

John Wesley: Hero or Heretic?

Historic Baptists and fundamentalists who obtain their history mainly from sanitized and hagiographical Protestant sources often have a very inaccurate view of the theology of John Wesley. The following post should serve as a corrective, and will bring up some of the facts often left out of the sanitized and hagiographical accounts.

1.) Wesley was an Arminian – he believed saints could lose their salvation.

For example, he said: “I believe a saint may fall away; that one who is holy or righteous in the judgment of God himself may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly.” (pg. 81, *Works*, vol. 6)

This heresy of Wesley is so well known that I will not provide further documentation of it.

2.) Wesley believed in the continuation of the sign gifts.

The Wesley brothers abandoned the dominant Protestant cessationism to adopt a continuationist doctrine, a view in which they were followed by the Methodist movement, and which explains much of the fanaticism that came to characterize much of Methodism. Wesley said: “[I]f the Quakers [who were strong continuationists] hold the same perceptible inspiration with me, I am glad” (“Letter to ‘John Smith,’ March 25, 1747; elec. acc. Wesley Center Online: Wesley’s Letters, 1747, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1747/>).

Compare pg. 43, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, Dayton). Thus, nineteenth-century Methodists, writing to defend continuationism, noted: “[W]e dare to maintain that many of the phenomena of the Pentecostal times have been continued, are common, and ought to be expected in every age. . . . [Cessationist] censors are exceedingly severe, [unjustly so, upon] the habitual reference made by the . . . teachers to the direct influence of the Holy Spirit . . . [as] a revealer as well as an interpreter of truth . . . speak[ing] to us not only by the written Word, but also by visions, or feelings, or aspirations, or impressions, independent of the Word; and extending even to what is sometimes claimed as a physical consciousness . . . [as by continuationist antecedent] Dr. Upham” (pg. 106, “The Brighton Convention Its Opponents.” *London Quarterly Review*, October 1875). Indeed, “much in Pentecostal teaching is a legacy from Anglicanism . . . through the mediation of Wesley” (pg. 185, *The Pentecostals*, Hollenweger).

3.) Wesley loved medieval Roman Catholic mysticism, and developed his doctrine of perfectionism in connection with it.

Roman Catholic mysticism was key to the development of the perfectionism and continuationism of John Wesley. “John Wesley . . . says that he began his teaching on Perfection in 1725 . . . [although he] was not converted [on his own testimony] until 1738 . . . [h]ow did he come to teach it? His father and mother . . . had both been interested in . . . Roman Catholic mystical teaching . . . and had read a great deal of it. . . . John Wesley

had read [in addition to other Romanist mystics such as] . . . Tauler . . . Thomas à Kempis . . . [and the] ‘Protestant mystic . . . [who] wrote a book on Perfection . . . William Law,’ but he was influenced “in particular [by]. . . Madame Guyon . . . [and] the Roman Catholic Archbishop Fénelon,” although the Romanist mystic “Marquis or Baron de Renty” was probably Wesley’s single “favorite author,” eclipsing even Guyon and Fénelon (pgs. 307-308, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, Lloyd-Jones). Thus, Wesley could speak of “that excellent man, the Marquis de Renty” although he knew the Catholic was infected with “many touches of superstition, and some of idolatry, in worshipping saints, the Virgin Mary in particular” (cf. Sermon 72, series 2, Sermon 133, series 4, *Sermons, on Several Occasions, and to which reference is made in the trust-deeds of the Methodist Chapels, as constituting, with Mr. Wesley’s notes on the New Testament, the standard doctrines of the Methodist connexion*, John Wesley. Orig. pub. 4 vol, 1771. Elec. acc. *Logos Bible Software*). Wesley was also profoundly influenced by the ascetic, Romanist, and Eastern Orthodox “monastic piety of the fourth-century ‘desert fathers’” during his time in the “Holy Club” at Oxford University. “[T]he consideration of Macarius the Egyptian and Ephraem Syrus and their descriptions of “perfection” (*teleiosis*) as the goal (*skopos*) of the Christian in this life” were influential in “shaping . . . Wesley’s . . . doctrine of Christian perfection . . . John Wesley . . . was . . . in touch with Gregory of Nyssa, the greatest of all the Eastern [Catholic] teachers of the quest for perfection. Thus, in his early days, [Wesley] drank deep of this Byzantine tradition of spirituality at its source and assimilated its concept of devotion as the way and perfection as the goal of the Christian life. . . . The devotional works . . . of two Latin [Roman Catholic] traditions of mystical spirituality . . . [and] the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy—Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Macarius of Egypt, and others . . . introduced [important] factors of . . . [Wesley’s] understanding of perfection. . . . Wesley . . . was inclined to go beyond logical subsequence [in justification and sanctification] to experiential subsequence because of the deep influence of the Eastern Fathers on him in terms of the relation of perfection to process and goal.” (pgs. 93-97, “‘Dialogue’ Within a Tradition: John Wesley and Gregory of Nyssa Discuss Christian Perfection,” John G. Merritt. *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22:2 (Fall, 1987) 92-117). Thus, Wesley received his idea of Christians entering into perfection or a second-blessing from Catholic mysticism, and transferred his two-stage notions into the Higher Life movement and into Pentecostalism. “John Wesley . . . under the influence of Catholic works of edification, distinguished between the ordinary believer and those who were ‘sanctified’ or ‘baptized with the Spirit.’ . . . This view was adopted . . . by the evangelists and theologians of the American Holiness movement . . . such as Asa Mahan and C. G. Finney . . . [and] the early Pentecostal movement” (pgs. 21, 322, *The Pentecostals*, Hollenweger). Along with perfectionism, Wesley (as already mentioned above) also adopted the ancient and medieval Catholic continuationism (cf. pgs. 44-45, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, Dayton) that provided such key support in the apologetic for image worship in the iconoclastic controversy and at other times, as well as Catholic worship of the saints themselves, transubstantiation, and other idolatries, since the marvels which were so often performed by the graven images of and relics culled from the saints, transubstantiated bread, and so on, validated such Catholic beliefs in a way that Scripture certainly could not (cf. pgs. 135ff., *Counterfeit Miracles*, Warfield).

It is noteworthy that John Wesley, while preaching Methodist perfectionism, “never claimed the experience for himself. He was a very honest man. He taught this perfectionism but he would never say that it was true of himself.” Indeed, for “many years he had great difficulty of producing any examples of it,” although at one point “he felt he could produce 30 such people; but only one of the 30 seemed to persist—the others fell away” (pg. 311, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, D. M. Lloyd-Jones).

4.) Wesley held erroneous views on the assurance of salvation.

“Wesley and Fletcher” held to a doctrinal error of an improper “immediate enjoyment of personal assurance” (pg. 180, *The Doctrine of Justification*, James Buchanan). Early in his ministry, “John Wesley summed up his thoughts on this subject in a letter written in January, 1740: ‘I never yet knew one soul thus saved without what you call the faith of assurance; I mean a sure confidence that by the merits of Christ he was reconciled to the favour of God’ [pg. 200, *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*]. Thus the *cognition* that saving grace had worked in a life was seen as the final means to ascertain if saving grace had indeed been present. The implications of this teaching, taken by itself, seem to lead to a condition in which superficial self-analysis (‘yes, I’ve got the witness’) results in spirituality while the kind of doubt which assailed such people as Luther and even at times John Wesley himself results in a loss of the hope of salvation” (pg. 171, “John Wesley and the Doctrine of Assurance,” Mark A. Noll. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132:526 (April 1975)). However, by 1755 Wesley had moderated his position slightly, so that one could be shaken in his assurance without losing his salvation, although a total lack of assurance was still only compatible with a lost estate: “I know that I am accepted: And yet that knowledge is sometimes shaken, though not destroyed, by doubt or fear. If that knowledge were destroyed, or wholly withdrawn, I could not then say I had Christian faith. To me it appears the same thing, to say, ‘I know God has accepted me’; or, ‘I have a sure trust that God has accepted me.’ . . . [Nonetheless,] justifying faith cannot be a conviction that I am justified. . . . But still I believe the proper Christian faith, which purifies the heart, implies such a conviction” (pgs. 452-453, Letter DXXXII, July 25, 1755, in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, vol 12, 3rd. ed, with the last corrections of the author. London: John Mason, 1830). Furthermore, Wesley affirmed that objective marks cannot be elaborated to distinguish between the witness of the Spirit to one’s regenerated state and self-delusion; “this kind of defense based on intuition . . . raised the specter of enthusiasm for some of Wesley’s critics” (pg. 174, *ibid.*). In this doctrine of assurance Wesley’s view was similar to that of Jacob Arminius: “Arminius thought that no one would be a true Christian who did not have a present assurance of present salvation. He wrote: ‘Since God promises eternal life to all who believe in Christ, it is impossible for him who believes, and who knows that he believes, to doubt of his own salvation, unless he doubts of this willingness of God.’” (pgs. 164-165, “John Wesley and the Doctrine of Assurance,” Noll, citing pg. 348, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, Carl Bangs. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971. Compare *The Doctrine of Assurance, with Special Reference to John Wesley*, Arthur S. Yates. London: Epworth, 1952).

Wesleyan confusion about conversion and assurance appeared in various preachers influenced by his theology; thus, for example, Welsh holiness evangelist Seth Joshua wrote: “[People] are entering into full assurance of faith coupled with a baptism of the Holy Ghost. . . . I also think that those seeking assurance may be fairly counted as converts” (pg. 122, *The Welsh Religious Revival*, Morgan, citing Mr. Joshua’s diary. Of course, some people who think that they are in need of assurance truly are unconverted, but such clarity appears to be lacking in Mr. Joshua’s comments. Spirit baptism has nothing to do with obtaining assurance in the Bible.). Methodist confusion on assurance passed over into the Pentecostal movement, which taught that assurance was of the essence of saving faith: “If God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you your sins, you know it. And if you do not know it better than you know anything in this world, you are still in your sins. When you go down in the atonement, in the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, you are accepted. And if you are accepted, and He has given you a clean heart and sanctified your soul, you know it. And if you do not know it, the work is not done” (pg. 2, *The Apostolic Faith* 1:2 (Los Angeles, October 1906), reprinted on pg. 6, *Like As of Fire: Newspapers from the Azusa Street World Wide Revival: A Reprint of “The Apostolic Faith” (1906-1908)*, coll. Fred T. Corum & Rachel A. Sizelove).

Scripture teaches that all believers can have assurance of salvation, but that assurance that one has personally passed from death to life is not of the essence of saving faith (cf. 1 John & *London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, 18:1-4).

5.) Wesley rejected the imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification.

John Wesley also rejected the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in justification, writing: “Does ‘the righteousness of God’ ever mean . . . ‘the merits of Christ?’ . . . I believe not once in all the Scripture. . . . It often means, and particularly in the Epistle to the Romans, ‘God’s method of justifying sinners.’ . . . ‘The righteousness of God’ signifies, the righteousness which the God-man wrought out[?] No. . . . It signifies ‘God’s method of justifying sinners.’” (pg. 217, *Aspasio Vindicated, and the Scripture Doctrine of Imputed Righteousness Defended, in Eleven Letters from Mr. Hervey to Mr. Wesley, in Answer to that Gentleman’s Remarks on Theron and Aspasio*, W. Hervey. Glasgow: J. & M. Robertson, 1762; & pg. 137, *Eleven Letters from the Late Rev. Mr. Hervey, to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, Containing an Answer to that Gentleman’s Remarks on Thereon and Aspasio*, W. Hervey. 2nd ed. London: J. & F. & C. Rivinot, 1789. cf. pg. 497, *The Doctrine of Justification*, James Buchanan. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997 (orig. pub. 1867)). “Many Wesleyan Methodists, following the example of their founder, have . . . keenly opposed . . . the doctrine . . . of [Christ’s] imputed righteousness” (pg. 500, *The Doctrine of Justification*, Buchanan). Thus, “Wesley could not resist assimilating justification into sanctification—the latter being his preeminent and enduring interest. The . . . notion that the believer is *simul justus et peccator* (at once both righteous and a sinner) Wesley firmly rejected. Many Arminians [including Wesley] further assert that faith is not merely the *instrument* of justification but the *ground* on which justification rests. Thus Wesley wrote that ‘any righteousness created by the act of justification is real because of the ethical or moral dimension of faith’” (pg. 353, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Bruce

Demarest). Thus, Wesley wrote: “Least of all does justification imply that God is deceived in those whom he justifies; that he thinks them to be what, in fact, they are not; that he accounts them to be otherwise than they are. It does by no means imply that God . . . esteems us better than we really are, or believes us righteous when we are unrighteous. Surely no. . . . Neither can it ever consist with his unerring wisdom to think that I am innocent, to judge that I am righteous or holy, because another is so. He can no more, in this manner, confound me with Christ, than with David or Abraham. . . . [S]uch a notion of justification is neither reconcilable to reason nor Scripture” (pg. 47, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, vol. 1. New York: Emory & Waugh, 1831—note that “reason” is mentioned before “Scripture” as a reason to oppose the Biblical doctrine of justification.)

6.) Wesley believed in the damnable heresy of baptismal regeneration.

The Wesley brothers and the Methodist denomination retained the Anglican belief in baptismal regeneration when they left the English state-church to start their own religion. Commenting on John 3:5, Wesley affirmed, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit—Except he experience that great inward change by the Spirit, and be baptized (wherever baptism can be had) as the outward sign and means of it [he cannot enter into the kingdom of God].” Commenting on Acts 22:16, he wrote: “Baptism administered to real penitents, is both a means and seal of pardon. Nor did God ordinarily in the primitive Church bestow this on any, unless through this means.” On both texts John Wesley clearly affirmed that baptism is the means of the new birth. He also declared, “It is certain our Church supposes that all who are baptized in their infancy are at the same time born again; and it is allowed that the whole office for the baptism of infants proceeds upon this supposition” (Wesley, sermon, *The New Birth*). In his *Doctrinal Tracts* (pg. 246, 251) he wrote, “What are the benefits . . . we receive by baptism, is the next point to be considered. And the first of these is the washing away of original sin, by the application of Christ’s death. . . . [T]he merits of Christ’s life and death, are applied to us in baptism. . . . infants are . . . proper subjects of baptism, seeing, in the ordinary way, they cannot be saved unless [sin] be washed away in baptism. Infants need to be washed from original sin. Therefore they are proper subjects for baptism.” (cited in chapter 9, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, Robert Boyt C. Howell, accessed in the *Fundamental Baptist CD-Rom Library*, Oak Harbor, WA: Way of Life Literature, 2003). He wrote elsewhere:

[T]he first of . . . the *benefits* we receive by baptism is . . . the washing away of the guilt of original sin by the application of the merits of Christ’s death. . . . [T]he merits of Christ’s life and death . . . are applied to us in baptism . . . baptism, the ordinary instrument of our justification. Agreeably to this, our Church prays in the baptismal office that the person to be baptized may be “washed and sanctified by the Holy Ghost, and being delivered from God’s wrath, receive remission of sins and enjoy the everlasting benediction of his heavenly washing” [A conflation of two prayers in The Ministration of Publick Baptism . . . *Book of Common Prayer* [BCP] (1662), sec. 375-376.]; and declares in the rubric at the end of the office, “It is certain, by God’s Word, that children who are baptized, dying before they commit actual sin, are saved” (BCP, pg. 388). And this is agreeable to the unanimous judgment of all the ancient Fathers. . . . By baptism we enter into . . . the new covenant which [God] promised to make with the spiritual Israel. . . [and our] sins and iniquities . . . [are] remember[ed] no more[.] . . . By baptism we are . . . united to Christ . . . [f]rom which spiritual, vital union with him proceeds the influence of his grace on those that are baptized[.] . . . By baptism, we who were “by nature children of wrath” are made the children of God. And this regeneration which our Church in so many places ascribes to baptism is

more than barely being admitted into the Church, though commonly connected therewith. Being “grafted into the body of Christ’s Church, we are made the children of God by adoption and grace” [BCP, pgs. 398-399]. . . . By *water*, then, as a means (the water of baptism) we are regenerated or born again. Nor does . . . [o]ur Church . . . ascribe . . . [merely] the *outward* washing [to baptism], but the *inward grace* which, added thereto, makes it a sacrament. Herein a principle of grace is infused which will not be wholly taken away unless we quench the Holy Spirit of God by long-continued wickedness. . . . *Baptism doth now save us* . . . as it admits us into the Church here, so into glory hereafter. . . . In the *ordinary* way, there is no other means of entering into the Church or into heaven. . . . [Since] infants are guilty of original sin, then they are the proper subjects of baptism, seing [that], in the ordinary way, they cannot be saved unless this be washed away by baptism. . . . To sum up the evidence. If outward baptism be generally, in an *ordinary* way, necessary to salvation; and infants may be saved as well as adults . . . [we] ought . . . not to neglect . . . any means of saving them[.] (pgs. 321-328, *On Baptism*, John Wesley, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964. Italics in original.)

John’s brother, the Methodist hymn-writer Charles Wesley, wrote against the Baptists, “Partisans of a narrow sect/ Your cruelty confess/ Nor still inhumanly reject/ Whom Jesus would embrace./ Your little ones preclude them not/ From the baptismal flood brought/ But let them now to Christ be saved/ And join the Church of God.” (*Charles Wesley’s Journal*, 18 October 1756, 2:128). The Wesleys only called adults already baptized as infants to conversion because of their heretical Arminian theology. Since they rejected the Biblical truth that once one is saved, he is always saved (Romans 8:28-39), they held that one who was regenerated in infant baptism could fall away and become a child of the devil again, at which time he would need a second new birth. Wesley consequently preached as follows to Anglicans who were, as he thought and as he preached, born again through infant baptism, but needed to be born again one more time because they had lost their salvation through sinning:

[That the] privileges . . . [of] being born again . . . being the son or a child of God, [and] having the Spirit of adoption . . . are ordinarily annexed to baptism (which is thence termed by our Lord [as] . . . being “born of water and of the Spirit”) we know[.] . . . The question is not, what you was [*sic*; also in the following] made in baptism, but, What are you now? . . . I ask not, whether you was born of water and of the Spirit; but are you now the temple of the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in you? I allow you was “circumcised with the circumcision of Christ;” (As St. Paul emphatically terms baptism;) but does the Spirit of Christ and of glory now rest upon you? Else “your circumcision is become uncircumcision.” . . . Say not then in your heart, “I was once baptized, therefore I am now a child of God.” Alas, that consequence will by no means hold. How many are the baptized gluttons and drunkards, the baptized liars and common swearers, the baptized railers and evil-speakers, the baptized whoremongers, thieves, extortioners? What think you? Are these now the children of God? Verily, I say unto you, unto whom any of the preceding characters belongs, “Ye are of your father the devil, and the works of your father ye do.” . . . Unto you I call, in the name of Him whom you crucify afresh[.] . . . Lean no more on the staff of that broken reed, that ye were born again in baptism. Who denies that ye were then made children of God, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven? But notwithstanding this, ye are now children of the devil. Therefore ye must be born again. . . . To say, then, that ye cannot be born again, that there is no new birth but in baptism, is to seal you all under damnation, to consign you to hell, without help, without hope. . . . You will say, “But we are washed;” we were born again “of water and of the Spirit.” So were . . . these common harlots, adulterers, murderers. . . . This, therefore, hinders not at all, but that ye may now be even as they. . . . And if ye have been baptized, your only hope is this,—that those who were made the children of God by baptism, but are now the children of the devil, may yet again receive “power to become the sons of God;” that they may receive again what they have lost[.] (Sermon 18, “Marks of the New Birth,” John Wesley, Elec. Acc. Wesley Center Online, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley-the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-18-the-marks-of-the-new-birth/>)

Whoever would deny that Anglicans were born again in baptism, John Wesley was not among their number. However, Anglicans who became unsaved by sinning after being sprinkled as infants were again lost and needed to be re-saved as adults.

See “John Wesley’s View of Baptism,” John Chongnam Cho, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 7 (Spring 1972) 60-73) for more on Wesley’s doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

Before making Wesley into a hero of the faith, historic Baptists and fundamentalists should make sure that their churches know that Wesley believed in Arminianism, in the continuation of the sign gifts (helping to prepare the way for Pentecostalism), in Catholic mysticism, in perfectionism, in a false doctrine of justification by becoming inwardly holy, and in the damnable heresy of baptismal regeneration.