



Ellen White and John Wesley

Wesley and his American children laid the foundation for the very core of Adventist teachings of salvation.

by Woodrow Whidden

WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT ADVENTIST THEOLOGY does not seem to be exclusively indebted to any one major Protestant theological tradition, the present article argues that the most immediate and essential influence on Adventism has been the Wesleyan tradition.

Emphases in the Adventist tradition regarding eschatology (such as imminence of the Second Coming and the Millennium) arose out of the broad impulse of American millennialist concern in the early 19th century. Other doctrines espoused by Adventists have been shaped by the Lutheran, Reformed/Calvinistic, Radical Reformation (Anabaptist), Puritan, and Pietistic traditions. However, Adventist understandings of salvation, and the closely related doctrines of the nature of humans, the

law,¹ and sin have been most directly formed by the Wesleyan tradition.²

Other teachings by Adventists reflect a Wesleyan flavor—trinitarianism, biblical authority, and church organization. However, I will concentrate on the Wesleyan influence on Adventist views of salvation, most notably in the writings of Ellen White.³

Under the broad category of salvation, the most notable concepts are divine calling and election, and relationship of justification and sanctification. Along with Wesleyans, Adventists have spoken of salvation by grace through faith alone intimately connected with faith as active participation in God's grace. Such a participating faith receives grace in a responsible way. This conception of faith and grace has given strong emphasis to a version of sanctification that involves extensive character transformation. Not surprisingly, such an emphasis has led to a carefully nuanced understanding of perfection in the Wesleyan tradition that has affected Adventist theology.

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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 re-created in the individual’s soul. Wesley and his early American followers certainly wanted to talk more in terms of “free grace” than “free will.” But no matter how it was expressed, the essence of the Wesleyan understanding emphasized the human will more than the Calvinistic, Reformed denominations—like the Presbyterians and United Church of Christ—could tolerate.⁴

Redemptive Calling and Prevenient Grace

Wesley always spoke of the redemptive response of the penitent as the fruit of free grace that was “preveniently” bestowed by the calling, convicting, and converting work of the Holy Spirit. But it was always calling and convicting that 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 is clear: God comes to awaken sinners to their great need caused by sin—both original and habitual—and to assure them of his redemptive love. Such an understanding has helped Wesleyans avoid the extremes of deterministic Calvinism.⁶ This perspective understands that sinners do not naturally seek for God; rather, God earnestly

seeks sinners to come into a redemptive relationship with him. Such gracious seeking “creates” a proto-renewal that 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 thrust 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 grounds for acceptance. In the order of salvation, justification, and sanctification are closely related, but 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 companion. However, he 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 his perception of the way Calvinists were using the concept to denigrate sanctification and opening the door to rejection of law. In other words, while Wesley was clear that justification granted gracious acceptance through the pardon of past sins, he was uncomfortable with the teaching that the life of Christ (his active obedience) was imputed, or reckoned to the believer’s account to “cover” present sins. He felt that such a concept of imputed righteousness imperiled an appreciation of the work of the Spirit in our lives.

Many in the 18th-century English evangeli-

cal revival were claiming that since Christ covered their present actions, sins included, 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 and especially his Reformed Scholastic heirs.⁹ In other words, for Wesley, believers “are pardoned in order to participate.” 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.¹⁰

Such a participatory model of Christian experience is better understood as a “way” of life, rather than a series of discrete redemptive events. In this vein, Randy Maddox has argued that Wesley’s view is better expressed as a *via salutis* (way of salvation) rather than the more Reformed/Scholastic expression *ordo salutis* (order of salvation). This Wesleyan “way” of salvation involves distinct waystops, but each one is intimately related to what has happened at previous stops and prepares the way for future events in the march to the kingdom.

Maddox has probably caught the spirit of this imagery of the way by characterizing Wesley’s key organizing principle as “responsible grace.” Each pause on the way of salvation is vitally related to what goes on before and after. In addition, the work of God at each waystop calls for interrelated “responses” from the believer. The result is graciously “responsible” behavior—morally, spiritually, and socially. God’s prevenient awakening and conviction are meant to elicit a “response” to God’s pardon, and pardon inevitably calls for “responsible” (as opposed to irresponsible) transforming participation in salvation. This “responsive” participation results in “responsible” growth in grace, that leads to that fullness of transforming grace called Christian perfection.

The resonance of such Wesleyan categories with Ellen White’s *Steps to Christ* is quite striking. Adventism, under the powerful influence of the very Wesleyan Ellen White, has not always been comfortable with emphases perceived as denigrating either salvation by grace through faith alone, or the importance of obedience and sanctification. Along with Wesley, Adventists have sought to hold together both justification and sanctification. We have wanted to speak of salvation in juridical or forensic metaphors (justification, satisfaction of divine justice, and judgment) and also in 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 John Wesley and Ellen White strove to express bear striking similarities.

Sanctification and Perfection

Not only on justification, but also regarding sanctification and perfection, the essence of Wesley’s position was repeated by Ellen White. For Wesley, 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 process than with discrete 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 that 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 distinction regarding human nature and sin. Regarding human nature, Wesley made clear distinctions between soul and body. While the body was certainly affected by sin, the very seat of original sin was the soul. In the moment of perfection, original sin was deemed to be eradicated. Perfected persons would no longer feel the promptings of inward sin. As a result, “sins proper” would no longer be manifest. That meant, for Wesley, that the perfected would no longer willfully sin. 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 “sins proper.”

These distinctions corresponded to the difference Catholics made between “venial” sins. Put another way, for Wesley, sins “proper” would be freely chosen—high-handed sins of habit, presumption, and rebellion. 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, for Wesley, 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

Along with Wesley, Ellen White¹² wanted to emphasize sanctification as a process (a *via*), not simply a single event. However, in contrast with Wesley, White’s writings are replete with warnings about teaching sanctification as an instantaneous experience. Adventists know in the marrow of their beings Ellen White’s favorite expression that sanctification 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 underscore that her major emphasis, both by dint of theological accent and sheer bulk of literature, was on sanctification, perfection, and character transformation.

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Reformed/Calvinistic) categories, are somewhat troubled by these holiness emphases. What these Adventists seek to preserve, with their emphasis on Reformation categories, is an emphasis on justification by faith alone. They want to avoid anything that smacks of tendencies toward legalistic salvation by works.

Actually, when both Wesley and White are clearly understood, all of the “faith alone” categories that these Adventists would ever want are present. But they are not accompanied by the antinomian temptations captured by phrases such as “irresistible election” or the “imputed righteousness of Christ.” In other words, for Wesley and White, salvation is understood to be by grace through faith alone (not by works). But the nature of true salvation (in Christ) is such that faith will never stop there. Participation in the grace of Christ always leads 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, especially, through 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 a concept 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 this: While we cannot “merit” final salvation, or

assume 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 his or her experience of sanctification. Thus, while sanctification is not “immediately” necessary for initial justification (only trusting faith is), sanctification is necessary for final justification. It is the fruits of faith that become the grist for any judgment regarding 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 Reformers that it could not be, then on what basis can salvation be lost? Luther and Calvin, strongly influenced by Augustine, emphasized that salvation was bestowed irresistibly upon the elect. The moment anything like categories of free will are interjected, the process of salvation becomes just as essential to salvation as what transpires during the early moments—i.e., justification.

For Wesley, God’s grace calls on humans to both freely accept grace and to freely choose ongoing participation in the life of grace. It is the quality of this ongoing participation of the responsible saints that 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) have also stoutly opposed the Adventist teaching of the investigative judgment. All of the works of sinful humans (including Wesley’s perfected ones or Ellen White’s hearty saints—even those in the “time of trouble”) need the merits of Jesus accounted to them. Nonetheless, they 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 also the evidence that 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 at the Second Coming is no carelessly chosen or accidental phrase.¹⁷ True, Wesley did not teach that such an investigative judgment was pre-Advent. However, he 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 those who trusted Christ's merits. In other words, their works had arisen out of an

experience of having been pardoned. Of course, Adventists who regard both Luther and Calvin as normative for their theology will continue to dismiss the concept of an investigative judgment.

Adventist Fruits of the Wesleyan Tree

Wesley's carefully articulated expositions of "responsible grace" have certainly provided the more immediate backdrop for Adventism's understanding of salvation—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 that helped to lay the foundations for the very core of Adventist teachings of salvation and one of its distinctive contributions to eschatology—the pre-Advent, investigative judgment.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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 [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), pp. 173-186 and *Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1995), pp. 15-22.

4. For a more extensive treatment of Wesley on sin and prevenient grace, see Oden, pp. 149-176; 334-343 and Maddox, pp. 73-93 and 180-185.

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. 149-159, 175, 176.

7. The classic expression can be found in Ellen White's *Steps to Christ* (Washington, D.C.: Review and

Herald Publ. Assn., 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; 311-334; and Maddox, pp. 148-151; 166-191.

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. disser-

tation, Drew University, 1989), especially chapters 4-6.

13. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 205-211.

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

15. See Oden, p. 329 and Maddox, pp. 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.