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JOHN WESLEY'S VIEW OF MARTIN LUTHER

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Since the middle ages two men have stood out as great leaders in our world in the area of church life. Martin Luther's leadership in the Great Reformation of the 16th century and John Wesley's leadership in the Evangelical Revival of the 18th century stand out as important. Students of history find it impossible to minimize the influence of either one of these men upon the modern world.

Generally Methodists have admired the work of Luther and looked upon the Reformation as a stepping stone to the Wesleyan Revival, but there has been too much ignorance of Luther among Wesleyans, and only very recently has the need been felt and steps taken toward an exploration of Luther's works by Methodists. On the other hand, there is a natural tendency among Lutherans to regard the Wesley revival as the English form of pietism and to dismiss Methodism as a heresy.[1] It would undoubtedly be an aid to scholarship in both groups if each could better understand the other.

In this paper I shall seek to find out what Wesley himself thought of Luther and his work. Since Wesley lived 200 years after Luther, it will be interesting to note just what concepts he formed of this great man, and what differences he recognized between their two theologies.

I The View Hidden

Wesley was born in 1703 and came into what he called his evangelical conversion in May of 1738 at the age of 35. Thirteen years prior to this conversion date Wesley had determined to live the Christian life and had set up a system of discipline and religious practice that made Wesley a zealous servant of God. The change that came in 1738 was that of a seeker who becomes a finder and a man who had the form of godliness now receiving its power. Where before he was a zealous servant of God, he now becomes a son.[2]

The first thirty-five years of Wesley's life were years of intense training. He had the happy privilege of being born into a home of great piety and of intelligent discipline. His father was a clergyman for the Church of England and his mother was a woman of exceptional ability.

Both parents were born of a background of dissenting Puritans. These ancestors had suffered for their faith and left a legacy of courage and stability which John Wesley admired. However, they had revolted from the Puritanism of their parents and had returned to the established church. Their theology had largely been purged of its strong Puritan tendencies and had become a form of English-Arminianism. To them Justification was largely a matter of belief. Like Bishop Laud, they conceived of faith as a human act which cannot stand alone but is supported by obedience.[3]

Even the church into which Wesley was born and in which he labored all of his life had repudiated much of its Protestant heritage. Some of the writings of Luther had come into England in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is possible that some of Luther's writings had indirectly influenced the theology of the Church of England and it may be that Wesley had read some of them directly before 1738, although there is no evidence for such. After his conversion, Wesley did have access to Luther's commentary on *The Epistle to the Galatians.*

Epistle to the Galatians

Futhermore it is also true that Reformation theology had greatly influenced the doctrinal views of composers of the *Thirty-Nine Acticles of Religion* of the Church of England and also the *Prayer Book*.[4] Undoubtedly Wesley read these and knew their contents. But it would seem that until 1738 he followed the 18th century version of them rather than the 16th. It would appear that John Wesley learned very little from the official documents of the Church of England concerning the doctrine of justification by faith alone.[5]

John Wesley attended Oxford University. Here one would think he would have encountered Luther in his varied studies. But it must be remembered that his university studies had no particular reference to theology. Also, he never entered a theology seminary. The atmosphere of his day did not impel to theological thinking. Because of this lack of interest in theology, Wesley during his college days would have taken little or no interest in Luther.[6]

The men that had the greatest influence upon Wesley's religious life before 1738 were three writers widely separated from each other in time and very diverse in genius and atmosphere, namely Thomas á Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law.[7] These men had a tremendous influence upon Wesley during these early years. It was from them that he received the inspiration to live and act like a Christian. He pledged himself to love God even if it meant persecution. These three writers were in the Anglo-Catholic tradition rather than in the Reformation tradition. It can quite safely be said that until 1738, when Wesley was 35, he was not much interested Luther and made no reference to any of his writings.

II The View Unveiled

In October of 1735 Wesley an earnest, devout, and consecrated son of the Church of England set his face toward Georgia and the heathen Indians in order to convert them. He was serious in this business of saving his own soul and the souls of them who heard him. Two factors entered into his life during this time that led to the great change of 1738. On ship he met a band of German Moravians. In order to speak to them he began to learn the German language. To him they seemed so peaceful, joyful and Christian. He was especially impressed with their calmness in the midst of storms.[8] They seemed to possess something to which he was foreign. During his two years in America, he often conversed with these Moravians, but they only served to interest his mind while he continued to depend on his own works for salvation.

The other factor that undermined Wesley and drove him to seek further was his apparent failure in his mission to Georgia. His work was largely confined to labors among the English people. His efforts were serious and his discipline as a clergyman were demanding on himself and others. Troubles with local leaders arose and Wesley voluntarily left, but with the charges of a libel suit over his head. His apparent failure nearly brought him to despair and prepared him to seek for spiritual help. He was made to write, "I went to America to convert the Indians, but O, who will convert me."[9]

Wesley arrived back in England on February 1, 1738. Six days later he met Peter Bohler for the first time. Bohler was born in Germany and had studied theology at the University of Jena. He was ordained by Count Zinzindorf, after which he set out for London and met Wesley.[10] They were together often and conversed much during the three months before Bohler left. It was during this time, February 7 to May 4, that Wesley changed from a believer in salvation by works

to a believer in salvation by faith alone, and Bohler was the chief human instrument that brought about the change.

A careful reading of Wesley's *Journal* from February 7 to May 24 convinces one of the important place Bohler had upon his thinking. In recording his first meeting with Bohler, Wesley placed this note "A day much to be remembered."[11] On February 18, he wrote, "All this time I conversed much with Peter Bohler, but I understood him not." On March 4th, in talking again to Bohler, Wesley was convinced "of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved." After talking with him again on March 23, Wesley began to search the Greek New Testament to see if this doctrine were of God. A month later Wesley admitted that he understood and accepted Bohler's doctrine of faith, but he was puzzled by the fact that it is an instantaneous work. Again a search of the Scriptures proved that Bohler was right. Wesley's final problem was that even though this doctrine were true in the early church, it did not work in the 18th century. But again Bohler succeeded and produced for Wesley convincing witnesses. Now Wesley was completely convinced of Luther's "Justification by Faith Alone" and began to declare it on April 25, 1738.[12]

It was a month later, on May 24, when Wesley experienced what he had come to believe. Here it is in his own words,

> In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation: and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even mine, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.[13]

John's brother Charles had entered into a similar experience a few days before John. It was through Martin Luther that they had come to know about the experience of Justification by Faith and the joy of this experience made them into new men. It is now that they leave behind them their fundamental Romanism, and become Protestant reformers. Though Wesley's contact with the Moravians was of short duration, it must be remembered that they were the ones who led him to his experience that integrated his life.[14]

During the summer of 1738 Wesley made a journey to Europe and visited the Moravians in Germany. He had many problems in his own mind, and he took the occasion of this journey to study this "new doctrine" as it appeared in the experiences of people. Here in Germany, he met and heard able preachers; he heard testimonies of living witnesss; he breathed the air of this Reformation teaching. In all he was highly impressed, and returned to England to declare in his own country the glad tidings of salvation.[15]

To us who look back at this experience in Wesley's life, it seems he should have been better acquained with Luther and his teachings before 1738. J. Ernest Rattenbury writes,

> It is true he had read the *Articles*, and was aware there was such a doctrine, and that after he began preaching it, he defended himself by reference to the Anglican formularies, but that it meant nothing to him before he met the Moravians could hardly be plainer than by his own words in his *Journal* . . . Justification by Faith, as he conceived it, and preached it, with all its implications, was to John Wesley, as he himself says, "A new doctrine."[16]

Thus it can be seen that Wesley's closest and most concentrated look at Luther

came in the year of 1738 by means of his conversion which made him a follower of Luther's Reformation doctrine, "Justification by Faith." His contact with the Moravians, both in Peter Bohler, and the German settlements, however far from Luther they may have been, gave him his clearest picture of Luther's central doctrine. They introduced him to Luther's writings, and Luther was able to speak directly to Wesley in his own words, and likely in his own language.[17]

Whatever other conceptions Wesley may have received through these various means, he did hold Luther in high esteem. Writing concerning Luther's life, he said "Doubtless he was a man highly favored of God, and a blessed instrument in his hand."[18] He admired his courage, for he wrote,

> When iniquity had overspread the church as a flood, the Spirit of the Lord lifted up a standard against it. He raised up a poor monk, without wealth, without power, and at that time, without friends, to declare war, as it were, against all the world; against the bishop of Rome and all his adherents. But this little stone being chosen of God, soon grew into a great mountain and increased more and more till it had covered a considerable part of Europe.[19]

From these quotations and experiences of Wesley, we can see he discovered Luther, and greatly admired him. His conversion was a "conversion to Protestantism." In 1738, Wesley joined the Apostolic succession of Paul, Luther, Calvin, and Bunyan, to which he had not previously belonged.[20]

III The View Modified

Had Wesley made as great a change in his mind as it appeared at first in 1738, the story of the difference between Lutherans and Wesleyans might have been modified. However, Wesley had too much of the Anglo-Catholic tradition in his background to shift completely into the Reformation opinion. He had had the goal of Christian Perfection set before him and he was strongly grounded in the discipline of good works. It was not possible for Wesley to abandon these inherited ideals.

One of Wesley's first criticisms of Luther, if it can be called a criticism, was in a journal entry of April 4, 1739, less than a year after his conversion. Wesley's most distressing concept of Luther came in the year 1741. It was during this year he was having serious difficulties with the Moravians. He had admired them so highly and, then, disillusionment came. Two years earlier Wesley had become convinced that this particular group was teaching errors, and so he had to withdraw from them and form the Methodist Society. Wesley tried to bring about a reconciliation, but finally gave it up. He accused them of teaching three grand errors, namely, universal salvation, anti-nomianism, and a kind of new, reformed quietism.[22]

Right in the midst of this controversy with the Moravians there was placed in his hands a copy of Luther's *Comment on the Epistle to the Galatians*. Leaving the Moravian Society he set out for London on horseback and during the day while riding, he read. These are his comments:

> I set out for London, and read over in the way, that celebrated book, Martin Luther's "Comment on the Epistle to the Galatians." I was utterly ashamed. How have I esteemed this book, only because I heard it so commended by others; or, at best, because I had read some excellent sentences occasionally quoted from it! But what shall I say, now I judge for myself? Now I see with my own eyes? Why, not only that the author makes nothing out, clears up no one considerable difficulty; that he is quite shallow in his remarks on many passages and muddy and confused almost on all; but that he is deeply

> tinctured with mysticism throughout, and hence often dangerously wrong. To instance, in only one or two points: How does he (almost in the words of Tauler) decry reason, right or wrong, as an irreconcilable enemy to the Gospel of Christ! whereas, what is reason (the faculty so called) but the power of apprehending, judging, and discoursing? Which power is no more to be condemned in the gross than seeing, hearing or feeling. Again, how blasphemously does he speak of good works and of the law of God; constantly coupling the law with sin, death, hell or the devil; and teaching, that Christ delivers us from them all alike.[23]

It is doubtful if Wesley intended in this short review of Luther's book to pass any kind of final judgment on Luther. It is not a mature judgment; it is a first impression. And this impression was already partly formed by his recent associations with the Moravians. It is possible they had loaned him the book to read, so he could see that they were not in error. At best it was a hurried reading, and could have in no wise been thorough.

Wesley was a busy man. One wishes that at this time in his life he could have made a special study of Luther's writings. Even if he had read this *Commentary on Galatians* with more care, he would have found Luther explaining himself.[24] Luther's being "muddy," "confused," "shallow" and "dangerously wrong" can only be explained on one basis; Wesley was looking at one thing, namely, Moravian errors. His quick scan of this commentary found the seeds of their errors. He saw Luther decrying reason; he had seen the Moravians unwilling to listen to reason. He found Luther speaking blasphemously of good works; he had seen the Moravians deny any value in works. If Wesley could have read some of Luther's other writings, he would have discovered that Luther "disposed of antinomians and mystical quietists in phrases more violent than had any place in John Wesley's genteel vocabulary."[25]

However much one would like for Wesley to have had a better opinion of Luther, it is well to remember that the fault he saw in him resulted in part from a difference in doctrine. It shows up in Wesley's evaluation of the Reformation in general and of Luther in particular. He wrote:

> Was there more religion in the preceeding century: the age of the Reformation? There was doubtless in many countries a considerable reformation of religious opinions; yea, and modes of worship, which were much changed for the better, both in Germany and several other places. But it is well known that Luther himself complained with his dying breath, "The people that are called by my name, (though I wish they were called by the name of Christ) are reformed as to their opinions and modes of worship; but their tempers and lives are the same as before."[26]

Wesley further saw Luther as failing to proclaim a Gospel that changed men's lives. At this point he saw the chief difference in his Gospel and that of Luther's. In discussing the limitations of the Reformation he wrote:

> "It is certain they were reformed in their opinions, as well as their modes of worship. But is not this all? Were either their tempers or live reformed? Not at all."

And then as if he were exhorting the Reformer, he cried, "You ought vehemently to have insisted on an entire change of men's tempers and lives;" and he concluded that the Reformation was "exquisitely trifling" without this change.[27]

When Wesley discussed the subject of sin in believers, he feared that the Reformers carried the matter too far. They so dscribed the corruption of the heart

in the believer, as scarce to allow that he had any dominion over it, but was rather in bondage to it.[28] Although Wesley looked upon Luther as a man "highly favored of God, and a blessed instrument," he wrote concerning him, "But O! What a pity he had no faithful friend! None that would at all hazards, rebuke him plainly and sharply for his rough untractable spirit, and bitter zeal of opinions, so greatly obstructive for the work of God."[29] Apparently Wesley would like to have gotten Luther into one of his class meetings, and, applying St. James' admonition of "confess your faults one to another," picked out some of the "straw" in Luther's life!

Wesley feared that Luther did not give the proper place to sanctification. He wrote:

> Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on Justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conception of it? In order to be thoroughly convinced of this, of his total ignorance with regard to sanctification, there needs no more than to read over, without prejudice, his celebrated comment on Epistle to the Galatians.[30]

It is here one can get Wesley's most mature view of Luther. He recognized Luther's great place in teaching and clarifying Justification by Faith, but he saw him as woefully lacking in sanctification, and very confused in his teachings. And the authority for it is found by Wesley in the *Commentary on the Galatians*. Whether Wesley ever thoroughly read Luther's writings or not, it is clear Wesley never considered that Luther taught sanctification nor urged a complete change in peoples' lives. It is at this point he sees the weakness of the Reformation and the strength in the Revival. Whatever distortion there is in his analysis of Luther, it is without question Wesley's mature view. He liked him for as far as he went but it was just not far enough. Wesley's task, he thought, was to carry on to perfection.

IV The View Evaluated

Even though Wesley made hasty conclusions concerning Luther's opinions, and even though his acquaintance with Luther's writings was very limited, yet it must be recognized there was a fundamental difference between them that could never have been reconciled, even if Wesley could have read all of Luther's works. This fundamental difference was more than a matter of century, nationality, or personality; it lay in Wesley's outlook upon Christian experience and life.

There can be seen a difference in their fundamental concepts of Justification. William Cannon makes this significant analysis of two kinds of Justification:

> It is possible to consider the nature of the Christian conception of Justification in one of two ways. Either it may be viewed as the means whereby a sinner, who stands in condemnation before the righteous law of God, is actually converted into a righteous person, and is thereby enabled to meet the standards of divine holiness and in a manner consistent with absolute justice to merit the right of eternal fellowship with God, or it may be interpreted solely as divine mercy which even in spite of sin claims the sinner and pardons him for Christ's sake and accepts him into the everlasting fellowship of the redeemed. The former of these alternatives leads to a limitation of the extent of the Justification in the process of salvation as a whole, and makes it, not the sum total or even the final goal of religion, but merely the start. The second of these alternatives, on the other hand, extends the bounds of Justification until it comes to include almost the whole of the Christian life and makes it synonymous with salvation itself.

> In the one instance, what God does in pardon and acceptance is relative to its consequences, and the act of forgiveness is not in itself ultimate, but is a means to a more glorious end. In the other instance, the exact opposite is the case; what God does and continues always to do in pardon, and acceptance is final, and all moral and spiritual effects in life and character are manifestations of the one fundamental act of forgiveness, which is the end as well as the beginning of man's religious life. Reformation theology is a classic expression of this latter, all inclusive concept of Justification, while Wesleyan thought stands as a representation within the stream of Protestantism of the former, less inclusive concept of Justification.[31]

With this basic difference in the concept of justification on the part of Wesley and Luther, one should not be surprised at Wesley's reaction at Luther theology. Basically, this same difference led to the conclusion on the part of Wesley that Luther was confused on sanctification, and that Luther's Reformation did not include a real change in tempers and lives.

Even though Luther did make a few, scattered remarks teaching a state of perfection, they do not constitute a doctrine.[32] His doctrine on the cure of sin states, "Original sin, after regeneration, is like a wound that begins to heal; though it be a wound, yet it is in course of healing, though it still runs and is sore" and will remain so until death, although it cannot condemn us.[33] He did not believe one could be perfected in this life by the work of the Holy Spirit.

What did Wesley say? He claimed for Christian Perfection that "all inward sin is taken away," that it begins when a man is justified, and can become perfect before death.[34] This was Wesley's most distinctive doctrine that was held throughout his entire life. Holding to it as he did and understanding it as he did and at the same time reading and understanding Luther as he did, he was only consistent to view Luther in the way that he did.

Wesley was too great a man to discard a person because of a basic difference in theology. Even in his mature view of Luther which takes into account the divergence in doctrine and the weakness with which he saw Luther, Wesley as has been seen ever held him in high esteem. He saw in him a man mightily used of God, and considered himself in full agreement with Luther on the doctrine of Salvation by Faith alone. He saw himself in agreement with Luther on other points, but did not take time to compare their similar ideas.

May it be said in closing that differences of opinion on points of theology among Christian brethren should not break Christian unity. Christian love should enable us to understand as best we can the opinions of others and yet at the same time to love them for being one in Christ with them. Wesley was able to see faults in Luther as he judged them and yet at the same time to look upon him as a brother beloved in the Lord. In this sense at least we can follow Wesley.

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FOOTNOTES

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5. Rattenbury, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
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14. Rattenbury, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.
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18. *Works*, Vol. III, p. 456.
19. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 110-111.
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21. *Works*, Vol. III, p. 127.
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28. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 108.
29. *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 456.
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