

Adventist Theology: The Wesleyan Connection

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While it is true that Adventist theology does not seem to be exclusively indebted to any one major Protestant theological tradition, the present article will argue that the more immediate and essentially formative baseline has been provided by the Wesleyan/Arminian Tradition.

It is quite clear that there are distinct emphases in the Adventist tradition, especially when it comes to eschatology (such as imminence of the Second Coming and the Millennium). These eschatological accents arose out of the broad impulse of American millennialist concern in the early Nineteenth Century.

Furthermore, there are some clear strands that have come down to the Seventh-day Adventist theological tradition from the Lutheran, Reformed/Calvinistic, Radical Reformation (Anabaptist), Puritan, Pietistic, and Restorationist Traditions. But I am suggesting that the way Wesleyans understood issues involved with soteriology and the closely related issues of the nature of man, law,[1] and sin were most directly formative for the core of Adventist theology.[2]

Other formative issues with a Wesleyan flavor concern Adventist theological methodology, Trinitarianism, the way Biblical authority is understood and used, and church organization. This paper, however, will concentrate on salvation issues. These Wesleyan soteriological influences found their most notable witness in Ellen White.[3]

Under the broad category of soteriology, the most notable concepts deal with divine calling and election, and the ways justification and sanctification are taught, related and emphasized.

With Wesleyans, Adventist have especially wanted to speak of salvation by grace through

faith alone, but such a sola gratia, sola fide vision is intimately connected with an emphasis on faith understood as active participation in God's grace. And such a participating faith receives this grace in a responsible way. This conception of faith and grace has given strong emphasis to a vision (version) of Sanctification which involves extensive character transformation. It should come as no surprise that such an emphasis has led to a carefully nuanced understanding of perfection.

What follows will be a preliminary analysis of these major perspectives, seeking to demonstrate how these Wesleyan/Arminian influences have affected Adventist theological formation.

Human Nature and Sin

While Adventists have not been comfortable with the Augustinian/Calvinistic understanding of original sin, taught in terms of original guilt, we are very much in what could be termed the "total depravity" tradition. John Wesley clearly argued for "original sin" as original guilt; but due to the effects of "prevenient grace" this guilt was canceled and the basic ability to freely respond to God's redemptive initiatives (popularly known as "free will") was recreated in the individual soul.[4]

Redemptive Calling and Prevenient Grace

Wesley always spoke of the redemptive response of the penitent as the fruit of free grace which was "preveniently" bestowed by the calling, convicting and converting work of the Holy Spirit. But it was always calling and conviction which took human freedom very seriously and sought to avoid the deterministic, predestinarian categories of Calvinism.[5]

The concept of "prevenient grace" was one of Wesley's more finely nuanced teachings; but the essence of it goes like this: God comes to awaken sinners to a realization of His redemptive love and their great need caused by sin—both original and habitual. Such an

understanding has helped Wesleyans avoid the extremes of deterministic Calvinism and Pelagianism.[6] This perspective understands that sinners do not naturally seek for God, but that He earnestly seeks for them to come into a redemptive relationship with Him. Such gracious seeking "creates" a proto-renewal which enables the convicted soul to respond to God's redemptive offer.

While Adventist theology has not usually used the technical term "prevenient grace," its evangelical Arminianism certainly expresses the essence of the concept.[7]

Justification and Sanctification in Balance

Wesley's teaching on justification by grace through faith alone was clearly in the Protestant tradition. His views stoutly opposed any concept that smacked of works righteousness as the ground of acceptance. He was opposed to the Augustinian/Tridentine version of justification which understood divine acquittal and forgiveness as the fruit of an infused righteousness. In other words, in the order of salvation, justification and sanctification are two closely related facets of redeeming grace, but facets that must be clearly distinguished.[8]

While Wesley understood the priority of justification (logically, not temporally), he saw it as not just the door to sanctification, but its essential, constant accompaniment. He, however, was wary of the way that Protestants (especially the Reformed/Calvinistic wing of the 18th Century English Evangelical Revival) used the concept of the "imputed righteousness of Christ."

The reason for his sense of discomfort (sometimes almost churlish opposition) was the way he perceived the Calvinists were using the concept to denigrate sanctification and open the door to both theological and practical antinomian attitudes and behavior. In other words, while Wesley was clear that justification granted gracious acceptance through the pardon of past sins, he was uncomfortable with the implications of the teaching that the life of Christ

(His active obedience) was imputed, or reckoned to the believers account to "cover" present sins. He felt that such a concept of imputed righteousness imperiled sanctification.

Many in the English Evangelical Revival were claiming that since Christ covers their present actions, sins included, therefore they need not be concerned with overcoming sin. For Wesley, justification by faith alone must be accompanied by sanctification by grace through faith.

Such a vision of Christian life is certainly much more participatory than the conceptions of Calvin[9] and especially his Reformed Scholastic heirs. In other words, for Wesley, believers "are pardoned in order to participate;"[10] the thought that pardoned believers could abdicate the life of active appropriation of Christ's character through the workings of the Holy Spirit was simply anathema to Wesley.

Such a participatory model of Christian experience is better understood as a "way" of life rather than an order or series of discreet redemptive events having little causative relationship with one another. In this vein, Randy Maddox has argued that Wesley's view is better expressed as a *via salutis* rather than the more Reformed/Scholastic expression *ordo salutis*. This "way" of salvation involves distinct way-stops, but each one is intimately related to what has happened at previous stops and prepares the way for future events and pauses in the march to the kingdom.

Maddox has probably caught the spirit of this *via salutis* imagery with his characterization of Wesley's key theological organizing principle as "responsible grace." What Maddox means by this is that each pause on the way of salvation is not only vitally related to what goes on before and after, but the work of God at each waystop calls for an appropriate "response" from the believer which will manifest itself in graciously "responsible" behavior—morally, spiritually, and socially. God's prevenient awakening and conviction are calls meant to elicit a "response" to God's pardon and pardon calls for "responsible" (as opposed to irresponsible) transforming participation. This "responsive" participation will result in "responsible" growth

in grace that leads to fullness of transforming grace—Christian perfection.

The resonance that such Wesleyan categories has with what one finds in *Steps to Christ* is quite striking. Adventism, under the powerful influence of the very Wesleyan Ellen White, has not been comfortable with emphases in salvation teaching which tend to denigrate either salvation by grace through faith alone or the importance of obedience and sanctification. Along with Wesley, we have sought to hold together both justification and sanctification. We have wanted to speak of salvation in terms of both juridical, or forensic metaphors (justification, satisfaction of divine justice, and judgment) and healing or therapeutic metaphors (reconciliation, recovery from sinful infection and participation with the Great Physician).

Ellen White's presentations on justification and sanctification are for all practical purposes nearly identical to Wesley's. While she was not as reticent as Wesley in using such terms as "imputation" and the "covering" of Christ's righteousness, the differences in their respective understandings of justification by faith amount to mere theological quibbles or a "strife about words." Although the comparison of their thinking on sanctification and perfection calls for a more nuanced treatment than does justification, the gist of what they strove to express bear striking similarities. A brief outline of Wesley's teachings on sanctification and perfection will prove helpful.

Sanctification and Perfection

The appropriate response of the penitent to God's offer of regenerating pardon is transforming participation. Such character transformation had much more to do with an attenuated process than it did with discreet events. In other words, Wesley saw sanctification as a dynamic experience of growth in grace. But he did not exclude the necessity of reaching an important, instantaneous waymark which he variously referred to as "entire sanctification," "perfection," "Christian perfection," "perfect love," "holiness," and "fullness of faith." This

waymark or state could be reached quite early in the "way", but more normally came after a lengthy walk with God—usually just before death.

The key to understanding the dynamics of perfection as a second, distinct work of grace, is to grasp Wesley's dualistic anthropology and his distinction between "sins proper" and "sins improper."

Regarding his anthropology, Wesley made clear distinctions between soul and body. While the body was certainly affected by sin, the very seat of original sin was in the soul. What was understood to happen in the moment of perfection is that original sin was deemed to be eradicated. The practical result of this eradication was that the perfected would no longer feel the promptings of inward sin and the result would be that "sins proper" would no longer be manifest.

What Wesley meant by "sins proper" was that there would no longer be willful sin of any kind. To choose to sin would cause a free-fall from grace. There, however, could (and usually would) still be "sins improper;" these were understood as nameless defects and lapses due to the lingering infirmities produced by the effects of sin. While these "sins improper" still needed pardoning grace, they were not in the same culpable category as the "sins proper."

Such nuanced definitions amounted to a "mortal" sins versus "venial" sins distinction. Put another way, sins "proper" would be the freely chosen, high-handed sins of habit, presumption and rebellion, while sins "improper" would be more in the category of benign neglect, fruits of infirmity (forgetfulness, lack of knowledge, etc)—the blind side hits of life. Stated more positively, the perfected were full of love, praise, joy, humility, and rich in works of charity, service and obedience. But such an experience was subject to loss if the perfected believer did not persevere in a trusting participation in God's imputed and imparted grace.[11]

Ellen White,[12] along with Wesley, wanted to emphasize sanctification as a process (a via), not simply a single event. In contrast with Wesley, however, her writings are replete with warnings about teaching sanctification as an instantaneous experience. Her favorite

expression is that it is the "work of a lifetime." She tended to speak not in terms of eradicating original sin, but of gaining victory over sinful tendencies and habits.

While Wesley never used the term "sinless perfection" to describe the state of the perfected, many understood it to be such and the door was opened to numerous bouts with fanatical perfectionism.[13] But for all practical purposes (minus the instantaneous eradication of original sin—possibly to be likened to the extraction of a rotten tooth),[14] Ellen White used most of Wesley's essential categories: a strong accenting of sanctification as process and the distinction between willful sin and the incidental sins of immaturity and infirmity.

My own research into Ellen White's understanding of salvation has certainly revealed that her major emphasis, both by dint of theological accent and sheer bulk of literature, was on sanctification, perfection and character transformation.

Many Adventists, especially those more directly influenced by Reformationist (especially Reformed/Calvinistic) categories are somewhat troubled by these holiness emphases. But what they really seek to preserve with their emphasis on Reformationist categories is an emphasis on justification by faith alone. Furthermore, what they want to avoid is anything that smacks of tendencies toward legalistic, salvation by works or the subtle inroads from Trent.

I would suggest that when both White and Wesley are clearly understood, all of the "faith alone" categories that they would ever want to argue for are present. But they are not accompanied by such antinomian temptations presented by irresistible election and perseverance and the presumptuous use of such expressions as the "imputed righteousness of Christ." In other words, salvation is understood to be by grace through faith alone (not by works), but the nature of true salvation (in Christ) is that such a faith will never be alone. Participation in the grace of Christ will always lead to the fruits of faith—loving obedience, service, joyous witness and worship.

Wesley's Synthesis and the "Investigative Judgment"

The genius of Wesley's theological effort was to create a carefully drawn synthesis of the juridical categories of the Latin West (filtered through Luther and Calvin, especially Calvin) with the therapeutic categories of the Eastern Tradition.

One other important fruit of this synthesis needs elaboration. While Wesley did not greatly inform Adventist eschatology, his emphasis on responsible grace led to his articulation of a concept which he designated as "final justification" or "final salvation." [15] This teaching has played an important, formative background role for the development of the Adventist doctrine of the investigative judgment. [16]

In his polemical jousts with the Calvinists, Wesley often provoked their wrath when he spoke of "final justification." The essence of what he meant by this expression was: while we cannot "merit" final salvation or that our works are a prerequisite to God's acceptance, the truly saved person will have the evidence of genuine faith in the inevitable fruits of their experience of sanctification. Thus while sanctification is not "immediately" necessary for initial justification (only trusting faith is), it is evidentially necessary to final justification. It is the evidential fruits of participating faith that become the grist for any judgment according to works.

The basic implications of this understanding of "final justification" go like this:

If one accepts that salvation can be lost, as opposed to the predominant emphasis of the Magisterial Reformers that it could not be, then the next question to be raised is: on what basis can it be lost? Luther and Calvin, strongly influenced by Augustine, emphasized that salvation was bestowed irresistibly upon the elect. Since God irresistibly bestows this, then it is incumbent on Him to grant perseverance. But, the moment anything like Arminian categories of free-will are interjected, it is at this moment that the quality of the process of salvation takes on critical importance. Such a process then becomes just as essential to salvation as that which transpires during the early moments—i.e. justification and imputation.

For Wesley, the responsible nature of grace calls for freely chosen initial acceptance and freely given constancy in on-going participation. It is the quality of this on-going participation of the responsible saints which finally legitimates the genuineness of their election. It is then only a very short leap to correlate the Biblical doctrine of a judgment according to works as the legitimate fruit and evidence of genuine saving faith. Believers are not saved by works, or faith plus works, but by a faithful participation in God's grace which works!

It is no accident that the great enemies of Wesley's views on final justification (those shaped by the Reformed Tradition) are the very same enemies that have stoutly opposed the Adventist doctrine of the Investigative Judgment. While all of the works of sinful humans (including Wesley's perfected ones or Ellen White's harried but hearty saints—even those in the "time of trouble") need the merits of Jesus accounted to them, they nonetheless give witness to the genuineness of faith in the judgment. The moment any theologian posits anything like choice, free-will, or free-grace, or suggests that salvation can be lost, it is at that moment that an investigative judgment (pre-Advent, at the Advent, or post-Advent) becomes a distinct possibility.

For Calvinists, such a judgment according to works becomes a rather perfunctory footnote to the history of salvation. For those in the Wesleyan Tradition, such a judgment reveals not only the will of God, but the evidence which justifies or vindicates the carefully weighed decisions of the judgment.

I would suggest that Thomas C. Oden's use of the expression "investigative judgment" to refer to Wesley's teaching about the great judgment scene which transpires at the Second Coming is no carelessly chosen or accidental phrase.[17] Again, let's be clear about these implications: the moment theologians open the door to choice and take faith participation seriously in the experience of sanctification—it is at that moment that a call for a real judgment of investigation is necessitated. Such a judgment will reveal the fateful choices that have truly determined the eternal destiny of God's professed people. No deterministic

afterthoughts here!!! No salvation by good works, but the revelation of true faith which works by love and produces the evidence for acquittal.

Again it must be emphasized that Wesley did not teach that such an investigative judgment was Pre-Advent. He, however, clearly taught that it was "co-Advent"[18] and he deemed it to be a genuine judgment based on the evidence drawn from fruitful works of such who had trusted Christ's merits. In other words, their genuine, evidential works had arisen out of an experience of pardoned participation. Calvinists still see red when confronted with such a teaching.

Conclusion

Wesley's carefully nuanced expositions of "responsible grace" have certainly provided the more immediate backdrop for the Adventist soteriological developments (heavily mentored by Ellen White). Adventist attempts to hold to a balanced synthesis of law and grace, faith and works, justification and sanctification, have been clearly anticipated and broadly mentored by the teachings of Wesley and his American children. It was such categories which helped to lay the foundations for the very core of Adventist soteriology and one of its distinctive contributions to eschatology—the Pre-Advent, Investigative Judgment.

[1]. Space does not permit a treatment of the consonance of Wesley's view of law with Adventism's emphasis, but the similarities are striking. I urge a thoughtful perusal of Randy Maddox's "Excursus: Wesley on the Nature and Uses of the Law" in *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books [An Imprint of Abingdon Press], 1994), pp. 98-101.

[2]. As an introduction to Wesley's theology, the following recent works should prove helpful: Thomas C. Oden has given an excellent digest of Wesley's major primary theological documents in his *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Randy Maddox's *Responsible Grace* is the best recent survey of Wesley's theology; Maddox gives a thorough digest of Wesley (especially as his theology unfolds during the Revival) and an exhaustive interaction with Wesley's major interpreters. Both Oden and Maddox provide extensive bibliographic references to the primary and secondary literature.

[3]. For further background and documentation of this contention, see my "Adventist Soteriology: Wesleyan Connection," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30 (Spring 1995): 173-86 and Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Pub. Assoc., 1995), pp. 15-22.

[4]. For a more extensive treatment of Wesley on sin and prevenient grace, see Oden, pp. 149--76; 334-43 and Maddox, pp. 73--93 and 180-85.

Wesley and his early American followers certainly wanted to talk more in terms of "free grace" rather than "free will." But no matter how it was expressed, the essence of the Wesleyan understanding was something more Arminian than most of the Calvinistic, Reformed competitors in both North America and Britain could tolerate.

[5]. Wesley would have said a hearty amen to Stephen Neill's elegant description of human freedom: "The characteristic dimension of human existence is freedom. On this narrow sand-bank between existence and non-existence, between coercion and chaos, God has withdrawn his hand so far as to make a space in which we can be really, though not unconditionally, free. In Jesus we see what a free man looks like" (*Christian Faith and Other Faiths*: Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1984), p. 23. [6]. Oden's comments are especially trenchant; see pp. 149-59, 175 and 176.

[7]. The classic expression can be found in Ellen White's *Steps to Christ* (Takoma Park, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1908), pp. 24-29, 32, 35, 36, 40, 49, and 54.

[8]. For a more extensive treatment of Wesley's views on justification and sanctification (including perfection), see Oden, pp. 187-212; 311-34; and Maddox, pp. 148-51; 166-91.

[9]. Calvin's understanding of sanctification is much closer to Wesley's teaching than was the emphasis given by many in the Lutheran Tradition.

[10]. Wesleyan scholarship is indebted to Albert Outler for this "pardoned to participate" terminology; see Maddox, p. 168.

[11]. In other words, perfection was remissible—it could be lost.

[12]. For a popularized study of Ellen White's understanding of justification and sanctification, see my *Ellen White on Salvation*, Chapters 9-17. For a more detailed study, see my "The Soteriology of Ellen G. White: The Persistent Path to Perfection, 1836-1902" (Ph.D dissertation, Drew University, 1989), especially chapters 4-6.

[13]. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodist* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 205-11.

[14]. The terminology is that of R. Newton Flew; see Hans K. LaRondelle's *Perfection and Perfectionism* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1971), p. 323.

[15]. See Oden, p. 329 and Maddox, p. 171, 172.

[16]. I know of no instance where Ellen and James White, Joseph Bates, or J. N. Andrews expressed direct, conscious dependence on Wesley as a source for the development of the Investigative Judgment teaching. I am simply arguing that such a doctrine of "final justification" is the logical outworking of the whole Wesleyan thrust of "responsible grace" and the Adventist, eschatological counterpart is the Investigative Judgment.

[17]. See Oden, pp. 351 ff.

[18]. My descriptive term, not Wesley's.