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The Wesleyan Connection and Discipleship

When speaking of the “Wesleyan Connection” it is in reference to the revivalism, evangelism, small group and pastoral nurture (mostly by lay pastors and visitors), and social relief or reform activities of the most notable Anglican para-church movement of the 18th Century — the Wesleyan Revival or the Methodism that was led by John and Charles Wesley and their lay and clergy associates.

Certainly, the most well-known leader of this British/Colonial Evangelical Revival movement was John Wesley (1703-1791). The Wesley brothers and their associates featured an Arminian perspective (emphasis on graced free will) and their movement became known as Wesleyanism or Methodism. While mostly recognized for their fearless, sustained itinerant evangelism, small group nurture, and the founding of the United Societies, or the Wesleyan Connection, the Methodists also made a very strong contribution to the wider Protestant theological developments, including the later teachings of Seventh-day Adventism. Though John Wesley never wrote a systematic theology (like Calvin’s *Institutes*), there was a sustained core to his theology around which revolved a number of key themes which he elaborated in oral and published sermons, commentaries on Scripture, published journals, occasional pamphlets, periodical articles, and numerous letters.

As already suggested, Wesley was broadly Arminian (following the “free grace” perspectives of Jacob Arminius—the late 16th and early 17th Century Dutch theologian) in his theological outlook, and thus he greatly accentuated God’s gracious initiative in salvation (prevenient grace), which elicits a freely chosen response on the part of the convicted sinner. Strongly opposed to the themes of irresistible grace, so typical of Calvinistic/Reformed Protestantism (whose monergism—where God determines all things—for Wesley, seemed to be an invitation to a do-nothing, passive religion), Wesley proactively proclaimed both justifying and sanctifying

grace in pursuit of his central theological theme—sinners are *pardoned* in order to *participate*.

His strong emphasis on the importance of sanctification and perfection led him to stoutly oppose any antinomian tendencies, especially those he perceived as coming out of the Calvinistic wing of English evangelicalism. While influenced by the classic Anglican doctrinal standards (especially the Thirty-Nine Articles, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Edwardsean Homilies), with their mild affirmations of the role of Christian Tradition (the famed *via media* between Rome and Puritan Protestantism), Wesley always sought biblical foundations for his theological convictions.

From an Seventh-day Adventist perspective, Ellen White did comment on Wesley in an affirmative but brief manner in a number of her published works (1911:598; 1900:78, 79; 1903:254; 1915:34; 1890:404). However, her only sustained treatment of his life, ministry, and theological convictions is found in *The Great Controversy* (White 1911b:252-264). After briefly reviewing the rise of Oxford Methodism (in both Britain and Colonial Georgia), Wesley's struggles with legalism, his frantic search for "holiness of heart," his evangelical conversion, and the beginnings of the English Evangelical Revival, Ellen White approvingly notes a number of his key theological emphases.

The lead factor for her was Wesley's hard-won understanding (theological, ethical, and devotional/experiential) of the proper relationship between justification and sanctification: "He continued his strict and self-denying life, not now as the *ground*, but the *result* of faith; not the *root* but the *fruit* of holiness (emphasis in original). The grace of God in Christ is the foundation of the Christian's hope, and that grace will be manifested in obedience. . . . Wesley's life was devoted to the preaching [of] . . . justification through faith in the atoning blood of Christ, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit upon the heart, bringing forth fruit in a life conformed to the example of Christ" (White 1911a:256). This exposition of law and grace was understood by her as the theological and practical center of Wesley's teachings, around which all else orbited.

Other key theological planets in the Wesleyan solar system of grace which Ellen White affirmed were (1) universal election and free will (White 1911a:261) in clear opposition to the limited atonement and irresistible election doctrine of Calvinism, (2) prevenient grace (262), (3) the full affirmation of the authority of the "moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments" (262), and (4) the "perfect harmony of the law and the gospel" (262): "Thus while preaching the gospel of the grace of God, Wesley, like his Master, sought to 'magnify the law, and make it honorable'" (264).

While Ellen White clearly expressed negative views on American Methodism (which dis-fellowshipped her and her family because of their

Millerite views) and the Holiness Movement because of their rejection of numerous doctrines held by the emerging Seventh-day Adventists, yet she was always affirmative of the core of Wesley's theology, especially the main outlines of his teachings on salvation.

Thus, it seems safe to conclude that the most important, influential aspect of Wesley's thought on Ellen White was the core of his theology of salvation which emerged in a setting of free grace and called for the response of human faith which inheres in God's offer of grace (both justifying and sanctifying). While Ellen White did go on to reject Wesley's teaching that sanctifying grace would lead to a moment of instantaneous perfection (in which original sin, with its inherited and cultivated tendencies to evil would be purged away before glorification), she was in essential agreement with the basic thrust of his teachings on transforming grace.

In fact, it can be persuasively argued that the Adventist doctrine of the "investigative judgment" (strongly affirmed by Ellen White) could only emerge in a setting mentored by the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition. If salvation is irresistible, as the fruit of God's pre-determined election, judgment becomes essentially superfluous as there is no freely chosen response of faith to God's offer of salvation. If God, however, seeks the freely chosen response of the faith of believers to his offer of grace, and our response can necessarily include either a reception or rejection of saving grace (both justifying grace, the "root" of faith and sanctifying grace, the "fruit" of obedience), then there is the strong implication that sinners are responsible to God and there can be a judgment according to works. And these works will witness to the balance of God's justice and mercy in his just judgments of sinful humans who receive or reject his offer of salvation. While Wesley did not understand such a judgment as "pre-Advent," he clearly taught a judgment of investigation for the professed believers in Christ at the end of the age.

While it is true that the theology of Ellen White is not exclusively indebted to any one of the major Protestant theological traditions (Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Anglican), the way in which Wesley understood the issues of personal salvation (and the closely related issues of election, free will, grace, heart-felt religion, law, sin, perfection, and judgment according to works) seems to have most profoundly influenced Ellen White. While not wanting to totally side-track other formative issues, such as theological method (Bible authority and its relationship to reason, experience, and tradition), Trinity, church organization, and Ellen White's own Methodist-nurtured experience of conversion and sanctification, it appears that the heart of Wesley's influence on Ellen White and subsequent Adventist theological developments came mainly through his expositions on personal salvation.

However, in addition to these theological concerns, it is also notable that both of Wesley's parents, John and Susanna (nee Annesley) Wesley, were young adult converts to Anglicanism (and what follows is a digest of Collins 2003:11-28). In these changes of allegiance, they were going against a considerable theological background in Puritanism (Reformed British Calvinism), personified in both of John and Charles Wesley's eminent Puritan grandfathers.

And it is also instructive that both of Wesley's parents were not only deeply influenced by Arminian theology, but that they were also significantly influenced by the devotional and moral reform concerns of the rising Religious Society movements in the Anglicanism which they adopted in their early adulthood and were sustained by in a lifetime of ministry. So a conversion to the Arminian concerns of their adopted Anglicanism (after the spurning of their Reformed upbringing) was accompanied by an active participation in many of the devotional, literary, and social reform movements of the day. Thus, the emerging adult views of Samuel and Susanna Wesley on theology, spirituality, personal, and social ethics/reform were destined to strongly influence the directions of their two eminent sons—John and Charles Wesley—the key founders of Wesleyan Methodism in the 18th Century and the rise of their version of Methodism in both 18th and 19th Century North American Methodism.

With this brief biographical and theological background in hand, the key burden of the balance of this presentation is to spotlight how the Wesley brother's theology informed their views and practices (especially John's) regarding discipleship (and what follows is essentially a digest of Thorsen 2013:112-116).

The Wesleyan View of Discipleship

There was never a temptation to any isolated quietism in the practical divinity of the Wesley brothers and their movement. In other words, a life in union with Christ by faith in his atoning work would be evidenced by a life of devotional exercises, attendance at public worship in the local Anglican parish churches, sacramental observances (at least baptism and the Lord's Supper) and a strong search for the fullest possible heights of character change. Thus, the Wesleyan Revival in its original intent, envisioned itself to be a supporting ministry of the Church of England, its preaching and sacraments, adherence to its doctrinal standards and worship rubrics, and an affirmation of its various ministries of relief, uplift, and education. Therefore, for the Wesleys to be a member of their United Societies, they also had to be a loyal and observant churchperson—all envisioned to be a part of normal Christian discipleship. And such discipleship began with

an earnest desire to live for the glory of God and be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Without earnest sanctification efforts, there was no effectual discipleship.

But John Wesley also saw the need of a special para-church ministry that included (1) public evangelism that reached beyond the boundaries of the church proper, and (2) the founding of the Wesleyan United Societies which featured mid-week fellowship in the gathered local societies. Thus, discipleship not only involved personal salvation and character transformation, local church attendance, and the celebration of the sacraments, but it also included the blessings of the special meetings of the local Wesleyan Societies that were intended to augment their church participation by involvement in what were called “classes” and “bands,” venues that afforded more intense mutual admonition and nurture and other groups that had been organized for special evangelistic outreach (such as prison visitation) and uplift help for the poor and needy. Wesley had a deep interest in such things as medical relief and the provision of seed money to help the poor to become entrepreneurial in founding small business enterprises. There were also special ministries for the visitation of the elderly, the shut-ins, and the sick. In fact, one friend of Wesley was reported to have said that it was almost impossible for him to sit still for a moment of conversation as he was so anxious to go off to visit some poor and needy elderly person.

The activities of the Wesleyan United Societies mostly consisted of participation in Wesley’s local Societies which featured mid-week gatherings for worship, prayer, and fellowship. It was probably analogous to the Adventist “prayer meeting.” But the local Societies also featured smaller groups called “classes” and “bands.” These were intended to facilitate more intensive group and personal discipline and were designed to inspire a deeper penitence for sin and a more profound devotion to Christian witness and other forms of uplifting service. So while public worship at the local parish church was greatly encouraged for the laity, the heart of the Wesleyan movement was the more intense group nurture in the local United Societies and their intensely nurturing classes and bands. If you were not active in these public and small group fellowship and service units, you were just not a good Wesleyan in either your lay or more professional, full-time public discipleship. To become a Wesleyan in the Evangelical Revival of both 18th Century British and American Methodism required not only intense group nurture, but also pressing demands for fruitful service for the average lay members.

But all of this was given leadership by not only the Wesley brothers, but also by a growing group of traveling “Lay Assistants” who functioned as regional evangelists and pastors. They were assigned by John Wesley

to annual appointments and their chief work was to consist of (1) public evangelism in their regional towns, and (2) pastoral care for the local Wesleyan Societies in their respective circuits. And the accountability levels were superintended by Wesley himself, especially through what became known as personal conferencing, and Quarterly and Annual meetings of the Wesleys with their lay assistants. And it was probably among these local, lay assistants that the greatest demands for intense discipleship were invested. To be “called” to such a ministry meant constant itineration (mostly on horseback), public evangelism (including street and open field preaching), and the nurture and discipline of their assigned local Societies on their respective regional circuits. And probably the most famous example of this “circuit” riding was the founder of American Methodism, the redoubtable Frances Asbury. So we can safely conclude that the demands for discipleship were quite intense for both the ministers and the lay participants in the United Societies and the fellowship provided by their local societies.

But such discipleship not only included lay and “ministerial” workers in evangelism and pastoral care, but also a growing network of “preaching houses” and ministries of relief—such as outreach and nurture to and for the poor and destitute, medical dispensaries (John Wesley’s medical handbook was called *The Primitive Physic* and functioned as a sort of “first aid” reference book for various healing nostrums), visitation of the sick, and entrepreneurial lending agencies to inspire small industries and prison ministries. Many of these varied ministries were administered by not only the Wesley’s and their itinerant assistants, but also by a growing group of financial and facilities managers called “stewards.”

So to become a Wesleyan (for both the lay and full time “workers”) in the 18th Century Evangelical Revival, in Great Britain and England’s North American and Caribbean Colonies, required some sober reflection and deep commitment to serious religious devotion, Christian fellowship, evangelism, social reform, and charitable relief. This was no path for the religious person who was looking for a more passive or relatively private “way” to the Kingdom of heaven. And only those who were deeply committed to a profoundly demanding version of the Wesleys’ “Free, or Responsible Grace” approach would thrive amidst the rigors of such an activist version of Christian discipleship.

Notes

¹This article is adapted from the “Wesley, John” entry in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Fortin and Moon 2013:1263-1265).

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