

John Wesley's Legacy – The Second Blessing and Hymn Singing

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(This is the third article based on the latter part of a paper given at the 2003 Free Presbyterian Theological Conference on The Life and Legacy of John Wesley. The first dealt with Wesley's contribution to the formation of an evangelical version of Arminianism. The second dealt with his views on Perfectionism and Women Preachers.)

The Second Blessing

The fourth strand of Wesley's legacy is an aspect of his teaching that has penetrated not only into the Evangelical Churches, but also into some Churches professing to be Reformed.

The distinctive element of John Wesley's doctrine of sanctification was his assertion that Christian perfection was experienced as a second blessing, distinct from, and subsequent to justification. This second blessing teaching was a significant injection into Protestant theology that has had far reaching consequences right down to the present time. By this concept Wesley introduced the now familiar construction of a two-tier view of the Christian life; the higher Christian life and the lower Christian life, the spiritual Christian and the carnal Christian, the spirit-baptized and the non-spirit-baptized, the sealed believer and the unsealed believer.

Within just two years of his Aldersgate experience Wesley wrote a preface to a selection of hymns published by himself and his brother Charles, in which he is dealing with the question of Christian perfection, or as he calls it, 'Full Salvation'. He wrote, 'Neither, therefore, dare we affirm (as some have done) that this full salvation is at once given to true believers. There is, indeed, an instantaneous (as well as a gradual) work of God in the souls of his children...we do not know a single instance, in any place, of a person's receiving, in one and the same moment remission of sins, the abiding witness of the spirit, and a new clean heart'.¹

From these early beginnings Wesley's concept of a second blessing was to develop and become more explicit as he grew older. In a letter written in 1762 he states his doctrine, '...sanctification (in the proper sense) is an instantaneous deliverance from sin and includes an instantaneous power then given always to cleave to God'.² Four years later in 1766, in his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, after stating that the destruction of sin can take many years and be a gradual work, he writes, 'All this we know: But we know likewise, that God may, with man's good leave, "cut short his work" in whatever degree he pleases, and do the usual work of many years in a moment'.³ In a letter of advice to a female preacher written in 1773, Wesley writes,

¹ *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, London, 1872, Vol. XIV, p. 326, (cited afterwards as *Wesley's Works*).

² *Letters of John Wesley*, (Edited by John Telford), London, 1931, (cited afterwards as *Wesley's Letters (Telford)*) Vol. 4, p. 188.

³ *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p. 423, The more available edition of Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* is the often re-issued Epworth reprint - 1952 onwards, p. 81.

‘Your own soul will be quickened if you earnestly exhort believers without fear or shame to press after full salvation as receivable now, and that by simple faith’.⁴ Seven years before his death, in another letter, Wesley re-states his second blessing theology in the starkest terms, ‘But the work itself (that is sanctification as well as justification) is undoubtedly instantaneous. As after a gradual conviction of the guilt and power of sin you were justified in a moment, so after a gradually increasing conviction of inbred sin, you will be sanctified in a moment. And who knows how soon? Why not now?’⁵

A great deal of discussion has taken place as to how Wesley developed his theology of a second blessing or second work of grace. Two sources have been identified as contributing to the formation of Wesley’s thinking. The first was the teaching of the Moravians.⁶ Wesley professed to have been brought to faith under Moravian influence. Directly after his Aldersgate experience, he went to Hernhutt, the Moravian settlement in Germany. The Moravians believed that the witness of the Spirit to the new birth was usually bestowed some time after a person had been forgiven, and it was this second experience that enabled them to gain a victory over sin.

Shortly after Wesley returned to England in September 1738, he wrote a letter to his older brother Samuel using language that was the germ of what would become, a year later, his doctrine of entire sanctification experienced as a second work of grace. His words were, ‘“the seal of the Spirit”, “the love of God shed abroad in my heart”, and producing joy in the Holy Ghost, “joy which no man taketh away”, “joy unspeakable and full of glory” – this witness of the Spirit I have not, but I patiently wait for it. I know many who have already received it, more than one or two in the very hour we were praying for it’⁷. By the autumn of 1739, he had become convinced that scripture taught that this fullness of blessing would accompany a second and deeper moment of hallowing grace, which would bring purity of heart and perfect love.⁸

The other major influence on Wesley’s thinking was his High Anglican upbringing where a type of second work of grace was a theological common-place. This was the High Anglican concept of confirmation. Low Church Anglicans view the rite of confirmation, when a Bishop lays hands on the head of the candidate, as being

⁴ *Wesley’s Letters* (Telford) Vol. 6, p. 13.

⁵ *Wesley’s Letters* (Telford) Vol. 7, p. 222.

⁶ For a discussion of the Moravian influence on Wesley’s second blessing teaching see, Timothy L Smith, ‘John Wesley and the Second Blessing’, in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 21:1&2, Spring-Fall 1986. This paper provides a most useful account of the development of Wesley’s second blessing theology.

⁷ The letter to Samuel from London is dated 30 October 1738 and is printed in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 25 Letters I, 1721-1739 (Editor Frank Baker), Oxford, 1980, pp. 576-577.

⁸ This is seen in a sermon he preached on 7 October 1739 titled, ‘The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption’. See *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*, E H Sugden (Editor), London, 1961, Vol. 1, pp. 178-198 (afterwards referred to as *Standard Sermons*). Wesley was very much encouraged at this time by his mother’s experience, which she seems only to have told him about in September 1739. Susanna Wesley explained to him that a few weeks before his own conversion she had an experience in May 1738. Whilst receiving the sacrament, she knew that God for Christ’s sake had forgiven her all her sins. This she regarded as the ‘witness of the Spirit’. See *Standard Sermons*, op. cit. Vol. 1, p. 200.

essentially a personal renewal of the promises made in the name of the subject by others at baptism. The High Anglican view is quite different. They regard it in a similar way to the Romanist teaching of confirmation as a rite for conveying the Holy Ghost. High Church influences and the Roman Catholic conception of piety and devotion permanently affected Wesley's thinking and were to have a major and formative influence on his conception of both Christian perfection and the second blessing. As A Keith Walker observes with regard to Wesley, 'He was even tempted to become a Roman Catholic. Nor did the 1738 experience relieve him from doubt and darkness, despite Bohler's promises. It is also significant that in later life he praised mortification, sacraments, ascetical and mystical writers. Wesley was never a simple protestant. Workman⁹ recognises the affinity between Methodism and mysticism and between Wesley and St. Francis of Assisi'.¹⁰

Lorraine Boettner describes the Romanist concept of confirmation in this way, 'In the so-called sacrament of confirmation the Bishop lays his hands on the head of the person who previously has been baptized, for the purpose of conveying to him the Holy Spirit'.¹¹ William J O'Shea of the Catholic University of America speaks of baptism and confirmation in these terms, 'Confirmation is the sacrament that bestows the Holy Spirit in a special way. Just as we can say that baptism is the sacrament of the resurrection, so we can say that confirmation is the sacrament of the sending of the Spirit. As we associate baptism with Easter, so we associate confirmation with Pentecost... The first anointing of the Spirit takes place in Baptism, making him a Son of God. The second takes place at Confirmation when the Spirit descends upon him again to make him a prophet, to equip him with the gifts he needs to enable him to live fully the life of an adopted son, and to fulfill his mission in the church'.¹²

Here we have the Romish and High Church concept of a second blessing. It is of immense significance from the viewpoint of the history of doctrine that Romanists, Wesleyans and Pentecostals all appeal to exactly the same Biblical passages in support of their different second blessing theologies: the Romanist to support confirmation, John Fletcher to support the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection and the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement for its doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit conceived of as a second blessing. All appeal to such texts as Acts 8:12-17, 10:44-46, 19:5-6.¹³

⁹ Herbert Brook Workman (1862-1951) was both an editor and contributor to one of the standard histories of Methodism – *A New History of Methodism*, Editors: W J Townsend, H B Workman, G Eayrs, 2 Vols. London, 1909. Workman contributed the first chapter titled, 'The place of Methodism in the life and thought of the Christian Church'.

¹⁰ A Keith Walker, *William Law: His Life and Thought*, London, 1973, p. 138.

¹¹ Lorraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, Philadelphia, 1962, pp. 190-191. The citation is on pp. 246-247 in the 1966 Banner of Truth British edition.

¹² William J O'Shea, *Sacraments of Initiation*, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, pp. 48-49, 63, cited in Laurence W Wood, *Pentecostal Grace*, Wilmore, 1980, pp. 243-244. The chapter from which this citation is taken in Wood's volume is titled, 'The Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection as a re-interpretation of the Roman Catholic and Anglican rite of confirmation'.

¹³ An outstanding exposition of these and similar texts will be found in Robert L Dabney's article 'Prelacy a Blunder – Grounded on erroneous exposition' reprinted in, *Discussions: Evangelical and*

Before Wesley there was no fully developed Protestant doctrine of a second work of grace; since Wesley, those who have embraced a second blessing concept have, wittingly or unwittingly, been Wesley's children. The second blessing concept is the hallmark of Pentecostalism, which it has inherited from Wesley via the American holiness movement.¹⁴

Amazingly this two-tier view of the Christian life has, in the last fifty years, become a feature of many churches and ministers professing the Reformed Faith. This has largely been due to the influence of Dr D Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In the introduction to Lloyd Jones' volume *Joy Unspeakable* his grandson, Christopher Catherwood, makes this observation with respect to his grandfather, 'He believed passionately in the baptism with the Holy Spirit as a second post conversion experience'.¹⁵ In the book Lloyd-Jones appeals to exactly the same texts to defend his second blessing teaching as the Romanist for confirmation, and the Wesleyans for second blessing perfection.¹⁶

Hymn Singing

The fifth and final strand of Wesley's legacy that we shall notice is hymn singing.¹⁷ This element of his legacy has not only penetrated evangelicalism but it is also the world wide practice of most Churches claiming to be Reformed.

John and Charles Wesley were not the first to introduce the singing of hymns into the worship of the Protestant Churches in England. The solemn responsibility for the introduction of this unscriptural practice lies mainly on the shoulders of Isaac Watts. The composition and singing of hymns was also a feature of seventeenth century

Theological, Vol. 2, London 1967, pp. 218-260, esp. from pp. 234ff, where he deals with the correct view of the charismata.

¹⁴ For further details see, Donald W Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, Grand Rapids, 1987; Donald W Dayton, 'The Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit: its emergence and significance' in *Wesley Theological Journal*, Vol. 13, Spring 1978, pp. 114-126.

¹⁵ D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable*, Eastbourne, 1984, p. 13.

¹⁶ Errol Hulse reviewing the volume and Lloyd-Jones' use of the Acts texts cited above observes, 'The Doctor builds his case on these texts in typical Pentecostal fashion' *Reformation Today* No. 84 March-April 1985, pp. 13-14. For further analysis of Lloyd-Jones' Second Blessing teaching see, Michael A Eaton, *Baptism with the Spirit: The teaching of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, Leicester, 1989; John Brencher, *Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) and Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism*, Carlisle, 2002, pp. 200-205; Peter Masters, 'Opening the door to Charismatic Teaching: Analysing the latter-day abandonment by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones of orthodox Holy Spirit theology' and 'Why did Dr Lloyd-Jones yield to quasi-Pentecostal ideas' in *Sword and Trowel*, 1988 No. 2, pp. 24-35; Roy Middleton, 'The Synod Resolution on the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement & the teaching of Dr. D M Lloyd-Jones' in *The Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 92 No. 5, May 1987, pp. 149-157.

¹⁷ For the general background to the hymns of the Wesleys see; J R Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study*, Oxford, 1997; Bernard L Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, London, 1942; Rupert E Davies, *Methodism*, London, 1976, especially chapter 5 dealing with, 'The Theology and the Hymns of the Revival' pp. 81-104.

Anglicanism, and of men like Richard Baxter, and the Baptist, Benjamin Keach.¹⁸ In the seventeenth century the English hymn developed alongside the Metrical Psalms. Isaac Watts forged them into a single art.¹⁹ Watts' mistaken concern was for what he considered to be the absence of specifically Christian doctrine in the Psalms. In language that is astonishing Watts wanted to accommodate the Book of Psalms to Christian worship. He wrote, 'in order to do this, it's necessary to divest David and Asaph of every other character but that of a psalmist and a saint and to make them always speak the common-sense of a Christian'.²⁰ Watts added, 'What a hard shift the minister is put to find proper hymns at the celebration of the Lord's Supper where the people sing nothing but out of David's Psalm Book'.²¹ William Romaine reacted to Watts' innovations by stating, 'Why should Dr. Watts, or any hymn-maker not only take the precedence of the Holy Ghost, but also thrust him entirely out of the church? Insomuch that the rhymes of a man are now magnified above the word of God, even to the annihilating of it in many congregations. If this be right, men and brethren, judge ye'.²²

Wesley's legacy with regard to hymn singing is not that of being the first to introduce hymns, although he was an early advocate of the singing of hymns within the Church of England. Wesley's legacy is twofold. The first element is that of introducing a new subjective and emotional type of hymn that was far removed from the sobriety of Watts. Some of the encouragement for this sort of production came from the Moravians whose hymns he translated. Wesley had been greatly impressed by Moravian hymn-singing in the midst of an Atlantic storm on the way to Georgia. The Moravians introduced Wesley to a new concept of hymnody which he and his brother would use extensively. Part of this construct was the idea that hymns used in public worship might not only be addressed to God, but might also be addressed to fellow worshippers. Hymns might be used for teaching as well as for worship.²³

The second element of the Wesley legacy is the use of hymns as a weapon in theological controversy. Hymns were used by the Wesleyans to propagate Arminianism, perfectionism and the second blessing. Theologians then as now tend

¹⁸ Watson, op. cit. pp. 110-114. Keach gradually introduced hymns into public worship when he was the minister of the Particular Baptist congregation in Southwark. He has been called 'a pioneer of congregational hymn singing'.

¹⁹ Watson, op. cit. p. 133.

²⁰ George Burder (Editor), *The Works of the Reverend and Learned Isaac Watts, DD*, London, 1810, Vol. IV, p. 118 cited in Watson, op. cit. p. 154.

²¹ *Watts Works*, Vol. IV, p. 114 cited in Watson op. cit. p. 154.

²² William Romaine, 'An Essay on Psalmody', in *The Works of the Late William Romaine*, London, 1813, Vol. 5, p. 85.

²³ B C Drury, 'John Wesley, Hymnologist' in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, Vol. 32, p. 103. Drury observes with respect to John Wesley's *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, published in 1737, it 'is unique amongst Wesley's hymn-books in that it contains nothing by Charles: Aldersgate was yet to come. It was John, not Charles, therefore, who started the eighteenth-century hymnodic revolution'.

not to take hymns seriously. The Wesleyans did take them seriously.²⁴ During the first Calvinistic controversy with Whitfield, they used hymns to propagate their distinctive teaching. Nehemiah Curnock, the editor of the standard edition of Wesley's *Journal* has observed regarding some of these hymns, 'The "hymns" referred to are those printed in Bristol, entitled, *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love*, which played so momentous a part in the Calvinistic controversy of the time, and which, in an enlarged edition, were reprinted in London. Sung in the meeting of the society and read in the Methodist homes they were fuel to the flames of the controversy. So were the tracts, pamphlets, and sermons which appeared in rapid succession from the press'.²⁵ The Methodist historian A W Harrison says 'By far the most effective publication [in the early Calvinistic controversy] was a lively collection of hymns and propagandist poems from the Wesleys. Presumably most of them were written by Charles Wesley and appeared under the heading *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love*, to which was added the hymns of the "Cry of the Reprobate" and the "Horrible Decree"'.²⁶

Both John and Charles Wesley detested the doctrine of the decrees and they caricatured them in verse. Harrison observes, 'Charles Wesley...was spoiling for the fray'.²⁷ His so-called hymn, the 'Horrible Decree' contains this appalling verse:

God, ever merciful and just
With new-born babes did Tophet fill
Down into endless torments thrust
Merely to show his sovereign will
This is that Horrible Decree
This is that wisdom from beneath
God (O detest the blasphemy!)
Hath pleasure in the sinner's death.²⁸

Concerning this verse J I Packer has written, 'Comment on the tone and content of such lines and on the degree of pastoral wisdom which they show as a contribution to domestic debate within the young evangelical movement is surely superfluous'.²⁹

The Wesleys deliberately composed verses for congregations to sing that taught universal redemption. These hymns, it is said, 'drove out of the societies the doctrines of election and reprobation'. There was the sound of battle in the following chorus:

²⁴ See Timothy L Smith's observations in, 'John Wesley and the Second Blessing', in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 21:1&2.

²⁵ *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, (Editor: Nehemiah Curnock), London, 1938, Vol. 2, p 447, note 2.

²⁶ A W Harrison, *Arminianism*, London, 1937, p. 195.

²⁷ Harrison, op. cit. p. 195.

²⁸ Cited in Harrison, op. cit. p. 196.

²⁹ J I Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings – Honouring the People of God*, Carlisle, 1999, Vol. 4 p. 301.

For all, for all the Saviour died
For all my Lord was crucified.³⁰

The Wesleys set their people singing verses that attacked Calvinism, and as Harrison notices, when ‘the controversy is forgotten...the teaching is absorbed’.³¹ They waged theological battle through hymns.³² John Wesley’s final response to John Gill was a short tract containing nothing but a collection of hymns. They had confidence in their hymns as statements of theology.³³

Dr. Sidney Martin, a Church of the Nazarene Minister, in a paper read to the Wesley Fellowship in 1989 commented on the effectiveness of Charles Wesley’s hymns as a weapon in theological controversy. He writes, ‘Charles Wesley’s hymns are read and sung today without those who use them being at all aware of a polemic intention in the word[s]. The battle with Calvinism has been won so completely that the original intention of many of the phrases in the hymns is quite unrealised, and the words are taken as the simple expression of what has become evangelical commonplace’.³⁴

From Wesley onward, those who wish to infiltrate the evangelical churches with false teaching compose their own hymns for that purpose. It is a significant feature of Pentecostalism that they purvey their false teaching by new hymns (some would call them songs) and choruses. It is hardly surprising that the modern defenders of hymnology seldom ever mention this use of hymns. A notable example of this is the recent, surprising, and rather shallow defence of hymnology by Iain Murray.³⁵ It is also profoundly sad that the Leicester Ministers’ Conference organised by the Banner of Truth Trust abandoned exclusive Psalmody and introduced hymn singing for the first time in 2004. A report by the editor of *Evangelicals Now* has the following observation, ‘The innovation of the singing of hymns (as opposed to just Metrical Psalms) with piano accompaniment (rather than unaccompanied singing) was a quiet revolution’.³⁶ A hymnbook called *Praise* published in 2000 and distributed by Evangelical Press, is riddled with Pentecostal teaching and contains over thirty of

³⁰ Harrison, op. cit. p. 217.

³¹ Harrison, op. cit. p. 197.

³² Harrison has observed, ‘Never since hymns about the Son being of one substance with the Father were sung in Alexandria during the Arian controversy did hymns play such a large part in theological discussion as in the eighteenth century’ op. cit. p. 197.

³³ See Luke L Keefer Jr, ‘Characteristics of Wesley’s Arminianism’, in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 22:1, Spring 1987.

³⁴ Sidney Martin, *John Wesley and the Witness of the Spirit*, Ilkeston, 1990, p. 8. Martin is quoting from Henry Bett who is cited in J Brazier Green, *John Wesley and William Law*, London, 1945, p. 95. Martin’s comment with respect to the ‘battle with Calvinism’ is clearly an overstatement. The point he makes, however, with regard to those who profess to be Calvinists singing Wesley’s hymns is rather disturbing.

³⁵ I H Murray, *The Psalter – The only Hymnal?* Edinburgh, 2001.

³⁶ *Evangelicals Now*, June 2004, p. 2.

Graham Kendrick's³⁷ songs. John Thackway in the Bible League Quarterly has robustly, and correctly, condemned this hymnbook.³⁸ It has, however, been defended by some of the leaders in the Reformed movement in England.³⁹

This use of hymns to spread false doctrine is the outworking of Wesley's legacy. Due largely to Dr Lloyd-Jones' influence, second blessing teaching has been accepted in some sections of the Reformed Community. It is not surprising, therefore, that, once these axioms of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement have been embraced, some of those who have done so will want to introduce the songs associated with that movement into congregational praise.

What are the distinctive strands of Wesley's legacy that have gone outside of Methodism and have penetrated not only into Evangelicalism but in some instances into sections of the so-called Reformed community? The list is one that Methodists would be proud to defend - it includes evangelical Arminianism, perfectionism, women preachers, the second blessing and hymn singing. For those seeking to maintain a witness to Calvinistic Presbyterianism the list is doleful. In the light of these serious departures from the teaching of Scripture we must state very clearly, that John Wesley's legacy is deeply flawed.⁴⁰

³⁷ Graham Kendrick (born 1950) is a Charismatic and a singer/songwriter. His most famous song is 'Shine Jesus Shine' which is included in *Praise* was sung in an open air mass in Manila. The pope is said to have swung his cane in time to the music.

³⁸ Thackway's vigorous critique is in the *Bible League Quarterly*, No. 403, October-December 2000, pp. 258-285. The article, slightly enlarged, was reprinted in booklet form, John P Thackway, *Praise! – A Critique*, Bible League, 2001. See also a further article by Thackway titled, 'The Sad Saga of Praise!' in *Bible League Quarterly*, No. 405, April-June 2001, pp. 342-354.

³⁹ For details see the articles cited earlier by John Thackway in the *Bible League Quarterly*, Issues No. 403, October –December 2000 and No. 405, April-June 2001. In addition see Thackway's excellent critique of new *Christian Hymns* (published by the Evangelical Movement of Wales and again distributed by Evangelical Press and also containing songs by Graham Kendrick) in the *Bible League Quarterly* No. 419, October-December 2004, pp. 128-151.

⁴⁰ It was rather surprising, and disappointing, that many of the articles on Wesley published in the tercentenary year of his birth and emanating from Reformed circles appeared unwilling to subject his highly defective theology to serious criticism.