

# WESLEY ON IMPUTATION: A TRULY RECKONED REALITY OR ANTINOMIAN POLEMICAL WRECKAGE?

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## THE REFORMED REACTION

Protestants have long been uncomfortable with Wesley's understanding of justification by faith. The usual suspicions surface with whispers of "pelagianism," "synergism," "Romanist moralism," and "legalism." In his own time he was under close scrutiny from the Calvinistic wing of the Evangelical Revival. Such scrutiny erupted into a storm of protest with the publication of the infamous "1770 Minutes." These "Minutes" have received most of the attention of Wesleyan scholars as they have sought to assess the genuineness of Wesley's Protestant credentials.<sup>1</sup>

## A SEEMINGLY ANOMALOUS STATEMENT

What is somewhat surprising is the almost total lack of attention given to Wesley's negative, delimiting comments on "faith alone" in the "first fully positive exposition of his 'new' soteriology"<sup>2</sup>—his sermon entitled "Justification by Faith."<sup>3</sup> After plainly stating that justification "is not being made actually just and righteous,"<sup>4</sup> Wesley gives this troubling, anomalous qualifier:

Least of all does justification imply that God is *deceived* in those whom he justifies; that he thinks them to be what in fact they are not, that he accounts them to be otherwise than they are. It does by no means imply that God judges concerning us contrary to the real nature of things, that he esteems us better than we really are, or believes us righteous when we are unrighteous. Surely no. The judgment of the all-wise God is always according to truth. Neither can it ever consist with his unerring wisdom to think that I am innocent, to judge that I am righteous or holy, because another is so. He can no more in this manner confound me with Christ than with David or Abraham.

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Let any man to whom God hath given understanding weigh this without prejudice, and he cannot but perceive that such a notion of justification is neither reconcilable to reason nor Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

This statement seems to imply that "justification" does make the believer "actually just and righteous." As if the point is not made forcibly enough, later in this same sermon (while dealing directly with justification as accounted or imputed righteousness) Wesley reiterates the above point:

... the very moment that God giveth faith (for 'it is the gift of God') to the 'ungodly,' 'that worketh not,' that 'faith is counted to him for righteousness.' He hath no righteousness at all antecedent to this, not so much as negative righteousness or innocence. But 'faith is imputed to him for righteousness' the very moment that he believeth. *Not that God (as was observed before) thinketh him to be what he is not* (emphasis supplied). But as 'he made Christ to be sin for us' (that is, treated him as a sinner, punished him for our sins), so he counteth us righteous from the time we believe in him (that is, he doth not punish us for our sins, yea, treats us as though we were guiltless and righteous).<sup>6</sup>

In other literary settings, Wesley had some similar cautions about imputation:

Do not dispute for that particular phrase "the imputed righteousness of Christ." It is not scriptural; it is not necessary... It has done immense hurt. I have had abundant proof that the frequent use of this unnecessary phrase, instead of "furthering men's progress in vital holiness," has made them satisfied without any holiness at all.<sup>8</sup>

After his initial qualifiers, cited above from the Sermon "Justification by Faith," Wesley proceeds (in the next paragraph) to give a rather deceptively brief and simple definition of justification: "The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins."<sup>9</sup> What then is to be made of Wesley's understanding of imputed, or reckoned righteousness in the setting of his teaching on justification?

#### WESLEY'S SOTERIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

First of all it needs to be understood that Wesley had not confined his thinking on salvation to the Western, or Latin "juridical" Tradition, but had drawn on the "therapeutic" themes so common to the Eastern Tradition. For Wesley, God is not only interested in legal pardon, but healing participation<sup>10</sup> and many (especially those in the Calvinist wing of the Evangelical Revival) had a hard time dealing with what appeared to them to be justification by infused righteousness (they smelled the odious scent of Rome and Trent).

Furthermore, Wesley was not thinking of the experience of salvation so much in terms of an *ordo salutis* but much more as a *via salutis*. Maddox has succinctly summed up this perspective: "Justification is not a stage that we leave behind to enter sanctification, it is a facet of God's saving grace permeating the entire Way of Salvation."<sup>11</sup> In other words, the experience of salvation is conceived more as a continuous, related process than as an order of discrete events. This inter-dependent process certainly involves legal standing and forensic reckoning, but such standing is always the baseline that enables sanctifying participation in the righteousness of God.

#### A POSITIVE DEFINITION OF JUSTIFICATION

Before we begin an interpretation of Wesley's polemic against "imputation" (especially as given in the above cited passages from the sermon "Justification by Faith"), a brief review of his positive understanding of justification is needed.

As has already been mentioned, Wesley's most simple and straight-forward definition of justification is "pardon." It is pardon for penitent sinners who exercise "trusting" faith in the merits of Christ's death. Such pardon "covers,"<sup>12</sup> or remits not only the sins of the past, but also the sin which "remains" in believers after justification takes place concurrent with the "New Birth."<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, God's justifying merit and pardoning righteousness are also needed to effectually deal with the sins "improper" of those who have been perfected in love. In other words, there is never a time on the *via salutis* that the redeemed are without the need for pardon and the "imputation" of righteousness granted in justification.<sup>14</sup>

So what drives Wesley in his polemic against "imputation"? If even those perfected in love still need justification, he certainly cannot be understood to be teaching some Tridentine version of justification—salvation by infused righteousness.<sup>15</sup> But taken at face value, one can certainly see why the forensic, juridically oriented Calvinists would so stoutly oppose Wesley.

#### IMPORTANT EXPLANATORY CLUES

The major explanatory clues to Wesley's chary view of "imputed righteousness" reveal themselves in his suspicions concerning the antinomian or quietistic directions taken by many who advocated such "righteousness." Every major interpreter of Wesley has pointed this out.<sup>16</sup> As Wesley himself noted, "the frequent use of this unnecessary phrase, instead of 'furthering men's progress in vital holiness,' has made them satisfied without any holiness at all."<sup>17</sup>

When Wesley speaks of imputation, he always seems to sense the ominous specter of quietistic Moravianism or hyper-Calvinism lurking about; the inevitable outcome was thought to be the ruination of sanctificationist aspirations.<sup>18</sup> Such doctrinal or practical antinomianism receives far greater polemical attention from Wesley than the scholastic cadences of Trent.

Even if quietistic and antinomian threats are conceded, Wesley's troubling qualifiers in regard to "imputed righteousness" certainly make it appear that he was headed back to Rome. But if it was not a beckoning Trent that Wesley was touting, what was he attempting to convey in these anomalous qualifiers?

First of all it is obvious that Wesley was speaking of the believer's life of active participation in God's righteousness. Here he clearly wanted to distinguish justification from sanctification—in opposition to the English Moravians. Neither can he be charged with confusing these two as Trent did (in traditional Augustinian fashion).<sup>19</sup> So when Wesley says that justification does not "imply that God is *deceived* in those whom he justifies" or that He "judges concerning us contrary to the real nature of things ... or believes us righteous when we are unrighteous," he has primary reference to those who are converted and enjoying sanctifying grace.<sup>20</sup> He is not referring to the pre-conversion sins of the

regenerate. What he is saying is that the believer does not have the option of any reality which gives *carte blanche* to presumptuous sin.

Certainly God has to reckon penitent sinners condemned by their history of past sins to be "righteous when" they were "unrighteous." The very nature of forgiveness involves a covering, a reckoning, or crediting which is "contrary to the real nature of things" and that God "believes us righteous" when we were "unrighteous." Wesley was simply too logical to deny such a view of imputation or pardon for sins that are past: the past is reckoned to be something other than sinful!

Some have objected to this understanding of Wesley on imputation by suggesting Wesley did deny that penitent sinners are "reckoned" or "accounted" to be something they in reality are not. It is claimed that such justified sinners are only seen as forgiven.

#### WESLEY ON ATONEMENT AND IMPUTATION

I would suggest that one key to understanding Wesley on imputation lies in his view of the Atonement.<sup>41</sup> Among Wesleyan interpreters, there seems to be general agreement that he did see the death of Christ as providing "satisfaction" to the justice of God. There is general agreement (at least in the use of substitutionary terminology) that the death of Christ was a substitute for the sinners just deserts. Not all are agreed, however, that such "satisfaction" enables God to "substitute" the "life" (active righteousness) of Christ for the occasional or incidental failings of the penitent. The argument seems to be that "satisfaction" only suggests that Christ has sufficiently satisfied divine justice to the extent that God can forgive and pardon sinners. Such pardon, however, does not require "substitution" of Christ's "active righteousness" in order for God to be seen as "just" in justifying the ungodly.

Perhaps the issue could be clarified this way: in the substitutionary model of imputation (which includes Christ's "active righteousness"), penitent sinners who trust the merits of Christ are constantly reckoned as perfect (both in their past and present lives) and the only way for them to lose such constant reckoning is to persistently break faith with Christ. Using the "satisfaction," pardon model, imputation would look like this: forgiveness for sins (both of nature and acts) is constantly available, but must somehow be constantly applied for by penitent ones experiencing salvation. Granted, God does not immediately consign those with sin(s) to damnation, but they must consciously apply for pardon or face the loss of their salvation.

Possibly the differences can be illustrated this way: struggling believers could be likened to high wire or trapeze artists; they have the option of performing with or without a safety net underneath. For the substitutionary model, the safety net is always underneath the faithful and one has to consciously move out of faith relationship with Christ to have such a net removed; but for the "satisfaction," pardon model, the incidentally falling performers must somehow appeal for the safety net to be put in place before they crash (through sin).

I would suggest, that outside of the deterministic contexts of the Reformed views, both models could be appropriate for Wesley, even though the "satisfaction," pardon model seems to fit better in Wesley's polemical contexts.

#### ANOMALOUS STATEMENTS INTERPRETED

So what does he mean when he says that it can never "consist with (God's) unerring

wisdom to think that I am innocent, to judge that I am righteous or holy, because another is so"<sup>22</sup>

What he seemed to be getting at was that those with justifying, regenerating faith are *really* just and holy in the sense that they have an obedient attitude, a sincere intention to do the right thing (though Wesley does not imply that such attitudes are in any sense meritorious—only evidential of the pardon received). Furthermore, not only do they have good intentions, they also have a qualified “holiness”—good actions and growth in character as the normal fruit of genuine faith.<sup>23</sup>

Such a righteous reality (including both intentions and fruitful obedience) stands in clear contrast to the attitude of the presumptuously “saved” antinomian who uses the concept of the constant imputation of Christ’s righteousness as a pretext for excusing sin.<sup>24</sup> It was this view of imputation, which seemed more often than not to wear the colors of Calvinistic determinism, that Wesley usually had in his sights.

#### BACKGROUND OF THE WESTERN DEBATE

A brief explanation of the background of the soteriological debates in Western Christianity should help illuminate the meaning and function of imputation as it was understood by these warring Evangelicals with their differing interpretations of the role of imputed righteousness.

Briefly stated, the polemics went like this:<sup>25</sup> the Reformed Scholastic Tradition viewed the death of Christ as the “formal” cause of justification, whereas Wesley (with Trent and the Anglican Tradition) saw the death of Christ as the “meritorious” cause. If the death of Christ is the “formal” cause (understood in scholastic terms as the actual immediate, or formative cause of some desired effect), then there are only two alternatives: particular election (hence the double predestination of Calvin and the Reformed Tradition) or universalism (inimical to both Arminian and Reformed Evangelicals).

Since Wesley sought a middle way between Trent’s infused righteousness (Trent’s formal cause of justification) and Reformed Scholasticism’s predestinarian determinism, he opted for the view that the death of Christ was the meritorious cause of justification and the formal cause was declared to be the universally offered grace of God which pardons us by virtue of the merits of Christ. Thereby (Wesley) could insist that we never “earn” or “deserve” God’s pardoning favor, without calling into question our *responsibility* to respond to God’s gracious acceptance.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, “the real nature of things” which God sees is human responsiveness to grace, not only justifying, but also sanctifying grace. And if one is only responding with a non-participatory species of faith, God is not “deceived” by such a presumptuous species of unreality.

#### IMPUTATION AND THE SINS OF THE PAST

Furthermore, given Wesley’s more Anglican view that the formal cause of justification is freely offered grace, it could well be that Wesley conceived of imputation (in the ongoing experience of faithful, responsive participation) as always dealing *only* with the “sins” of the *past*.<sup>27</sup> Here Wesley has in mind both the sins of the believer’s pre-conversion *past* and the immediate “past” incidental sins of the participating faithful (both the justified and

the perfected). In other words, Christ's justifying merits are always seen as available to those participating in the covenant; but they are never reckoned in the sense of being a fail-proof, irremissible state of imputation. Such a fail-proof experience is simply contrary to real spiritual reality.

Although Wesley never addresses this issue directly, it does seem clear that he would not take the position that the moment a true believer sins (properly or improperly), that moment the believer is out of saving relationship with Christ. Such a "yo-yo" version of salvation seems contrary to Wesley's deeply relational vision of Christian experience. Such a behavioristic conception of the life of faith (one moment you are in and one moment you are out—depending on your latest failure or success in the battle with sin) just does not seem to resonate with Wesley's grace saturated vision of the *via salutis*.<sup>28</sup>

But make no mistake about it, what Wesley wants to negatively convey by these seemingly anomalous polemics over imputation (especially in his sermon on "Justification by Faith") is that a willful, habitual indulgence in sin of any type will sooner or later cause the loss of salvation—both for the newly justified and those with fullness of faith. The positive message seems to be that Jesus' offer of forgiveness and pardon, through His priestly intercession, is constantly available—but only to those who are participating in such a way that leaves them open to the experience of on-going penitence and dynamic growth in grace. Anything else is a perversion of imputation and is not in the realm of saving reality.

#### CONCLUSION

For Wesley, the reality of imputation dealt mainly with the sins of the past: sinners are reckoned to be something which in reality they are not, i.e., in Christ they are counted sinless, though their records testify otherwise. Thus imputation is a reckoned reality; but imputation is not a reality that may be viewed as a cover for attitudes and dispositions that would tolerate sin in any form. Thus Wesley's polemics, far from wrecking his understanding of objectively reckoned justification, seeks to point to a truer reality: cheap grace and true justification cannot really co-exist on the *via salutis* where the nature of saving grace is always participatory, not just detached mental assent. Is pardon constantly available to believers travelling this way? Of course it is, but only to those who are truly eschewing the sin which necessitates such pardon.

#### NOTES

1. See Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books [An Imprint of Abingdon Press], 1994), pp. 171, 172.
2. The two best recent studies on Wesley's soteriology are found in Kenneth Collins, *John Wesley on Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Francis Asbury Press [imprint of Zondervan Publishing House], 1989), pp. 41-54 and Maddox, pp. 157-91 (for special focus on justification, see pp. 162-72). Maddox gives extensive bibliographic sources for further study of Wesley's understanding of justification—both primary and secondary.

In addition to Collins and Maddox, other notable interpretations are given by William R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley: With Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1946), Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Francis Asbury Press [imprint of Zondervan Publishing House], 1980 (a reprinting of the original

published in 1946), pp. 55ff., 75ff., and 83ff., Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship-Resources-Tidings, 1975), pp. 45-64, and W. Steven Gunter, *The Limits of Love Divine, John Wesley's Response to Antinomianism and Enthusiasm* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books [an imprint of Abingdon Press], 1989), chaps. 4, 6, and 7; Gunter is especially helpful in fleshing out the polemical contexts of Wesley's developing explanations of justification.

For those not readily conversant with Wesley's teachings on justification, Thomas C. Oden provides a concise introduction to the primary documents (and a good, basic secondary bibliography) in his *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), pp. 188-213.

3. Frank Baker and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Editors-in-Chief successively, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* vol. 1, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1984), Sermon 5, p. 181.

The *Bicentennial Edition* is henceforth cited as *Works*. The text of the sermon is found on pp. 182-99.

4. *Ibid.*, 187.

5. *Ibid.*, 188, 189.

6. *Ibid.*, 196.

7. While Wesley is correct that the specific phrase "the imputed righteousness of Christ" is not found in Scripture, he certainly must have known that the clear intent of Romans 4 supports the basic theological intent of the phrase that believers are reckoned to be something they are not in reality; this is especially true in the way that Paul employs the Greek verb *logizomai* (sometimes translated in the KJV as to "impute" [see Romans 4: 6, 8, 11], but also given the following possible meanings in Arndt and Gingrich: to "reckon," "count," "account," "credit," "look upon as," "consider," "be regarded as," "be classed among" [William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 476, 477]): v. 4: "Abraham believed God and it was counted (*logizetai*) unto him as righteousness"; v. 5: "And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned (*logizetai*) as righteousness"; v. 6: "David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons (*logizetai*) righteousness apart from works"; v. 9: "We say that faith was reckoned (*elogisthe*) to Abraham as righteousness"; and v. 11: "who thus have righteousness reckoned (*logisthenai*) to them" (RSV).

8. Cited in Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 71.

In a similar comment, Wesley made further observations about the phrase "the imputed righteousness of Christ": "I am myself the more sparing in the use of it, because it has been so frequently and so dreadfully abused; and because the Antinomians use it at this day to justify the grossest abominations" (cited in Oden, p. 210). Oden comments: "Wesley thought the troublesome particular phrase, 'the imputed righteousness of Christ' was prone to misinterpretation, and had been used as a ruse to avoid any effort actually to walk in the way of holiness, and hence had inadvertently done immense hurt" (Oden, p. 210).

9. Outler, *Works*, p. 189.

10. Maddox cites Outler: "As Outler has nicely phrased it, Wesley's characteristic emphasis was that we are pardoned in order to participate," p. 168.

11. *Ibid.*, 172. Compare Maddox's more elaborated comments about this perspective on pp. 157, 158.

12. *Works*, vol. 1, p. 190.

13. See the sermons "On Sin in Believers" and "The Repentance of Believers," in Outler, *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 314-52 and "The Scripture Way of Salvation," vol. 2, pp. 153-69, esp. p. 165.

14. While it is true that Wesley does studiously avoid, even censure, the use of almost any varia-

tion of the word "impute" in the sermon "Justification by Faith" (and other contexts), he does use it more comfortably in less polemical settings. See especially the landmark sermon "The Lord Our Righteousness," *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 454ff. and Maddox's comments, pp. 165, 166.

15. Wesley is clear that "the sole cause of our acceptance with God ... is the righteousness and the death of Christ, who fulfilled God's law and died in our stead" (cited in Oden, p. 209).

16. Typical are Lindstrom, pp. 74 and 75, Collins, pp. 51-53; Geoffrey Wainwright, *Geoffrey Wainwright on Wesley and Calvin: Sources for Theology, Liturgy and Spirituality* (Melbourne, Australia: Uniting Church Press, 1987), p. 22, and Maddox, pp. 166-68.

17. Cited in Colin Williams, p. 71.

18. Such antinomian suspicions are even present in his most irenic, olive branch piece—the sermon "The Lord Our Righteousness"; see *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 462, 463.

19. See Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 376-92.

20. *Works*, vol. 1, p. 188.

21. Two of the best discussions of Wesley's views on the Atonement are Maddox, pp. 96-109 and John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960, 1985), pp. 150-90. Compare Kenneth Collins, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology* (Wilmore, Ky.: Wesley Heritage Press, 1993), pp. 49-54 and Lindstrom, pp. 55-75.

22. *Works*, vol. 1, p. 187.

23. I see no evidence that such an evidential understanding of the attitudes of the "justified" should be restricted only to "second" or "final justification." Granted, Wesley was not as explicit about initial and on-going justification having similar evidential fruitage in the same way he was regarding "final justification"; but I would argue that the entire tenor of his soteriological discussions sustains the present interpretation (especially the way he relates justification and sanctification as the inseparable root and fruit of genuine Christian experience).

24. Collins has perceptively caught the gist of this faith reality: "Real faith is different from that of a devil in that it is not barely a speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart." Notice here that Wesley does not exclude an intellectual component to faith; he simply points out that this ingredient by itself is insufficient; it must be joined to a disposition of the heart" (*Wesley on Salvation*, p. 47). Compare Outler's comments in *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit*, p. 52.

25. For an excellent explanation of the scholastic categories of the "causes" of salvation, see Maddox's digest of Outler, pp. 166-68; what follows is my even briefer digest of Maddox.

26. Maddox, p. 168.

27. The discussion which follows is a further elaboration of issues discussed above in the section entitled "Wesley on Atonement and Imputation."

28. See Maddox's perceptive discussion, under the heading of "Repentance within the Christian Life," in which he explains Wesley's understanding of the believer's "awareness of God's pardoning grace," which becomes an awareness that enables a "repentance within the Christian life" which "revitalizes our continuing *responsible* growth in holiness" (pp. 165, 166).