

Writing in 1740, Wesley described this central doctrine as "the old way, of salvation by faith only" and opposed it to "the *new path* of salvation by *faith and works*."⁴ Two hundred years earlier, Luther was urging the defence of "the old faith against new articles of faith" and of "the old good works against the new good works."⁵ In the first of his standard sermons, Wesley declared: "Never was the maintaining this doctrine more seasonable than at this day. Nothing but this can effectually prevent the increase of the Romish delusion among us. It is endless to attack, one by one, all the errors of that Church. But salvation by faith strikes at the root, and all fall at once where this is established. It was this doctrine, which our Church justly calls *the strong rock and foundation of the Christian religion*, that first drove Popery out of these kingdoms; and it is this alone can keep it out."⁶ Luther used the same argument: "The doctrine of faith and justification, or how we become righteous before God...drives out all false gods and idolatry; and when that is driven out, the foundation of the Papacy falls, whereon it is built."⁷

Wesley was at one with the Reformers in regarding justification not simply as the most important tenet of Christian belief, but also as that which controls all the rest. "Wesley's doctrine of justification," asserts Prof. William R. Cannon, "was the measure and determinant of all else."⁸ This was altogether in the manner of the Reformers. "This doctrine, as Luther found it expounded in St. Paul's Epistles," explained Charles Beard, "furnished the standard to which all other scriptural statements of the method of salvation were brought to be judged."⁹ That was why Luther referred to this as "the article of a standing or falling Church."¹⁰ He described justification as "master and prince, lord, ruler, and judge over all kinds of doctrine, which preserves and governs all ecclesiastical doctrines."¹¹ It is "the chief of the whole Christian doctrine, to which all divine disputations must be directed....For when this article is kept fast and sure by a constant faith, then all other articles draw on softly after....God has declared no article so plainly and openly as this, that we are saved only by Christ....He dwells continually upon this article of the salvation of our souls; other articles are of great weight, but this surpasses all."¹² Wesley clearly stood in this Protestant succession, for such a recognition not only directed his thinking but dominated his message.

As we have seen, this magisterial truth of justification was first accepted as revealed in God's Word and then transposed into the key of Christian experience. It was when the doctrine caught fire in his heart that Wesley became an evangelist. What Wesley learned at Aldersgate Street, according to Dr. Harmon L. Smith, was "that man is justified by

grace alone and that this grace is given only through faith."¹³ This was when salvation by grace became his "standing topic," shared with his fellow-labourers in the gospel of Christ.¹⁴ Here was the fulcrum of his whole career. His ministry was revolutionized when he took up this stance. And it is important to note, as Dr. Cannon brings out, that Wesley's doctrinal conversion radically altered his conception not only of works but also of faith.¹⁵ He no longer thought of salvation in terms of good deeds and pious practices, and even the faith which replaced them was now seen, not as an effort of man, but as a gift from God. It was perhaps more at this point than at any other that the essence of Wesley's reorientation could be recognized. It was here, too, that the plainly broke with the current Anglican interpretation, which was a legacy from the Caroline divines, and went back behind Laud to Cranmer and the Reformation.

It was such considerations as these which led Prof. George Croft Cell to the conclusion, in a masterly analysis, that it was this theologico-experiential *volte face* which gave the eighteenth-century awakening its remarkable dynamic. "The spring of religious energy in the Revival lay in Wesley's essential concurrence with the Luther-Calvin doctrine of salvation by faith; it lay in the Luther-Calvin doctrine how that faith is given and on the Luther-Calvin thesis that a God-given faith is the sole and abiding principle of all Christian experience; it is witnessed in the revolution wrought in Wesley's preaching by his abandonment of the libertarian theology and his adoption of the Luther-Calvin position."¹⁶

Wesley realized that the biblical centrality of this doctrine was related to the assumption of divine sovereignty which lay behind it. The whole stress of salvation by grace rests on God's initiative. It takes man's hand off his own redemption, and shows it to be altogether the supernatural work of God. Commenting on Ephesians 1:9, Wesley explained "the mystery of His will" as "the gracious scheme of salvation by faith, which depends on His own sovereign will alone. This was but darkly discovered under the law; is now totally hid from unbelievers; and has heights and depths which surpass all the knowledge even of true believers."¹⁷ In view of this repeated emphasis in Wesley, Cell repudiates the charge, renewed of late, that he was guilty of synergistic compromise. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that Wesley's thought was even more strictly monergistic in regard to its expression of grace than that of some later Calvinists. His rejection of the extreme logic of predestination (and more particularly in its corollary of reprobation), did not imply that he allowed even a minimal element of human co-operation in the matter

Application of grace within the life of Wesley, explaining how his conversion through faith had led him to works, though no amount of his prior works had led him to faith

God saves not man

other; but retire for a while from the busy world, and make the experiment yourself."³

Let me illustrate the presence of Wesley's inductive reasoning with perhaps his most mature and systematic theological work—a monograph entitled *The Doctrine of Original Sin, according to Scripture, Reason, and Experience*. The monograph serves as a case study for investigating the inductive methodology Wesley used in biblical as well as theological studies.

Case Study: Doctrine of Original Sin

John Wesley wrote his treatise on original sin in 1756 in response to another work written earlier by John Taylor entitled *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin*. Wesley considered the work to be very scholarly, surpassing his own skills especially in Greek and Hebrew. Nevertheless, Wesley could not remain silent in the face of so many teachings he considered to be false. He regarded Taylor's work as nothing more "than old Deism in a new dress; seeing it saps the very foundation of all revealed religion, whether Jewish or Christian."⁴

Wesley believed that more than temporal repercussions occurred as a result of Adam's sin. People became spiritually and morally corrupt, and culpable for eternal as well as temporal punishments. According to Wesley, "The Christian system falls at once" if we eliminate the doctrine of original sin and the idea that people exist "by nature foolish and sinful, 'fallen short of the glorious image of God'."⁵

Wesley objected to the clever arguments Taylor used to remove traditional beliefs about sin in general, and about original sin in particular. To defend what he considered part of classical orthodoxy, Wesley undertook to present a comprehensive theological position on sin. The result is the most systematic treatise Wesley produced—a treatise that reveals much about his theological method. The treatise does not indicate a systematic approach for Wesley's whole corpus, but it does reveal that he had a self-conscious method of study when he undertook serious theological reflection. Other writings by Wesley may not state his theological method as explicitly, but such method informed the overall approach he took in dealing with the theological needs of the church and the world.

I will use the categories of observation, interpretation, evaluation and application, and correlation in trying to understand the workings of Wesley's inductive reasoning. These categories are implicit in the structure of *The Doctrine of Original Sin* and in arguments developed therein.

While Scripture remained his primary data for inductive investigation, coupled with deductive explanations and proofs, Wesley reveals a broader contextuality than some Christian observers acknowledge or appreciate. Wesley's treatise reveals a sophisticated understanding of the multiple dimensions of theological reflection that permeated other writings by Wesley. In the treatise on *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Part 1 approximates the investigative process of observation; Part 2 is comparable to interpretation; Part 3, evaluation and application; and Parts 4-7, correlation.

Observation of Relevant Facts

Wesley began his experimental study of the doctrine of original sin with the first logical step of any inductive process, namely, observation. Similar to scientific observation, Wesley understood the need to direct careful analytic attention toward noted facts or particulars related to the existence of sin. So he tried to become saturated with facts relevant to the occurrence of universal corruption—of personal immorality and social injustices—so that he could be sure about the nature and extent of its existence and the need for some kind of constructive explanation. He stated:

Before we attempt to account for any fact, we should be well assured of the fact itself. First, therefore, let us inquire what is the real state of humankind; and, in the Second place, endeavour to account for it.⁶

Wesley opened his treatise with a section entitled "The Past and Present State of Mankind," wherein he inquired, "What is the real state, with regard to knowledge and virtue, wherein humankind have been from the earliest times? And what state are they in at this day?"⁷ He began his theological investigation by observing the facts available in Scripture, treating Scripture as a reliable source of historical data.

He continued by observing additional facts of wickedness in history, including research found in church and secular sources of history. For example, he had no qualms about drawing facts from such classical authors as Cato, Cicero, Horace, Juvenal, Ovid, and Seneca. Wesley believed that every "fair and impartial survey" of sacred and secular history manifestly revealed the "universal corruption" of humanity.⁸

In his final observation, Wesley asked people to reflect upon their own experience. He expected that most people would humbly admit their moral shortcomings. However, he observed that many people feel quite pleased with themselves and do not consider themselves the least immoral or corrupt. In response, he condemned prideful self-decep-

John Wesley
this study may not be necessary for some of his friends of a secular nature.

there before, namely, internal conversion by the power of the Holy Ghost dwelling in the heart by faith. He called it *perfection*, and as such baited it out of the place." Fletcher then said to Wesley: "I saw the College was no longer my place, as I was not likely to do or receive any good there."⁴¹

THE CALVINIST METHODISTS DISAGREED WITH PERFECTION

Previous to this controversy, Fletcher and Benson had hoped that the Calvinists would have been more open to receive Wesley's doctrine of holiness if it was explained as the same in meaning as being baptized with the Holy Spirit, a phrase commonly used by the Calvinist Methodists as well. Wesley had once warned Benson in a letter (December 26, 1769) that the Countess was strongly opposed to "perfection." Wesley quoted her as having said: "I will suffer no one in my society that even *thinks* of perfection."⁴² Given her bias against "perfection," it is understandable that Fletcher thought that highlighting the connection between Pentecost and full sanctification was an appropriate way to win over the Calvinist Methodists. Unfortunately, the Calvinist Methodists interpreted Wesley's view of holiness to mean sinless perfection, even though Fletcher and Benson hoped to communicate a better understanding through using the relational language of love perfected through the indwelling Spirit.⁴³

Even after the controversy erupted, Fletcher tried to explain to the Countess that Wesley's doctrine of perfection was essentially what she believed herself. In a letter to the Countess in 1771, Fletcher wrote:

With regard to perfection itself, I believe that when Mr. Wesley is altogether consistent upon that subject, he means absolutely nothing by it but the full cluster of Gospel blessings, which Lady Huntingdon so warmly presses the students to pursue; namely, Gospel faith, the immediate revelation of Christ, the baptism of the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of adoption, the kingdom that cannot be moved, the element of forgiving love, deep and uninterrupted poverty of spirit, and, in a word, a standing upon Mount Zion and enjoying its great and glorious privileges. And I am fully persuaded that, in this respect, there is more misunderstanding between my lady and Mr. Wesley about words and modes of expression than about things and essential principles. All the difference between them seems to me to consist in this: my lady is more for looking to the misery and depth of the fall. Mr. Wesley more for considering the power and effects of the recovery. My lady speaks glorious things of free grace; and Mr. Wesley inculcates the glorious use we ought to make of it. Both appear to me to maintain one and the same truth, and to guard it; my lady against the Legalists, Mr. Wesley against the Antinomians. If, therefore, they do not understand one another, and fall out by the way, I shall think it is a great pity, and shall continue to be, at least in my heart, the loving servant of both.⁴⁴

Here Fletcher noted that the Countess herself had emphasized the baptism with the Holy Spirit. He also noted in this same letter that other Calvinists associated with Trevecca, such as "Mr. Harris," also had spoken of "*the fiery baptism [that] will burn up self*." Fletcher explained that by this phrase he only means: "I live not, but Christ lives in me."⁴⁵

Before he became president of Trevecca College, Fletcher had already been using the event of Pentecost as the goal of the Christian life in his preaching. For example, in one of his earlier writings, probably (according to Melville Horne) in the early 1760s after he had become vicar of Madeley, he linked Pentecost and perfect love, showing that this highest stage of grace is attained "when the Holy Christ descends abundantly." Fletcher wrote:

There is a day of pentecost for believers; a time when the Holy Ghost descends abundantly. Happy are they who receive most of this perfect love, and of that establishing grace, which may preserve them from such falls and decays as they were before liable to.⁴⁶

In his sermon notes for these early years at Madeley, Fletcher said the "general necessity of the baptism of the Holy Ghost" is that one "must be sanctified."⁴⁷

In a letter to Miss Hatton (November 1, 1762), Fletcher made the distinction between justifying faith and being "sealed by the Spirit" (or, "the abiding witness of the Spirit") when "they are fully assured of that justification" (or Christian perfection). Fletcher noted that most believers experience these two events separately, citing the Samaritans (Acts 8) as an example of those who received the seal of the Spirit after their justification.⁴⁸ In another letter to Miss Hatton (August 8, 1765), Fletcher also defined Christian perfection in terms of such biblical references as, "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?" and "After that ye believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise."⁴⁹

In a letter addressed to "My Dear Friend" (around 1770), Fletcher noted his friend had "got safe out of Egypt with gladness," but "now you seem entangled in the wilderness." He encouraged his correspondent to "hold fast what you have, and to be thankful for it, till the Lord comes with more; till he baptizes you with the Holy Ghost and with fire."⁵⁰

At this early stage of his preaching and writing, Fletcher had not yet developed his doctrine of the stages of grace into a full-blown, self-conscious theology of dispensations. This was first fully developed in his *Third Check to Antinomianism*, though he did previously speak of Christian perfection as a possibility because of Pentecost.⁵¹ Throughout the earlier years of his ministry, Fletcher used a wide variety of Pentecostal phrases, including "baptism with the Holy Spirit,"⁵² "filled with his Spirit,"⁵³ "receiving the Holy Ghost,"⁵⁴ and being "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise."⁵⁵

We know as early as November 24, 1771, in a letter to Charles Wesley, that

and Wesley are in dispute due to his common notion. That he believes they describe two sides of one coin.

Allow not that passion my tale, but that you patiently await the Lord!