The Conversion of the Wesleys  
--1738 Reconsidered

JOHN LAWSON

John Wesley's famous definition of evangelical saving faith occurs towards the beginning of his Standard Sermons: "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." (Sermon I.i.4.) Here are two qualities in principle distinct one from another, yet in authentic Christian experience inseparably connected. There is first the rational basis of Christian faith, "a train of ideas in the head." This is something reliable, which can be learned, argued about, and to which rational and responsible assent can be given. And built upon this foundation, or rather, flowering from this root, there is "a disposition of the heart." This is the mysterious gift of God, and is immediate and personal. One can by wise teaching be persuaded to desire it, but one cannot by learning come to possess it. It is a gift.

That this must be so springs from the circumstance that our Christian faith is an historic faith, and also a life of present fellowship with a living personal Savior. Most certainly our faith is not based on subjective feelings. We totally repudiate the seductive suggestion of unbelief that religion took its origin in the fact that our primitive ancestors woke to consciousness in a mysterious world full of uncanny dangers, and found a compelling psychological need to imagine a protective "father figure" to

This article was first delivered as the annual lecture of the Wesley Fellowship in Britain, and is released for publication in America by that Society. Further texts of the hymns discussed in this article, and the texts of other important Wesley hymns, are printed and commented on, with full analysis of the Scripture references in them, in The Wesley Hymns as a Guide to Scriptural Teaching (written by John Lawson, published by Zondervan.)

John Lawson, M.A., B.D., B.Sc., was a Methodist circuit minister in England for twenty years, preceding twenty-one years as a professor at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. He is retired and lives in England.
supply a sense of security, and that we believers still cling to the idea of God because we desire comfort in a tragic and dangerous world. The foundation of Christian faith is rational knowledge of God's saving acts performed upon the plane of history.

The Old Testament contains the record of God's choice of His Chosen People, and of His discipline of them through historic experience and the teaching of the prophets, until there was a people and a time prepared for the coming of Christ. Thus the Old Testament speaks of Christ, and is Christian, as well as Hebrew Scripture. In the New Testament there is witness to those historic facts about Christ which are requisite to the preaching of the gospel--His birth, character, teaching, acts, death and resurrection. In the New Testament, also, there is the first formative and authoritative interpretation of the theological and spiritual meaning of these facts, through the influence of the Holy Spirit. Thus in Scripture there is the essential foundation of all doctrine.

If Scripture gives a clear witness to some point of belief, then to the Christian that is definitive, final. Yet how is Scripture to be interpreted? This is not purely an individual concern. The reliable interpretation of Scripture requires, under the guidance of the Spirit, the consensus of thought of long centuries of Christian experience from that first day to this, among men and women of many and various gifts and temperaments, social and cultural backgrounds. In the broad sense, then, Scripture is to be interpreted through tradition. Yet there is also a place for reason, for "a three-fold cord is not quickly broken." The interpreters in the Church must not only be devout, reverent and Spirit-guided--though that is essential if they are to discern truth in Scripture--they must also be informed in sacred learning. Nor are Christians antiquarians, who love a position simply because it is venerable and accustomed. Tradition as well as exposition must be put through the sieve of reason.

All this, however, though the indispensable foundation of faith, is not more than "a train of ideas in the head." It is a body of belief meriting intellectual assent, though it must not be assumed that this assent is "cold and lifeless." It may well be a matter of profound and sincere conviction. Nevertheless, the body of reliable scriptural belief only becomes full, evangelical faith, "the faith that worketh by love," when it captivates the heart and the imagination as well as the mind, when it moves the affections and emotions in such a way as to stir the moral will to action.

It is at this point that mention must be made of the cherished evangelical principle of "the open Bible." We judge that this is not to be taken to mean that the uninstructed Christian man or woman can, as an isolated individual in a private corner, divine all sound
doctrine from the Bible. "The open Bible" belongs to the sphere of public and private devotion, of worship and prayer, rather than of theological instruction. It is the experience of Christian people that if the sincere searcher, coming to the Bible with the eyes of a modicum of informed Christian belief, reads in the attitude of reverent devotion, then the Holy Spirit can visit with the blessed experience that a text lights up with spiritual illumination. Our Lord, as it were, "steps out of the page," and brings to the heart the personal experience of His living presence, and of love shed abroad. The grand case in point is that formative pioneers of the evangelical way, such as St. Augustine, Luther and Wesley, came to their liberating experience through Scripture in just this way. Here is the mandate for all searchers to read the Bible, and to hear it preached.

It is a familiar truth that whereas the thinking mind, with its intelligent convictions, is the rudder on the ship, the engine which moves the human will to effective action lies in the emotions. Thus both parts are necessary. A Christian and scriptural "train of ideas in the head," though of itself an excellent thing, may of itself constitute only a sincere but powerless religion. It is uncharitable to say of such a believer that he or she is not treading in the paths of Christian salvation. However, such a one will not enjoy the peace of mind and joy in God which is the good purpose of God for His children. Even more of importance, such a one will not be fully equipped to be an effective and winning witness to the Christian gospel. In the last resort, the divine purpose in "a full personal experience of Christ" is not to make us happy, but to make us useful to God. On the other hand, to be possessed in imagination and emotion without a secure grounding in authentic Christian and scriptural knowledge is to have an engine without a rudder. This sort of religion is at best weak Christian sentimentality, at worst, the perilous path of fanaticism.

Those who are wise enough to wish for Christian instruction have something which they can usefully do. They can follow the example of the "more noble" people of Berea who, having "received the word" under the guidance of apostles "searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). However, those who are painfully aware of the poverty of their personal experience cannot hope to improve themselves by their own efforts. There is no profit for the heart to say within itself: "Oh, I ought to have more sense of the presence of God, more delight in prayer, more love to men and women round about me," and to repeat desperately a hundred times: "Oh, I ought! Oh, I ought! Oh, I ought!" To seek to work oneself up into an experience is the path to artificiality, and thence perhaps to
despair. A man who is distressed to find that his marriage is threatened has some things which he can try to do, and which he can rightly do. He can try to be understanding to his wife, to be courteous, to be just, to be forgiving. But he cannot try to love, for the spring of pure personal affection is spontaneous. And so it is with our standing before God. If all we had to do to please God was to obey Him, the more fortunate among us in temperament, habits and background might at a pinch try to save ourselves. But God requires obedience for the sake of love. Whereas we can try to make ourselves obey, we cannot, by trying, make ourselves love. This is why there is so little use in conventional exhortations that we ought to love God and our neighbor. And this is the essential reason why salvation is by grace. Divine grace is not merely assistance to make it easier to do something which if we try hard we can do for ourselves. It is the power of God to do for us what we cannot do. All we can do if we would be granted the “full personal experience of Christ” is to wait upon God for Him to bestow His “unspeakable gift,” in the time and in the measure adapted to our need. And we are to wait upon God not in indiscipline, but in the appointed means of grace, expectantly using them, but not trusting them. Many well-intentioned plans for evangelism have miscarried at that point. Some have supposed that the Church can by its devotional efforts work itself up to the point when it can, as it were, constrain the “showers of blessing.” This is a subtle branch of salvation by works. We cannot go through “a great door and effectual” to the work of God, however much we desire, unless God opens it, and leads us through.

A great example of these principles is the evangelical experience of the Wesleys. It is often assumed that the “formal Churchmen” of the Holy Club did not understand evangelical doctrine. It is said that by the Aldersgate Street experience they were brought to a new form of doctrine. This is clearly an exaggeration. John Wesley does indeed express surprise when, in conversation with the Moravians, he came across the idea of instantaneous conversion not as something limited to the apostolic or ancient Church, but as a matter of present experience. He was also surprised, and deeply impressed, at testimonies to abounding peace, and joy in the Lord (cf. Journal, April 21, 1738). However, these are things connected with “the disposition of the heart,” the apprehension of Christian truth in personal experience. They are matters of spiritual devotion rather than the body of doctrine properly so called.

John Wesley had been brought up to accept that salvation is by the grace of God, and had always accepted the doctrine of justification by faith. These truths are enunciated in the Articles and Homilies of the Church of England, which he regularly cites as
The authoritative standards of "our own church." The element which was revolutionary was the notion that one could venture outside the decent and disciplined confines of the Church with this gospel. The mind of Wesley is revealed in the celebrated and moving testimony recorded in the Journal for March 4-6, 1738. He writes: "Peter Böhler, by whom (in the hand of the great God) I was, on Sunday the 5th clearly convinced of unbelief; of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved." That was the immediate impression, candidly recorded. Yet when he got round to publishing for the guidance of his people, there is the later footnote added and also candidly recorded, reflecting a more considered verdict: "whereby alone we are saved - with the full Christian salvation." So there are in fact degrees of faith, even degrees of authentic justifying faith (cf. Journal December 31, 1739). The "unbelief" of which he was convinced was not resistance to sound doctrine, but inability to "feel."

The response to Böhler's famous challenge "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it you will preach faith" is "I began preaching this new doctrine, though my soul started back from the work. The first person to whom I offered salvation by faith alone, was a prisoner under sentence of death." What, may we ask, was "the new doctrine?" Hardly, "justification by faith," considered formally as a doctrinal position. Possibly the emphasis "alone" was a new note. However, the sense of the passage surely is that the chief thing which was new was the notion that one could take justification by faith to a man who was in the desperate condition of Clifford, awaiting execution. "My soul started back from the work" because until that time he had been "a zealous asserter of the impossibility of a death-bed repentance." What was coming new to Wesley was an engagement of the heart, more than a conviction of the theological mind.

The same point arises in connection with Wesley's preaching of holiness. We are familiar with the proposition that Wesley regarded it as the distinctive mission of Methodism "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land." It is significant that he always sought to vindicate the truth of his preaching by demonstrating that the doctrine was not new. It was part of the original tradition, and he himself had always upheld it. Here is an example of the gulf between the modern "liberal" theological mind and the traditionalist mind of Wesley. Nowadays a scholar commonly seeks to establish his credentials by affirming that he is abreast of the latest developments. To Wesley the mark of a true doctrine was that it was old, as was the manner of the writers of the ancient Church. So he rejoices to find "Perfect Love" in the good old Book of Common Prayer, citing the Collect for Purity. He points
out that he lived in pursuit of holiness as an Oxford student, long before Aldersgate Street.

Surely there is something of this behind the dialogue recorded in the Journal for November 25, 1739, of Wesley’s first visit to Exeter. He preached in the beautiful Norman Church of St. Mary’s Arches, just ‘round the corner from the Mint Methodist, where I worship. He writes, in the morning “I preached at St. Mary’s, on, ‘The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.’ [We may deduce the gist of what he said from Sermon VII: Real religion is not common honesty, regular church attendance and almsgiving, but inward holiness, and joy in God.] Dr. Wight told me, after sermon, ‘Sir, you must not preach in the afternoon. Not,’ said he, ‘that you preach any false doctrine. I allow all that you have said is true; and it is the doctrine of the Church of England. But it is not guarded; it is dangerous; it may lead people into enthusiasm or despair.’ ” (And the nature of these objections is appropriately laid out in Sermon I.iii.3-7.) Wesley was doubtless gratified that Prebendary Wight had sufficient knowledge and candor to recognize that what had been preached was not an innovation, considered as a body of doctrine. What was new and disturbing was the way in which he said it! It was the application from the heart to the heart.

We are aware of the intangible but potent difference between evangelical doctrine as sincerely accepted by the mind and as captivating the heart. It is sadly possible to be an Evangelical in the one sense, but not evangelical in the other. I remember many years ago my honored tutor, that learned and evangelical soul; Dr. R. Newton Flew, was disconcerted by my confession that I sometimes felt reserve in singing the well-loved lines:

My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

What I was feeling after was this. Here was I, a young man of an evangelical background, who had, thank God, as a youth come to a genuine conversion experience, and who was an entirely sincere believer in and preacher of “our doctrines.” Nevertheless, as I read the moving testimony of the Wesleys I was painfully aware that my personal experience and my evangelistic passion were low-key compared to that of my heroes. And this was not because in anything I had consciously been disobedient to the heavenly vision. It was simply the effect of my personality and the times in which I lived. It has been my joy and pride to be a preacher of the gospel, and a Methodist minister. I look back on the work I have done,
with its modest success, with sincere satisfaction. In my early days
I desired with a great desire that God would powerfully use me in
the revival of His work, yet somehow He never laid His hand on
me in quite that manner. So after these years I have to accept that
in character and gifts and calling I am what I am, and not someone
else I might wish to be, because God has made me that way.

Surely, this is where our Church now is. We know that
emasculated and unevangelical doctrine sadly flourishes in some
quarters of the Church. It is important, I think, that friends of
evangelical truth should take an informed and a charitable
judgment of this phenomenon. It does not generally spring from
carelessness for the truth, or conscious hypocrisy. The fact is that
if one's personal experience, and experience of preaching, makes
evangelical fervor hard to sustain, evangelical doctrine gradually
ceases to be credible. If one's sense of God has grown dim, it is
hard to speak convincingly about the Living God. It is easy to
refer to "the ground of being," a phrase not false in itself, but
inadequate. It is more congenial to speak of Jesus as a great
teacher, which He is, than as an atonement. Not a few teachers
coming from a Christian background, and sincerely wishing still to
call themselves Christians, have discovered that with the passage of
years, "the faithless coldness of the times," and the prevailing
intellectual atmosphere of the secular world have gradually chilled
down both themselves and their congregations. So they
instinctively seek to make Christianity easier to believe by half-
believing men and women by lightening the load of doctrine. This
is a fatal step, which makes the ailment worse. So we judge that
"reconstructed" theology is not the faith of the future being
creatively pioneered, as some would assure us. It is residual
Christian faith, sincere so far as it goes, but faith observed in
process of dissolution, like the Cheshire Cat gradually vanishing,
until in some extreme cases only the grin is left. The only remedy
is one provided by God, namely, widespread spiritual revival, such
as will produce more and more convinced and convincing
preachers, and congregations prepared to respond. This is what
happened before. The revivals of spiritual devotion which marked
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries dispelled the miasma of
latitudinarianism, Deism and thinly disguised Unitarianism, which
had so widely prevailed, and restored to credibility the traditional
document.

Some will accuse my own Methodist Church of evangelical
decay. It is my distinct impression, gained from helping to
examine candidates for the preachers' plan, and for the ministry,
and from working with local preachers in their studies, that the
great majority of those who offer themselves have a genuine
personal experience of Christ, and an authentic sense of divine call. When, synod by synod, we Methodist ministers acknowledge that we believe and preach our doctrines, I think in the main this is true. Our difficulty is that, though our hearts have been touched, they are not sufficiently engaged. It is hard for even the most resolute preacher to live and minister unaffected by the world in which we live. So we sing:

Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart  
With boundless charity divine;

but we do not always expect the prayer to be answered because our expectations have been lowered by the experience of apathy in our hearers. However, this is not the end, because “there is a God in heaven.” If His witnesses are faithful in bad times as well as good He can work “His work, His strange work.” So we have to wait upon Him in believing prayer, though our cry is bound to be “O Lord, how long!”

This expectation is in fact our confidence. We cannot hope to outbid the massive apparatus of the secular world in resources for propaganda. If competition of that sort were our only hope we should indeed have arrived in “the post-Christian era.” We cannot forget that that is just what intelligent and sympathetic observers were saying of England when the events we commemorate were taking place. Joseph Butler, Bishop of Bristol, was the most learned defender of the Christian faith in his day. When invited to become Archbishop of Canterbury, he declined, on the ground that “I have not strength to support a falling Church.” That is what it looked like in a day of frequent emasculated doctrine, relaxed discipline and small congregations. Yet during that time there endured God’s righteous remnant in the Church, and God was preparing His secret weapon. It is sad that the good and wise bishop could not see the signs of the times, and was repelled by the teaching of Wesley. On a famous occasion he said to Wesley: “Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing.” He had his case, for there were some pretenders to divine inspiration of which this was true, just as there are in Britain today. The difference was that Wesley was securely grounded in scriptural doctrine and the discipline of the Church. His father and mother were of that righteous remnant. So he possessed the reliable “train of ideas in the head” as well as “the disposition of the heart.” This is why his claim to “the witness of the Spirit” was not individualist, subjective and “extraordinary.” The wise evangelical will not be too hasty in questioning the right of the Holy Spirit to work
salvation through eccentric sects, even if they are disapproved.

Me will ye mete with reason’s line?  
Or teach My grace how far to move?

Nevertheless, the historic experience of the Church shows that the substantial, the lasting, the truly beneficial revivals of spiritual religion have not taken place through individualist sects nourished on partial truths, but through “the true Church within the Church.” The natural instinct of impatient groups of zealous revivalists to despair of the Great Church and to break away, has often proved to be one of “Satan’s devices” in frustrating revival.

In line with this we observe that Wesley’s preaching of holiness was not new. It had a background in reliable Christian tradition. John Wesley was essentially a High Churchman turned evangelist, and the traditionalist High Churchman had a reverence for Christian antiquity. The young Wesley read, and found much to admire in, such writers of the ancient Church as Clement of Alexandria, and some of the ascetic writers such as “Macarius.” He also studied some of the devotional writings of the Roman Church of later times. This historic tradition had a place for “perfection,” and the holy life, though we have with all respect to say that it was often a flawed tradition. St. Anthony of Egypt was one converted through hearing the reading of Scripture. His text, which became the sheet-anchor of monasticism, was the words of our Lord to the rich young man who had kept all the regular commandments: “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me” (Matthew 19:21). Out of this was derived the idea of a double standard of Christian morality.

The notion of a double standard is offensive to the doctrine of salvation by grace, for it savors of the notion of the merit of good works. At the same time, it appears to be a common-sense idea, for it is a matter of plain experience that in the Christian community there are always a few ardent souls who seem called by God to a more fully committed life of service, and a great many other essentially well-intentioned people who do not seem to have it in them to embark upon the more heroic course. So it was traditionally taught that God has given the “evangelical precepts” for the guidance of the general body of believers, and the higher “counsels of perfection” for those who are called thereto, and given grace sufficient to follow them. This distinction extended to all spheres of human life. For example, in the matter of property, God has, since the Fall, allowed to sinful men and women the institution of private property, and the social distinctions which
flow from it. The reason for this is that unregenerate men will only care for what is their own, which appears to be a realistic judgment upon common human nature! However, those who would anticipate on earth something of the life of heaven, and who have the grace and spiritual vocation for it, can embrace the higher life of the communal property and individual poverty of a religious order. So in the matter of sex, the evangelical precept is the holy estate of matrimony, instituted by God, for one man and one woman “till death us do part,” with a calling to bear and nurture Christian children. And the higher way for the few is the celibate life, married to Christ and His Church.

This doctrine has the advantage that it sets no limit on the power of grace “to save to the uttermost.” It is possible by grace to live a life entirely devoted to the service of God. It is a salutary discipline that this ideal should be affirmed. The flaw in the scheme is that it appears to place a barrier between the holy life, and the home and workshop. The fatal implication that more can be expected of folk like monks and nuns, or perhaps the clergy in general, is that not too much can be expected of “ordinary people.” If the general body of men and women who have homes, spouses, children and a living to earn in a hard world are made to feel that they are condemned to a life of inevitable moral compromise, they will cease to aspire to the highest. The common-sense attitude of a double standard “lowers the sights” of spiritual expectation.

Classic Reformation doctrine represents a natural strong reaction against this venerable system. The young Martin Luther, caught in an emergency by the sudden fear that he might die without being fortified by the Last Rites, made the typical medieval reaction of one who would devote himself entirely to God. To make sure of his salvation he embarked upon the counsels of perfection, and entered a monastic order. The change of times is discerned in that he found deep spiritual frustration in this course of life. There were many things which the young monk found he could do by the exercise of disciplined will. He could excel all the other young monks in his zeal for keeping the rules of monastic devotion. However, there was one thing he could not do. He could not make himself love God, in the way he knew God ought to be loved. He was moved to obedience too much by hope of celestial reward, and fear of punishment.

Most sincere but conventional minds are more or less content if they find that they can keep the usual rules of religion. They are not too deeply concerned to look minutely within. However, Luther was different. Being a man of spiritual genius, he had grace and sense to discern that his condition was deeply unsatisfactory in the sight of God. To please God he must not
only obey. He must obey for the right reason, from the heart. So in the end, when God mysteriously visited him with "the o'erwhelming power of saving grace," and set him free from his bondage, Luther very naturally turned strongly against the whole conception of counsels of perfection. Talk of "perfection" reflected a totally inadequate estimate of the fallen character of human nature, and of the impossibility of doing anything to please God by one's own moral resolve. So far, so good: we accept this Lutheran position. However, there is in it concealed a flaw.

It would, we judge, be unsympathetic to condemn Luther himself at this point. The phrase we are later to quote from him in relation to Wesley's evangelical experience is a clear affirmation of the true evangelical position that saving faith must of necessity produce moral good works. However, there is in Luther an element of rugged paradox, and phrases which have sometimes been misunderstood by those who have proclaimed themselves his followers. The Reformation proposition *simul justus et peccator* (i.e., that the Christian believer is "at the same time justified and a sinner") is intended as no more than a statement of the truth that those justified by faith still need to pray for forgiveness. However, it can be allowed to slip into a degraded sense, namely, that it is not absolutely necessary for the believer to bring forth the good works of faith in order to be accepted by God. The bare transaction of the atonement is sufficient for divine acceptance, without a moral change in the believer. "Just as I am," taken in the sense "In my hand no price I bring; Simply to Thy cross I cling," involves the separation of justification and sanctification. This also is a fatal "lowering of the sights" of moral expectation, in another direction. The common-sense attitude among quite sincere believers that "after all, no one of us is perfect" can convey the implication that even in believers some degree of deliberate moral compromise is in principle inevitable, human nature and the world we live in being what they are. This is to deny the power of God "to save to the uttermost."

Between these two extremes we find Wesley, the High Churchman turned evangelist, occupying a prudent and moderate middle ground. No one could be plainer than he in witnessing to salvation by grace, through faith, and in excluding all thought of the merit of good works. Herein he is clearly on the Reformation side. Yet to him "perfection" is not an opprobrious word. He boldly restores it to a place of honor. And he is most vigilant to guard the preaching of salvation by grace from antinomianism—that is to say, from the notion that free divine forgiveness in some way releases the believer from the absolute duty of obeying the moral law of God. So, following the devotional writers of the
ancient tradition, he is not afraid to talk about "perfection" and "holiness" as the only proper aim in life for the earnest Christian disciple. Yet in Wesley there is no flawed double standard, as between the cloister and the hearth. There is no place for "counsels of perfection" in practice limited to religious orders, or to the clergy. Wesley upholds a sternly Puritan holiness, but not an ascetic holiness.

In Wesley's teaching, all "ordinary" believers, if they will but fully trust their Savior, are called to the highest imaginable, even if they are surrounded by the pleasures and cares of home and family life, and by the thronging concerns of earning a living in the busy world. This life of austere religious discipline is called upon boldly to witness against all the sins and follies and moral compromises of the secular order, in hope of reforming the whole life of the nation. Anyone who reads documents such as The Rules of the Society, and sermons such as "The Use of Money" (44), "On Spiritual Idolatry" (78), "On Dissipation" (79), "On Friendship with the World" (80), "The Danger of Riches" (87), "On Dress" (88), "On Redeeming the Time" (93), and "On Pleasing all Men" (100), will be aware that Wesley's ideal for the Methodist Society was that of a kind of "married monasticism," which should present to the world the sort of challenge mounted by the monastic orders, but organized from the basis of the home, the market and the workshop, not the convent. The true Methodist was to be set apart from society just as clearly as were the members of a religious order, or the early Quakers, or the Mennonites, by their regular devotions, close fellowship, plain dress and austere manner of life, industry and economy, and plain-spoken rebuke of the mores and manners of the community. And this was the outward expression of inward holiness.

Do we say of this ideal, as of the Charge of the Light Brigade, "It is magnificent, but it is not war"? Is this asking too much of human nature? Was the cooling down of institutional Methodism into a denomination of "respectable" but Puritan manners inevitable? Perhaps in the world of practical affairs it was. The irony of the situation is that Wesley was commonly dismissed as an extremist, even as a fanatic. Yet, coolly considered, his doctrine is the eminently reasonable balance, the salutary comprehension between extremes. Dr. Outler is surely right in his "Introduction to Wesley's Theological Foundations" to say that "He was, by talent and intent, a folk-theologian: an eclectic who had mastered the secret of plastic synthesis, simple profundity....The elements of his theology were adapted from many sources" (Library of Protestant Thought: John Wesley, p. 119.) We do not, however, agree with the judgment that this position excludes him from "the front
rank—that select company of systematic thinkers who have managed to effect major mutation in the Christian mind.” “The faith once committed to the saints” is not seeking “major mutations,” but rather new ways of giving plain statement to old truths. The renovation of the Christian faith consists in the return to original positions, including the holding together of diverse shades of “the manifold wisdom of God” which were in danger of falling apart in the apprehension of small minds. Wesley’s “new creative synthesis” was creative, but not in fact new, because it was a return to the position as it was before it was polarized between Rome and anti-Rome. That is to say, it was scriptural and apostolical. That Wesley did not appear to so many of that day to be eminently reasonable and balanced was due to the contrast between “the train of ideas in the head” and “the disposition of the heart.” Considered as a body of doctrine, the preaching of perfection is indeed balanced and reasonable. It was the prophetic conviction with which it came, and the conviction which it evoked, which was unnerving to conventional minds.

It would appear that the preaching of holiness has sometimes been brought into disrepute by too emotional an approach. Enthusiastic preachers have encouraged their hearers to expect some sort of sudden emotional earthquake which would fill them with ecstasies of joy—and that is the sum of the matter. Clearly, a firing of the imagination and the affections is a part of the matter. The dynamic of evangelical perfection is love shed abroad in the heart, and this of necessity has an emotional content. However, following Wesley, the primary purpose of the divine gift of holiness or perfect love is not to make men and women happy, but to make them morally upright, and fully obedient to God, so that they may live and serve to His glory. This is an important and salutary proviso, which will keep the preaching of holiness on a rational and disciplined track.

Here again is an aspect of the principle that Wesley is a moralist turned evangelical, and that the evangelical Wesley is a moralist still. In the great doctrinal sermons on the religion of the heart there is a constant “war on two fronts.” His treatment characteristically has three points. First, he rehearses the praiseworthy acts of devotion and charity which commonly and conventionally pass for “religion.” This, he says, is not the Christian faith. Second, the act of faith in appropriating the saving work of God in Christ is enforced. Third, the praiseworthy acts of charity and devotion are again rehearsed as essential in the life of the believer, because they are the necessary fruits of faith. The war on two fronts is ever carried on against the opposite errors of legality and antinomianism. Here is another example of Wesley’s central,
A chief reason for Wesley’s rejection of the Calvinist theology is connected with his resistance to antinomianism. A modern liberal Christian who repudiates Calvinism commonly does so because it seems to infringe upon the dignity of the human personality, by denying autonomous free will. We note that Wesley never argues like this. He is not concerned for the reputation of humanity, but for the glory of God. Wesley abhors, as a base slur upon God’s justice and goodness, the more extreme doctrine of reprobation, that is, that God has positively willed the perdition of those who are finally lost. There is, however, another point of importance. One of the chief factors which gave Calvinist preaching its cutting edge was that it professed a strong doctrine of the assurance of salvation, based upon the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints. This was the teaching that if one was elected to salvation, and the object of irresistible saving grace, it was impossible finally to fall into eternal damnation, even though one might appear temporarily to slip upon the path of Christian grace. This conviction fortified the believer with a most comforting assurance of salvation.

The element of truth in this position is enshrined in the traditional lines:

Let me no more my comfort draw
From my frail grasp of Thee;
In this alone rejoice in awe;
Thy mighty grasp of me.

However, Wesley discerned a fatal flaw in the Calvinist presentation of assurance. It might encourage insensitive people to suppose that their final salvation was assured solely by the action of God, and apart from the absolute necessity of bringing forth the fruits of good moral character and conduct. We are far from accusing responsible and informed Calvinist teaching of being antinomian. If Calvinist moral teaching has erred, it is more likely to have done so in the opposite direction of legality, the stern religion of the Ten Commandments. However, Wesley was not concerned to judge the abstract principles of Calvinist doctrine, but the practical views of some he met who called themselves Calvinists. Characteristically, he is not debating the theory of God’s government of all human souls in this world, and in glory. He is concerned for the practical good of simple people in the Society. Some, on the strength of the proposition “once saved, always saved,” did seem to sink into presumption, and here was an error Wesley abhorred. His preaching of full assurance is marked
by a clear insistence that the foundation of all was a deep awareness of moral change in the heart of the believer.

In his exposition of the leading text, Romans 8:16, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit," Wesley points out that there are two "witnesses." There is "the witness of my own spirit," which is the common sense moral argument: "Since my conversion I am so deeply aware of a complete change of inward character and outward conduct that I cannot doubt that God's saving grace is at work in my heart" (cf. Sermon X.i.2-6). And there is also "the witness of the Spirit," which belongs in the last resort to the sphere of the emotions, the imagination, the affections--that is to say, "the heart." This "inward impression on the soul - whereby the Spirit of God directly witnessed to my spirit that I am a child of God" is by the nature of things mysterious (cf. Sermon X.1.7,11-12). When the two "witnesses" chime together, then, and only then, is the believer granted the privilege of a present full assurance of salvation.

A point to be remembered, however, and often slurred over in popular teaching, is that to Wesley the reasonable and moral "witness of my own spirit" is the essential element. To claim an assurance of salvation solely on account of "the witness of the Spirit," that is to say, on the ground of the great joy in believing, and without the moral change, is to fall into the most dangerous delusion. Wesley never taught the naive subjective doctrine: "I feel saved, therefore I am saved." Although the heartfelt "witness of the Spirit" comes first in time, because we must consciously love before we can fully obey (i.8), yet the all-important test that the supposed "witness of the Spirit" is not in fact the delusion of Satan, is the awareness of the moral change. This is argued with characteristic emphasis (ii.1-12). We are aware, however, that Wesley's teaching underwent a certain cautious modification in light of continuing evangelical experience. In the early days of the Revival, he was inclined to the position that if one did not enjoy full assurance one was not in a state of full salvation. This is to make "the witness of the Spirit" essential. This he realized later was too rigid a judgment. The effect of this modified teaching is that if one is aware of the moral change, one may have confidence that one is indeed on the way of salvation, even though the deep sense of peace with God, and of joy abounding, is denied. However, the divine gift of "the witness of the Spirit," and the full assurance which it brings, is the privilege of all believers, intended by God, and to be expected, preached and believingly prayed for. This privilege is indeed not essential to salvation, but it is part of the fitting spiritual equipment of the fully useful and convincing servant of Christ and the gospel. (Cf. the sermon, "The
Witness of the Spirit--Discourse II," v.3,4. This is not in the familiar Standard Sermons.)

Once again we find Wesley in the characteristic position of teaching a creative synthesis of elements which were in danger of falling apart in polarization. In this he is the High Churchman turned evangelist. In England before Wesley the old High Church party maintained the predominant tradition of the ancient Church, that saving grace is in principle available to all mankind, because the means of grace, and in particular the sacramental means of grace, are open to all. Thus, they did not accept the Calvinist doctrine of particular election, i.e., that those individuals are saved whom God has chosen to save. In current controversy, "Arminian" was used as a term of opprobrium applied to the High Church party by their Puritan and Calvinist opponents, to indicate that they were unsound on salvation by grace, and on this account not proper Protestants. However, though the High Church party in principle professed universal grace, they were not on that account evangelists to "all sorts and conditions of men." Their characteristic interest was to uphold the spiritual prerogative and the power of the bishops, and above all, the king. The image of the High Churchman is struck in the old ballad, "The Vicar of Bray:"

In good King Charles' golden days,
When loyalty no harm meant,
A zealous High Churchman was I,
And so I got preferment.
To teach my flock I never missed
Kings were by God appointed,
And lost are those that dare resist,
Or touch the Lord's anointed.

And the whole Wesley family were certainly devoted "King's men"!

It is from this background that Wesley lifted to a place of honor the term "Arminian," just as he had done with the word "perfection," though there is no evidence that he had actually read Arminius, or was directly influenced by his teaching. The Church party had a cautious maxim with which to express human destiny: "No saved Christians but dead Christians." As saving grace is not irresistible, it is sadly possible, if the believer did not persevere in the spiritual and moral discipline of the Christian life, to fall from grace into perdition. Therefore no one was safe home until he or she had arrived at a godly deathbed! This is a sober degree of expectation, well-guarded against presumption. This is the voice of the Book of Common Prayer at the graveside: "that, when we
shall depart this life, we may rest in Him, as our hope is this our brother doth." After all, we can express kindly hope for everyone in the parish, but not more than hope for anyone! All this is very reasonable. However, frail humans can hardly launch out over the awesome gulf between this world and the next on the strength of the reasonable proposition that "probability is the guide to life." In the hour of stress we need some stronger word. And this Wesley has, yet without falling into the presumption of the opposed maxim, "Once saved, always saved." He has the comforting message of a present assurance, "an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast," yet which is not to be presumed upon, for in principle it can be lost. Of evangelical believers he says: "They are saved from the fear, though not from the possibility, of falling away from the grace of God" (Sermon I.ii.4).

The fitting commentary upon this body of doctrine is the Pilgrim's Progress of John Wesley, as illustrated from his Journal, and illuminated by his brother's hymns. When the celebration of the centennial of Methodism was being discussed, some suggested that the hundred years should be measured from Wesley's ordination. This would have included the Oxford Methodism of the Holy Club, and the venture to Georgia, as a part of the Methodist story. This was refused on the ground that "At that time Mr. Wesley was not converted." So the centennial of Methodism was celebrated in 1838, one hundred years after Aldersgate Street. This raises the question, "At what point did Wesley become an effective Christian? When was he 'converted'?"

One sometimes hears an enthusiastic soul use the phrase "Since I became a Christian." Sometimes this can give one pause for thought, or even a painful jolt. The speaker may, by implication, be writing off the spiritual validity of Christian parentage and baptism, nurture in a Christian home and Sunday school, perhaps years of regular worship, or even of work as a teacher or steward, up to the moment of a more recent and blessed "time of refreshing from the presence of the Lord." One may have a good deal of sympathy with what the person is trying to say. He is rejoicing in the splendid newness and power of a great evangelical experience. Yet the phrase often reflects muddled theology. Even Charles Wesley slipped at this point. He adorned his mother's tombstone with some of his less gifted verse, in which he stated that she:

Mourn'd a long night of griefs and fears,
A legal night of seventy years.

This is indeed a ruthless judgment upon the heroic mother of the Wesleys!
It is important to observe that John Wesley did not speak like this. On the one hand, the Aldersgate Street experience clearly meant a great deal to him. So, in his Journal for May 24, 1738, he prepares the way for his testimony by giving a careful and very moving survey of his previous spiritual experience. Yet the strange thing is, the momentous experience over, he hardly ever refers to it again, though he often remembers with affection his experience as an Oxford Methodist. He was not the sort of Methodist who lived by recounting a conversion experience of ten years ago, of twenty, or of fifty. There was much of spiritual worth which went before, and much which came after. "The experience of the heart strangely warmed" was an important link in a chain, but not more.

In the autobiographical sketch in the Journal for that momentous day, we find him first as the child and schoolboy of religious habits, and then as the High Church Oxford student. On the one hand, judging himself by the severe standard of later years, he taxes himself with spiritual blindness. Yet on the other, he is scrupulous in preparing himself to receive the communion at the required three times per year. It is significant that the later "evangelical" Wesley should have communicated so much more regularly than the early "legal" one. So he comes to what has been described as "his first conversion":

When I was about 22, my father pressed me to enter into Holy Orders. At the same time the providence of God directing me to Kempis's 'Christian Pattern,' [Imitatio Christi]
I began to see that true religion was seated in the heart.

So he embarks upon a life of whole-hearted Christian discipline. "I set apart an hour or two a day for religious retirement. I communicated every week - I began to aim at, and pray for inward holiness." And, being appointed a fellow of Lincoln College, he reads William Law's Christian Perfection and Serious Call to a Holy Life.

So we have a man who in many ways comes close to the later evangelical Wesley. He realizes that true religion is inward, he aspires after perfection, or holiness, and, in that aspiration, waits upon God in all the means of grace. Indeed, he can salute this period in a very significant way. Among his Standard Sermons there is a University Sermon preached in this period, and upon the very subject of inward religion (XIII, "The Circumcision of the Heart"). He states that after these years he cannot preach a better, save that, most significantly he adds to his statement of faith in the atoning work of Christ a clearer reference to assurance by the work of the Spirit (XIII.i.7). In theology and moral discipline he has
everything he needs. The one thing lacking is a sufficient engagement of the heart. He has done everything which a spiritual seeker, by the assistance of God's grace, can do. And these are the things which the earnest seeker for growth in grace must do, if he is to receive more grace. Wesley would hardly have arrived eventually at Aldersgate Street unless he had persevered with the Holy Club, for that was the door of obedience set before him by God at that stage. The one thing he lacks is the one thing he cannot do for himself. "The heart" is not fully engaged. He does not enjoy the fullness of that inherently mysterious "inward impression on the soul" which only God can give.

Is this man, then, a "converted Christian," or is he not? It must have been a strangely stirring confrontation with former university colleagues, who remembered Wesley of the Holy Club, to hear him paint a portrait in words of himself as "the Almost Christian" in his University Sermon of July 25, 1741. It is almost, though perhaps not expressly, implied that the entirely dutiful, disciplined and sincere clergyman, and preacher of the atonement and of salvation by faith, is on the way to perdition (Sermon II.i.1-13). This very severe judgment does rather appear as the triumph of theological theory over common sense. So we are not surprised that, after long reflection, the level-headed Wesley comes to a more moderate judgment in the much later Sermon 89, "The More Excellent Way." In fact, the "almost Christian" is a Christian after all, though God has still something further to give him!

It is significant that Wesley's further pilgrimage advanced through worship rather than through argument. First, he was impressed by the Moravians he met on the voyage to America by their peace of mind and moral courage, by their humility and by their song (Journal, January 25, 1736). So, in Georgia, he sang with them, and made those masterly translations into English of many of their hymns. These are a priceless part of the Methodist heritage of hymnody, and the chief witness to German Pietism in English Christianity. In the manner natural to evangelicals who look back to a pre-conversion state, Wesley takes a severe view of his spiritual condition, and we cannot doubt his sincerity. We must also make allowance for the natural and inevitable clash of temperament between a precise and very zealous clergyman, and a free-and-easy frontier colony of folk who were certainly not anxious to be disciplined by him into a model parish! This landed him in mistakes in human relationships, and many discouragements, which must have taken a heavy toll of his good spirits.

So he records of this time "In this vile, abject state of bondage to sin, I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering. Before I had willingly served sin; now it was unwillingly." In
those memorable and bitter words he penned as the ship got back to England: "It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country, in order to teach the Georgia Indians the nature of Christianity; but, what have I learned myself in the meantime: Why (what I the least of all suspected,) that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God." Yet, after the candid confession there is the candid footnote, later added. "I am not sure of this." And a further footnote reads: "I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son" (Journal, February 1, 1738). And one with the faith of a servant is treading the road to salvation, even if not "saved to the uttermost."

There is, however, another side to this. At this time in Georgia Wesley translated from the German of Tersteegan:

Thou hidden love of God, whose height,
Whose depth unfathomed, no man knows,
I see from far Thy beauteous light,
Inly I sigh for Thy repose;
My heart is pained, nor can it be
At rest, till it finds rest in Thee.

Each moment draw from earth away
My heart, that lowly waits Thy call;
Speak to my inmost soul, and say,
"I am Thy love, Thy God, Thy all!"
To feel Thy power, to hear Thy voice,
To taste Thy love, be all my choice.
(Hymns and Psalms, 544; M.H.B. 433.)

The man who could be attracted to the original, and translate with such feeling, can hardly be described as a dull formalist, or a "legal" Christian. He is an active and growing soul. Yet the hymn itself shows evidence of growth in spiritual understanding. The fourth verse, (omitted in Hymns and Psalms) originally read:

Is there a thing beneath the sun
That strives with Thee my heart to share?
Ah tear it thence, that Thou alone
May'st reign unrivall'd Monarch there;
From earthly loves I must be free
Ere I can find repose in Thee.

So it appeared in Psalms and Hymns, 1738. Wesley later amended the lines to:
Ah, tear it thence, and reign alone,
The Lord of every motion there!
Then shall my heart from earth be free,
When it hath found repose in Thee.

This shows the salutary realization that divine love must expel
“earthly love,” not “earthly love” be driven out to make room for
the divine. The action is from God, not man.

The finger of divine providence may indeed be seen in the
circumstance that within a few days of Wesley’s arrival back in
London Peter Böhler arrived from the Continent, on the way to
America. They were together for only a few formative weeks, for
Böhler left before the Aldersgate Street experience. We have
already glanced at some of the counsel which took place between
them. We need not suppose that the frustrated missionary to
America came back a beaten man. Like St. Paul, he was “cast
down, but not destroyed.” After such cruel disappointment some
would have gone into retreat, to give time for reflection, and who
could blame them? Not so John Wesley, the man of iron! Having
penned his chapter of bitter self-reproach, on disembarking, of the
inn where he spent the first night he writes: “I here read prayers,
and explained the second Lesson, to a few of those who were
called Christians, but indeed were more savage in their behaviour
than the wildest Indians I have yet met with.” So much for the
British!

The conversion scene now changes to Brother Charles, the
mercurial, the man of poetic fire, who got there first. In John
Wesley’s Journal for May 20, 1738, we read:

The next day, being Whitsunday, after hearing Dr. Heylyn
preach a truly Christian sermon, - and assisting him at the
Holy Communion - I received the surprising news, that my
brother had found rest to his soul. His bodily strength
returned also from that hour.

This account dovetails with Charles Wesley’s Journal, a narrative
which is unfortunately much less known among Methodists than
the story of John Wesley’s experience. The contrast is most
illuminating, and illustrates how the Holy Spirit performs His
converting work in different ways in men and women of different
temperament and background.

Though God, and His historic saving action in His divine Son,
incarnate, crucified and risen, is always the same, the way in
which this action is brought home to the heart of believers varies
with the variation of human condition. This is why the different
parts of the Church, despite the things which apparently divide, are in fact so largely united, and must be united, in the doctrine of God, the incarnation, the atonement and the resurrection. Churches tend to be disunited in doctrine arising from conceptions of the effect and mode of the means of grace, the worship and devotional experience of believers, and the ministry and discipline of the Church. There is in modern conditions often more divergence within the various denominations between scriptural traditionalists and liberal reconstructions, than there is between the official standards of those churches.

For more than a century past the churches of this land have been deeply exercised in spirit that such a large part of the nation, the unprivileged, the less educated and the less socially responsible, have remained obstinately outside their ministry. It seems to have been this way for centuries, and no one seems to have any solution to this intractable problem. So our hearts warm when prevailing spiritual revival now and again spans the gulf between the classes.

It is good to know that a plain working man and his wife had a part in the action at Charles Wesley’s conversion. It is a token of what did happen, at least to some extent, in the early and great days of the Revival. After Peter Böhler had departed for Carolina, and had written his good-bye letter from Southampton in Latin, Charles Wesley, the Oxford scholar of good family, but no money, sat down for pastoral counseling with Mr. Bray, the worker in brass. The unlearned may understand the things of God, as well as the learned. Wesley uses a phrase which, in these equalitarian days, would be interpreted, by some, as patronizing. Taken in the right sense, however, it is a magnificent tribute.

In his Journal for Thursday, May 11, 1738, Charles Wesley writes:

I was just going to remove to old Mr. Hutton’s, when God sent Mr. Bray to me, a poor ignorant mechanic, who knows nothing but Christ; but by knowing Him, knows and discerns all things. Some time ago I had taken leave of Peter Böhler, confessed my unbelief and want of forgiveness, but declared my firm persuasion that I should receive the atonement before I died. His answer was,“Be it unto thee according to thy faith.” Mr. Bray is now to supply Böhler’s place. We prayed together for faith. I was quite overpowered and melted into tears, and hereby induced to think it was God’s will that I should go to his house, and not to Mr. Hutton’s - His sister [Mrs. Turner] I found in earnest pursuit of Christ; and his wife well inclined to conversion. [There is also a Mrs. Musgrave in the house.]
Sunday, May 21: I waked in hope and expectation. [Wesley is in bed with pleurisy.] At nine my brother and some friends came, and sang an hymn to the Holy Ghost. [Some investigators think that this was perhaps "Granted is the Saviour's prayer," Hymns and Psalms, 287, M.H.B. 277.] My comfort and hope were hereby increased. In about half an hour they went. - I composed myself to sleep, in quietness and peace, when I heard someone come in; Mrs. Musgrave I thought by the voice [it was, in fact, Mrs. Turner], and say "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities." I wondered how it should enter into her head to speak in that manner. - I sighed, and said within myself, "O that Christ would but speak thus to me!" I lay musing and trembling: then thought, "But what if it should be Him? I will send at least to see." I rang the bell, and, Mrs. Turner coming, I desired her to send up Mrs. Musgrave. She - said, "Mrs. Musgrave has not been here." - I hoped it might be Christ indeed. - I felt in the meantime a strange palpitation of heart. I said, yet feared to say, "I believe, I believe!" She [Mrs. Turner] came up again and said, "It was I, a weak, sinful creature, spoke; but the words were Christ's: He commanded me to say them, and so constrained me that I could not forbear."

Wesley goes on to say that Bray encouraged him that he had indeed received faith. He informed Wesley that some days before, his sister, in a dream, had had a vision of Christ in white, and had been commanded to go and speak these words to the invalid upstairs. She had reflected much and prayed about this. The Journal continues: "On Sunday morning she took Mr. Bray aside, burst into tears, and informed him of the matter; objecting she was a poor weak sinful creature, and should she go to a minister? She could not do it, nor rest till she did." Bray had encouraged her, prayed with her, and she had gone upstairs with her strange message.

Tuesday, May 23: I waked under the protection of Christ, and gave myself up, soul and body, to Him. At nine I began an hymn upon my conversion, but was persuaded to break off, for fear of pride. Mr. Bray coming, encouraged me to proceed in spite of Satan. I prayed Christ to stand by me, and finished the hymn. Upon my afterwards showing it to Mr. Bray, the devil threw in a fiery dart, suggesting it was wrong - when, casting my eye upon a Prayer book, I met
with an answer for him. "Why boastest thou thyself, thou tyrant, that thou canst do mischief?" (Psalm 52:1). Upon this, I clearly discerned it was a device of the enemy to keep back glory from God.

Wednesday, May 24: Towards ten, my brother was brought in triumph by a troop of our friends, and declared, "I believe." We sang the hymn with great joy, and parted with prayer.

The conversion hymn is sufficiently well known that it is hardly necessary to cite the whole of it. "Where shall my wondering soul begin" appears as 706 in Hymns and Psalms, and 361 in M.H.B. It may be presumed that the point at which Charles Wesley feared that he was being led into pride was the end of verse 2:

Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,
Blest with this antepast of heaven.

"Should know" and "should feel" may almost be taken to represent the two parts of that which John Wesley expounds from Romans 8:16 as the witness to full assurance. The reasonable and moral "witness of my own spirit" is "knowledge," the mysterious "impression on the soul" is "feeling."

The warm temperament of Brother Charles is so lifted up at this assurance that he sings of the "antepast of heaven," the "Joy of heaven to earth come down." Perhaps he is flying too high, into the dreaded "enthusiasm"! It is the remembrance of those many who have not yet found "the gift unspeakable" which emboldens him to continue with his gospel invitation to the world. We may perhaps quote verses 4 and 6 from the original, as they are less generally known.

No - tho' the Antient Dragon rage
And call forth all his Hosts to War,
Tho' Earth's self-righteous Sons engage;
Them, and their God alike I dare:
Jesus the Sinner's Friend proclaim,
Jesus to Sinners still the same.

Come all ye Magdalens in Lust,
Ye ruffians fell in Murders old;
Repent, and live: despair and trust!
Jesus for you to Death was sold;
Tho' Hell protest, and Earth repine,
He died for Crimes like Yours - and Mine.
We now turn to the more familiar account of John Wesley’s evangelical experience. First, Wesley’s conversion, if that is indeed the right name for it, is the conversion of a scholar, and of a highly disciplined scholar. We find from his Journal for May 24, 1738, that at five o’clock in the morning he is reading his Greek Testament. The text which goes to the heart is 2 Peter 1:4. We observe something of the debit side to modern critical scholarship. 2 Peter has, we feel, been somewhat downgraded by the critics because it is generally agreed that it is “late,” and not by St. Peter, and because it is written in a pretentious dialect, full of strange words. Its right to be in the canon has even been questioned. Such issues were indeed known, and had been discussed, in Wesley’s day, but he is untroubled at his devotions. To him this epistle is a word from God.

Second, here is the conversion of a musical man. In the afternoon he remembers being helped by the singing of De Profundis as an anthem at St. Paul’s. We need not enquire too closely whether all the choristers were “real Christians,” because the effect of God’s word is from God, not from the singers. However, it will surely encourage all singers, choirmasters and organists that they were granted a presence in this memorable action. Why did Wesley go to the religious society in Aldersgate Street “very unwillingly”? Certainly he was not a man seeking sensation. There is much significance, however, in the passage of Luther which was being read, and which was adapted to Wesley’s present condition, particularly as he was later sometimes critical of some things in the great reformer. We may presume from the phrase “while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ” that the passage in Luther’s Preface to Romans was:

Faith, however, is a divine work in us. It changes us and makes us to be born anew of God; it kills the old Adam and makes altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers, and it brings with it the Holy Ghost. O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them. He who does not these works is a faithless man.

The significance of this particular passage is that Luther is here pointing out most plainly that evangelical saving faith holds the secret of spontaneous moral effort, of morality from the heart.
Wesley has shown himself to be searching not so much for joy as for something which will enable him to obey God as He ought to be obeyed, freely and from the heart, and release the servant from inward moral frustration into the liberty of a son. Luther is pointing out just what Wesley required, and the reading was the trigger which God used to bring the release. The words "I felt my heart strangely warmed" have unfortunately too much overshadowed the remainder of this revealing passage in the Journal:

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 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. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?" Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but, that as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth. - After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and he sent me help from His holy place. And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace, but then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered: now I was always conqueror.

The contrast between this down-to-earth and sober evangelical experience with Brother Charles’s "antepast of heaven," is most significant, though it has not always been sufficiently noticed. Clearly, what came to Wesley that memorable night was a genuine measure of full assurance. He received the mysterious "inward impression on the soul," "the witness of the Spirit" which works this "privilege" of the believer. There was indeed something of this morally liberating emotional content to the experience, or he would hardly have used the phrase "the heart strangely warmed." However, the impression was peace, rather than "transports of
joy.” The first thing which Wesley discovered was that he was not as happy as he thought he ought to be. “Where is thy joy?” He had doubtless been long considering what the Moravians’ converts had been saying about the great joy and peace brought by faith in Christ, and had built himself up to expect that when the gift came to him he would be lifted up to heights of happiness. Yet this was not so. He did not go home that night “treading on air” and whistling revival choruses. The chief thing he discovered was that he had been granted power to pray for his enemies, and to overcome his temptations. The change was chiefly in moral will. “The witness of one’s own spirit” was powerfully reinforced, the essential constituent to assurance. By the experience of “the heart strangely warmed” Wesley was lifted powerfully in sanctification, though it was not entire sanctification, or perfect love.

Wesley’s evangelical experience was the conversion of a moralist, which left him a moralist still, though now a victorious moralist. If one reads on into the Journal one finds that he continued to have ups and downs of peace and joy, until, in the spring of the following year, he was constrained by Whitfield to preach in the open air. He was then astonished to find multitudes of convulsive conversions in response to his message (Journal April 2–29, 1739). It was then, and only then, that his own experience of liberation came to its climax. This is the measure of the work of God. The new convincing power was not the outcome of his temperament, or gifts or preaching approach. The message was the same as before: salvation by faith, and the pursuit of holiness. Before Aldersgate Street Wesley’s earnestness appeared as fanaticism, and produced the response of indignant rejection. Now some still rejected, more indignant than before, and discerned fanaticism. There is no way of making all hearers believe. But some began to be powerfully convinced. The change was that God had decided to work, for the time was come and the messenger prepared.

It is a symptom of the decay of understanding for these things in current conventional Methodism that the classic Wesley hymn on the subject of full assurance was printed in the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book without the operative verse, and that the hymn was on the point of being rejected altogether in Hymns and Psalms, had it not been the subject of special pleading in Conference. Ostensibly the objection to the hymn was a philosophical one to the phrase “the signs infallible,” though this is Wesley’s reference to Acts 1:3. Speculative thinkers do not like the idea of “infallibility.” Clearly there are some among us to whom the idea of strong religious certainty, and the confident preaching of Christian doctrine is still “very horrid enthusiasm.” This doubtless is in part reaction against the common misrepresentation of Wesley’s doctrine of assurance as
simply based on subjective feeling. It may be of interest to quote a selection from the many verses of this hymn as Charles Wesley originally wrote them. It will be noted that John Wesley himself altered the meter for the hymn as it appeared in the 1780 hymnal. Clearly, no one "is able to mend either the sense or the verse" of Brother Charles other than Brother John himself! Compare the version, no. 114 in *The Methodist Hymnal* (1964):

How can a sinner know  
His sins on earth forgiven?  
How can my Saviour shew  
My name inscribed in heaven?  
What we ourselves have felt, and seen,  
With confidence we tell,  
And publish to the sons of men  
The signs infallible.

We who in Christ believe  
That He for us hath died,  
His unknown peace receive,  
And feel His blood applied:  
Exults for joy our rising soul,  
Disburthened of her load,  
And swells, unutterably full  
Of glory, and of God.

His love, surpassing far  
The love of all beneath  
We find within, and dare  
The pointless darts of death:  
Stronger than death, or sin, or hell  
The mystic power we prove,  
And conquerors of the world we dwell  
In heaven, who dwell in love.

The meek and lowly heart  
Which in our Saviour was,  
He doth to us impart,  
And signs us with His cross:  
Our nature's course is turned, our mind  
Transformed in all its powers,  
And both the witnesses are joined,  
The Spirit of God with ours.

Charles Wesley's famous hymn "For the Anniversary Day of
one's Conversion," published originally in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740), and given pride of place as the first hymn in the 1780 *Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, as in the British *Methodist Hymn Book* (1904 and 1933), and the American *Methodist Hymnal* (1964), has been so widely loved and sung, and included in so many hymnals, that it may be of interest to reproduce in full the original text. John Wesley opened the hymn at verse 7, under the title *Exhorting Sinners to return to God,* and “dear Redeemer” was later changed to “great Redeemer.” Dr. Henry Bett in *The Hymns of Methodism* (1913, 1945, p. 95) records that Peter Böhler said to Charles Wesley, “Had I a thousand tongues I would praise God with them all!” and gives the German of the Herrnhut hymn he doubtless had in mind. This great hymn is Charles Wesley's own comment upon the events we have been considering.

Glory to God, and Praise, and Love  
Be ever, ever given:  
By Saints below, and Saints above,  
The Church in Earth and Heaven.

On this glad Day the glorious Sun  
Of Righteousness arose,  
On my benighted Soul he shone,  
And fill'd it with Repose.

Sudden expir'd the legal Strife,  
Twas then I ceas'd to grieve,  
My Second, Real, Living Life  
I then began to live.

Then with my Heart I first believ'd,  
Believ'd, with Faith Divine,  
Power with the Holy Ghost receiv'd  
To call the Saviour Mine.

I felt my Lord's Atoning Blood  
Close to *my* Soul applied;  
*Me, me* he lov'd—the Son of God  
For *me*, for *me* He died!

I found, and own'd his Promise true,  
Ascertain'd of *my* Part  
My pardon pass'd in Heaven I *knew*  
When written on my Heart.
O for a Thousand Tongues to sing
My dear Redeemer's Praise!
The Glories of my God and King,
The Triumphs of his Grace.

My gracious Master, and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread thro' all the Earth abroad
The Honours of Thy Name.

Jesus the Name that charms our Fears,
That bids our Sorrows cease;
'Tis Musick in the Sinner's Ears,
'Tis Life, and Health, and Peace!

He breaks the Power of cancell'd Sin,
He sets the Prisoner free:
His Blood can make the Foulest clean;
His Blood avail'd for me.

He speaks; and listening to His Voice,
New Life the Dead receive,
The mournful, broken Hearts rejoice,
The humble Poor believe.

Hear Him ye Deaf, His Praise ye Dumb
Your loosen'd Tongues employ,
Ye Blind, behold your Saviour come,
And leap, ye Lame, for Joy.

Look unto Him, ye Nations, own
Your God, ye fallen Race!
Look, and be sav'd, thro' Faith alone;
Be justified, by Grace!

See all your Sins on Jesus laid;
The Lamb of God was slain,
His Soul was once an Offering made
For every Soul of Man.

Harlots, and Publicans, and Thieves
In holy Triumph join!
Sav'd is the Sinner that believes
From Crimes as great as Mine.
Murtherers, and all ye hellish Crew,
Ye Sons of Lust and Pride,
Believe the Saviour died for you;
For me the Saviour died.

Awake from guilty Nature's Sleep,
And Christ shall give you Light,
Cast all your Sins into the Deep
And wash the Ethiop white.

With me, your Chief, you then shall know,
Shall feel your Sins forgiven;
Anticipate your Heaven below,
And own, that Love is Heaven.

The first major theological point to be observed in this great hymn is that the full evangelical experience is granted when the Holy Spirit brings home to the heart a personal realization of the historic fact of an unlimited atonement for sin in Christ crucified. This comes out in the repeated phrase, emphasized in italics, “for me, for me!” This answers to the words used by John Wesley of his Aldersgate Street experience. A further vital evangelical point is expressed in the familiar line “He breaks the Power of cancell’d Sin.” Here is the saving union of justification and holiness. The guilt of sin is first freely cancelled by trust in the atoning work of Christ. But this essential first step is not by itself sufficient. The power of sin must also be broken, inwardly and outwardly. The professed believer is no true believer unless conversion brings a radical change of character and conduct. We should read with discrimination the couplet:

Look, and be sav’d, thro' Faith alone;
Be justified, by Grace!

Justification, forgiveness, the cancellation of the guilt of sin, is indeed “by faith alone,” the characteristic Reformation formulary. There is no place for earning forgiveness, and acceptance with God, by the merit of good works. The saving work of Christ has to be received by simple and penitent faith. Yet Wesley does not say “by grace alone,” in the sense that the action of the sovereign grace of God is the whole matter of salvation. This would be the Calvinist position. Sinful men and women cannot be saved without the action of grace. At every stage of the Christian life the empowering grace of God must go first, or man can do nothing.
Yet at every stage man must respond to grace with that degree of free and morally responsible choice which creating and redeeming grace makes possible.

It is perhaps not superfluous to observe, in light of some recent and rather pointless controversy, that to be understood these great scriptural hymns must be read in a scriptural sense. Thus, the Word “man” in “For every soul of man” does not mean “male” as the counterpart to “female,” as though women either can not be saved, or do not require a Savior! The word has the scriptural sense of “human being.” In the same way, there is no point in the deaf, the dumb, the blind or the lame being offended at the twelfth verse. This is implying a reference to our Lord’s words in Matthew 11:5. The cure of the afflicted is a mark of the Kingdom, not a slur on the disabled! Nor can we blame Jeremiah for being a “racist” for having written “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil” (13:23). This is no more a slur on black people than on leopards, but a statement of fact!

Both the Wesleys agreed that the due end of the process of sanctification, that is, “entire sanctification,” is to be defined as perfect love or holiness. John Wesley, as we have seen, strongly encouraged his followers to believe that perfect love can be granted by God in this present life, and that it is to be expected in a second dynamic spiritual experience. We have to admit that this doctrine has sometimes had prejudice generated against it by unwise and unbalanced advocacy by some later teachers. This has happened in three ways. First, the preaching of holiness has sometimes been too much associated with an unduly emotional atmosphere in some revival movements. The plain answer to this is that Wesley’s authentic doctrine, though based on the love of God shed abroad in the heart, is essentially a preaching of moral change and renewal. The focus is on right doing, personal and social, not spiritual excitement. Second, there has been an undue emphasis upon the gift of holiness as a sudden and perhaps convulsive experience. This has been associated with the notion of “the second blessing,” a phrase not very characteristic of Wesley. However, psychological processes often work up to some sort of climax, and if a believer, having long waited upon God in spiritual and moral discipline, is granted some outstanding spiritual blessing, it is not unnatural to suppose that it may well come in a flash of sudden insight. The danger is to suppose that this must be convulsive. The third difficulty is perhaps the most substantial. There is the strong feeling that it is either naive, or immodest, or both, to claim the gift of holiness for oneself, or for one’s religious circle. It is an essential part of goodness to be modest about one’s
goodness! To most people it seems plain common sense that "They who fain would serve Thee best are conscious most of wrong within."

The answer to this third prejudice is that holiness is not to be thought of as a sort of individual and permanent possession, to be gloried in as a mark of spiritual status. This attitude is very offensive. Wesley clearly teaches that even those few who do come to the gift of perfect love can fall away, if they grow slack in moral and spiritual discipline. The gift is not to be presumed upon. Also, it is not a purely individual experience. The essential background to all Wesley's teaching on the subject is that those who are seeking holiness are joined together in the inner circle of the Society, in the Band meeting, with its unsparing discipline of confession and mutual criticism. Anyone who could face that discipline would have had any faults pointed out! Members would take a modest view of their own attainments. This was of the essence of the business, which is why Wesley so constantly insists upon humility, teachability and modesty as marks of discipleship. The approved model is surely Fletcher of Madeley, the acknowledged saint of early Methodism. He did apparently become aware that God had granted him the gift of perfect love, and he dare not deny the gift. But he would only mention it with deep hesitation, and in quiet tones, and in private moments. If the gift can be claimed it must not be claimed loudly and self-confidently.

Another difficulty is a purely logical one, which will appeal to systematics. Any system of moral and spiritual discipline to be lived by real men and women in this world must contain provision for growth through experience. And a "perfection" which can be "improved," the critic will say, is a contradiction in terms. Perfection is by definition timeless and static. It belongs to heaven! The issue depends on what is meant by "perfection." To Wesley, holiness is "perfect love," not perfect performance. It is certainly not "sinless perfection." Once again we are driven back to what we mean by various terms. If "sin" is anything in human nature which is at variance from the moral perfection of the holy God, and for which frail humans may feel shame in the presence of God, then, of course, freedom from sin is impossible in this world. However, if we follow Wesley in the common sense moral view of sin, that it is "an actual, voluntary transgression of the law, - of any commandment of God acknowledged to be such at the time" (Sermon XV.ii.2), then complete victory over sin in the heart of the believer is at least possible in principle, if God can indeed "save to the uttermost." Yet, "acknowledged as such" speaks of an elastic standard, for believers can grow, and may be expected to grow, in understanding of God's will, in light of
continuing experience and discipline. The idea of "perfect love" answers to a heart and will entirely going out in obedience to what is seen to be the will of God. It does not follow from this that the believer is possessed of instant and infallible knowledge of what the will of God in fact is. Thus there is room for learning.

The believer may indeed have a heart filled with love, and desire to obey, but in a very mixed and puzzling world, moral guidance is not always easy to come by. Particularly is this the case if one is taken in unaccustomed circumstances, or by surprise. Then there are all those hard cases where legitimate calls of right pull in opposite directions. Also, however close be Christian fellowship, we cannot always see into the hearts and motives of other people, so we may misjudge them. The mark, surely, of the "perfect" Christian is that as soon as the disciple is aware that "sin lieth at the door," it is not weakly welcomed in a little, dallied with, and then repented of. That is a sadly common experience, even among sincere Christians. Rather does the whole heart turn away from temptation with loathing. The incipient error is swiftly recognized, and gladly corrected. The lesson of that experience is well and truly learned, and vigilance increased. Furthermore, with "perfect love" human personality and temperament is not lifted clean above all limitation. Thus, for example, a completely devoted preacher who is somewhat lacking in that precious gift of a winning personality is not by divine grace turned into a different person, but is kept by grace from allowing disability to get the better of him, so that he is less than fully useful to God.

Holiness may be defined as entire victory over all known and wilful sin. It is not freedom from temptation, or superhuman character, or perfect performance. Thus the perfect still need to come to God in penitence, and are dependent upon supporting grace. And they can grow in grace. A treatment of this process of growth is given in Sermon VIII.ii.4-13, and LXXVI. The distinction between those who are justified, and growing in grace, and those who have been granted perfect love is set out in the "Plain Account of Christian Perfection" (Works, XI, p. 379). "They are freed from evil thoughts, so that they cannot enter into them, no, not for a moment. Aforetime, when an evil thought came in, they looked up, and it vanished away. But now it does not come in, there being no room for this, in a soul which is full of God." However, practical account had to be taken of the circumstance that the majority of devout Methodists, whose final salvation it was uncharitable to question, had not come to this experience. So Wesley had to teach that these would be granted holiness in the hour of death. This is really a way of saying that the matter is shrouded in mystery. So, in the Methodist Minutes
for August 2, 1745:

Q. What will become of a man - if he dies without being thus sanctified?
A. He cannot see the Lord. But none who seeks it sincerely shall or can die without it, though possibly he may not attain it till the very article of death.
Q. But ought we not to expect it sooner?
A. Why not? Although we grant: That the generality of believers whom we have hitherto known are not so sanctified till near death.

(See also Methodist Minutes, June 17, 1747, QQ 1-17, particularly 2.)

There was a certain difference of opinion between John and Charles Wesley at this point. Brother Charles viewed perfection as virtually of an absolute kind, and therefore only possible at death. Perfection comes slowly, as a result of painful self-abnegation. (See the 1960 Cambridge dissertation by James Dale, The Poetry of Charles Wesley.) It has to be admitted that, within the mainstream of Methodism, Charles Wesley has largely carried the day, because the effective witness to the preaching of holiness among Methodists has been through the singing of his great hymns on the subject. These are all-aspiring prayers for the gift of perfect love. Nowhere is there a claim to have attained. Whatever may be true of the private experience of individuals, this attitude surely is the proper ethos for general congregational worship. It is significant, also, that neither of the Wesleys ever claimed that the gift had been granted to them. In general, then, perfect love is something to be accepted as the proper goal of serious Christian discipleship, to be believed in, prayed for, and expected, but not claimed for oneself.

Perhaps the most widely loved of all Charles Wesley's great prayers for the gift of perfect love is "Love divine, all loves excelling" (The Methodist Hymnal, p. 283). The original form of the second verse merits discussion, on account of its great theological interest:

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit
Into every troubled breast;
Let us all in Thee inherit,
Let us find that second rest:
Take away our power of sinning,
Alpha and Omega be,
End of faith as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Jn 20:22, 2 Tim 1:17
Lk 24:38
Rom 8:17
Heb 4:8-9
1 Jn 3:9
Rev 1:8
Heb 12:2
Ps 119:32 (B.C.P.)
The phrase which has caused misgiving is "Take away our power of sinning." This, as Dr. Frank Baker observes, "implies an extreme view of Christian perfection" (Representative Verse of Charles Wesley, p. 95). A phrase having similar implications, which has also disappeared in modern Methodist hymnals, occurs in the original text of "O come and dwell in me" (Hymns and Psalms, 293, M.H.B., p. 554):

The original offence
Out of my soul erase,
Enter Thyself, and drive it thence,
And take up all the place.

Original sin is that bias in common human nature which renders temptation seductive, and evil in general easier to do than good, and which secures that, unless supported by divine grace, all men and women inevitably commit sin, and are by nature alienated from God. For this bias to be entirely eliminated by divine grace would indeed be the highest degree of perfect love.

The difficulty in "Take away our power of sinning" has been commented upon by no less an authority on holiness than Fletcher of Madeley:

Mr. Wesley says second rest, because an imperfect believer enjoys a first inferior rest: if he did not, he would be no believer. "Take away the power of sinning?" Is not this expression too strong? Would it not be better to soften it by saying "Take away the love of sinning"? (or the bent of the mind towards sin.) Can God take away our power of sinning without taking away our power of free obedience?

In line with this suggestion, American Methodist hymnals have read "Take away our bent to sinning" (The Methodist Hymnal, 1964, no. 283), thus preserving a fine verse. John Wesley avoided the difficulty by omitting the verse in his hymnals of 1761 and 1780.

The issue depends on what is meant by "liberty." In the ordinary secular sense of the word, "liberty" means autonomous moral choice. The mental picture is that I have my hand on the wheel, and am completely free to choose between "the high road" and "the low road." The Christian agrees that this is a part of liberty. As Fletcher observes, one cannot have responsible moral choice without some measure of it. However, the "liberty" spoken of in the New Testament is surely much more than this, a bare
power of indifferent choice. The Christian picture of spiritual liberty is that when one has used the wheel to steer on to one's chosen course, one finds that one is in a high-power car on the motorway, with no obstruction in sight. One then enjoys the freedom to open out full throttle, mile after mile! Christian liberty is the release of that fatal frustration of the divided heart which prevents us from moving effectually upon that course of life which our higher and "real mind" has resolved upon. It is the ending of that condition diagnosed by St. Augustine, that the mind commands the will, but the will disobeys, because the mind does not fully command (Confessions, viii.21). By contrast, the unregenerate man has indeed that degree of free moral choice which makes him morally responsible, but he is like the motorist with his hand on the wheel, but who cannot move because he is in a traffic jam. There is a nominal but painfully fettered freedom. However, if the love of God and one's neighbor, shed abroad by the influence of the Holy Spirit, is such as wholly to fire the imagination and move the affections, so as to dominate the moral will, and make obedience instant, constant and glad, this is holiness. Clearly, the climax of this holiness would be a character and personality entirely confirmed in good, so that the residual freedom of the will to choose evil would be a purely nominal freedom. It would be present, as the theoretical condition for moral responsibility, but it would not be exercised. Let me quote part of the note written upon this hymn in my book, *The Wesley Hymns as a Guide to Scriptural Teaching*:

The very bold petition "Take away our power of sinning" is a reference to a famous passage in St. Augustine (De civitate Dei, xxii, p. 30) in which he is discussing the spiritual condition of unfallen Adam, as compared with the better condition of the redeemed. "The first immortality, which Adam lost by sinning, was the ability not to die (posse non mori); the new immortality will be the inability to die (non posse mori). In the same way, the first freedom of choice conveyed the ability not to sin (posse non peccare); the new freedom will confer the inability to sin (non posse peccare). It surely cannot be said that God Himself has not freedom of choice, because He is unable to sin?" Thus unfallen Adam was morally free in the sense that he was not fated to sin. The perfected in Christ will be morally free in a higher and fuller sense. They will share in the moral freedom of God, who, being entirely good, cannot sin. - The difficulty which has troubled some is that whereas St. Augustine is talking about the condition of the perfected saints in glory, of which
this is doubtless true, Charles Wesley is praying that it may happen on earth! Is it indeed possible for the believer to speak as though the love and joy of heaven has actually come down to earth? We observe, firstly, that Wesley's line is an aspiring prayer that this degree of holiness may be granted, not a presumptuous claim that he had attained. And secondly, a raptured poet must not be expected always to express himself in the language of common sense, such as may be taken literally. Even hymn writers may be allowed on occasion some degree of enthusiastic poetic licence! Nevertheless, the phrase is perhaps over-bold.

A prayer from the venerable Sarum Use speaks in a more moderate tone, and framed in matchless English, but it joins in voicing the petition for the divine gift of perfect love:

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.