

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

John Wesley and George Whitefield:

A Study in the Integrity of Two Theologies of Grace

by Irwin W. Reist

Dr. Reist, Associate Professor of Bible and Theology at Houghton College, Houghton, New York, discussed "The Old Testament Basis for the Resurrection Faith" in our issue of January-March, 1971. Here he turns to another subject of special relevance to the history of evangelical theology in England, but not only in England. In this connexion we are reminded of a passage in a paper prepared by Dr. J. I. Packer for the Conference Seminar in Evangelical Awakenings held at Oxford in July 1974 (one which we hope to publish in a later issue of the QUARTERLY), referring to "John Wesley's theology, which he mis-called Arminianism out of deference to the Wesley family tradition but which is better categorized as inconsistent Calvinism".

JOHN Fletcher, the venerated saint of Methodism, wrote in his "A Vindication of the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Minutes" in 1771 an evaluation of John Wesley and George Whitefield which equated them in the area of ministerial labors.

Of the two greatest and most useful ministers I ever knew, one is no more. The other, after amazing labours, flies still, with unwearied diligence, through the three kingdoms, calling sinners to repentance.¹

Whitefield had died in 1770; Wesley was to go on for twenty more years in his indefatigable labors for the gospel of Christ. Their lives had revealed an amazing number of similarities.

Both had been ordained deacon and priest in the Church of England. Whitefield became deacon in 1736 and priest in 1739;² Wesley became deacon in 1725 and priest in 1728.³ Both had come from rather obscure backgrounds although differing in moral tone. Whitefield arose in the environs of an inn; Wesley was reared in the little-known parish of Epworth. Each entered Oxford University; Whitefield in Pembroke College, Wesley in Lincoln College. In 1732 Wesley united with the Methodists; in 1735 Whitefield was

¹ J. Fletcher, *First Check to Antinomianism, The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher* (N.Y.: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1836), Vol. I, p. 63.

² S. C. Henry, *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness* (N.Y.: Abingdon, 1957), pp. 200-201.

³ V. H. H. Green, *John Wesley* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 15, 18.

received into the same group. Each went through agonizing spiritual experiences and efforts before entering the peace of the gospel in the experience of the new birth. Strangely, Whitefield underwent the experience first in 1735; Wesley, not until three years later, in 1738. Both travelled to America for purposes of evangelism and engaged in field preaching in England. While Whitefield was more dramatic in his preaching than was Wesley, both showed an early interest in acting. The young Whitefield "was very 'fond of reading Plays' and was truant 'from School for Days together to prepare' for them."⁴ The young Wesley, it is hinted "was not himself immune to theatrical charm."⁵ Both had somewhat cold, sub-romantic marriages. In the realm of theology, each proclaimed the necessity of the authority of Scripture. Whitefield wrote

If we once get above our Bibles, and cease making the written word of God our sole rule, both as to faith and practice, we shall soon lie open to all manner of delusion; and be in great danger of making shipwreck of faith and a good conscience.⁶

Wesley asserted just as strongly,

The Christian rule of right and wrong is the Word of God, the writings of the Old and New Testaments . . . This is a lantern unto a Christian's feet, and a light in all his paths. This alone he receives as his rule of right or wrong, of whatever is really good or evil.⁷

and "My ground is the Bible, yea, I am a Bible-bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small."⁸ Despite this and their respect for and reverence of the Church of England, Wesley wrote, ". . . under the article of heretics, Dr. Maclaine, in his Chronological table is pleased to place Mr. Whitefield and me."⁹ The list of similarities, of course, could be multiplied. Surprisingly enough, Wesley and Whitefield have often been conceived as differing in their theologies in the sphere of grace. This may, perhaps, be due in part to their conceptions of each other at this point. Wesley has been thought of as teaching some antecedent, natural ability on the part of

⁴ Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁵ Green, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁶ "Sermon II: Walking With God." *The Works of The Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), Vol. V, p. 27. Hereafter referred to as Sermon No., GW, *Works*, Vol. No., page no.

⁷ "Sermon XII: The Witness of Our Own Spirit." *The Works of John Wesley*, T. Jackson, editor. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), Vol. V, p. 136. Hereafter referred to as Sermon No., JW, *Works*, Vol. No., page no.

⁸ "The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M." *The Works of John Wesley*, T. Jackson, editor. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), Vol. III, p. 251. Hereafter referred to as JW, *Journal*, Vol. No., page no.

⁹ "A Short History of The People Called Methodists." *The Works of John Wesley*, T. Jackson, editor. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n. d.), Vol. XIII, p. 303. Hereafter, when not referring to the Sermons, the Journal, or the Letters of Wesley, the reference will be: Title, JW, *Works*, Vol. No., page no.

man in the order of salvation. Whitefield had charged him with making "salvation depend not on God's free-grace, but on man's free-will . . ." ¹⁰ This has been interpreted by many expositors of Wesley's theology in the direction of a semi-Pelagianism, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. ¹¹ Thus Wesley has been seen as a proponent of "works religion." Whitefield, in his theology (but not excessively in his preaching where he exhorts sinners to repent and trust in Christ), has been interpreted as teaching, as every Calvinist supposedly must, a mechanical fatalism. V. H. H. Green interprets Wesley as charging that the Calvinism of Whitefield and other Methodists ". . . contravened the logic of the Christian faith, sabotaged the pursuit of true holiness and divested good works of any function in the Christian scheme of things." ¹² Wesley, himself, could write that

the doctrine of predestination . . . directly tends to destroy that holiness which is the end of all the ordinances of God . . . tends to destroy our zeal for good works. ¹³

Whitefield, of course, had asserted that God's distinguishing grace and love had elected some to salvation and passed others by. God's grace is "free, because not free to all; but free, because God may withhold or give it to whom and when He pleases." ¹⁴

The idea, which this study wishes to investigate, is that both Wesley and Whitefield agreed in the matter of grace being the source of man's salvation and, as such, being free, but that they differed in

¹⁰ "A Letter to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley: In Answer to His Sermon, Entituled, Free Grace." *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), Vol. IV, p. 71. Hereafter, when not referring to the Letters, Sermons, or Journal of Whitefield, the reference will be: Title, GW, *Works*, Vol. No., page no.

¹¹ Cp. J. Miley, *Systematic Theology*, Two Volumes (N.Y.: Hunt and Eaton, 1894), II, p. 304: ". . . for the question of moral freedom, it is indifferent whether this capacity be native or gracious"; H. O. Wiley, *Christian Theology*, Three Volumes (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1953), II, p. 352: "The Spirit of God leads the sinner from one step to another, in proportion as he finds response in the heart of the sinner and a disposition to obedience . . . there is a human co-operation with the divine Spirit working with the free-will of man"; S. Wakefield, *A Complete System of Christian Theology* (N.Y.: Hunt and Eaton, 1869), p. 316: "In . . . the act of willing the case is very different. Here the mind is perfectly free, because it possesses a power of acting over which there is no controlling power either within or without itself. This is what we understand by the free moral agency of man"; and H. Sheldon, *System of Christian Doctrine* (N.Y.: The Methodist Book Concern, 1903), p. 294: "The power of contrary choice is a necessary endowment of man as a free, responsible being."

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹³ "Sermon CXXVIII. Free Grace." JW, *Works*, VII, pp. 376, 378.

¹⁴ "A Letter to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley: In Answer to His Sermon, Entituled, Free Grace". GW, *Works*, IV, p. 72

the mode of its operation upon mankind. For Wesley, salvation was gracious, but God moved upon all men, drawing them to Himself.

. . . there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly devoid of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called *natural conscience*. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, *preventing grace*. Every man has a greater or less measure of this . . . so that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.¹⁵

For Whitefield, grace moved the Triune God to provide for the redemption of the elect and to apply it to the persons of the elect.

It was grace, free grace, that moved the Father so to love the world, as to 'give his only-begotten son' . . . It was grace, free grace, that moved the Son to come down and die. It was grace, free grace, that moved the Holy Ghost to undertake to sanctify the elect people of God.¹⁶

This unity in believing grace to be the source of salvation and this difference in interpreting its method of operation was occasioned by the historical encounters between Wesley and Whitefield.

Wesley and Whitefield had both belonged to the Holy Club at Oxford University. When Wesley returned from America in 1738, Whitefield had left for America one day before his arrival in England.¹⁷ Towards the end of that year Whitefield, himself, returned from Georgia and he and Wesley were able "to take sweet counsel together."¹⁸ In March, 1739, Wesley writes

I had no thought of leaving London, when I received . . . a letter from Mr. Whitefield . . . intreating me in the most pressing manner to come to Bristol without delay. This I was not at all forward to do . . . My going was proposed to our society in Fetter-Lane . . . it was determined I should go.¹⁹

Wesley arrived in Bristol and began his, at first, disconcerting practice of field preaching.²⁰ About one month later he writes

While I was preaching at Newcastle . . . I was insensibly led, without any previous design, to declare strongly and explicitly, that God willeth "all men to be 'thus' saved."²¹

Yet about three months later, no problem had yet arisen from Wesley's preaching on the possibility of any man being saved, for Whitefield could write to one seeking salvation

I hope you have conversed with Mr. Wesley. It will require some degree of boldness to own either of us before men. God vouchsafes to honor us: No wonder our names are cast out as evil.²²

15 "Sermon LXXXV. On Working Out Our Own Salvation". JW, *Works*, VI, p. 512.

16 "Sermon XXXVI. The Marriage of Cana." GW, *Works*, VI, p. 77.

17 JW, *Journal*, I, p. 75.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

22 "Letter LVII." *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: Edward and Charles Dillee, 1771), Vol. I, pp. 57-58. Hereafter referred to as Letter No., GW, *Works*, Vol. No., page no.

By the year 1740, Whitfield had returned to America and Wesley had preached two sermons, "Salvation by Faith" (first preached 18 June, 1738 at Oxford)²³ in which he proclaimed perfection in the Christian life and which he (if Whitefield's negative response at this time is any indication) repeated again in part or in whole in Bristol at various times, and "Free Grace", preached at least before 24 May, 1740,²⁴ in Bristol for on that date Whitefield writes to Wesley. In his letter he argues against Wesley's perfectionism, universal redemption, and non-belief in the certainty of the final perseverance of the Christian.

The more I examine the writings of the most experienced men . . . the more I differ from your notion about not committing sin and your decrying the doctrines of election and the perseverance of the saints. I dread coming to England, unless you are resolved to oppose these truths with less warmth . . . I dread your coming to *America* because the work of God is carried on here . . . by doctrines quite opposite to those you hold . . . I write not this . . . from heat of Spirit, but out of love . . . Perhaps I may never see you again, 'til we meet in judgement; then if not before, you will know that sovereign, distinguishing, irresistible grace brought you to heaven.²⁵

In this Sermon, "Salvation By Faith", Wesley had taught that salvation by faith means (1) a present salvation, (2) salvation from original and actual sin, (3) salvation from the guilt of sin, (4) salvation from the fear of sin, and (5) salvation from the power of sin. The last he interpreted to mean that the believer does not sin by (1) any habitual sin, (2) any willful sin, (3) by any sinful desire and (4) by his infirmities "for his infirmities have no concurrence of his will; and without this they are not properly sins."²⁶ Yet, later, Wesley asserted that infirmities as mistakes "were it not for the blood of the atonement, would expose to eternal damnation",²⁷ hence implying some kind of sin quality to them.

Whitfield charged Wesley with contending for sinless perfection: "I am sorry, honoured Sir, to hear by many letters, that you seem to own a *sinless perfection* attainable in this life"²⁸ and setting a mark that he would never arrive at.²⁹ Yet Whitefield himself argued that the

²³ "Sermon I. Salvation By Faith. Preached at St. Mary's Oxford, Before the University on June 18, 1738", JW, *Works*, V, p. 7.

²⁴ "Sermon CXXVIII. Free Grace. Preached at Bristol, in the year 1740." JW, *Works*, VII p. 373. Here it is depicted as having been preached sometime in the year 1740 at Bristol, to which place Whitefield had invited Wesley. See above.

²⁵ "Letter CXCII. To the Rev. Mr. J.W." GW, *Works*, I, pp. 181-182.

²⁶ "Sermon I" JW, *Works*, V, pp. 10 ff.

²⁷ "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, As Believed and Taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, from the Year 1725, to the Year 1777." JW, *Works*, XI, p. 395.

²⁸ "Letter CCXXI. To the Rev. Mr. J. W." GW, *Works*, I, p. 211.

²⁹ "Letter CCXXIX. To Mr. J. . . . W. . . ." GW, *Works*, I, p. 219.

Christian is “to be holy as Christ is holy”³⁰ and that “Jesus Christ came down to save us, not only from the guilt, but also from the power of sin.”³¹ He, himself, confessed sin had no dominion over him, although he felt “the struggles of indwelling sin day by day.”³² He could proclaim that a

Scriptural mark of our having received the Holy Ghost is, Not committing sin . . . This expression does not imply the impossibility of a Christian’s sinning . . . It only means thus much; that a man who is really born again of God, doth not willfully commit sin, much less believe in the habitual practice of it.³³

Yet he still declared: “You may carry sanctification to what degree you will, only I cannot agree that the in-being of sin is to be destroyed in this life.”³⁴ He also believed the Church of England to be correct in its article which states “That this corruption remains even in the regenerate. . .”³⁵

Wesley, in his later work “The Principles of a Methodist,” argued that he had been teaching Christian perfection for above forty years which took him back beyond 1740 for the tract was written in 1771. In it he writes:

The Second thing laid to my Charge is, that I hold sinless perfection . . . We willingly allow . . . there is no such perfection in this life, as implies either a dispensation from doing good and attending all the ordinances of God; or a freedom from ignorance, mistake, temptation, and a thousand infirmities necessarily connected with flesh and blood.³⁶

Hence, he renounced sinless perfection, and more positively argued for Christian perfection. This was not perfection in knowledge; freedom from ignorance, mistake, or infirmities; complete freedom from temptation; nor was it a perfection incapable of increase. Hence it was not absolute.³⁷ Christian perfection was “The loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.”³⁸ The perfect man had “a heart so all-flowing with the love of God . . . as continually to offer up every thought, word, and work as a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God through Christ.”³⁹ This “perfection”

30 “Sermon CCLXVIII. To T..... K....., at London.” GW, *Works*, I, p. 252.

31 “Sermon XXXVIII. The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of All Believers.” GW, *Works*, VI, p. 99.

32 “Letter CLXIX. To the Rev. Mr. J.W.” GW, *Works*, I, p. 156.

33 “Sermon XLII. Marks of Having received the Holy Ghost.” GW, *Works*, VI, pp. 165-166.

34 “Letter CCCLXIII. To the Rev. Mr. J..... W.....” GW, *Works*, I, p. 331.

35 “Letter CCXXI. To the Rev. Mr. J.W.” GW, *Works*, I, p. 211.

36 JW, *Works*, VIII, pp. 363-365.

37 “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection”, JW, *Works*, XI, p. 374.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 394.

39 “The Principles of a Methodist.” JW, *Works*, VIII, p. 365.

was received through faith, instantaneously, and every moment.⁴⁰ Wesley believed that Whitefield misunderstood what he meant by perfection, rejecting it because he set it too high. In writing to his brother, Charles, John questioned:

I wonder you do not, in this article, fall in plumb with Mr. Whitefield . . . I cordially assent to his opinion, that there is no such perfection as you describe. At least, I never met with an instance of it; and I doubt I ever shall. Therefore I still think, to set perfection so high is effectually to renounce it."⁴¹

Perhaps if Wesley earlier had emphasized to Whitefield the concept of love, the instrumentality of faith (which both he and Whitefield taught was the gift of God), the necessity of continual growth, and the privilege of a second crisis experience after the new birth, the latter might have been able to accept the Wesleyan exposition of sanctification. That he did not in theory is certain; that he did experience in life the power is quite possible. When Wesley preached Whitefield's funeral sermon he cried out:

Is there any other fruit of the grace of God with which he was eminently endowed . . . ? There is one, that is, catholic love . . . Who is a man of catholic spirit? One who loves as friends, as brethren in the Lord . . . all of whatever opinion, mode of worship, or congregation, who believe in the Lord Jesus; who love God and man; who, rejoicing to please and fearing to offend God, are careful to abstain from evil, and zealous of good works.⁴²

It is important to note that both Wesley and Whitefield during the debate and soon following its eruption sought to express love. Whitefield wrote in Nov., 1740 "O that there may be harmony and very intimate union between us!"⁴³ and again in Feb., 1741, "My heart is much united to Messrs. W.....s, tho' we differ in some particulars."⁴⁴ Wesley wrote in his Journal for 23 April, "I spent an agreeable hour with Mr. Wh..... I believe he is sincere in all he says concerning his earnest desire of joining hand in hand with all that love the Lord Jesus Christ."⁴⁵

In addition to the conflict over perfection occasioned by the message of "Salvation By Faith," Wesley and Whitefield disagreed over the matters of unconditional election and final perseverance. The controversy was triggered by the above mentioned sermon,

⁴⁰ "A Plain Account . . .", JW, *Works*, XI, p. 393.

⁴¹ "Letters to His Brother Charles. LXXV.—To the Same." JW, *Works*, XII, p. 131.

⁴² "Sermon LIII. On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield." JW, *Works*, VI, p. 180.

⁴³ "Letter CCXXXVI. To the Rev. Mr. J.W." GW, *Works*, I, p. 225.

⁴⁴ "Letter CCLXIV. To Mr. J..... H....., at Bethesda." GW, *Works*, I, p. 247.

⁴⁵ JW, *Journal*, I, p. 365.

"Free Grace." Whitefield could write somewhat despairingly and in gentle humility to Wesley, on 25 September 1740,

I find your sermon has had its expected success; it hath set the nation a disputing . . . O that you would be more cautious . . . If you go on thus, honoured Sir, how can I concur with you? . . . Honoured Sir, pray for me. The Lord be with your dear soul.⁴⁶

A few months later on 20 February 1741 he wrote, "You must not be surprised, if I publish an answer to Mr. John W.....'s sermon, entitled *Free Grace*. It is wrote in much love and meekness."⁴⁷ The publication turned out to be a letter he had written to Wesley on 24 December 1740. Its title became the above-mentioned, "A Letter to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley In Answer to His Sermon Entituled *Free Grace*."⁴⁸

Basic to the controversy were the following points:

(1) Both Wesley and Whitefield confessed grace as the source of man's salvation. Whitefield taught:

I know Christ is all in all. Man is nothing. Therefore he hath a free-will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and to do after his good pleasure. It is God must prevent . . . must accompany with his grace . . .⁴⁹

Wesley also confessed:

We are to observe that great and important truth which ought never to be out of our remembrance. It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure . . . this expression cuts off all such vain conceits, and clearly shows his motive to work lay wholly in himself, in his own mere grace, in his unmerited mercy.⁵⁰

(2) Both Wesley and Whitefield taught that man is totally depraved in Adam. Whitefield wrote at the time of the controversy to American Indians:

We died in them [Adam and Eve]; and come into this world poor and miserable, blind and naked, as they were . . . Hence it is that we are given to lust, anger, envy, hatred, pride and malice. . .⁵¹

Wesley wrote words which echo Calvin himself:

Know that corruption of thy inmost nature. . . that thou art corrupted in every power, in every faculty of the soul, that thou art totally corrupted in every one of these.⁵²

(3) Both Wesley and Whitefield denied any natural, innate will power in man which enabled him to turn to God. Whitefield wrote

⁴⁶ "Letter CCXXI. To the Rev. Mr. J.W." GW, *Works*, I, p. 212.

⁴⁷ "Letter CCLXV. To Mr. S..... W....., at Bristol." GW, *Works*, I, p. 248.

⁴⁸ GW, *Works*, IV, pp. 51-73.

⁴⁹ "Letter XCIV. To the Rev. Mr. P....." GW, *Works*, I, 90.

⁵⁰ "Sermon LXXXV. On Working Out Our Own Salvation." JW, *Works*, VI, pp. 508-509.

⁵¹ "Letter CL XXXIII. To the Allegany Indians." GW, *Works*, I, p. 172.

⁵² "Sermon VII. The Way to the Kingdom." JW, *Works*, V, p. 82.

at the center of the controversy, "Adam could not stand in paradise when left to his own free-will, how then can we?"⁵³ and later in a more evangelistic context, "But I know no one can come, unless the Father draw him."⁵⁴ Whitefield misunderstood Wesley at this point for he argued that universal redemptionists made free-will the ground of their hope rather than God's sure word of promise.⁵⁵ "All others leave free-will in man, and make him, in part at least, a Saviour to himself."⁵⁶ But Wesley explicitly asserted that man since the fall has no natural, innate free will.

Both Mr. F. and Mr. W. absolutely deny natural free-will. We both steadily assert that the will of man is by nature free only to evil. Yet we believe that every man has a measure of free-will restored to him by grace.⁵⁷

The difference between Wesley and Whitefield is not about the source of salvation, which is grace, but in its mode of operation. For Wesley grace is operative positively on all men; for Whitefield it is applied redemptively only to the eternally elect in Christ. For Wesley the eternal decree of God in Christ is to set blessing and cursing before men whom He has already graciously enabled to choose.

This decree, whereby 'whom God did foreknow, he did predestinate' was indeed from everlasting; this whereby all who suffer Christ to make them alive are 'elect according to the foreknowledge of God' . . . it is as unchangeable and eternal as is the being of God that gave it.⁵⁸

For Whitefield, God's grace is given to all men to hinder their sinning, but redemptively only to the elect.

. . . God intends to give saving grace through Jesus Christ, only to a certain number, and that the rest of mankind, after the fall of Adam, being justly left of God to continue in sin, will at last suffer that eternal death which is its proper wages.⁵⁹

To Whitefield, when Wesley denied the particular, distinguishing love of God efficaciously and irresistibly applied to the elect,

53 "Letter CLVII." GW, *Works*, I, p. 146.

54 "Sermon XL. The Holy Spirit Convincing the World of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment." GW, *Works*, VI, p. 141.

55 "A Letter to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley." GW, *Works*, IV, pp. 65-66. The term in the controversy, "universal redemption" is unfortunate, for it does not mean on the part of Wesley that all are saved, but only that all may be saved (Cp. P. Watson. *The Message of the Wesleys*, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1964) nor on the part of Whitefield that most men are lost. Cp. his words, "Do not say I preach despair: I despair of no one, when I consider God had mercy on such a wretch as I. . ." "Sermon IX. The Folly and Danger of Being Not Righteous Enough." GW, *Works*, V, p. 138.

56 "Letter XCIV. To the Rev. Mr. P....." GW, *Works*, I, p. 89.

57 "Some Remarks on Mr. Hill's 'Review of all The Doctrines Taught by Mr. John Wesley.'" JW, *Works*, X, p. 392.

58 "Sermon CXXVIII. Free Grace." JW, *Works*, VII, p. 385.

59 "A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley." GW, *Works*, IV, p. 58.

he clearly questioned whether grace was the source of man's salvation and whether anyone would be saved.

You plainly make salvation depend not on God's free-grace, but on man's free-will; and if thus, it is more than probable Jesus Christ would not have had the satisfaction of seeing the fruit of his death in the eternal salvation of one soul.⁶⁰

In the sermon, Wesley was concerned not only with stating that God's grace was free in all to whom it was given, *i.e.*, that it was given without merit on man's part, but also that it was free for all because God's mercy was over all His works. With the former Whitefield agreed; with the latter he intensely disagreed, for he asserted that God's mercy being over all his works was not saving mercy.⁶¹ Having asserted his thesis that God's grace is both free in all and free for all, Wesley went on to argue against the decree of absolute predestination. Whitefield, in his reply, argued that Wesley should first have proven that God's grace is free to all and then argued against election, rather than following the course he did of assuming election as not true and free grace to all as true. Wesley rather argued against reprobation which people were disliking, which, in turn, moved them against election.⁶² "After the first paragraph, I scarce know whether you have mentioned it [election and free-grace] so much as once, through your whole sermon."⁶³

However, notwithstanding, Wesley did assert free-grace to all and began his attack on predestination. He argued first, that absolute predestination makes preaching vain, *i.e.*, makes void the ordinance of God. It is needless to the elect and useless to the non-elect.⁶⁴ Wesley reveals here, of course, a gross misunderstanding of Whitefields' Calvinism, as Whitefield was quick to reveal by asserting: (1) that God has also ordained the means of reaching the elect as well as ordaining the elect; (2) that the preacher does not know who is elect and who is not, hence he must preach to all, and (3) that preaching might even be useful to the non-elect in restraining them from sin.⁶⁵

Wesley's second argument was that the decree of absolute predestination tends to destroy holiness, not in the sense that none holding the doctrine are holy, but that the doctrine tends to take away the first motives to holiness: the hope of reward, heaven, and the fear of punishment, hell, and the branches of holiness: meekness and

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 55-58.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁶⁴ "Sermon CXXVIII. Free Grace." JW, *Works*, VII, p. 376. Hereafter referred to as "FG", *Works*, Vol. No., page no.

⁶⁵ "A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley." GW, *Works*, IV, p. 58. Hereafter referred to as "Letter," *Works*, Vol. No., page no.

love, for it breeds a spirit of sharpness contrary to Christ and inspires coldness towards those without.⁶⁶ To this, Whitefield replied that (1) those, believing election, who are proud, are answered by those who are meek, (2) many of Wesley's group who espoused perfection were also proud, (3) the express argument of Scripture was against pride in relation to being elect (cf. Col. 3: 12-13: "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, bowels of mercy, kindness . . ."), (4) Wesley may mistake zeal for the truth for contempt and narrowness, (5) a believer seeks to be holy for the sake of being holy out of gratitude to Christ without regard to rewards, (6) the elect know that the greater they work, the greater will be their reward, and (7) Scripture teaches that holiness is a mark of the elect—"chosen through sanctification of Spirit."⁶⁷

Wesley's third argument was that absolute predestination tended to destroy the comfort and happiness of Christianity, for all who believe they are reprobate lose the promises of God and all who believe they are elect tend to rest in a speculative opinion rather than the "feeling possession of God in your heart, wrought in you by the Holy Ghost."⁶⁸ In reply, Whitefield asserted that (1) Wesley could never prove his thesis, for he had never believed election, (2) the doctrine, a supposed "bare speculation," was Whitefield's daily support of assurance, (3) none who desire God's salvation can know they are reprobate, (4) doubting one's election causes one to search for assurance, (5) Wesley cannot judge whether predestination destroys the witness of the Spirit, for he doubts he has it, (6) even the experience of spiritual desertion or doubt of the Spirit's assurance is parallel to that of Christ in the garden and (7) the only real hope is assurance of final perseverance guaranteed by the doctrine and decree of election, for a present assurance of the Spirit that past and present sins are forgiven, gives no hope for the future.⁶⁹

Wesley's fourth argument was that the doctrine tended to destroy zeal for good works in the sense that it lessened our love, which produces good works, for those elected to evil and lessened our relieving bodily needs because such would be needless to the elect and useless to the non-elect.⁷⁰ Whitefield did not reply to this charge although he could and probably should have as follows: (1) good works *in* the elect are ordained as well as the *elect*, (2) gracious election calls forth good works in love in gratitude for election and (3) one can never know who the elect and non-elect are.

66 "FG", *Works*, VII, pp. 376-377.

67 "Letter", *Works*, IV, pp. 59-61.

68 "FG", *Works*, VII, p. 377.

69 "Letter", *Works*, IV, pp. 63-64.

70 "FG", *Works*, IV, pp. 378-379.

Wesley's fifth and sixth arguments were that the decree tended to destroy the Christian revelation, making it unnecessary and therefore untrue and making it contradict itself, for Scripture says God hated Esau yet also it says "God is love" and it makes God respect those whom He has chosen from eternity when elsewhere we are told God is no respecter of persons.⁷¹ Whitefield cogently replied that (1) it is by the Christian revelation that we know of election, therefore it is necessary and true and the Christian revelation is the means of the effecting of election, (2) may not God hate all men as fallen in Adam and then show forth love to whom He pleases?, and (3) God is no respecter of persons in the sense that any who trust in Christ because of election are His by grace not merit.⁷²

Wesley's seventh argument was that the decrees made universal texts of Scripture, especially on the lips of Christ, meaningless and Christ a blasphemer.⁷³ Whitefield did not reply to the charge of blasphemy in regard to Christ; he did reply to the charge of the meaninglessness of the universal texts in the following way: (1) God does not delight in the death of the sinner simply because of the death, but to magnify His justice, and (2) if the texts are taken literally, they mean that no one will be lost and all will be saved. We know this is not so.⁷⁴

Wesley's eighth and final argument was that the decrees blaspheme the Father's truth (for not even the devil has promised falsely that all may be saved), His justice (for they make God condemn men for sin they cannot avoid because He will not give them grace) and his mercy (for even the devil in seeking to do evil finds no rest or place for it). Can God seek to do evil then and do it?⁷⁵ Whitefield in reply spoke only to the problem of God's justice and simply said that God looks on men as fallen in Adam and therefore He might justly pass all or some by.⁷⁶

Whitefield then made a comment on a secondary point in the structure of Wesley's argument: the relation between foreknowledge and predestination. Wesley said that Scripture teaches that election depends upon foreknowledge (I Pet. 1: 2; Rom. 8: 29).⁷⁷ Whitefield's reply was that if approbation or approval is meant by foreknowledge then election does depend on foreknowledge, for then it means grace, but if by foreknowledge is meant God's foreseeing good works and then choosing men, election does not depend on fore-

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 379-380.

⁷² "Letter", *Works*, IV, p. 60.

⁷³ "FG", *Works*, VII, pp. 381-382.

⁷⁴ "Letter", *Works*, IV, p. 71.

⁷⁵ "FG", *Works*, VII, pp. 382-383.

⁷⁶ "Letter", *Works*, IV, p. 67.

⁷⁷ "FG", *Works*, VII, p. 380.

knowledge.⁷⁸ Germane to this issue is the fact that strictly speaking there is no foreknowledge with God since all time is an eternal present for God. He sees all chronological sequence at once and He does this through Christ. Also important here is whether faith is a good work. For both Wesley and Whitefield, it is not, since it is a gift and work of God in the soul.

Wesley concluded the presentation on the decrees by giving four arguments in favour of free grace for all: (1) it encourages good works and holiness, (2) it is a wellspring of joy and comfort, (3) it is worthy of the justice, mercy, and truth of God, and (4) the whole scope of Christian revelation agrees with it: Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles.⁷⁹

The sermon also raised the issue of final perseverance, for Wesley had said that the witness of the Spirit means assurance of the forgiveness of past and present sins, "But it does not necessarily imply a full assurance of our own future perseverance. I do not say this is never joined to it, but that it is not necessarily implied therein; for many have the one who have not the other."⁸⁰ Whitefield, of course, held to final perseverance as an outgrowth of his Calvinism which he claimed was taught to him by Christ and the apostles, not because he read Calvin.⁸¹ "No, God chose from eternity, he called us in time, and I am persuaded will keep us from falling finally, till time shall be no more."⁸² He even asserted that the text Wesley used for the sermon (Rom. 8: 29-30) plainly proved final perseverance.⁸³ Wesley's view of the text however was that

the apostle is not here, as many have supposed, describing a chain of cause and effects . . . but simply showing the *method in which God works*; the order in which the several branches of salvation constantly follow each other.⁸⁴

Elsewhere Wesley argued that men are "saved from the fear, though not from the possibility, of falling away from God."⁸⁵

What shall we say about the debate between Wesley and Whitefield mediated through the sermon of Wesley and the letter of Whitefield, and about the issues which it raised? Contemporary theology should not, of course, minimize the issue of the sovereign, gracious God electing in Jesus Christ to be for man. Nor should contemporary Christians take the approach Wesley did about one

78 "Letter", *Works*, IV, p. 70.

79 "FG", *Works*, VII, p. 385.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 377.

81 "Letter CCXIV. To the Reverend Mr. J..... W....." *GW, Works*, I, p. 205.

82 "Letter XCV." *GW, Works*, I, 90.

83 "Letter." *Works*, IV, p. 57.

84 "Sermon LVIII. On Predestination." *JW, Works*, VI, p. 226.

85 "Sermon I. Salvation by Faith." *JW, Works*, V, p. 11.

year after the storm broke. On 4 April, 1741, he argued that (1) Whitefield should not have published his answer for it put weapons into the hands of their common enemies,⁸⁶ (2) Whitefield should have published his answer in pamphlet form without mentioning Wesley's name,⁸⁷ (3) Whitefield's answer was "a mere burlesque upon an answer; leaving four of my eight arguments untouched, and handling the other four in so gentle a manner, as if he was afraid they would burn his fingers."⁸⁸ and (4) Whitefield had said enough to what was foreign to the question "to make an open (and probably, irreparable) breach between him and me."⁸⁹

About two years later in 1743, Wesley evidenced a desire to unite with Whitefield and revealed a change in his views which moved him towards Whitefield theologically. He could now see God's election of certain people for a special work, certain nations for special privileges; some people to temporal and spiritual advantages, and the possibility of some individuals to salvation. He could also assert that, although, in general, grace does not work irresistibly, at times it does, and that there is a state in this life which a man may attain from which he cannot fall.⁹⁰ Here we can see Wesley teaching us that openness on secondary points and change on extra-kerygmatic matters may be possible. Whitefield does the same in dealing with the mystery of election.

How God will be pleased to deal with the Gentiles, who yet sit in darkness and under the shadow of death, and upon whom the sun of righteousness never yet arose, is not for us to inquire. 'What have we to do to judge those that are without?' To God's mercy let us recommend them, and wait for a solution to this and every other difficult point, till the great day of accounts, when all God's dispensations, both of providence and grace, will be fully cleared up by methods to us, as yet unknown, because unrevealed. However, this we know, that the judge of all the earth will most assuredly, do right.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Why not, if truth was at stake? Love, at the expense of truth, is not true love. The question here is whether the issue was a major one or not. Is not God's sovereign, electing love in Christ basic?

⁸⁷ Wesley does not say why he believes this—perhaps it was to present a united front to the world and the Church.

⁸⁸ JW, *Journal*, I, pp. 305-306. Has not Wesley deserted his own view and experience of Christian love here? Was not Whitefield explicitly trying to show reserve because of love? Wesley also seems not to have read Whitefield's answer closely, for he replies to all but two of the arguments of Wesley and pursues intently the secondary point of election and foreknowledge. See above.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 306. Although the rift between them resulted in two Methodist groups, the Calvinistic and the Wesleyan, and occasioned major controversies at the Methodist Conferences in the later years (1745 and 1770 especially) of Methodism's history in England, Wesley and Whitefield show again and again that at heart they were one and that in the two essential doctrines of the gospel, the new birth and justification by grace through faith alone, they were agreed.

⁹⁰ JW, *Journal*, I, pp. 425-427.

⁹¹ "Sermon XLVI. Of Justification by Christ." GW, *Works*, VI, p. 224.

The main lesson of Wesley and Whitefield which the contemporary church may and must learn is the centrality of kerygmatic theology. As St. Paul wrote: "The word of the Cross . . . is the power of God" (I Cor. 1: 18) and "We preach Christ crucified . . . the power of God" (I Cor. 1: 23-24). When Wesley preached the funeral sermon of Whitefield he gave as Whitefield's fundamental point:

'Give God all the glory of whatever is good in man and in the business of salvation, set Christ as high as possible' . . . So he and they⁹² taught: There is no power in man, till it is given him from above, to do one good work, to speak one good word, or to form one good desire,⁹³

In thus speaking, Wesley spoke for himself, Whitefield, and the entire fellowship of the redeemed. It is the sovereign, free grace of God revealed in Christ that saves any man who is saved.

Houghton College, Houghton, N. Y.

⁹² The Methodists.

⁹³ "Sermon LIII. On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield." JW, *Works*, VI, p. 178.