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How Arminian was John Wesley?

Mr Bennett's article on a topic closely related to our concern in this journal with the nature of Reformed theology arose from his postgraduate studies on the public invitation system in evangelism.

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J. I. Packer has called John Wesley's theology 'inconsistent Calvinism'.¹ If Mr Wesley had heard such a thing, no doubt his beautiful, wavy hair would have quickly straightened or even stood on end. Wesley certainly thought of himself as an Arminian from the time of his controversial sermon on free grace in 1740 to his publication of the *Arminian Magazine* in January 1778, and beyond. But the true picture is not quite that simple. Clearly not all types of Arminianism are the same, nor for that matter are all forms of Calvinism. Clark Pinnock writes of 'a spectrum of Calvinisms' and 'a spectrum of Arminianisms'.² Perhaps it might be better to think of one spectrum, stretching from Hyper-Calvinism to Pelagianism. But whether it be one spectrum or two, there certainly are degrees of belief in both camps.

The decidedly Arminian nature of Wesley's 'Free Grace' sermon preached at Bristol in 1740 caused considerable heartbreak to his friend George Whitefield, an ardent Calvinist. We have here, early in his career, what was probably his most Arminian statement. Yet as early as 1743, prior to a debate with Whitefield, he could write that he did not deny that God had 'unconditionally elected some to eternal glory', though he could not hold that all those not so elected would of necessity perish.³ Two years later, Wesley could say, 'the truth of the Gospel' (that is Wesley's brand of Arminianism) is 'within a hair's breadth' of Calvinism. Indeed, in some respects it comes 'to the very edge of Calvinism'.⁴

This article will begin with a close examination of Wesley's 'Free Grace' sermon, then look at some of his other pronouncements,

1 J. I. Packer, *Among God's Giants* (Eastbourne, 1991), 56.

2 Clark H. Pinnock (ed), *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis, 1995), x.

3 John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (14 vols; Grand Rapids, [1872] 1991), 1:426-7.

4 *Ibid.*, 8:284-5.

particularly those made at later dates, and try to assess his surprising lack of use of that sermon as Methodism became established. It will then make a comparison with his Arminianism and that of Arminius and modern Arminians.

The Free Grace sermon

Right at the commencement of the 'Free Grace' sermon John Wesley draws the battle lines: 'The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all, and free for all.'⁵ The grace that is 'free in all' gives rise to any 'good tempers', 'good desires', and 'good purposes and intentions' to be found in anyone. Indeed, 'Whatever good is in man, or is done by man, God is the author and doer of it', by his grace.⁶ Here Wesley's views are not dissimilar to the concept of common grace taught by Calvin and others,⁷ though, as shall be seen later, he goes a significant step further.

But where Wesley caused Whitefield and others concern was the phrase 'free for all' and its exposition. Here he did not just reject preterition, he also rejected the idea that some were elected to salvation and others not so elected. For if some were not elected to salvation, then it was the same effectively as preterition, however one chose to describe it.⁸

In this sermon he states that the verse 'Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died' (Rom. 14:15) is 'a clear proof that Christ died, not only for those that are saved, but also for them that perish'. Whether this verse is proof of that or not does not matter too much for our purposes here; what is important is that in 1740 Wesley believed that it was. He then proceeds to pile up the texts in support of his case: 'He is "the Saviour of the world" (Jn. 4:42); He is "the lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29) . . . He "is the Saviour of all men"' (1 Tim. 4:10), etc.⁹

Wesley also says in this sermon that 'It cannot be denied, that [Jesus] everywhere speaks as if he was willing that all men should be saved', nor can it 'be denied that the gracious words which came out of his mouth are full of invitations to all sinners . . .'¹⁰ He asks 'Why then are not all men saved?', and answers, 'Not because of any decree of God; not

5 *Ibid.*, 7:373; (his emphasis).

6 *Ibid.*, 7:374.

7 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles; 2 vols; Philadelphia, 1960), 1:276-7.

8 Wesley, *Works*, 7:374-5.

9 *Ibid.*, 7:380-381. In scriptural quotations being used by Wesley, the text of the Authorised Version has been retained.

10 *Ibid.*, 7:382.

because it is his pleasure they should die . . . for . . . "He is not willing that any should perish . . ." (2 Pet. 3:9).¹¹

But God did make a decree 'before the foundation of the world'. It was 'Even this: "I will set before the sons of men 'life and death, blessing and cursing'. And the soul that chooseth life shall live, as the soul that chooseth death shall die". 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"'.¹² Thus God's foreknowledge of human response is a prerequisite of predestination.

But does this contradict other statements that Wesley makes in this sermon such as that to whom God gives his grace 'does not depend on any power or merit in man; no not in any degree, neither in whole nor in part'? Indeed, according to Wesley 'It does not in anywise depend either on the good works or righteousness of the receiver; not on anything he has done, or anything he is . . .' There certainly seems to be a contradiction, or at least an 'inconsistency' there, in that according to Wesley's sermon God predestinates certain individuals in line with what he knows they will do, yet God's grace is granted without consideration of prior merit.

Other writings and sermons

Later, in 1743, when he debated these issues with Whitefield, he still argued with him on three points: '1. Unconditional Election; 2. Irresistible Grace; 3. Final Perseverance'. With the first point he was prepared to accept that people such as the Apostle Paul were 'unconditionally' elected to perform certain functions, that some nations were so elected to hear the gospel, and even 'some persons' were 'unconditionally elected . . . to eternal glory'. But he rejected that 'all those' not so 'elected to glory must perish everlastingly', and 'That there is one soul on earth, who has not ever had a possibility of escaping eternal damnation'.

With regard to irresistible grace he could state that though grace does not generally 'act irresistibly, yet in some souls the grace of God is so far irresistible that they cannot but believe and be finally saved'.

Concerning final perseverance, once more Wesley did not generally accept it, but he did believe that there was 'a state attainable in this life, from which a man cannot finally fall'.¹³

To Wesley, salvation was never just a matter of simple human decision, nor even primarily so, and a major reason for this was that he

11 *Ibid.*, 7:381.

12 *Ibid.*, 7:385.

13 *Ibid.*, 1:426-7.

strongly believed in the sinful condition of humanity. He could say that the human state was sinful and powerless, for since the Fall no one 'has a natural power to choose anything that is truly good'.¹⁴ For humanity is 'by nature all "earthly, sensual, devilish"; altogether "corrupt and abominable" [and] cannot of himself think one good thought'. Indeed, each of us is 'all sin, a mere lump of ungodliness'.¹⁵ This does not mean that people cannot do good deeds as such, rather that even those are done from the wrong motives, and are thus still sin.¹⁶

Wesley goes as far as to say that there 'dwelleth no good thing' in anyone, but adds the crucial rider: 'till he find grace'.¹⁷ And within Wesley's concept of common grace, mentioned above, was his doctrine of prevenient grace, which maintained that God gives sufficient grace to all people to make it possible for each one to believe. Indeed, all had 'a possibility of escaping eternal damnation'.¹⁸ But even then additional gifts of grace are necessary before one can be saved,¹⁹ and the source of that grace is solely in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 'It was of mere grace, of free love, of undeserved mercy that God hath vouchsafed to sinful man any way of reconciliation with himself', he proclaimed.²⁰

But if grace 'is the source' of salvation, 'faith' is its 'condition'.²¹ But what is faith? In a conversation with Wesley in 1739, the Bishop of Bristol suggested, 'faith itself is a good work'. Wesley strongly disagreed. To him even faith 'is the gift of God, and a gift that presupposes nothing in us but sin and misery',²² a view he confirms in his sermon on justification by faith.²³

Believing that not only one's justification is the gift of God, but also the faith which leads to it, humanity being powerless to believe without grace, could, indeed, lead to the charge of 'inconsistent Calvinism'. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston argue that this belief was a key belief of the Reformers, such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Bucer, all

14 *Ibid.*, 10:350, from *Some Remarks on Aspasio Vindicated*, written in 1766. See also Robert W. Burtner & Robert E. Chiles (ed), *A Compend of Wesley's Theology* (Nashville, 1954), 132.

15 John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions: Forty-Four Sermons* (London, [1760] 1944), 69, from his sermon *The Righteousness of Faith*, first published in 1746.

16 Wesley, *Works*, 9:456, from the 'Doctrine of Original Sin', Extracted from *Mr Boston's Fourfold State of Man*, written in 1757. See also Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London, 1960), 50.

17 Wesley, *44 Sermons*, 69, from his sermon 'The Righteousness of Faith'.

18 John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* (ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols; London, 1938), 3:85.

19 Williams, *Theology*, 42.

20 Wesley, *44 Sermons*, 70-71, from his sermon 'The Righteousness of Faith'.

21 *Ibid.*, 2, from his sermon 'Salvation by Faith'.

22 Wesley, *Works*, 13:499-501.

23 Wesley, *44 Sermons*, 58-9.

Calvinists.²⁴ Yet, the reason Packer calls Wesley's theology 'inconsistent Calvinism' goes beyond even that, though it includes it. It is because of 'Wesley's emphasis on the sovereignty of God in the new birth'.²⁵

Packer cites a conversation between Wesley and Charles Simeon, recorded by the latter, which demonstrates this well. They met on 20 Dec, 1784, and Simeon's record runs:

'Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and that I have sometimes been called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions . . . Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?' 'Yes, [replied Wesley], I do indeed.' 'And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?' 'Yes, solely through Christ.' 'But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?' 'No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.' . . . 'And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?' 'Yes, I have no hope but in Him.' 'Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance of all that I hold, and as I hold it . . .'²⁶

Certainly, Simeon seems to have been not able to discern a significant difference between their beliefs on these points.

On one occasion Wesley urged a condemned murderer to cry unto God with all his might for grace to repent and believe the Gospel.²⁷ Yet it was not the crying unto God, with or without all one's might, that saved; it was the grace of God made active through God-given faith. Nor was it the activity of the preacher that brought this about, but the Holy Spirit of God. It is the Spirit who convicts the sinner, opens his eyes and quickens him. Indeed, the new convert is born of the Spirit.²⁸ In his evangelistic practice, Wesley shared little with much of modern 'Arminianism', with its hurrying people into making a 'decision for Christ'. An examination of his *Journal* makes it evident that he saw

24 R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe* (Grand Rapids, 1997), 22–3, quoting 'Historical and Theological Introduction', in Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (trans. J. I. Packer & O. R. Johnston, Cambridge, 1957), 57–8.

25 Packer, *God's Giants*, 56, fn. 36.

26 J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and The Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, 1991), 13–14, quoting *Horae Homileticae*, Preface: 1, xvii f. Wesley speaks highly of Simeon in his brief mention of this meeting in his *Journal*, but gives no details of their conversation, Wesley, *Works*, 4:294.

27 Wesley, *Journal*, 3:43.

28 Williams, *Theology*, 101–2.

conversion primarily as the work of God, rather than human decision.²⁹

In 1745 John Wesley had some conversations with his brother, Charles, and some other associates about various doctrinal issues, during which a number of questions were asked and appropriate answers given. Two questions are of particular relevance to the subject under consideration. Question 22 asked, 'Does not the truth of the gospel lie very near both to Calvinism and Antinomianism?' The answer came, 'Indeed it does; as it were a hair's breadth: So that it is altogether foolish and sinful, because we do not quite agree either with one or the other, to run from them as far as ever we can'. Question 23 asked, 'Wherein may we come to the very edge of Calvinism?' To which the answer was given, '1) In ascribing all good to the free grace of God. 2) In denying all natural free-will, and all power antecedent to grace. And, 3) In excluding all merit from man; even for what he has or does by the grace of God'.³⁰

The two phrases a 'hair's breadth' from Calvinism and 'to the very edge of Calvinism' make it clear that though Wesley and his closest associates may have rejected Calvinism they did not do so by much, nor did they believe their brand of Arminianism to be very different from it. It is also possible that by 1745 Wesley may have moved a little from his earlier understanding of free grace, or at least have become a little less militantly Arminian than he was five years earlier.

Further evidence to support this is Wesley's surprising, and probably significant, decision to omit the 'Free Grace' sermon from the various editions of his *Sermons on Several Occasions*. In the first edition of his sermons in 1746, containing 12 addresses, he wrote in the preface that they contained 'the substance of what I have been preaching for between eight and nine years last past', but they did not include the 'Free Grace' sermon. Was, then, the Arminianism of that sermon not included in the 'substance' of his teaching after 1740? When additional sermons were added in 1748, 1750 and 1760 (the *Forty-Four Sermons*), that sermon was still omitted. Even when he later added further addresses to make it the *Fifty-Three Sermons*, 'Free Grace' was still missing.³¹

It is hard to determine the reason for that omission, but it is not likely that he just simply forgot to include it. The 'Free Grace' sermon had been the cause of too much dispute for it to be easily forgotten. As the sermons were intended as standards of Methodist belief to go

29 See Wesley, *Journal*, 2:246-8, 253, 256, 375-7; 3:52; 6:524; 8:48; A Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart* (Exeter, 1967), 163-5.

30 Wesley, *Works*, 8:284-5.

31 Wesley, *44 Sermons*, ii, v; John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions: Fifty Three Sermons*, (London, [1771]).

alongside his *Notes on the New Testament*, the omission would seem to be both deliberate and significant. The two possibilities seem to be, first, that it was omitted because his soteriology by this time had moved a little closer to Calvinism, secondly, that he was trying to avoid controversy. Yet, though Wesley did not court controversy, neither did he retreat from it, and, as has been noted, the publication of the *Arminian Magazine* in 1778 indicates that he was still ready to nail his colours to the Arminian mast, whatever the consequences. In addition these collections of sermons were intended primarily for his own preachers, in other words those one would expect to agree with the sentiments expressed, so the idea that he was trying to avoid controversy is not persuasive. It is more probable that his soteriology had moved a degree or two towards Calvinism, and he was not entirely happy with some of his earlier thoughts.

Wesley and Arminius

It is not intended here to make a detailed analysis of the soteriology of the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, but a few points need to be noted here, so that a comparison may be made with Wesley.

Arminius had a low view of humanity in its fallen, sinful condition. To Arminius, human free will is not only 'wounded, maimed, infirm, bent and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost . . . it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by divine grace'.³² Stemming from that was the impossibility of human beings initiating repentance and faith for themselves; these could be initiated by God alone.³³ Wesley (and, indeed, Calvin) would have said 'Amen!' to that.

Arminius held then that even the faith to believe in Christ was the gift of God, as did Wesley. To illustrate his position he told a story of a rich man who gave alms to a beggar. Though the beggar held out his hand to receive that gift, the gift still remained a donation of the rich man's generosity, rather than being dependent upon the beggar. In the same way the faith to believe was also only a gift of God's grace.³⁴

Arminius viewed the election of individuals as based on God's foreknowledge of who would believe.³⁵ This, as has already been noted was Wesley's view. With regard to the extent of the atonement, once more the two are generally in accord, with Arminius teaching the

32 Sproul, *Willing*, 125, quoting James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius: The London Edition* (Grand Rapids, 1986), Vol. 2: 192.

33 A Skevington Wood, 'The Declaration of Sentiments: The Theological Testament of Arminius', *Evangelical Quarterly* LXV/No. 2 (Apr. 1993), 123-4.

34 Sproul, *Willing*, 133, quoting Arminius, *Works*, 2:52.

35 Charles M. Cameron, 'Arminius—Hero or Heretic', *Evangelical Quarterly* LXIV/No.3 (July 1992), 220; Wood, 'Declaration', 122.

universality of the atonement, whilst rejecting Universalism,³⁶ as did Wesley. Arminius, again with Wesley, also rejected the idea of irresistible grace,³⁷ stating that 'All unregenerate persons have freedom of will, and a capability of resisting the Holy Spirit, of rejecting the proffered grace of God'.³⁸

On the issue of the Perseverance of the Saints Arminius was, perhaps, a little less firmly decided than Wesley. To Wesley one could quite definitely fall away, even though it was possible to reach a state from which one could not fall away. Yet to Arminius there seemed a little less certainty on this issue. Indeed, there was, perhaps, a wavering in his position.³⁹ Though within what might be seen to be contradictions in his writings on this issue, Carl Bangs and Charles Cameron suggest that Arminius may have been distinguishing between the position of the 'believer' and that of the 'elect'. The 'believer' may fall away, but the 'elect' could not.⁴⁰

After Wesley

After Wesley soteriology underwent some dramatic changes. In America Nathaniel Taylor made an attempt to do what has been described as restate 'Calvinism in more acceptable terms'.⁴¹ In doing so it could be argued that the results were hard to describe as 'Calvinism'. For example, with regard to total depravity Taylor accepted that the nature of each individual would inevitably lead to sin, but he did not accept that that nature made it impossible for an individual to believe in Christ.⁴² Taylor's view here would seem to be more 'Arminian' than Wesley's.

Taylor's teachings were followed in word and deed by the evangelist Charles Finney; indeed, J. W. Nevin, the Mercersburg theologian, claimed that 'Finneyism is only Taylorism reduced to practice'.⁴³ Yet Finney went further than Taylor. He held that moral depravity was not because of the nature with which we all have been born, rather it was 'a voluntary attitude of the mind'.⁴⁴ Indeed, human beings had the ability

36 Cameron, 'Arminius', 221-3.

37 *Ibid.*, 223-5.

38 Sproul, *Willing*, 130, quoting Arminius, *Works*, 2: 721.

39 Wood, 'Declaration', 124-5.

40 Cameron, 'Arminius', 225-6, quoting Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Grand Rapids, 1985), 347-9.

41 Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh, 1994), 260-261, quoting S. E. Mead, *Nathaniel William Taylor*.

42 Nathaniel W. Taylor, 'Concio ad Clerum', a sermon preached in 1828, in Keith J. Hardman, *Issues in American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, 1993), 138-140; Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids, 1986), 17.

43 John W. Nevin, *The Anxious Bench (Reading, [1844] 1892)*, 104.

44 Charles G. Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (ed. Garth M Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 152.

to obey God, and to repent and believe in Christ.⁴⁵ At conversion the Holy Spirit exercised only a 'moral influence' on people, not a 'physical' one.⁴⁶ In other words, the Spirit did not in the strictest sense convert anyone. Finney, however, did hold to a similar view of election to Wesley's, in that he taught that God elected those he foreknew would believe.⁴⁷

Finney's evangelistic methods were based very strongly upon human persuasion, with each of his hearers assumed to be completely capable of believing in his/her own strength,⁴⁸ having natural free will. In this Finney had clearly gone a step, even several steps, beyond Wesley's Arminianism. It is unlikely, however, that Finney ever thought of himself as an Arminian as such, and many others would consider him semi-Pelagian or even Pelagian.⁴⁹

In the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic much of Calvinism moderated into something which was scarcely recognisable as the Calvinism of an earlier age. Arminianism marched on powerfully, and the distinction between the two at times became blurred. John Clifford made a perceptive comment in 1870, when he said that 'For all practical ends what might be called the Calvinism of' the Particular Baptists in Britain 'is exactly the same as the Arminianism of' the General Baptists in that land.⁵⁰ And that observation could also probably be fairly applied to other groups whose creeds officially differed.

Modern Arminianism

But what of Arminians today? To understand where Wesley sits among Arminians it will be necessary to have a quick look at modern Arminianism. This will be done in two ways: first by looking at the views of some modern Arminian theologians, and secondly by looking briefly at 'Arminianism' at the popular level.

Though some of today's Arminian theologians follow the traditional belief that God elects individuals on the basis of his foreknowledge, a view, as has been seen, held by both Arminius and Wesley, a more common modern view is that election is corporate rather than individual. An optimistic view of the human will is also common.

45 Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals* (NY, 1868), 101; Finney, *Memoirs*, 351.

46 Finney, *Memoirs*, 155, 350.

47 Lewis A. Drummond, *Charles Grandison Finney and the Birth of Modern Evangelism* (London: Hodder, 1983); Finney, *Memoirs*, 51; Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

48 Finney, *Lectures*, 12.

49 Sproul, *Willing*, 170, 180-181.

50 J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot, 1994), 119, quoting from W. Underwood, *Centennial Survey* (1870), 14f.

Jack Cottrell holds that 'Even before the creation God foreknew every free-will act' that men and women would make.⁵¹ And that 'God has a true foreknowledge of future free-will choices without himself being the agent that causes them or renders them certain. Such foreknowledge is grounded in—and thus conditioned by—the choices themselves as foreknown'.⁵² One of those 'free-will choices' is the decision to believe in Christ. Cottrell sees election, however, as God's choice 'for service, not salvation', and this can be either individual or corporate.⁵³ Clearly to Cottrell the human will is considerably freer than Wesley ever conceived it to be.

Terry Miethe argues that Christ died 'potentially' for all, and that the sovereign God has 'delegated sovereignty' to the whole of humanity, so that each one can make free choices, and among those choices is the one to follow, or not to follow, Christ.⁵⁴ Allied to that, he rejects the idea of our natural inability to believe the Gospel.⁵⁵ Miethe also argues, contrary to Wesley, that 'Faith is not a gift of God', indeed, to him faith is a free and responsible human act.⁵⁶

Pinnock holds to corporate election and regards it as having distinct advantages over that of individual election. First, God 'far from arbitrarily excluding anybody, encompasses them all potentially'. Also, whereas with election based on foreknowledge it really appears that God is just 'ratifying' our choices', with corporate election it remains 'a divine decision'.⁵⁷ William MacDonald strongly emphasises that the chosen are elected 'in Christ'.⁵⁸ He is another that regards this election as corporate rather than individual.⁵⁹

In his article 'Soteriology in the Gospel of John', Grant Osborne presents a 'modified Arminian theology that balances [divine] sovereignty and [human] responsibility'.⁶⁰ One of the key ideas within this is the essential role of 'human decision' (or, in Osborne's terminology 'faith-decision'). He avoids the extreme views of decision-conversion, which at times reduce conversion almost entirely to a human act, rather than primarily a divine work. To him 'Men and women cannot produce their own salvation, but they can "accept" God's act in Christ, and for those who do so Christ is "pleased to give" them "life"'

51 Jack W. Cottrell, 'The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty', in Pinnock, *Grace*, 112.

52 *Ibid.*, 111.

53 *Ibid.*, 114.

54 Terry L. Miethe, 'The Universal Power of the Atonement', in Pinnock, *Grace*, 72-4.

55 *Ibid.*, 86.

56 *Ibid.*, 77, 87.

57 Pinnock, 'From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology', in *Grace*, 20.

58 William G. MacDonald, 'The Biblical Doctrine of Election', Pinnock, *Grace*, 208, 214, 219-229.

59 *Ibid.*, 217, 219-229.

60 Grant R. Osborne, 'Soteriology in the Gospel of John', in Pinnock, *Grace*, 258.

(Jn. 5:21, 24).⁶¹ Nor does he see 'divine election' as producing an individual's 'faith-decision', rather he sees it as 'working with' it, for conversion 'is a blend of God's sovereign call and man's deliberate decision'.⁶²

Yet this goes further than Wesley. The terms 'decision' or 'faith-decision' are not found in Wesley's writings in a conversion context, nor is the concept, as was noted earlier. Conversion to Wesley was much more something that God does, than that which a human being does.

It is probably wise at this point to mention Karl Barth's understanding of election, in which first is the election of Jesus Christ, and through him the whole human race, God having willed and created the world for the sake of Christ. However, not all live as the elect; some recognise their status, others do not.⁶³ But this borders on, and perhaps even crosses into, Universalism, and thus goes beyond Arminianism.

When one comes to examine the picture at the popular level today, one often notices a theology that seems to owe more to Pelagius and Finney than Arminius or Wesley. The emphasis of much of both mass and personal evangelism is upon human decision, and the work of the Holy Spirit often seems to be secondary. Though on occasions lip service may be given to some form of divine election, the final human decision seems not only to be the crucial factor, but almost a thing in itself. And within that, the concept of God's grace is almost lost. An examination of some of the public invitations made by even major evangelists, with their 'Decide for Christ' emphasis, and the materials used in counselling enquirers strongly give this impression.⁶⁴ This is very different from the doctrine of Wesley.

Conclusion

If one compares John Wesley's Arminianism with such as Jacobus Arminius then he was at least very close to being a true Arminian: an Arminian in the mould of Arminius. But much of modern theological Arminianism rather than accepting an individual election based upon foreknowledge, as did Wesley, posits a corporate election. It is true, however, that Wesley did accept a limited form of corporate election.

61 *Ibid.*, 247.

62 *Ibid.*, 256, 258.

63 Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (London, 1964), 105-112; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1985), 921-4.

64 See such booklets as *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (San Bernardino: Campus Crusade), *Personal Commitment Guide* (Atlanta: Southern Baptist), and *Steps to Peace with God* (Billy Graham Evangelistic Assoc.). 8:284-5.

Modern Arminian theologians also tend to have a more optimistic view of human nature than Wesley. If one compares Wesley's views with much that is described as Arminianism today at the popular level, then he could be considered a Calvinist, though, perhaps, an 'inconsistent Calvinist'.

Abstract

This paper examines the soteriology of John Wesley and tries to establish how Arminian his doctrine was. It notes that his views were closer to Calvinism than is generally thought, and, with some justification, have attracted the charge of 'inconsistent Calvinism'. It also makes a comparison between Wesley's views and those of Jacobus Arminius, noting that they were very similar. Comparison is also made between Wesley and modern Arminians. With modern Arminian theologians it is more common to have a corporate view of election, and a more optimistic view of the human will than did Wesley. At the popular level conversion is often viewed today as something that is primarily brought about by human decision, which is very different from Wesley's understanding. Wesley was, indeed, an Arminian in the mould of Arminius, rather than in the common patterns of modern Arminianism.

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