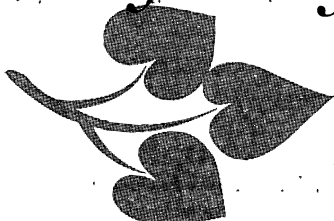


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THE  
*Wesley*  
BIBLE

☪ New King James Version

*A Personal  
Study Bible for  
Holy Living*



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# The Wesleyan Perspective

In many ways John Wesley's thought represents the mainstream of the Christian tradition. While this is a sweeping statement, it is not indefensible. Nor is it surprising. He was raised, and spent all his life, in the Anglican Church, which gave him both an understanding of, and appreciation for, the catholic faith. But Wesley's mother was the daughter of a noted Puritan divine who imbued in her children the Puritan concern for righteousness based on principles derived from the revealed Word. In the midst of all of this, as an eighteenth-century Oxford student, and later an instructor, Wesley developed a thoroughgoing commitment to rationality. In addition to these influences, Wesley had a lifelong interest in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Yet again, out of his experiences on the way to the New World, he became enamored with Moravian pietism, even traveling to Bohemia to learn more.

What Wesley was able to bring out of this remarkable breadth of background and experience was a genuine synthesis of the Christian faith in which seemingly irreconcilable concepts were brought into a remarkably consistent system.

## **Unlimited Atonement, Free Will, Total Depravity, Prevenient Grace.**

So, for instance, Wesley was thoroughly Arminian in his insistence upon unlimited atonement and free will. To him, the Calvinist teaching that some people were predestined to damnation was unthinkable. Christ's death was for all who would choose to believe. At the same time, Wesley was quite Calvinist in his refusal to see humans as anything but totally depraved. It was this conviction that saved him from the suggestion which always clung to Arminius's teachings that humans could somehow save themselves through their own choice. But how could totally depraved humans choose God's way? Here again, Wesley stands with the Reformers; the answer is divine grace, that grace which precedes any effort and precludes any merit on our part.

## **Salvation by Grace Alone, the Witness of the Spirit.**

Without question Wesley believed in salvation by grace alone. His own experience convinced him of the correctness of Luther's exegesis of Galatians and Romans. And because salvation was by grace and not by human achievement, it was possible to know you were saved. The inner witness of God's Spirit to the certainty of salvation, as well as to perfection in love, is the birthright of every believer. This settled assurance makes it possible to live daringly for God even when the circumstances are unfavorable.

## **Imparted Righteousness.**

Unlike some other Protestants, Wesley's commitment to salvation by grace alone did not blind him to one of the great truths which had been the centerpiece of the Orthodox and Catholic faith for 1,700 years. This was the recognition that the purpose of salvation was righteousness, actual holiness. To be sure, he did not mistake righteousness as a means of salvation, as some strands of Roman Catholicism did. He always recognized it to be the result of salvation. But neither did he succumb to the idea that Christian righteousness is merely imputed, a divine fiction which relieves the believer of any need to seek the reality of righteousness in his or her life. God imparts His righteousness to believers. To be God's child is to manifest His character, nothing more nor less.

## **Sanctification by Grace.**

But how is a fallen human being, however deeply forgiven, to live out the holiness of the divine life? Wesley's answer was simple, and yet profound. It is God's grace, grace which does not now come to forgive, but rather to purify. Here Wesley brings together the Orthodox/Catholic tradition with the Reformation teaching. The Orthodox/Catholic view saw the holy life as the goal, but sought to achieve it through human effort. Reformation teaching recognized that human effort can never save, but then

suggested that since salvation is all of God, real human righteousness is not a feasible goal. Wesley says that such righteousness is the goal, but that it is achieved only through God's enabling and purifying grace. Like forgiveness, this purity of heart is God's gift in response to faith. Just as forgiveness may be received in an instant, so may this purity.

**Possibility of Backsliding.** Since salvation is given in response to the decision to exercise faith, Wesley recognized, both through logic and in Scripture, that it is possible to reverse that decision, to fall from grace, and to backslide from God.

**Authority of the Bible.** With regard to the Bible, Wesley styled himself as "a man of one book." This did not mean that he read no other books. Far from it! He read voraciously. But there was only one book which judged all the others. The Bible was the standard and the rule. More than that, it formed the breath and fabric of all Wesley's thinking. Hardly a sentence of his sermons does not have some allusion, some turn of phrase, which is distinctly biblical. But Wesley was not naive. He understood that the Bible must be interpreted, and he looked to three resources to help him understand the Word: experience, reason, and tradition. It is impossible to improve upon these. If the truth cannot be lived, then it is not the truth; though the Word sometimes goes beyond the rational, it is never irrational; when a teaching flies in the face of all that students of previous centuries have understood, it is not novel, but wrong. Beyond these is the witness of the Scripture itself. Wesley recognized that isolated passages can often be made to give a false understanding of Christian truth. To find true interpretation of such passages it is necessary to understand both the immediate context as well as the treatment of the subject by the rest of Scripture. It is very rare that Wesley is caught mistreating a text. He had too much regard for God's revelation.

This is the Wesleyan perspective, a remarkable synthesis of what is good and true about biblical and Christian faith. As such, it has much to commend it, especially in the present age when Christians everywhere need to be able to present and live their religion in a consistent way before an increasingly hostile world.