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WESLEY'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

"I THINK on justification," wrote Wesley in 1765, "just as I have done this seven and twenty years and just as Mr. Calvin does. In this respect I do not differ from him an hairsbreadth."¹ But since his contemporaries had lost sight of this great article of Reformed theology, Wesley found himself constantly compelled to expound, defend, and redefine it, fortifying his arguments from Scripture, the Anglican Standards, and the witness of Christian experience. At its best, eighteenth-century piety rose no higher than a diligent moralism, married to a frigid theological intellectualism, a degenerate latitudinarianism, more at home in the subtleties of deistic controversy than the realities of the religious life. It preached a "gospel of rectitude" which "was little more than a prudential morality, based on reason rather than revelation, and appealing deliberately to sober commonsense."² Justification was regarded as ultimate destination rather than point of departure in the religious life; faith, as intellectual assent to theological propositions, rather than, as one of Wesley's former critics later interprets him, "a living growing principle which is the root of all inward and outward holiness;"³ and assurance, as an intolerable impertinence, rather than as one main spring of moral action. Against such a religion the Evangelical Revival was a revolt in the Luther-Calvin tradition, originating in Wesley's rediscovery of the doctrine and experience of justification by faith alone; the experience bringing to him an unambiguous assurance that his sins were forgiven, overflowing love for his enemies, the influx of apparently invincible moral energies, and hitherto unimagined power in preaching. Henceforth he was the herald of a message at once evangelical, experiential, and ethical.

Wesley's doctrine of justification was the result of his own search for spiritual reality, reconciliation with God, and holiness of life, guided in its closing phases by the skill of Peter Bohler, and illuminated by the Holy Scriptures, confirmed by the experience of those who had already found peace. Almost from the time, when by the providence of God, he met with Thomas à Kempis, and "began to see that that true religion is

¹ *Journal*, Standard Edition, Vol. v, p. 116.

² Canon Charles Smyth, *The Priest as Student*, quoted by G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, p. 362.

³ *Journal*, Vol. ii, p. 305.

seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions",¹ he bent all his energies to the quest for holiness and vital fellowship with God. But the omnivorous character of his rule of life, the rigid regimen of the Holy Club, the incredibly concentrated discipline practised by the group on the voyage to Georgia, and the noble self-sacrifice of the missionary period, failed to produce the hoped for results. His contacts with the Moravians only served to underline what his own frustrations italicized; their mutual love, serenity, and fearlessness in danger, contrasting strongly with his own doubting, fearful spirit. Wesley returned from Georgia a disillusioned man groping for a Gospel. That Gospel he found on May 24th, 1738, in a meeting room at Aldersgate as William Holland read from Luther's *Preface to Romans*. He had already been convinced that justification by faith is Biblical doctrine, that the New Testament experience of conversion is instantaneous, and that the apostolic message created the New Testament experience in eighteenth-century England as well as the first-century Roman Empire. On May 24th, this intellectual conversion moved into an evangelical conversion.

About a quarter before nine [he writes], while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart.²

"The dogma of justification by faith had become his experience."³

It is against the background of this experience, of his own idiosyncrasies of mind and character, and the immediate problems of his work that Wesley's doctrine must be seen. He was first and foremost a Biblical thinker, and for him Biblical meant primarily New Testament. Wesley brought everything to the norm of Scripture. Experience confirms Scripture, derives from it, but cannot replace it. It follows that Wesley

¹ *Journal*, Vol. i, p. 466.

² *Journal*, Vol. i, pp. 475 f.

³ H. E. Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* (Epworth Press, 1938, p. 82).

was an essentially practical thinker, who had deliberately renounced speculative theology, and this practical concern governed both proportion and accent in his presentation of doctrine. He was no careful system-maker, but like the apostle Paul an active evangelist and administrator whose writings confront specific situations in the life of the Church and deal with problems emerging in a growing missionary movement. And just as there is a stubbornly experiential element in Scripture, so Wesley is incurably empirical in his thinking. His writings are full of acute analysis of religious experience, arising from his essentially pastoral and biblical approach to theological problems. With this went a strong tendency to theological eclecticism. His thinking is the confluence of various theological traditions, where the church-consciousness of the high churchman balances the individual conversion experience of the evangelical, and the Catholic ideal of Christian perfection is correlated to the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith only; and Wesley could allow no interpretation of Christianity that denied the organic unity of these varying elements in the Biblical message. Finally, we must note, what will appear more fully later, the uncompromisingly ethical note that rings through all Wesley's teaching.

I

Justification, in Wesley's view, is nothing less than the pardoning love of God in action. "The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins."¹ It is not to be confused with sanctification which makes men righteous nor is it attributing Christ's righteousness to us. Equally groundless are the assertions that justification involves clearing us from the accusations of the devil and the law ("strange company for the law", he cried). Rather is it "that act of God the Father, whereby for the sake of the propitiation made by the blood of His Son, He showeth forth His righteousness (or mercy) by the remission of sins that are past".² "What is it to be justified? To be pardoned and received into God's favour, into such a state that if we continue therein, we shall be finally saved."³ "Justification is another word for pardon. It is the forgiveness

¹ Sermon on Justification by Faith: *Works*, Vol. v, p. 57.

² *Ibid.*

³ Minutes of Conversations: *Works*, Vol. viii, p. 275.

of all our sins; and what is necessarily implied therein, our acceptance with God."¹

This insistence on justification as a present pardon is the very nerve of Wesley's gospel. It makes justification a free personal act springing directly from the love of God in Christ. He recognizes, but never emphasizes, the forensic origin of the terminology of justification. Rather, he cuts his way through the current artificialities of a too-scholastic theology and stresses the fact that salvation originates in the unfathomable love of God. We are justified when we discover God loves us, and cast ourselves on the infinite tenderness of the divine mercy, and because man is sinner God's love includes forgiveness. "Pardoning love is still at the root of all. He who was offended is now reconciled."² Justification is a divine act, and involves an immediate encounter between the penitent and believing soul, and a pardoning God, whose love and justice have been satisfied in the cross. The moment a man believes he is absolved from all iniquity.

Justification is, then, from start to finish a work of God, and therefore all theologies of self-redemption are an unrealistic misreading of the situation. (a) They misunderstand the real character of justification and its relation to sanctification. God justifies the ungodly and only the ungodly. "It is sin alone which admits of being forgiven. . . . For it is not a saint but a sinner that is forgiven and that under the notion of a sinner."³ Justification in the Biblical sense can never be analytic but must always be synthetic. (b) They fail to recognize man's true predicament as utterly corrupt and in need of atonement for his highest moral achievements; so totally dependent upon God that any good he possesses is due to the divine action on his soul. Wesley is as convinced as any of the Reformers of the radical sinfulness of human nature, and its complete dependence on God, even for the gift of faith. Therefore, justification must be preceded not only by faith but by repentance, which is a divinely given conviction of sin, a devastating illumination of a man's heart and history which leads to a total repudiation of both. (c) Religions of self-redemption, further, misunderstand the true nature of the Christian salvation and its ethic of love. Salvation is, primarily, renewal in the image of God and all

¹ Sermon on the Scripture way of Salvation: *Works*, Vol. vi, pp. 44 f.

² *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*: *Works*, Vol. viii, p. 24.

³ Sermon on Justification by Faith: *Works*, Vol. v, p. 58.

inward holiness, which being content cannot also be condition. Holiness is energized by love, born of the knowledge of God, a knowledge mediated through faith, which must, therefore, be the sole condition of justification. (d) Most tragic of all, every attempt to contribute to our own salvation ignores the prodigal generosity of illimitable love. God justifies the ungodly, who have no hope apart from Christ's sacrifice, by His sheer grace. "No merit, no goodness in us, precedes the forgiving love of God. His pardoning mercy presupposes nothing in us, but a sense of mere sin and misery." Before such a love men can only plead, "God be merciful to me a sinner."¹

With this emphasis on justification as forgiveness, Wesley combines an irreconcilable antagonism to views on imputation, particularly as propounded by such men as Zinzendorf. The gravamen of his charge is fourfold. (a) It is unnecessary; there being many ardent and active believers who never give a thought to imputed righteousness. (b) It is unscriptural in a threefold sense. First, the phrase "the righteousness of Christ" nowhere occurs in the Bible, and the verses adduced in favour of the doctrine are all susceptible of a more natural interpretation; second, undue emphasis on Christ's active obedience minimizes the worth of His death; and, third, the law requires obedience or death, not both. The imputed righteousness of which the New Testament speaks is something quite different. "To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted unto him for righteousness."² (c) It is unreal, as making too rigid a distinction between the righteousness which is imputed and that which is imparted, and as involving an impossible confusion between Christ and the believer. It is significant that Wesley has no sermon on the believer's union with Christ and that he mentions the doctrine in his controversy with the Moravians only to criticise it as a cloak for antinomianism.³ He would have agreed with the modern theologian who writes, "Obedience is not a concrete act where another can depute, but exists only in the free, personal, whole-hearted action of the debtor. God does not desire anybody's obedience, He desires mine."⁴ (d) Finally,

¹ *Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*: Vol. viii, p. 6.

² Rom. iv. 5, the text of his famous sermon on Justification by Faith, constantly repeated in this connection.

³ He does, however, make use of the idea of the indwelling of Christ.

⁴ Paul Althaus in *Mysterium Christi* (Longmans Green, 1930), p. 203.

and this is the real crux of Wesley's objection, it is unethical in tendency. "This nice metaphysical doctrine of imputed righteousness leads not to repentance but to licentiousness,"¹ and Wesley had only too tragic support for this thesis in his own family circle. To one to whom justification and sanctification were inseparable, a justification which included an imputed entire sanctification, and denied a real inward sanctification at the same time, was morally intolerable. But, guarding against these antinomian misinterpretations, Wesley was prepared to concede not only the use of the phrase, but of the conception of imputation, provided it meant nothing more than that Christ is the Author of our salvation, the One who purchased the benefits of the New Covenant, and whose death is the ground of our forgiveness.

II

Justification is the forgiving love of God in action; justifying faith is an unshakable assurance that this love has reached me, forgiven me, delivered me. "I want that faith," wrote Wesley, on his return from Georgia, "which none can have without knowing that he hath it."² "The faith I want is 'a sure trust and confidence in God, that, through the merits of Christ, my sins are forgiven, and I reconciled to the favour of God'."³ Wesley is never tired of quoting those words of the Homily as a thoroughly adequate description of justifying faith; the faith which has at its heart a profoundly personal and satisfying sense of assurance. "Justifying faith implies, not only a divine *ἐλεγχος* that God 'was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself', but a sure trust and confidence, that Christ died for my sins, that He loved me, and gave Himself for me. And the moment a penitent sinner believes this, God pardons and absolves him."⁴ Like Luther, and under his influence, Wesley believed that the theology of justification makes much of personal pronouns.

Such an assurance belongs to the very nature and function of faith and its reality cannot be questioned. For faith is a new power of discernment that penetrates the world of spiritual

¹ *Correspondence with Hervey.*

² *Journal*, Vol. i, p. 424.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Vol. viii, p. 48.

reality; an entirely new insight into the ways of God, a new sense or awareness of divine impressions on the soul. It alters the whole quality of inner experience, often instantaneously, always unmistakably. "For faith after repentance is ease after pain, rest after toil, light after darkness."¹ It delivers from doubt, fear and discontent, bringing peace, joy, and the "love of God and all mankind" in its train. And as it alters the whole content of the emotional life, so the moral life receives a totally new character. For faith is the moral energy of a totally new quality of life, in which the power of sin is broken, and love finds a new sovereignty. The bondage of sin is over, the night of legalism is at an end, the dawn has broken, the light is shining, and shall a man not know what has happened?

This confidence is implicit also in the whole Biblical concept of justification. It is a divinely originated conviction that is independent of any process of inference on our part, a spiritual intuition that is absolute in its givenness. This is the witness of the Spirit, a direct impression on our spirits that is not to be confused with the answer of a good conscience in response to a survey of our own moral transformations. Such a process is legitimate enough, and its result the witness of our spirit that we are justified, but is not to be confused with the witness of the Holy Spirit which, like justification, is always a work of God. It is God's word to lost and guilty sinners, antecedent to any goodness, or any evidence of moral transformation on their part, that they are sons of God, accepted in the Beloved, and is implicit in the whole idea of justification as an act of sheer grace. The denial of the witness of the Spirit, therefore, or its equation with the witness of our spirit, is a denial of justification by faith and springs from a covert doctrine of justification by works. The two modes of assurance are indeed interdependent. The assurance that is arrived at by inference is inadequate apart from the assurance that is intuitively discerned, and it in turn is sheer self-deception, if it be not ultimately supported by the assurance drawn from a knowledge of a life transformed by the power of God.

But it does not follow that everybody leaps into the joy of full-blooded assurance the moment he believes. Wesley distinguishes between the assurance of faith, the full assurance of faith, and the full assurance of hope. The first may be intermittent, and consist with all manner of doubts and fears; the

¹ *Minutes of Conversations*, Vol. viii, p. 276.

second is a steady confidence that I am now in a state of justification, without in any way mortgaging future possibilities; the last of these is the assurance of final perseverance. In later years Wesley distinguished between the faith of a servant and the faith of a son. He who has the faith of a servant has been convinced of spiritual reality, of his own sinfulness and guilt, and of the holiness of God, and consequently obeys Him out of fear. When the faith of a son comes, he obeys out of love, is born again, and assured of sin forgiven. Prior to May 24th, 1738, Wesley had the faith of a servant; thereafter, his was the faith of a son. While it is possible to have the faith of a servant this is not a permanent possibility. The servant must become son, or cease to be servant altogether.¹

In this reading of faith, Wesley broke decisively with current interpretations of faith as intellectual assent to propositional truth. Rather is it a spiritual sense which is the basis of truly rational life; a new awareness of spiritual reality which opens a new world to the wondering soul, a supernatural illumination evoking total personal response to the revelation of God in Christ. It is neither religion within the limits of pure reason, nor is it sheer irrationalism. It is in deepest accord with reason rightly understood, the key to the complete re-integration of life in all its relationships, to the recovery of the true meaning of human existence. The gift of faith is the prerequisite of any truly rational life; its intuitions the foundations of any adequate dialectic concerning the spiritual life. It is faith which hears the Word of God in Scripture, and apart from faith, the Bible is simply so much literature. Only through faith can there be any true knowledge of God, and until the miracle of faith gives vision to sightless eyes even the most orthodox are still in the dark. Right opinions of themselves have no more redemptive validity and give no truer spiritual insights than do Moslem and pagan creeds. There can be no valid theological thinking, and no effective redeeming encounter, except in the orbit of faith and the experience of God of which it is the organ. Wesley thus gives religious experience, the experience mediated through faith, a new place and a new validity, not only in his interpretation of faith itself, but in the whole field of theological debate.

¹ "We preach assurance as we always did, wrote Wesley late in life, as a common privilege of the children of God, but we do not enforce it under pain of damnation." This is an important modification of his doctrine but not a total revocation.

III

The faith which justifies is the faith which worketh by love and this is the ethic of the justified life. From the first Wesley's primary concern was with sanctification. It was through justification by faith that he entered the life of sanctification and he engages in a constant polemic against anything that would separate the two. For him, justification and the commencement of sanctification, like pardon and acceptance, are two moments in a total experience, which may be distinguished but not divided. He regarded it as the glory of the Methodists that they combined the Protestant experience of justification by faith with the Catholic ideal of Christian perfection. Therefore, good works must follow justification as surely as they cannot procure it. A faith that does not produce holiness is no faith at all. True justifying faith has in it the seeds of holiness, for it brings the gift of the Holy Spirit, who sheds abroad in the heart "the love of God and all mankind", which is the constitutive principle of all good works. Against those who charged him with making "the way too broad, teaching, men may be saved by faith without works", appealing to those who wanted "to get to heaven the shortest way and with the least trouble",¹ he opposes the strenuous ethical demands of his message, his insistence that inward and outward holiness are consequent on justification and that holiness is the condition of final justification. The moral power of Wesley's doctrine is sufficiently attested by its impact upon contemporary society and by the great stream of philanthropic and humanitarian activity which traces directly or more remotely to the Revival. "Methodism in one form or another stamped most of the philanthropic work of the century that ended with Wilberforce."²

Wesley's emphasis on assurance is linked with this strong ethical concern. He held that a sense of the pardoning love of God was one spring of inward holiness, evoking a responsive love, confidence and gratitude of incalculable value in the moral struggle and apart from which real goodness is impossible. Anything therefore (and in this, he included the doctrine of predestination), which undermined the sense of assurance arrested the whole process of sanctification. And, paradoxically enough, it was precisely this ethical concern which led him to

¹ Letter to Rev. Mr. Downes: *Works*, Vol. ix, p. 101.

² G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, p. 366.

oppose the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints. For since wilful sin, and prolonged apostasy, denied the fundamental principle of holiness—devoted love to God—and since holiness is the content of salvation, how can the disobedient or apostate be in a state of justification, or be restored to it without repentance? The Biblical evidence he held is all against the doctrine, the empirical witness is inconclusive, and the logic of salvation renders it morally incredible.

A similar concern underlies his polemic against predestination which, according to him, not only travesties the divine love, truth and justice, but completely depersonalizes man. While holding strongly to the bondage of the will, Wesley maintained that the action of grace sets a man free to make responsible personal decision. Grace is not irresistible¹ any more than election is unconditional, and to hold these, as Calvinists do, is to make havoc of the moral order of the universe, deny all moral responsibility and destroy man as moral personality. Justification ceases to belong to the realm of personal relationships, faith becomes entirely non-moral in character, and the religious life is denuded of any moral dynamic, motive, or content. His answer to unconditional election is an election conditioned by faith; to irresistible grace, a grace that makes possible free personal decision. God's method is moral suasion, not totalitarian compulsion, nor a merely mechanical process which evacuates justification and judgment alike of moral reference, and leaves the brutal blasphemy of reprobation an unresolved enigma in a universe governed by Holy Love.

On this ground also he joins issue with the solafidianism of Moravian mysticism, which he traces, inaccurately enough, to the baneful influence of Luther. The assertion that there is only one command in the New Testament—that to believe—is not only unscriptural in the sense that textual proof is all in the opposite direction, but in the deeper sense, that it fails to grasp the essential continuity of grace in Old and New Testaments. Only unfallen man was under a covenant of works, and ever since the Fall, God's action has been on the principle of grace. There is no radical discontinuity therefore between old and new. Response to grace and fulfilment of law are not antithetical but concurrent. To hold that we are released from the obligation to fulfil commands as such, or from using the

¹ Wesley allows exceptional cases of irresistible grace.

means of grace, because we have faith, or, that we need only do these as the inner impulse moves, is a blow at the root of holiness. It is to demolish it from top to bottom and to wound Christ in the house of his friends. In the name of loyalty to Christ it denies His own criterion of discipleship: "if ye love me, ye will keep my commandments." It fails to grasp the nature of faith as the principle of inward and outward holiness, which recognizes that obedience to the imperatives of the redeemed life is as much duty as privilege. For Wesley as for St. Paul, "the law is holy, just and good," and his own experience of legal bondage never drove him to antinomian extremes. His quest had never been for release from the directive control of divine law, but only for the moral energy that would make possible its fulfilment. "In 1729, two young men, reading the Bible, saw they could not be saved without holiness, followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737 they saw holiness comes by faith. They saw likewise that men are justified before they are sanctified; but still holiness was their point."¹ In those words Wesley not only describes the origin of Methodism, but indicates why, for him, sanctification and justification can never be divorced.

IV

In closing, it is worth glancing at the implications of Wesley's doctrine for contemporary English piety, as these were both radical and significant. In proclaiming justification as present pardon rather than eschatological event moralistically conditioned, Wesley substituted an evangelical for a legalistic message, and wrought a religious revolution comparable to the Reformation. By his stress on an experienced salvation, he shifted the emphasis in religion from the purely intellectualist to the empirical and gave this principle a place in modern theology and apologetic it has never since lost; while in insisting that the Biblical and empirical witness are inter-related he saved his empiricism from degenerating into mysticism. For Wesley, experience is always specifically Christian experience created by the Word, and bound up with the historical realities of Cross and Church; and it must never be allowed to lose its objective character. Mysticism, intellectualism and moralism

¹ The Large Minutes. *Works*, Vol. viii, p. 300.

were for him variant forms of salvation by works which stood in direct antithesis to his own message of justification as divine gift and against them he waged unwearied war.¹ And finally, in interpreting divine sovereignty in terms of universal love, he broke the power of hyper-Calvinism, while in the music of evangelism he struck a note which has never died away.

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¹ See G. C. Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (Henry Holt, 1935), chapter VI.