

## John Wesley's Legacy – Evangelical Arminianism

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*(John Wesley was born on 17 June 1703. At the Free Presbyterian Theological Conference in the year of the tercentenary of his birth a paper was given on The Life and Legacy of John Wesley. This and subsequent articles are a slightly revised version of the second part of the paper that dealt with five elements of Wesley's legacy that have gone beyond Worldwide Methodism and have penetrated into the Evangelical Churches and two of them into some churches claiming to be Reformed. This article deals with the first of these aspects of Wesley's legacy.)*

The leadership of the evangelical revival in the eighteenth century in Great Britain and America was almost entirely Calvinistic. The major exceptions to this were John and Charles Wesley and John Fletcher. It was Wesley's vigorous defence of Arminianism that first split the revival movement and eventually caused a permanent division. During George Whitefield's lifetime, and largely due to his influence, a fragile harmony was maintained. Just months after his death the movement split irrevocably.

John Wesley was brought up in a High Anglican home where Calvinism was intensely disliked. His Arminianism was, however, of a different type to that of the Dutch Remonstrants.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Arminius he did not deny total depravity and original sin. The Remonstrants asserted that man never lost the ability to respond to God if he so chose. Wesley taught that man lost this ability in the fall, but that it had been restored to everyone as a gift of grace.<sup>2</sup> This was his doctrine of prevenient grace.<sup>3</sup> As a young man of twenty-two Wesley was troubled by the seventeenth article of the Church of England creed that deals with Predestination. He wrote to his mother, Susanna Wesley<sup>4</sup>, asking for her opinion and advice. This is how she replied:

‘The doctrine of predestination as maintained by rigid Calvinists is very shocking and ought to be abhorred because it charges the most holy God with being the author of sin...I do firmly believe that God from all eternity hath elected some to everlasting

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<sup>1</sup> The Remonstrants were the followers of Jacobus Arminius. Their teachings were condemned at the Synod of Dort (1618 -1619)

<sup>2</sup> J I Packer has observed, ‘It is important to realise that both in its general tenor and in its practical effect the Arminianism of the “Belgic semi-Pelagians”, as John Owen called the Remonstrants and their supporters, was not by any means identical with the Arminianism of John Wesley, his Arminian Magazine...and his colleague John Fletcher’. For details of the differences between Arminius and Wesley, see J I Packer's lecture ‘Arminianisms’ in *The Manifold Grace of God, Papers read at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference*, 1968, p 23-24. An expanded version of the lecture will be found in, J I Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings*, Carlisle, 1999, Vol. 4 pp. 279-307.

<sup>3</sup> See Luke L Keefer Jr, ‘Characteristics of Wesley's Arminianism’, in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 22:1, Spring 1987. A recent exposition of Wesley's Arminianism is Herbert Boyd McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace – John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism*, Carlisle, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Susanna Wesley's father was Samuel Annesley, a leading London Puritan. He was ejected from St Giles, Cripplegate in 1662 and was the main support of the Morning Lectures at Cripplegate. Six of his sermons will be found in the volumes containing the sermons delivered at the Cripplegate Exercise. On this noble dissenting background Susanna turned her back and became a High Anglican. Her decision was taken at the early age of thirteen and was one from which she never swerved.

life, but then I humbly conceive that this election is founded on his foreknowledge according to Romans 8:29-30, "Whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his son". Whom in his eternal prescience God saw would make a right use of their powers and accept of offered mercy, he did predestinate - adopt for his children, his peculiar treasure...This is the sum of what I believe concerning predestination...nor can it with more reason be supposed that the prescience of God is the cause that so many finally perish than that our knowing the sun will rise in the morning is the cause of its rising.'<sup>5</sup> This is exactly the view of predestination and of the meaning of Article seventeen of the Thirty-Nine Articles that Wesley upheld in later life.

Wesley's view of the Five Points of Calvinism can be summarised as follows. His view of prevenient grace removed the effects for all mankind of total depravity. Election was based on God's foreknowledge of man's sovereign choice. He then rejected entirely a definite atonement, effectual calling and the final perseverance of the saints. During John Wesley's entire career as a travelling evangelist he was in constant conflict with Calvinism.

The Calvinistic controversy during Wesley's lifetime had five distinct phases. The purpose of this article is to highlight the major issues, the men who were involved in each phase of the controversy, and to show Wesley's contribution to the development of an evangelical version of Arminianism.

### **The controversy with George Whitefield**

The first phase of the Calvinistic controversy was Wesley's dispute with George Whitefield. It began in 1739 after Whitefield had asked Wesley to assist him in his work in Bristol. No sooner had Whitefield left for his second mission to America than Wesley published a sermon titled *Free Grace*.<sup>6</sup> Wesley's understanding of the meaning of the term 'Free Grace' was very different from that of the Calvinists; to Wesley, free grace meant grace freely available to all, to Whitefield and the Calvinists, free grace is grace given, or withheld, freely by God. Whitefield eventually responded to the sermon in his *Letter to the Rev. John Wesley, in answer to his sermon entitled Free Grace*.<sup>7</sup>

Arnold Dallimore has provided in his *Life of George Whitefield*<sup>8</sup> an objective account of Wesley's unsatisfactory behaviour throughout this controversy. During

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<sup>5</sup> The letter is given in Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of John Wesley*, London, 1871, Vol. I p 39-40. A fuller version is now contained in the first volume of the definitive edition of Wesley's letters. *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 25 Letters I, 1721-1739 (Editor Frank Baker), Oxford, 1980, p 178-180.

<sup>6</sup> The sermon is printed in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, London, 1872, Vol. VII, pp. 373-386 (cited afterwards as *Wesley's Works*). After it was preached Wesley circulated the sermon as a pamphlet with a hymn annexed to it by Charles Wesley on Universal Redemption.

<sup>7</sup> Whitefield's letter is printed as Appendix III to *George Whitefield's Journals*, London, 1960, pp. 563-588. The appendix contains a most useful prefatory note by Iain Murray. Whitefield's letter is also printed in Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Edinburgh, 1980, Vol. II, pp. 549-569.

<sup>8</sup> Dallimore, op cit, Vol. II pp 19-78.

Whitefield's absence in America he prejudiced Whitefield converts against him, and that after Whitefield had invited him to take care of them. Thomas Maxfield and his wife were among those who Wesley sought to prejudice. Maxfield gave this testimony, 'When the contention began, both she and I were warned by the persons into whose hands Mr. Whitefield had entrusted us till he should return...not to go near him upon any consideration. No, not near enough to hear his voice in the fields! No, not by all that is sacred'.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Gilbert Tennent Whitefield writes, 'Brother W(esley) had so prejudiced the people against me, that those who were my spiritual children would not so much as come and see me: nay they have gone by me whilst preaching in Moorfields and stopped their ears'.<sup>10</sup>

The main theological issues in this initial Calvinistic controversy were election, particular redemption and Wesley's view of perfection. Amongst the literature the controversy produced was an anonymous tract by Wesley's mother defending her son.<sup>11</sup>

### **John Gill and Final Perseverance**

The second phase began in 1751 when Wesley published a short anonymous tract titled *Serious thoughts on the Perseverance of the Saints*.<sup>12</sup> He sums up the teaching of the tract in the last section in these words:

'If the Scriptures are true, those who are holy or righteous in the judgment of God himself; those who are endued with the faith that purifies the heart, that produces a good conscience; those who are grafted into the good olive tree, the spiritual, invisible Church; those who are branches of the true vine, of whom Christ says, "I am the vine, ye are the branches;" those who so effectually know Christ as by that knowledge to have escaped the pollutions of the world; those who see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and who have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost, of the witness and of the fruits of the Spirit; those who live by faith in the Son of God; those who are sanctified by the blood of the covenant, may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly'.<sup>13</sup>

The pamphlet caught the attention of the Baptist Pastor-Theologian, John Gill, who responded with a short treatise, *The Doctrine of the Saints Final Perseverance Asserted and Vindicated; in Answer to a late Pamphlet called 'Serious Thoughts' on the Subject*.<sup>14</sup> Gill was rightly shocked by Wesley's approach to the sure promises of God. In his essay, Gill lists Wesley's arguments and then deals with them one by one.

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in Dallimore, op cit, Vol. II p 47.

<sup>10</sup> *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, Vol. I*, London, 1771, (Reprinted by the Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p 362.

<sup>11</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Some Remarks on a Letter from the Reverend Mr Whitefield to the Reverend Mr Wesley, In a Letter from a Gentlewoman to her friend*, London, 1741.

<sup>12</sup> See *Wesley's Works* Vol. X. pp. 284-298.

<sup>13</sup> op cit, p 298.

<sup>14</sup> John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, Primitive Baptist Library, 1981, Vol. III pp. 63-100.

Gill's essay had not been in print long before Wesley replied with a larger work, *Predestination Calmly considered* with the sub-title, *A full answer to Dr Gill's pamphlet on perseverance*.<sup>15</sup> To this Gill responded with *The Doctrine of Predestination stated and set in the light of scripture*.<sup>16</sup> It was now clear to Gill that Wesley was the author of the earlier anonymous tract and he expressed some surprise at how Wesley had changed the subject from final perseverance to predestination. This, however, was a favourite Wesley tactic as he always felt more comfortable attacking predestination and reprobation. Gill thought Wesley's second tract was more of a harangue than an argument.<sup>17</sup>

Wesley's final response to Gill was a twelve page pamphlet composed entirely of selections from the hymn book *Hymns of God's Everlasting Love*, a production that contained such notorious productions as 'The Cry of the Reprobate' and the 'Horrible Decree'.<sup>18</sup> This indicates the confidence of Wesley in hymns as statements of theology. A W Harrison, the Methodist historian, regards this collection of hymns as by far the most effective publication in the controversy with Calvinism.<sup>19</sup>

### **James Hervey and Imputed Righteousness**

At the centre of the third phase of the Calvinistic controversy were the doctrines of justification and the imputed righteousness of Christ. James Hervey had asserted these doctrines very forcibly in his book *Theron and Aspasio*<sup>20</sup> published in 1755. Wesley is said to have provocatively dismissed the doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ as 'imputed nonsense'.<sup>21</sup> He attacked Hervey's teaching in his tract, *A Preservative against Unsettled Notions in Religion*,<sup>22</sup> which was printed in 1758.

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<sup>15</sup> See *Wesley's Works* Vol. X pp. 204-259.

<sup>16</sup> John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, op.cit. Vol. III pp. 100-132

<sup>17</sup> George M Ella, *John Gill and The Cause of God and Truth*, Eggleston, 1995, p 226. Ella deals very fully with the Wesley-Gill controversy. See op cit, pp. 220-234. It is to be regretted that both Iain Murray and Geoffrey Thomas have recently criticised Gill and appear to provide excuses for Wesley. See, I H Murray, *Wesley and the Men Who Followed*, Edinburgh, 2003, p 61-62; G Thomas, John Wesley – Bane or blessing in *The Voice of God, Papers read at the 2002 Westminster Conference*, p 75. Whilst we appreciate Murray and Thomas's disagreement with aspects of Gill's theology, in his controversy with Wesley he was clearly defending Calvinism.

<sup>18</sup> *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* are printed in George Osborn, Editor, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, London, 1868-1872, Vol. III pp. 3-106.

<sup>19</sup> A W Harrison, *Arminianism*, London, 1937, p 195.

<sup>20</sup> James Hervey, *Theron and Aspasio, Or a Series of Dialogues and Letters upon the Most Important and Interesting Subjects*, Three Volumes, London, 1755.

<sup>21</sup> A Sell, *The Great Debate – Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation*, Worthing, 1982, p 66.

<sup>22</sup> This work is a collection of thirteen pamphlets, mostly written by Wesley, on a variety of topics. The twelfth piece was *A letter written to the Rev Mr. Hervey* in 1756. The letter is also contained in *Letters of John Wesley*, (Edited by John Telford), London, 1931, (cited afterwards as *Wesley's Letters (Telford)*) Vol. 3, p 371-388.

An outcome of this protracted phase of the Calvinistic controversy was to make clear that Wesley's Arminian doctrine of justification was similar to that of Richard Baxter. Both Wesley and Baxter taught that faith itself, rather than the righteousness of Christ, is the ground of justification. Faith is counted for righteousness. The Arminian and Baxterian view of justification is that Christ has procured a new law for mankind by satisfying the demands of the old one. The new law is the obedience of faith.<sup>23</sup>

In Wesley's critique of *Theron and Aspasio*, he makes some quite startling comments that reveal his intense hatred of Calvinism. Hervey had written, 'The righteousness wrought out by Jesus Christ is wrought out for all His people, to be the cause of their justification and the purchase of their salvation. The righteousness is the cause and the purchase'.<sup>24</sup> This is Wesley's response, "For all His People." But what becomes of all other people? They must inevitably perish for ever. The die was cast or ever they had a being. The doctrine to pass them by has:

Consigned their unborn souls to hell,  
And damned them from their mother's womb.<sup>25</sup>

I could sooner be a Turk, a Deist, yea an atheist, than I could believe this. It is less absurd to deny the very being of God than to make Him an almighty tyrant'.<sup>26</sup>

### **Augustus Toplady and Absolute Predestination**

The fourth phase of Wesley's battle with Calvinism was the prolonged controversy with Augustus Toplady. In September 1758, when merely a seventeen-year old student at Trinity College Dublin, Toplady had written to Wesley approving of his criticism of James Hervey. Toplady, then an Arminian, had written, 'I have long been convinced, that self-righteousness and antinomianism are equally pernicious; and that to insist on the imputation of Christ's righteousness, as alone requisite to salvation, is only strewing the way to hell with flowers. I have myself known some make shipwreck of faith, and love, and a good conscience, on this specious quicksand'.<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after writing the letter Toplady became a decided Calvinist following his reading of Thomas Manton's *Exposition of John 17*.<sup>28</sup> Over a decade later, in 1769,

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<sup>23</sup> Wesley's controversy with Hervey is dealt with in, L Tyerman, *The Oxford Methodists*, London, 1873, pp. 279-333; A Brown-Lawson, *John Wesley and the Anglican Evangelicals of the Eighteenth Century*, Bishop Auckland, 1994, pp. 193-269; G M Ella, *James Hervey, Preacher of Righteousness*, Eggleston, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in *Wesley's Letters, (Telford)* Vol. 3, p 386-387.

<sup>25</sup> *Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, op.cit, Vol. 3, p33.

<sup>26</sup> *Wesley's Letters, (Telford)* Vol. 3, p 387.

<sup>27</sup> Toplady's letter to Wesley is printed in L Tyerman, *The Life and Times of John Wesley*, London, 1872, Vol. 2 pp. 315-316. The citation is on p 315.

<sup>28</sup> This treatise is in *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, Vol. 10, pp 107-490 and Vol. 11, pp. 1-149, London, 1872.

Toplady wrote two tracts, *The Church of England Vindicated from Arminianism*<sup>29</sup> and *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination Stated and Asserted*.<sup>30</sup> The latter treatise was largely a translation of a work by Jerome Zanchius and was very offensive to Wesley.

On seeing these works by Toplady, Wesley wrote to one of his literary helpers, ‘add a word to that lively coxcomb, Mr. Toplady, not only with regard to Zanchius, but his slander of the Church of England. You would do well to give a reading to both his tracts. He does certainly believe himself to be the greatest genius in England’.<sup>31</sup>

This led to a protracted exchange on the topic of predestination that continued until Toplady died, in 1778, at the age of thirty-eight. Wesley published what he called an abridgment of Toplady’s teaching<sup>32</sup> that parodied his view of predestination. An advertisement beneath the title of the tract contained what Wesley considered to be a summary of Toplady’s teaching. It read as follows:

The sum of all is this: One in twenty (suppose) of mankind is elected: nineteen in twenty are reprobated. The elect shall be saved, do what they will; the reprobate shall be damned: Reader believe this or be damned. Witness my hand. Augustus Toplady.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Minutes Controversy**

The final phase of the conflict is what has been called the ‘Minutes Controversy’. It was a direct result of the Minutes of the 1770 Methodist Conference. These Minutes repeated a statement that had been made in the Minutes of the 1744 Conference, a quarter of a century earlier, shortly after the dispute with George Whitefield. The statement was ‘Have we not then unawares leaned too much towards Calvinism?’<sup>34</sup> The minutes then go on to explain what the statement meant. The meaning was essentially this: salvation by faith alone had been stressed at the expense of the need for good works.

The explanation of how the Methodists had leaned too much towards Calvinism was in these terms:

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<sup>29</sup> Reprinted in *The Works of Augustus Toplady*, (cited afterwards as *Toplady’s Works*) London, 1837, pp. 610-663.

<sup>30</sup> Reprinted in *Toplady’s Works*, pp. 663-718.

<sup>31</sup> This comment is in a letter to Walter Sellon. See, *Wesley’s Letters (Telford)* Vol. 5, p 167. It should be noted that at the time Toplady was twenty-nine and Wesley was sixty-six.

<sup>32</sup> The title of the tract was *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination, Stated and Asserted*, by the Reverend Mr. A...T... London, 1770.

<sup>33</sup> See, *Wesley’s Letters (Telford)*, Vol. 5 p 167; *Toplady’s Works*, op cit, p 721; George Lawton, *Within the Rock of Ages, The Life and Work of Augustus Montague Toplady*, Cambridge, 1983, p 100-101.

<sup>34</sup> See *Minutes of some late conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and others*. Minute of Monday 25 June 1744 in *Wesley’s Works* Vol. VIII p 278.

(1) With regard to man's faithfulness. Our Lord himself taught us to use the expression: Therefore we ought never to be ashamed of it. We ought steadily to assert upon his authority, that if a man is not "faithful in the unrighteous mammon, God will not give him the true riches".

(2) With regard to "working for life", which our Lord expressly commands us to do. "Labour", literally, "work for the meat that endureth to everlasting life". And in fact every believer, till he comes to glory, works *for* as well as *from* life.

(3) We have received it as a maxim, that "a man is to do nothing in order to justification". Nothing can be more false. Whoever desires to find favour with God, should "cease from evil, and learn to do well". So God himself teaches by the prophet Isaiah. Whoever repents, should "do works meet for repentance". And if this is not in order to find favour, what does he do them for?

The resulting Minute,<sup>35</sup> of which the above citation is just the first part, looked alarmingly like a popish statement of justification by works. It also contained the following rather inflammatory statement, 'As to merit itself, of which we have been so dreadfully afraid. We are rewarded according to our works, yea because of our works. How does this differ from, "for the sake of our works?" And how differs this from *secundum merita operum*? Which is no more than "as our works deserve". Can you split this hair? I doubt I cannot.'<sup>36</sup>

The 1770 Methodist Conference minutes sparked off a bitter controversy that lasted for six years.<sup>37</sup> The Countess of Huntingdon and her nephew Walter Shirley organized a protest at the 1771 Methodist Conference. The Calvinists defended the Biblical doctrine of justification and its compatibility with godly living, whilst Wesley's lieutenant, John Fletcher of Madeley, accused the Calvinists of being Antinomians. For Wesley, justification was merely forgiveness; he rejected the forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness to his people. The literature of the controversy is very extensive and includes John Fletcher's *Five Checks to Antinomianism*.<sup>38</sup> These were volumes that Wesley greatly admired and seem to have been the basis of Wesley appointing Fletcher as his 'Designated Successor'.

The main authors on the Calvinistic side, who defended the protestant doctrine of justification, were Augustus Toplady, Richard and Rowland Hill and John Berridge of

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<sup>35</sup> The entire minute is in *Wesley's Works*, Vol. 8, pp. 337-338, it is also cited in full in, C W Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, London, 1960, pp. 61-62.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, op. cit. p. 62.

<sup>37</sup> More historical analysis is still required of this crucial controversy. It is briefly traced in A Brown-Lawson, op. cit, pp. 301-354 and A W Harrison, op. cit, pp. 204-222. Fuller accounts appear in the biographies of John Fletcher. See Luke Tyerman, *Wesley's Designated Successor – The Life, Letters, and Literary Labours of the Rev. John William Fletcher*, Stoke on Trent, 2001, (Tentmaker Publication Reprint) pp. 183-354, Patrick Streiff, *Reluctant Saint? – A Theological Biography of Fletcher of Madeley*, Peterborough, 2001, pp. 149-237.

<sup>38</sup> John Fletcher's *Five Checks to Antinomianism* are a series of volumes published between 1771 and 1774 that greatly fuelled the controversy. There were six tracts with this title – the Fifth Check was in two parts. These were followed by three further volumes in 1774 and 1775, *An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* (In two parts) and *The Last Check to Antinomianism*. These volumes were long regarded by Methodists as the model of Arminian doctrine.

Everton.<sup>39</sup> The Minutes controversy resulted in the revival movement being irrevocably divided. One of the organs used by the Calvinists was the *Gospel Magazine* (which is still published) and was edited for a time by Toplady. To counter the influence of the *Gospel Magazine* Wesley began in January 1778 the *Arminian Magazine*. It was in the midst of this last phase of the Calvinistic controversy that Toplady produced his tract descriptive of Wesley, *An old fox tarred and feathered*.<sup>40</sup>

Towards the end of his life Wesley wrote:

Q. What is the direct antidote to Methodism, the doctrine of heart holiness.

A. Calvinism. All the devices of Satan for these fifty years have done far less towards stopping the work of God than this single doctrine.<sup>41</sup>

‘Misrepresentation like this’, as J I Packer has observed, ‘from a godly man who over fifty years had had many Calvinistic friends and abundant opportunity to read Calvinistic books, argues a degree of prejudice and closed mindedness which is almost pathological’.<sup>42</sup>

Before Wesley, Arminianism in England was of the rationalistic Dutch type as seen in men like Archbishop Laud. After Wesley, Arminianism became the hallmark of a section of Evangelicalism. All the modern Arminian evangelists from Charles Finney (who was born in the year Wesley died) to Billy Graham are Wesley’s children and inheritors of this aspect of his legacy.

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<sup>39</sup> The major treatise by Toplady during the controversy was *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England*. The title of one of Richard Hill’s many contributions gives a sense of the intensity of the theological battle, *A Review of all the Doctrines taught by Rev. Mr. John Wesley; containing a full and particular answer to a book entitled, ‘A Second Check to Antinomianism’*. In six letters to the Rev. Mr. Fletcher. Wherein the Doctrines of a twofold justification, free will, men’s merit, sinless perfection, finished salvation, and real antinomianism, are particularly discussed; and the Puritan Divines and Protestant Churches vindicated from the charges brought against them of holding Mr. Wesley’s doctrines. To which is added, a Farrago; and some remarks on the Third Check to Antinomianism, London, 1772. John Berridge’s most significant contribution was *The Christian World Unmasked; Pray, Come and Peep*, London, 1773.

<sup>40</sup> *An Old Fox Tarred and Feathered; Occasioned by what is called Mr. John Wesley’s Calm address to our American Colonies*, in *The Works of Augustus Toplady*, London, 1837, pp.762-766.

<sup>41</sup> *Wesley’s Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 336

<sup>42</sup> J I Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings*, Vol. 4, p. 300