

# John Wesley: Original Sin and Limited Universalism

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## Introduction

It is clear that within the pages of Scripture there are, what can best be described as *tensions*. For example, there are clear passages that emphasize God's sovereignty, His fore-ordaining of events and His foreknowledge (Gen. 15.12-16; Exod. 33.19b; Rom. 9.18). With that needs to be paired the biblical emphasis on free will, the times when God's sovereignty is frustrated, and the reality of *risk* in the plan of salvation (2 Peter 3.9; John 7.17; Josh. 24.15).

These tensions should cause bible students to closely examine their position on bible doctrines to ensure one maintains the biblical harmony. John Wesley, the leader of the 18th century Methodist revival, did this in an area which at first glance seems irreconcilable. It is the apparent contradiction between Wesley's stance on total depravity as a result of original sin, and his insistence on free will be explored in this paper. In studying Wesley's understanding of original sin, preventing grace<sup>1</sup> (his term), and his resulting "limited universalism" (my term, admittedly an awkward one), a harmonious gospel becomes clearer.

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<sup>1</sup> In today's English this would be called preceding grace.

Wesley was an extremely multifaceted individual, the last 'renaissance man'. He was an organizer, preacher, educator, and a powerful influence in English society.<sup>2</sup> He had a wide range of interests as indicated by a volume on health he published in 1747, called *Primitive Physick*.<sup>3</sup> He preached thousands of sermons over his the course of his life, at times preaching up to 800 times in one year, traveling by horseback over 3,000 miles to keep those appointments. Although it is certain that he repeated sermons, his journal records numerous accounts of his preparing sermons as he traveled on horseback. Often those sermons were prepared during the day that they were to be preached. A statue remembering Wesley in Bristol, England, shows Wesley astride his horse, with a book opened in his right hand.

This method of sermon preparation would not lend itself to an extreme precision in thoughts and words. He clearly lived in a world very different from ours, with Accordance, Logos, and BibleWorks. It is inevitable that some contradiction or ambiguity should be found among the hundreds of pages of written sermons. However, at least in one major

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<sup>2</sup> For a sampling of the many books written about Wesley see: Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles, eds. *A Compend of Wesley's Theology*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954); Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 2003); Randy L. Maddox ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990); Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, 2 Vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1973); Robert G. Tuttle, *John Wesley: His Life and Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992); Stephen Thomkins, *John Wesley A Biography*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Ingvar Haddal, *John Wesley A Biography*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961); John Wesley and Percy Livingstone Parker, *The Heart of John Wesley's Journal* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014). Scott J Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> The book went through 23 editions during his life time, and nine after his death. Wesley also experimented with electricity for treating disease. See A. Wesley Hill, *John Wesley Among the Physicians: A Study in Eighteenth-century Medicine* (London: Epworth Press), 1958.

instance, the apparent contradiction is resolved by an underlying harmony that arises from Wesley's close attention to scripture.

This paper will first explore Wesley's understanding of original sin and total depravity. It will then consider a key area in which Wesley differs from the Continental Reformers such as Luther and Calvin in their solution to the problem of original sin. This will be followed by an examination of Wesley's 'limited universalism' and a final conclusion.

### **Original Sin**

In 1757, Wesley published a treatise entitled *The Doctrine of Original Sin According to Scriptures, Reason and Experience*. Two years later this was shortened into the sermon *Original Sin*. This sermon was included in the book of **Forty-Four Sermons**, a standard for Methodist beliefs.<sup>4</sup> This well-considered sermon, first preached, then refined, and finally incorporated into the book of sermons, demonstrates Wesley's considered understanding on this subject. The sermon is based on Gen. 6.5 and has three main divisions. The first discusses humanity before the flood; the second considers humanity's condition at the present time; and the third section draws conclusions.

Wesley opens the sermon briefly discussing how his text pictures a humanity in a vastly different condition than did ancient philosophers. Instead of being full of virtue and happiness, Scriptures declare that humanity is "dead in trespasses and sins." However, the difficulty is not simply with early philosophers. Wesley argues that there are those "in the

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, "Original Sin" in *44 Sermons* (London: J. Alfred Sharp, n.d.), 535-546. The sermon was incorporated into other collections as well. It can be found on line at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-44-original-sin/> accessed Sept. 12, 2017. Due to the number of editions in which Wesley's works can be found I have added electronic editions for the interested reader.

present century" who hold a view of the human nature that is not in harmony with Scripture.<sup>5</sup> These people, Wesley stresses, consider humanity to be little less than God but this view will never agree with Scripture. The nature of humanity after the fall "was purely evil" and "unmixed with anything of an opposing nature."<sup>6</sup> This is a description of humanity completely fallen.

Wesley did not in any way view original sin as fictional. He understood that the present human condition is a direct result of Adam's fall. His argument was that when "fallen, sinful Adam" began to have children, they received the results of Adam's transgression. These children were formed in his likeness, which is a likeness that is fallen and sinful. As a result of this, all of humanity is "by nature 'dead in trespasses and sin.'" Every person receives this heritage. In the exposition of his opening text, Gen. 6:5, Wesley emphasizes the universality of the effects of sin. He underlines the fact that the fall has affected "the whole human race," "every man born" and the "whole of human nature."<sup>7</sup> He repeatedly insisted that there was nothing good in humanity and there was no capability within the human race to make its way back to God.

The universal effect of sin has many dimensions. Wesley emphatically preached that due to Adam's sin, human nature is devoid of all natural goodness. Humanity, in the "natural state," that is, without the work of God's grace, has only evil thoughts, and "that

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<sup>5</sup> The background for these remarks is found in the teaching of Dr. John Taylor, a Presbyterian minister who became the first president of the Presbyterian Theological College at Warrington. Taylor wrote against the doctrine of original sin, and Wesley encountered his disciples who scoffed at the doctrine. In one edition of Wesley's works, there is an introduction to the sermon, which explains Wesley's encounter a booklet of Taylor's, and that Wesley felt compelled to respond.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin" 535-537.

<sup>7</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin" 534-537.

continually." By nature, a person has no knowledge of God. By nature, no one loves God, or delights in Him. By nature, children would grow up without any religion at all.<sup>8</sup> Sin has brought about the entire corruption of the whole human nature.

Wesley emphasized this total depravity throughout his sermon. On behalf of those who would argue against original sin, he raises a question: "Was there not good mingled with the evil? Was there not light intermixed with the darkness?" He then gives the unequivocal answer, "No; none at all." Wesley stresses his point by attributing *atheism* to everyone. He states that before God opens the understanding, all are "without God, or rather *atheists in the world*." Later in the sermon he concludes "Thus are all men atheists in the world."<sup>9</sup> Due to Adam's fall, the human race, by nature, is totally separate from God. Humanity, by nature, has no inclinations toward God, nor knowledge of God.

For Wesley, the doctrine of original sin—whether one calls it by that title or not—which includes from his perspective total depravity is an essential teaching of the Christian faith. This doctrine separates Christians from heathens. A person may believe that there is a tendency toward evil which manifests itself in innumerable vices, yet also believe that there is some natural goodness that can over balance the evil within. This is not Christianity, Wesley contends. The dividing line between Christianity and any other faiths is the understanding of the human condition. He states unequivocally:

*Here is the shibboleth: Is man by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Or to come back to the text, is 'every imagination of the thoughts and hearts only evil continually? Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but an Heathen still.'*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin" 540.

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin" 539.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin" 545.

Here Wesley is very much in harmony with the thinking of Augustine<sup>11</sup> who was followed by the Reformers as evidenced in the teachings of Luther and Calvin.<sup>12</sup> They frequently used the concepts of total depravity and total corruption to describe the human condition. Both spiritual life and the image of God in the soul, were lost at the fall. In losing the image of God, all virtue, all righteousness and true holiness were also lost. The image of God was replaced with that of another image.

Wesley pairs the loss of God's image in the soul with a loss of love toward God. Instead of love toward God reigning supreme in the heart, now a new love reigns there, one

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<sup>11</sup> Augustine developed the idea that Adam was free to “not sin, was able not to die, was able not to forsake the good.” See *On Rebuke and Grace*, 33. However, when man sinned this infected the human race with the propensity to sin and the ability to abstain from evil was lost. Humanity uses the will to act in ways that are in opposition to God. See *On Man’s Perfection in Righteousness*, 9. Augustine’s views were sharpened by the teaching of Pelagius, who argued that the fall did not have a direct effect on humanity and that the will was free to choose to follow God or not. Augustine more fully developed his view of predestination as a corollary to the truth that the will lost its ability to choose not to sin. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.24.2; 13. 3, 14. See also Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 1994), 909-911.

<sup>12</sup> For some selected readings on Calvin see: Elsie Anne McKee, ed. *John Calvin, Writings on Pastoral Piety*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2001); William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1988); Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006); T.H.L Parker, *John Calvin*, (Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1975); Benjamin Warfield *Calvin and Augustine*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1956); A.N.S. Lane, ed. *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, trans. G.I. Davies, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996); Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). On Luther see: Roger Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950); Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther Man Between God and the Devil*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); James Atkinson, ed. *Luther: Early Theological Works*, Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XVI, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962); John M. Todd, *Luther* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982); Richard Marius, *Martin Luther, The Christian Between God and Death*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); John Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther Selections From His Writings* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961); Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, Henry Cole and Henry Atherton eds. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1976).

that is devoted to self.<sup>13</sup> Wesley contends that the giving of honor to oneself, is evidence that the image of God has been replaced by the image of Satan. That "Satan has stamped his own image on our heart" is demonstrated by both human pride and self-will. Wesley states it in this manner:

We worship ourselves, when we pay that honour to ourselves, which is due to God only. Therefore, all pride is idolatry; it is ascribing to ourselves what is due to God alone.<sup>14</sup>

Wesley's understanding of original sin is very orthodox. In contending against those who hold in high esteem the ability of the human will, Wesley paints a very bleak picture. He understood the fall to have caused total depravity in the human race, there is, an utter inability of humanity to move toward God. The fall has brought a spiritual death and the loss of the image of God within the soul. Humanity, by nature, does not have the capacity to know God. God's image has been replaced with that of the devil and with a feral nature. Toward the end of the sermon, Wesley points out that the remedy for the fall is the healing of the soul. This *θεραπεία ψυχῆς*, or God's method of healing is the restoration of the soul. Restoration occurs by God revealing Himself and this heals the atheism that infects humanity. If the fall did not so completely ruin the human race this act of healing would be unnecessary. It is important that both the disease and the cure be proclaimed equally. All are born in sin, and all must be born again.<sup>15</sup> How this revelation is given, involves a unique Wesleyan understanding.

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<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on love as the chief attribute of a true Christian is of great importance to Wesley. See John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1976) for an extended treatment of the necessity of love.

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin" 541.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin" 546.

Up to this point, Wesley has been in harmony with the Reformed views of sin and its effect on the will.<sup>16</sup> It is in the solution to the fall, that Wesley makes a striking break with Calvin, Luther and the Continental Reformers. Calvin argues that only the elect will experience God's grace, thus moving them toward God. For Calvinism, this grace is sovereign and cannot be resisted, in any of its aspects. Thus God's grace is understood in terms of electing some to salvation. It is in his understanding of the work of grace, that John Wesley significantly differs from the Reformers and many of his contemporaries and yet avoids the dangers associated with the teaching of Pelagius.<sup>17</sup>

### **Preventing Grace**

Wesley has drawn a picture of human nature that is in total need of redemption. The impact of Adam's sin reaches and infects everyone who is born. None escape the sickness that Adam brought to humanity, that is a will that is in bondage to sin, and cannot do otherwise. This naturally raises important questions, such as, how can humanity turn to God or to exercise faith? How can the cycle of self-love be broken? If the will is captive to sin, and each one is held slave to their own lust, how can one turn to God? While some in Anglicanism argued for a capacity of the will to respond to God's grace (the fall affecting humanity "from the neck down" so to speak), Wesley forcibly argued against any such capacity of the will or of nature. Calvinism's answer is the irresistible grace of God, which in turn elects certain individuals to be saved. Calvin considers, with Augustine, that individuals are lost due to God's will and that it is unreasonable to say this is unjust. From

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<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Theology Today* 52.

<sup>17</sup> For Pelagius' thoughts on Romans 5, a key passage in the discussion of original sin see: Theodore De Bruyn, ed. and translator; *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 92-95 where he stresses the influence of Adam on humanity through means of example.

Calvin's perspective the "Divine Will" is "only another name for the highest rule of justice."<sup>18</sup> In other words, God's will and His justice are one and the same, thus to argue against predestination because it is unjust is a non sequitur. Instead of embracing this as the solution to the fall, Wesley strongly contends against it. Wesley definitively lays the responsibility for a person being lost, not on God's will, but because people will not, choose not, to be saved.

This position naturally caused consternation with the Calvinistic Methodists.<sup>19</sup> The issue was unavoidably raised, if salvation can be laid to free will, how would that impact the doctrines of total depravity and salvation by grace through faith alone?<sup>20</sup> George Whitefield<sup>21</sup> wrote to Wesley imploring him to lay aside his own "carnal reasoning" and to become as a "little child." Whitefield urged Wesley to understand that salvation is free because "God may withhold or give it to whom and when he pleases."<sup>22</sup>

Wesley's refusal to accept a Calvinistic view of grace and predestination led to a break with Whitefield and the Calvinistic Methodists. One of Wesley's main objections to predestination was his concern for God's honor. Wesley did not want to take away human responsibility, and thus place the responsibility for sin upon God. Another concern was his interest in holiness. Yet at the same time Wesley needed to protect against the influence of the teachings of Pelagius. In his *Dialogue between a Predestinarian and his Friend*,

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<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* III, 15.

<sup>19</sup> For more historical context, see Tomkins, *A Biography*, 165-173.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Theology Today*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> It was Whitefield who first introduced Wesley to field preaching, which later was to become a main characteristic of the Wesleyan revivals. Parker, *Journal*, 66-67.

<sup>22</sup> Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, Vol 1. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1870), 324.

Wesley imagines an instructive dialogue.<sup>23</sup> Using the Socratic method of questions and answers he highlights his main point. Wesley's concern is that predestination removes human responsibility and places the responsibility back on God. This impugns God's integrity and honor. This point is strengthened by Wesley inserting quotations from well-known writers who hold to predestination into the conversation.

Friend: Sir, I have heard that you make God the author of all sin, and the destroyer of the greater part of mankind without mercy.

Predestinarian: I deny it; I only say, 'God did from all eternity unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass' (*Assembly's Catechism, chap. 3*)

Friend: Do you make no exception?

Pred: No, surely; for 'nothing is more absurd than to think anything at all is done but by the ordination of God.' (*Calvin's Institutes, Book i, chap 16, sec. 3*)

This is Wesley's main argument. By stating that God has decreed what should happen, the predestinarian has made God the one responsible for both sin and those that are lost, thus effectually mitigating human responsibility. The dialogue continues, with Wesley using selective quotations to demonstrate his view. He shows that Calvinism puts God in the position of governing humanity's will and electing the chosen to salvation. This is not to be construed as referring to simply the permissive will of God, but all things come from the irresistible will of God. His foreknowledge springs from what he has decreed, including that Adam and Eve were made for the purpose of falling into sin. The election of some to salvation inevitably "elects" some to condemnation. This occurs either by the direct decree of God, or by the lost, simply not having been chosen. For Wesley, either of these views, reflects on God, and takes away human responsibility.

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<sup>23</sup>John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, M.A.* 63-68.  
[http://sermonindex.net/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic\\_id=20964&forum=34&1](http://sermonindex.net/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=20964&forum=34&1) as of 9/17/2017. It is also in the standard works of John Wesley.

Wesley's central concern is how predestination necessarily depicts God. In his sermon *Free Grace*, Wesley picks up the theme again. He views the doctrine as representing God in a worse light than the devil. After arguing that it makes Christ to be a hypocrite, he states:

It represents the most holy God as worse than the devil, as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust. More *false*; because the devil...hath never said, 'He willeth all men to be saved.' More *unjust*; because the devil cannot, if he would, be guilty of such injustice as you ascribe to God, when you say that God condemned millions of souls to everlasting fire...for continuing in sin, which, for want of that grace *he will not* give them, they cannot avoid: And more *cruel*; because that unhappy spirit "seeketh rest and findeth none;" so that his own restless misery is a kind of temptation to him to tempt others. But God resteth in his high and holy place; so that to suppose him, of his own mere motion, of his pure will and pleasure, happy as he is, to doom his creatures, whether they will or no, to endless misery, is to impute such cruelty to him as we cannot impute even to the great enemy of God and man.<sup>24</sup>

Unjust, cruel and hypocritical is how predestination pictures God. Unjust, because people are condemned for sin, when it is only God's grace that could keep them from it. Cruel, because he condemns his creatures to endless misery, when only He could rescue them. Hypocritical, because he states he wants all to be saved, but won't save them. Here is the heart of the issue:

This is the blasphemy clearly contained in the horrible decree of predestination! And here I fix my foot. On this I join issue with every assertor of it. You represent God as worse than the devil; more false, more cruel, more unjust.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, while accepting and preaching the doctrines of original sin and total depravity, he rejects the doctrine of predestination, considering it blasphemy.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> John Wesley, "Free Grace" in *Wesley's Works* Vol VII. (London: John Mason, 1829), 379, emphasis original. The sermon is also available at <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-128-Free-Grace> accessed 11/5/2017.

<sup>25</sup> Wesley, "Free Grace", 382.

<sup>26</sup> An interesting aside in this discussion, is Wesley's attitude toward *persons* who hold this view. Although clearly abhorring the doctrine, he often states his love for those holding it. For example, in his sermon *Predestination Calmly Considered*, he appeals to predestinarians to join

Wesley's position of holding to the twin teachings of original sin and total depravity, and then rejecting election, appears to give rise to the inconsistency mentioned in the beginning of this paper. If one is totally fallen, without any ability to come to God, without an ability to choose righteousness instead of sin, how then would it be possible to respond to invitations to salvation? It is here that there is an apparent contradiction. Wesley poses the question as to why everyone is not saved. His answer is, that although God wants to save them, they *will not* be saved. The lost are such because they refuse God's desire to redeem them. Yet, how could they refuse, if their wills are totally captive to sin?

Wesley hints at his solution, even in the sermon *Original Sin*. Throughout the sermon are short phrases that are inserted as qualifiers to the doctrine. For example, Wesley uses an illustration of two children brought up without religious instruction. He argues that they would not have any religion "unless the grace of God interposed."<sup>27</sup> Earlier, he writes that the "grace of God" can occasionally work to the good in a soul. He states that "preventing grace" can work in individuals. To escape the dilemma of choosing between an Augustinian view of predestination, or a Pelagian view of the power of the human will, Wesley's understanding of salvation demands that the grace of God be at work, not only in the saved, but in all of humanity.

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with him in declaring the importance and nature of holiness. Wesley states "if we serve God our agreement is far greater than our difference." Here is a striking amount of tolerance. Wesley feels that those who hold the doctrine of predestination do so "in the uprightness of [their] hearts." This is a mark of the breadth of Wesley's charity. He is evidently granting to Calvinistic Methodists the same room he desires from the Church of England. In the sermon *The Ministerial Office*, written in 1789, he states "we require no unity of opinions...but barely that they 'fear God and work righteousness.'" It is a good perspective for us to hold toward those who might differ from us on certain theological points, yet labor with us as fellow ministers.

<sup>27</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin" 539.

What seems to move Wesley to this conclusion, is his willingness to give certain passages of Scripture more weight than is generally allowed them. Those passages that have a universal application, Wesley often sees as truly applying to all humanity. He frequently uses John 1:9 to describe how God's grace reaches everyone. In his sermon, ***The Scripture Way of Salvation***, Wesley push the borders of the salvation experience. For Wesley it begins with and includes “the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory.” This “first dawning of grace”<sup>28</sup> occurs in every child of humanity, and is what Wesley equates with the natural conscience. Unfortunately, this first work of God is generally stifled as soon as possible. Wesley believed that salvation in its broadest understanding included the work of grace, preventing grace, that is active in everyone.

Wesley understood that God's preventing grace works in everyone from birth. This grace *draws* a person to God, and convicts them of right and wrong. It also *frees* them from the total bondage of the will, so that they can choose to respond to further workings of divine grace. This is an essential point. The will is captive to sin due to Adam's fall. However, God's grace gives to everyone a measure of free will, before they are even aware that God is working. Wesley expanded on the capacity of the will, given through preventing grace, in his sermon, ***On Conscience***.<sup>29</sup>

In this sermon, he defined conscience as the ability of knowing the value or demerit of our thoughts, words, and actions. Wesley argued that this ability of the will, to discern

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<sup>28</sup>This sermon is available at <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-43-The-Scripture-Way-of-Salvation> accessed 9/20/2017. See paragraph 2.

<sup>29</sup> John Wesley, “On Conscience”, in *Wesley's Works* Vol X (London: John Mason, 1829). Also available at <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-105-On-Conscience> accessed 11/5/2017.

between good and evil is natural, only in the sense that everyone has it. All, he contends, whether “uneducated or barbarous” agree that it is correct to do to others, as you would have them do to you. This faculty is called natural conscience, but this is not strictly an accurate description. It is natural because it is found in all of humanity. It is supernatural in that it comes from God. A measure of free will has been “supernaturally restored to every” one. With this, is “that supernatural light, which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world.” This is not to be understood as an innate faculty of human nature. Rather, it is “the Son of God that is the ‘true light, which enlighteneth’” all (John 1:9).<sup>30</sup>

What is of importance here, is Wesley's understanding of preventing grace as being “irresistible.” There is a significant difference between a Wesleyan understanding of irresistible grace and a Calvinistic one. Wesley saw grace as irresistibly at work in everyone, granting to all humanity a perception of right and wrong, in some aspect mitigating the effects of the fall. This grace gives to everyone the ability to respond to further drawings of grace. Thus, while original sin has destroyed *everyone's* ability to move toward God, preventing grace has restored this ability to *everyone*. It is in this way, that Wesley is able to hold the twin doctrines of total depravity and human responsibility. Wesley's understanding of preventing grace shows that God has taken the initiative in redemption, and has corrected some of the damage wrought by Adam's fall. For Wesley, none remain untouched by preventing grace. It is the result of God's activity through Christ, and does not wait for humanity to request it. He develops this further in the sermon entitled ***Working Out Our Own Salvation***.

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<sup>30</sup> Wesley “On Conscience”, 232.

Building on Phil. 2.12,13, Wesley attempts to bring out the underlying scriptural harmony between God's actions and the human response. If God did not first work within us, there would be no ability for us to work at all, seeing that all are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2.1). Yet, even though all humanity is by nature dead, none remain in that condition.

There is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void 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, which waiteth not for the call of man.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, while preventing grace is irresistible and universal, justifying and sanctifying grace are not. One *cannot* resist God's first action of grace that enables the will to respond to further actions of grace. However, one *can* resist the wooing of grace toward salvation. It is this resistance that brings condemnation. Calvinism depicts the entire work of grace as irresistible and particular, Wesley saw preventing grace as irresistible and universal. It is possible for us to love God, because he first loved us, placing enmity between us and Satan.

### **Limited Universalism**

Wesley's resolution to the tension between total depravity and free will, is found in his understanding of preventing grace. This grace reaches everyone, and it enables the will to be able to respond to further works of grace. To arrive at this understanding, Wesley allowed the passages of Scripture that compare or parallel Christ with Adam to have a fuller weight than is generally given to them. Having taken the fall of humanity through Adam seriously, so he also takes the work of Christ as the Last Adam seriously. For Wesley,

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<sup>31</sup> John Wesley, "Working Out Your Own Salvation", in *Wesley's Works* Vol III (London: John Mason, 1829), 207.

preventing grace operates because of the death of Christ. This work of grace is strictly Christocentric. It is founded on the atoning work of Christ. As the sin of Adam has had an effect upon all, so too, has the life and death of Christ.

The work of Christ as the Last Adam, with its universalistic implications, is brought out through a series of questions in *Late Conversations*. The question is posed, "In what sense is Adam's sin imputed to all mankind?" This is answered by several points, already highlighted in the discussion of original sin. They are: in Adam all die (this includes mortality and separation from God), all have a sinful nature, and all are children of wrath. The next question asks "In what sense is the righteousness of Christ imputed to *all mankind* or to believers?" (emphasis supplied).

Here is an unexpected aspect of Wesleyan theology. Very few in his day (or today) would have entertained the idea that the righteousness of Christ has had any effect on "all mankind." Wesley perceptively notes that there is no express statement in scripture that God imputes the righteousness of Christ to any. Rather, that faith is counted as righteousness.<sup>32</sup> However, in answer to the question, he quotes from Romans 5:19.

This passage, beginning in verse 12, compares and contrasts Christ with Adam. The passage discusses the effect both have had on humanity. Rom. 5:14 explicitly states that Adam was "a type of Him who was to come." The entire passage implies that as Adam's sin has had some kind of universal effect, so also, Christ's death has some universalistic application.

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<sup>32</sup> Throughout his writings Wesley demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the actual wording of the biblical text.

Wesley quotes Romans 5:19, a concluding verse, and states that due to the merits of Christ "all men were cleared from the guilt of Adam's actual sin." The condemnation that came to all because of Adam's transgression is removed by the righteousness of Christ. Through the obedience, death, and resurrection of Christ, humanity has been set upon vantage ground. The human race reaps other benefits as well. These are enumerated in five points. The first is, the promise of immortality for all "after the resurrection." Second, all have a present capacity for spiritual life. Third, all receive a spark or seed of spiritual life. Fourth, all believers will become children of grace, and fifth they are made partakers of the divine nature.<sup>33</sup> The last two of these are clearly particular, applying only to the believers. The second and third, however, are universalistic in that all have the capacity for spiritual life and all have a spark of the same.

Wesley sees an effect of the atonement that reaches to to the entire human race. As the fall has had a universal aspect, so also has the work of redemption. The conscience, an ability to be receptive to spiritual things, some aspect of spiritual life, all are given to everyone through the merits of Christ. Wesley clearly identifies it as a gift from God.

Wesley is well aware that some will be lost and does not come close to espousing the idea that all will be saved. The responsibility for the condemnation of the lost is due to their own unbelief and resistance to grace. It is this knowledge that keeps him from going to a position of universalism. In this context of balance (or tension), Wesley tries to be fair with his Biblical texts.

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<sup>33</sup> John Wesley, "Minutes of Late Conversations", in *Wesley's Works* Vol VII, ed. Thomas Jackson, (London: John Mason, 1829), 277-8.

In demonstrating this tension, his sermon **Predestination Calmly Considered** is instructive. Wesley quotes 2 Cor. 5:14 as evidence that Christ has died for all. This he argues, affirms the fact that Christ's death has touched all. He then refers to 1 John 2:2 and argues that the fact that Christ is the propitiation for the world, is the consequence of his dying for all. This is an important point. Christ is not merely the propitiation for the believer. As a result of dying for all, he is the propitiation for all, and he intercedes for all.

The aim or design of Christ's death and intercession is that all should live for him. In order to support this, Wesley refers back to 2 Cor. 5:15. Here Paul states that "those who live should...live...unto Him who died for them." As all have been benefited by the death of Christ, so all should now live in response to that death.<sup>34</sup> Here Wesley contends that even those who do not claim to follow Christ have an obligation to live for him, because of what he has done for them.

Holding a broad view of the work of Christ gave Wesley a wide conception of those that will finally be saved. It is this charitable view of salvation, that I term "limited universalism." Wesley believed that because of the universal effect of the death of Christ, which gives preventing grace to everyone, enabling the will to respond to further acts of grace, people can be saved without ever personally responding to a proclamation of the gospel. This is brought out in his sermon **On Faith**. There he describes different aspects or levels of faith. In so doing, he touches upon various groups, such as deists, heathen, Mohammedans (Muslims), and Jews in relation to their salvation. In speaking of the

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<sup>34</sup> John Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered", in *Wesley's Works* Vol X, ed. Thomas Jackson, (London: John Mason, 1829), 225. The text can also be found at <http://evangelicalarminians.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Wesley.-PREDESTINATION-CALMLY-CONSIDERED.pdf> accessed 11/03/2017.

heathen, Wesley allows their salvation, without their ever having heard of or responded to the gospel.

Inasmuch as to them little is given, of them little will be required. As to the ancient Heathens, millions of them likewise were savages. No more therefore will be expected of them, than the living up to the light they had. But many of them, especially in the civilized nations, we have great reason to hope, although they lived among Heathens, yet were quite aware of another spirit; being taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion.<sup>35</sup>

What is important is their response to the work of the "true light" (John 1:9) within their hearts.

Here Wesley again leans heavily on personal experience. It is not necessary for an individual to hear the gospel or respond intelligently to Christ. A continual response to the work of grace is sufficient. Wesley would not want this to be misunderstood as any lowering of the importance of preaching the gospel. This is necessary to help bring people to a fuller knowledge of God and to perfection. Still, one can be saved without a direct response to the gospel.

In a letter answering questions about Quakerism and Christianity, Wesley quotes the Quaker author Robert Barclay comparing his views with Christianity. In the letter he approvingly includes this quote which discusses those who have no direct knowledge of Christ's death and indicates his agreement with it.

Even these may be partakers of the benefit of His death, though ignorant of the history, if they suffer His grace to take place in their hearts, so as of wicked men to become holy.

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<sup>35</sup> John Wesley, "On Faith", in *Wesley's Works* Vol VII, ed. Thomas Jackson, (London: John Mason, 1829), 197. See <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-106-On-Faith> accessed 11/05/2017. In the next few sentences Wesley includes adherents to Islam as those who have been taught the principles of true religion.

In this view, from Wesley's perspective, Quakerism and Christianity agree.<sup>36</sup>

Wesley displays the broad net of salvation that he casts. Although he sees truth in the teaching on original sin, he also argues that no one remains in that condition. All have had the moving of preventing grace upon their mind and heart. The guilt of Adam has been removed by the merits of Christ and at least the effect of total depravity is mitigated by Christ's actions as well. Therefore, the possibility exists for even those who have never heard of Christ to be eternally saved.

It must be stressed, that this is solely due to Christ's atoning work. Those within heathenism, or non-Christian religions are not saved on the merit of their deeds. It is the grace of Christ which inwardly teaches them the principles of true religion. Wesley is able to keep the doctrines of human inability to move toward salvation and human responsibility in balance. This is because of his harmony between his view of original sin and preventing grace. Anything that a person does in the Christian walk, is *already* a response to the initiating activity of God.

Through the work of the last Adam, God has begun a spiritual fire in every soul. The human agent can respond or quench the burning embers. Yet even that ability to respond is already a gift from God. In this way, God's honor and justice are maintained. God is shown to be clear of the responsibility for sin and the sinner's final punishment. God also receives the praise for that good the human agent does. After commenting on Phil. 2:12,13 Wesley stated: "Why the very power to 'work together with Him' was from God. Therefore to Him is all the glory."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Theology Today*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Wesley, "Calmly Considered", 230.

Despite difficulties, temptations and heaviness of mind, one can still live to bring God glory. This was Wesley's aim in life. Notwithstanding the spiritual battles that Wesley himself felt, a knowledge of God's love sustained him. Even in his death, he was able to exclaim "Best of all, God is with us. Best of all, God is with us." Truly Wesley understood that God had been with him, indeed, is with all of us, from the womb to the grave.