

5.

John Wesley

The life and influence of John Wesley (1703-91) are such that he demands a chapter in this series. The Father of Methodism, the key thinker behind the holiness movement and an inspiration for global Pentecostalism, his journey from academic pursuits to revival preaching, battling to be understood in his passion for sanctification as a core of the Christian life, his personal story and experiences are integrated with his impact of the church during and after his time. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral developed from his work is now an important factor in discussions of theological method, with experience recognised as a key facet.

The basics of the story of Wesley's conversion are relatively well known. He was a member at Oxford of the Holy Club, founded by his younger brother Charles, with an emphasis on discipline and charity, from the late 1720s. He was the leader before he went to America in 1735, handing over his position to George Whitefield. By the time Wesley returned in 1738, Whitefield had become famous as an evangelistic preacher. Wesley spent some time with Moravian Christians, who emphasised the transformative work of the Spirit, and then reported his own conversion experience famously on 24 May 1738 at a meeting in Aldersgate Street with his 'heart strangely warmed' and a powerful sense of assurance of his salvation.

From this point, Wesley followed Whitefield into public preaching, with a radically transformed spirituality at the core of his message. It is thought that Wesley preached over 40,000 sermons during the course of his ministry. Methodist societies were formed for mutual support,

care, discipleship and worship, in addition to presence at the Anglican liturgies on a Sunday.

Theologically, Wesley was an Arminian, seemingly from a family tradition and an English movement that may have pre-dated Arminius himself (if so, one questions whether 'Arminian' is quite the right term!). Wesley certainly identified himself with the movement, although with some caution as he recognised at one point: 'To say, "This man is an Arminian" has the same effect on many hearers as to say, "This is a mad dog."'¹

George Whitefield, the other key voice in early Methodism, became increasingly convinced of the Calvinist position from the time of his own journey to America in 1739 and, with the relevant themes playing important roles both in their theology and in their public speaking, parallel forms of Methodism developed in the 1740s. While the history of Arminianism and Calvinism has been marked by harsh language by each side of the other, it is notable that Wesley and Whitefield were reconciled despite their theological differences such that John Wesley preached the funeral sermon for Whitefield at the latter's request.

Wesley was active throughout his life, but for the current task of bringing together his thought on sin, grace and free will there is a slight issue in that so much of his published work is in the form of journals, sermons and letters, none of which are generally being used as sources in this series of volumes. Some of Wesley's sermons have been incorporated because they directly address relevant theological themes. Wesley did not write many extensive theological works, his longest being the *Doctrine of Original Sin*, which is useful for this presentation.

There have been many collections of John Wesley's works, with a new one still in process through Abingdon Books promising at least 32 volumes, of which three currently seem to be his theological works. An excellent resource has been established at wesleyscholar.com, where early editions of Wesley's works can be accessed through links in helpfully themed sections, although these are less easy to read in their eighteenth-century script and format than the modern versions that are being produced.

In order to try to cover Wesley's thought as fully as possible, there are more individual works covered in this chapter than for any of the previous writers in this series. Many of his published works were only a

1. Wesley, 'The Question, "What Is an Arminian?" Answered by a Lover of Free Grace', 1.

few pages long (or short) but these often contain phrases or passages of relevance to our major themes.

Besides the treatise on Original Sin, one theme that informs many of Wesley's works is his Arminianism and resulting attacks on Calvinist positions. This includes writing on predestination and election, on the sovereignty of God, on necessity and on antinomianism. Interestingly for this task, free will is not a common theme in Wesley's theological works and, when we get to that part of this chapter, we shall see how Wesley talks about the human will both in its fallen and regenerate state.

In addition, there are a number of pieces related to Wesley's work on Perfection, most notably his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Reading through Wesley, this seemed to have a greater influence than the classic historic Arminian/Calvinist discussions and often strongly informed Wesley's approach when writing about those themes. There are some sacramental texts that talk about means of grace bearing in mind both Anglican and Nonconformist teachings, and some more philosophical and political works that merit some inclusion in their language about liberty in terms of human society.

It is the approach in these volumes to focus on explicit references to sin, grace and free will in the writings of the selected thinkers, partly to limit what might be included and keep the volumes at a manageable size and partly to recognise how this language was used rather than seeking to infer its application in other passages. With Wesley at times this was a touch frustrating, most notably when he talks about the gifts of the Spirit where there are few references to grace itself, although clearly that is the theological framework for his discussions. There is thus not a subsection under grace on the charismata, although it was important for Wesley – for a thorough treatment of the charismata in Wesley, his *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* is a good place to look.

Sin

Wesley provides brief definitions of sin on at least two occasions in his works. The most famous is in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, where he distinguishes between sin 'properly so-called' and sin 'improperly so-called', and clarifies that Christians will still commit involuntary transgressions even as they follow his teaching on perfection:

Not only sin properly so called, that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law, but sin, improperly so called,

that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown, needs the atoning blood. I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions, which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality.²

In his work on Original Sin, Wesley provides a slightly different take on a similar theme in unintentional sin against those who would deny the doctrine of Original Sin:

Spite, envy and those other passions and tempers which are manifestly discernible even in little children are certainly not virtuous, not morally good, whether you term them sinful or not. And it is as certain that these exist before they are consented to, much less caused by those that fell them. [Opponent] 'But sin, if it is unavoidable, is no sin.' Whether you term it 'sin' or not, it is contrary to the nature of God, and a transgression of his holy and good Law.³

Shortly afterwards he affirms a similar principle: 'Actual sins may proceed from a corrupt nature and yet not be unavoidable. But if actions contrary to the nature of God were unavoidable, it would not follow that they were innocent.'⁴

In the same work, Wesley defines sin more in terms of disobedience with a link to the punishment that is due to one who sins:

Sin is taken either for an act of disobedience to a law, or for the legal result of such an act – that is, the guilt of liableness to punishment. Now when we say, the sin of a traitor is 'imputed to their children', we do not mean that the act of the father is charged upon the child, but that the guilt of liableness to punishment is so transferred to them that they suffer banishment or poverty on account of it.⁵

2. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 19.

3. Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin: According to Scripture, Reason and Experience*, 3.7.7.

4. *Ibid.*, 3.7.9.

5. *Ibid.*, 4.5.1.

He gives a similar definition in the next section of the same work: “Sin” is a “transgression of the law”, of that law of God to which a rational creature is subject ... but as sin involves the creature in guilt, that is, a lialleness to punishment, the same words are often used to denote either sin itself or guilt and punishment.”⁶ Wesley later includes a clarification in the ‘principle of all sin’ in terms of that which is sinned against: “There is in every particular sin the principle of all sin – namely, the contempt of that sovereign authority which is equally stamped upon every command.”⁷

As we look through Wesley’s thoughts on sin, we shall begin with the causation of sin before we turn to the first sin committed by humanity. From this we shall look at Wesley’s ideas on Original Sin before finally looking at some of the effects of sin – as always, these last two features recur in considerations of grace and free will.

Cause of Sin and First Sin

As with many other writers in this series of presentations, Wesley is keen to emphasise that God is not responsible for sin. In Wesley’s case, as for Arminius, this is important because of concerns that Calvinist thought does leave God responsible. Wesley argues this point in his *Thoughts Upon Necessity* against a range of determinist positions from ancient thinkers through to his contemporaries:

It is not easy for a person of common understanding, especially if unassisted by education, to unravel these finely woven schemes, or show distinctly where the fallacy lies. But they know, they feel, they are certain that they cannot be true – that the Holy God cannot be the author of sin. The horrid consequences of supposing this may appear to the meanest understanding from a few plain, obvious considerations, of which every person that has common sense may judge.

If all the passions, the tempers, the actions of people are wholly independent on their own choice, are governed by a principle exterior to themselves, then there can be no moral good or evil. There can be neither virtue nor vice, neither good nor bad actions, neither good nor bad passions or tempers.

6. Ibid., 5.4.1.

7. Ibid., 6.2.1.

Again. If all the actions, and passions and tempers of people are quite independent on their own choice, are governed by a principle exterior to themselves, then none of them is either rewardable or punishable, is either praise- or blameworthy.⁸

In considering Original Sin, Wesley makes much use of the distinction between God as first mover and causing motion in things and any suggestion that God is the cause of the sin by the one who moves:

God is really the producer of every person, every animal, every vegetable in the world, as he is the true *primum mobile*, the spring of all motion throughout the universe ... The power of God, vulgarly termed nature, acts from age to age under its fixed rules. Yet he who this moment supplies the power by which a sinful action is committed is not chargeable with the sinfulness of that action.⁹

Shortly afterwards, Wesley recognises the limits of his understanding of the relationship between God as the producer of sinners and the sin that they commit, but remains certain that God is not responsible for its sinfulness:

So, if God produces the action of every person in the world, with all its qualities, then whatever those qualities are, they are the will and the work of God. Surely no. God does ... produce the action which is sinful. And yet ... the sinfulness of it is not His will or work. He does also produce the nature which is sinful ... And yet ... the sinfulness of it is not His will or work. I am as sure of this as I am that there is a God, and yet impenetrable darkness rests on the subject. Yet I am conscious my understanding can no more fathom this deep than reconcile human free will with the foreknowledge of God.¹⁰

Earlier Wesley had considered motion alongside the creation of the foetus in similar terms:

8. Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Necessity*, III.1-2.

9. Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, 3.7.2.

10. *Ibid.*, 3.7.5.

[The power of God] produces not only the foetus, but all the motion in the universe ... But does He therefore produce adultery or murder? Is He the cause of those sinful motions? He is the cause of the motion (as He is of the foetus); of the sin, He is not. Do not say, 'This is too fine a distinction.' Fine as it is, you must necessarily allow it. Otherwise you make God the direct author of all the sin under heaven.¹¹

Related to this, Wesley elsewhere considers the relation of Christ's death to the advent of sin in the world: '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.'¹²

How then did the first sin occur? As we shall see, the responsibility is placed firmly on Adam, but the concept of the creation in which Adam lived is interesting in lacking any indication of the tempter: 'Neither can we conceive that anything destructive or hurtful could be found in this delightful habitation but what man would have sufficient notice of, with sufficient power to oppose or avoid it.'¹³

Adam's nature was such that there was no need for him to yield to any temptation that came his way: 'From the justice and goodness of God we may infer that though humankind was made free with a power to choose either evil or good, that they might be put into a state of probation, yet they had a full sufficiency of power to preserve themselves in love and obedience to their Creator, and to guard themselves against every temptation.'¹⁴ Earlier in the work, Wesley writes about temptations 'of which we cannot possibly judge' leading to the first sin, with Adam having full responsibility for falling into sin:

They [traditional theologians] suppose Adam to have been created holy and wise, like his Creator, and yet capable of falling from it. They suppose farther that through temptations of which we cannot possibly judge he did fall from that state; and that hereby he brought pain, labour and sorrow on himself and all his posterity – together with death, not only temporal, but spiritual and (without the grace of

11. *Ibid.*, 2.3.16.

12. Wesley, *A Dialogue between an Antinomian and His Friend*, 1.

13. Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, 4.1.4.

14. *Ibid.*, 4.1.2.

God) eternal. And it must be confessed that not only a few divines, but the whole body of Christians in all ages did suppose this, till after seventeen hundred years a sweet-tongued orator arose, not only more enlightened than silly Adam, but than any of his wise posterity, and declared that the whole supposition was folly, nonsense, inconsistency and blasphemy.¹⁵

Wesley pictures Adam gradually yielding to temptation until he fell: '[Original righteousness in Adam] was consistent with no sinful propensity at all, but barely with a power of yielding to temptation. It declined in the same proportion, and by the same degrees, as he did actually yield to this. And when he had yielded entirely, and eaten the fruit, original righteousness was no more.'¹⁶

In his sermon on the Fall, Wesley takes a slightly different route, although the responsibility of Adam is still affirmed:

But why is there sin in the world? Because humankind was created in the image of God: Because Adam was not mere matter, a clod of earth, a lump of clay, without sense or understanding; but a spirit like his creator, a being endued not only with sense and understanding, but also with a will exerting itself in various affections. To crown all the rest, he was endued with liberty; a power of directing his own affections and actions; a capacity of determining himself, or of choosing good or evil. Indeed, had not Adam been endued with this, all the rest would have been of no use; had he not been a free as well as an intelligent being, his understanding would have been as incapable of holiness, or any kind of virtue, as a tree or a block of marble. And having this power, a power of choosing good or evil, he chose the latter; he chose evil.¹⁷

In this sermon, there is a consideration of the serpent's role in temptation, but still no indication why the tempter was present in the garden.

It is difficult for us today to appreciate the situation of Adam, according to Wesley, but we should not map our weaknesses on to Adam:

15. Ibid., 2.4.

16. Ibid., 3.8.7.

17. Wesley, Sermon, 'On the Fall of Man', 1.

“To describe the corruption of our nature as it is, is not disparaging the work of God. For that corruption is not his work. On the other hand, to say it is, to say God created us as corrupt as we are now, with as weak an understanding and as perverse a will – this is disparaging the work of God, and God himself, to some purpose!”¹⁸

As a bridge to the next subsections on Original Sin and the effects of sin, we see some indications related to the cause of sin in humanity after the time of Adam. First, in terms of propagation, Wesley declares himself ignorant as to how sin is communicated from one generation to the next: ‘If you ask me how, in what determinate manner, sin is propagated, how it is transmitted from father to son, I answer plainly, I cannot tell.’¹⁹

Second, Wesley argues that we are not today responsible for Adam’s sin, but are the cause of the sins that we commit: ‘That all men are liable to these for Adam’s sin alone, I do not assert. But they are so for their own outward and inward sins, which through their own fault spring from the infection of their nature.’²⁰

Third, although we receive this corrupt nature and sin from this, this does not form a necessary cause for humans to go on sinning:

Even babes in Christ are so far perfect as not to commit sin ... what if the holiest of the ancient Jews did sometimes commit sin? We cannot infer from hence that ‘all Christians do and must commit sin as long as they live’ ... [On Peter and Paul having sinned] No necessity of sin was laid upon them. The grace of God was surely sufficient for them. And it is sufficient for us at this day.²¹

Original Sin

In his work, ‘The Question, “What Is an Arminian?” Answered’, the first point Wesley claims against Arminians is that they deny original sin. Not only there, but particularly, of course, in his lengthy treatment of the subject, Wesley rejects this – the work on Original Sin is against an extreme position taken up by John Taylor that does deny the

18. Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, 2.7.

19. *Ibid.*, 3.7.1.

20. *Ibid.*, 2.3.19.

21. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 8.