeonhole Wesley by forcing him into a pre-conceived theological mold, whether Anglican, Arminian, Calvinist, or Catholic, fail to comprehend the complexity of his symbiotic absorption and amalgamation of the sources of his own intellectual history.

63. *Works*, VIII, 44.