Abstract:

The importance of justification by faith in the thinking of John Wesley (1703-1791) after his Aldersgate Street experience in May 1738 has long been doubted by some Wesley scholars. This article argues, however, that Wesley was motivated only by works-righteousness while he was a missionary to Georgia, and that salvation by faith did not characterise his thinking until he finished his mission there.

Keywords: Aldersgate, mission, Georgia, John Wesley, primitive church, salvation by faith, works-righteousness

Roger W. Fay is an elder of Zion Evangelical Baptist church in Ripon, UK. He graduated with a ThM at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, South Carolina, USA, in 2022. He is a trustee of Evangelical Press Missionary Trust and a trustee and former editor of Evangelical Times, a UK-based monthly newspaper. His ThM research thesis, from which this article is derived, is entitled The Faith of John Wesley and is available on Theological Research Exchange Network.
Introduction

Wesley was a pioneer leader of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Awakening in Britain. His influence, perpetuated by the vigorous impact of Wesleyan Methodism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has been stamped on both Established and Nonconformist churches for well over two centuries. His influence as a ministerial role model during an evangelical awakening is still commended among Protestant churches. If wrong perceptions concerning his precise relationship to faith before and after Aldersgate have gained scholarly traction, they need correction, both for historical accuracy’s sake and because Wesley stood for religious centralities that matter as much in the present as in the past.

Scholarly interest in John Wesley flagged under the influence of nineteenth century Higher Criticism. But various developments during the mid- to late-twentieth century renewed interest in him. For example, Wesley has re-emerged in the context of Enlightenment studies, since he was a well-documented religious leader who interacted with Enlightenment thinking although in a selective and nuanced way. In the last 40 years, renewed attention has also been given to him from a variety of other perspectives, including ecclesiological, psychological, philosophical, sociological and medical. Because of this increasing diversity of “takes” on Wesley, John W. Wright maintains we are now faced with “too many Wesleys” and, more pointedly, that:

During John Wesley’s life and within the early nineteenth century and onward, polemic has accompanied the question of how to situate the texts and practices of John Wesley as interpreted by friend and foe alike. His heirs have proven a most fractious group. They have abandoned Wesley’s seemingly fundamental commitments, consequently taking the movement in radically different directions. (2014: 4-8)

One litmus test available for assessing different scholarly perspectives for their adherence, theologically speaking, to Wesley’s “fundamental commitments” is their evaluation of Wesley’s account of receiving “salvation by faith” at Aldersgate Street, as recorded in his famous journal entry for 24 May 1738:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter
before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for 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. (Journal, 475-476)

That evening at Aldersgate Street marked the occasion when Wesley first recognised that he had saving faith, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation.” The nature of this faith he later described, with reference to Church of England doctrine, in his 1741 sermon “The Altogether Christian”:

The right and true Christian faith is (to go on in the words of our own Church), “not only to believe that Holy Scripture and the Articles of our Faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ. It is a sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God, that, by the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God; whereof doth follow a loving heart, to obey his commandments.”

Wesley’s description of faith unites assent to the truth — as taught by Holy Scripture and, secondarily, as defined in the Articles of the Church of England — with personal appropriation of the One whom that truth reveals, that is, Jesus Christ in his redemptive merits. This saving faith brings in its wake inward and outward holiness, and (sooner or later) a reliable personal assurance that the goal of faith — reconciliation with God — has been attained. All these elements together, according to Wesley’s sermon, constitute real faith. This definition of faith by Wesley, albeit in an Anglican context, is difficult to improve on.

On 24 May 1738 Wesley was sure he had received that “right and true faith.” Nevertheless, some modern scholars are hesitant to accept his explanation of Aldersgate’s significance to him or to give it the same prominence as he did. This hesitation is, no doubt, partly due to their own theological presuppositions, but also partly due to several enigmatic factors emanating from Wesley himself. These factors include, first and foremost, Wesley’s surprising footnotes to the “pessimistic” January 1738 entries concerning his spiritual state, as found in the later 1774 edition of his Journal (1909: 421-424, with Wesley’s 1774 glosses shown in a footnote on page 423); second, his modified, post-Aldersgate doctrinal emphases;
and third, his occasional, post-Aldersgate expressions of self-doubt. But the enigmas do not give adequate grounds for radical scepticism concerning Wesley’s own assessment of Aldersgate’s evangelical significance.

The two twentieth century anniversaries commemorating what happened at Aldersgate — in 1938 and 1988 — elicited scholarly attempts to re-instate the traditional Methodist understanding of that occasion. They included, for example, The Conversion of the Wesleys by J. Ernest Rattenbury (1870-1963) in 1938 and “Twentieth-Century Interpretations of John Wesley’s Aldersgate Experience” by Kenneth J. Collins in 1989. But scholarly unease with traditional interpretations of justification by faith at Aldersgate remains. Such interpretative differences are exemplified by Albert C. Outler (1908-1989), who articulated in 1964 (at the height of the twentieth century ecumenical movement) that, “The Aldersgate Experience’ has come to be the most familiar event in Wesley’s life. It often goes unnoticed, however, that it actually stands within a series of significant spiritual experiences, and is neither first nor last nor most climactic” (Outler 1964: 14, cf. 51-52).

However, the available historical evidence still firmly supports John Wesley’s own account of what 24 May 1738 meant to him. Certainly, after Aldersgate, his convictions concerning the exact relationship between faith, assurance and sanctification began to change, as he critiqued the Moravian understanding of these subjects — for example, by summer 1740 he realised that there are degrees of faith and degrees of assurance and that a child of God may exercise a justifying faith which is mixed with both doubt and fear. But he never changed his mind about the centrality and importance of justification by faith for salvation. He still firmly identified with Church of England formularies that defined saving faith, in a homily attributed to Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), as “a sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God, that through the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven and he reconciled to the favour of God.”

Georgia

What then was motivating the 32-year-old John Wesley to undertake his Georgia mission? Was it the same conviction of salvation by faith — albeit at that time immaturity articulated — that he would express more coherently at Aldersgate in three years’ time? Or was it something very different, that is, works-righteousness?
On 14 October 1735 three “Holy Club”, Oxford Methodists — John, his brother Charles (1707-1788), and Benjamin Ingham (1712-1772) — boarded the Simmonds at Gravesend, England. The three were now ordained clergymen of the Church of England, supported by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) and designated “Volunteer Missionaries” to Georgia. John was also approved by The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), although, at this stage, regarded himself as an independent missionary to the indigenous Americans. The ship was bound for Savannah, Georgia’s chief city and port. The voyage, carrying 121 passengers, would last four-and-a-half months, including a three-week wait for favourable winds off the Isle of Wight.

It had been Dr John Burton, Tutor at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and a Georgia Trustee, who had written to John Wesley during 1735 about him going to the colony as a missionary (Letters, 8, 18 and 28 September 1735). There was the need for someone at Savannah to replace Samuel Quincy, an SPG missionary suffering from indifferent health. The Trustees licensed John Wesley as the next minister of Savannah.

As Geordan Hammond (2014) has cogently argued in, for example, John Wesley in America Restoring Primitive Christianity, Georgia was ideal virgin territory for John Wesley to ground its young Church in “Primitive Christianity.” Wesley determined that it should recover the nuances of the 1549 edition of The Book of Common Prayer with its more Catholic rubrics and usages, rather than use the 1662 edition commonly accepted by the Church of England (Hammond 2014: 108-112).

Wesley had been brought up “from a child ... to esteem the primitive Fathers, the writers of the first three centuries” (John Wesley, “Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church”, 209). When preparing for ordination during winter 1724/5, his father had sent him a recommended reading list that included the Church Fathers Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus and Athanasius, and various Anglican divines who promoted Patristic study within the Church of England. He had read some of the Church Fathers and most of the Anglican divines.

Wesley had been strongly influenced while at Oxford by John Clayton (1709-1773), who associated with the Oxford Methodists for some months before departing to Manchester. Clayton, an ardent High Churchman, stimulated Wesley’s religious zeal in the direction of works-righteousness by intensifying his commitment to the practices of the “Primitive Church” of the first three centuries after Christ. Wesley recalled
in May 1738 that, from spring 1731, he “began observing the Wednesday and Friday Fasts, commonly observed in the ancient Church; tasting no food till three in the afternoon” (Journal, 468). Hammond records that his thirst to recover Primitive Christianity “was so well-known that in 1730 his friend Mary Pendarves nicknamed him ‘Primitive Christianity’” (Hammond 2009: 192).

Perhaps Burton was aware of the danger of Wesley pushing his “Primitive” agenda too far, since in his correspondence he advised Wesley that in Georgia:

> Accordingly in every case you would distinguish between what is essential and what is merely circumstantial to Christianity, between what is indispensable and what is variable, between what is of divine and what is of human authority. I mention this because men are apt to deceive themselves in such cases, and we see the traditions and ordinances of men frequently insisted on with more rigour than the commandments of God, to which they are subordinate; singularities of less importance are often espoused with more zeal than the weighty matters of God’s law.

But by the end of his mission, despite Burton’s sound advice, Wesley’s “Primitive” application of canon law would prove deeply unpopular with some colonists. Alexander Gordon has described their reaction:

> Wesley's preaching was regarded as too personal, and his pastoral visitation as censorious. His punctilious insistence on points of primitive usage (e.g., immersion of infants at baptism and use of the mixed chalice), his taking the “morning service” at five, and “the communion office (with the sermon) at eleven”, his introduction of unauthorised hymns, his strictness in the matter of communicants, excluding dissenters as unbaptised, his holding a private religious “society”, provoked the retort, “We are Protestants.” (Dictionary of National Biography)

Robert Southey, more caustically, wrote that Wesley “drenched his parishioners with the physic of an intolerant discipline” (Southey 1820: 55).

Several mothers in Georgia demurred from Wesley’s insistence on baptism of their infants by trine immersion. Thomas Causton (1692-1746), later an enemy of Wesley, called him “a murderer of poor infants by plunging them into cold water.” William Stephens (1671-1753), who arrived
in Savannah in November 1737 and was later president of the colony, wrote that, “Some parents ... have suffered their children to go a long while without the benefit of that sacrament, till a convenient opportunity could be found of another minister to do that office” (2014: 112-114). Such negative reactions were just one part of the complex of circumstances contributing to Wesley’s later realisation that, “all the time I was at Savannah I was thus beating the air” (Journal, 470).

Works-righteousness

That “works-righteousness” best describes Wesley’s spiritual state when he departed for Georgia is evidenced by what he wrote to John Burton on 10 October 1735, a few days before boarding the Simmonds. In his letter he disclosed his fundamental motive for going to Georgia:

My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen ... I am assured, if I be once fully converted myself, [God] will then employ me both to strengthen my brethren and to preach His name to the Gentiles, that the very ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God. But you will perhaps ask, “Cannot you save your own soul in England as well as in Georgia?” I answer, “No; neither can I hope to attain the same degree of holiness here which I may there.”

Hammond argues that, in using the words “saving my own soul,” Wesley was not subscribing to “works-righteousness” but using an expression synonymous for “work out your own salvation” in Philippians 2:12-13 (“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,” KJV).

According to Hammond (“John Wesley’s Mindset,” 18-20), “saving my own soul” was “language central to the holy living school exemplified by Wesley’s mentor William Law, who interpreted [Philippians 2:12] as referring to: ‘The salvation of our souls’ — a ‘salvation [that] depends upon the sincerity and perfection of our endeavours to obtain it.” Such a text, says Hammond, would have been on Wesley’s mind because, only ten days before writing to Burton, Wesley had written to someone at Oxford® that
“Dr Tilly’s sermons on Free Will are the best I ever saw. His text is, ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’” (cf. 1712: 258-270).

Hammond argues, as did Charles A. Rogers before him (1966: 137-141), that William Tilly’s (1675-1740) two sermons on Philippians 2:12-13 taught that “baptismal and preventing grace’ restores enough free will to allow a person to cooperate with ‘the grace of God [which] works with us and enables us to will and to do of his good pleasure.’” Wesley therefore accepted the corollary of Philippians 2:13, that God’s activity in the soul is needed to work out one’s own salvation — that is, to this extent salvation depends on the Spirit.

Moreover, Hammond points out, Wesley’s sermon of 1 January 1733, “The Circumcision of the Heart” (Sermon 17), had declared that nothing good can be thought or done “without the supernatural assistance of his [God’s] Spirit.” Wesley’s “hope of saving my own soul” was thus, for Hammond, a shorthand for striving after Christian perfection as enabled by God’s grace, rather than a bare statement of works-righteousness.

But Hammond’s circumstantial argument does not disprove that Wesley was, in fact, pursuing works-righteousness in his mission to Georgia, since, despite Tilly’s statements, there is little in Tilly’s sermon to wean readers from a works-based approach to salvation. Tilly acknowledges that “liberty” is given to a person who is under “the covenant of grace” to fulfil the Christian duties implied by Philippians 2:12-13, but he does not enlighten his readers as to how, by faith, that covenant secures their obedience to the law of God. Nor does Tilly point his hearers to Christ’s incarnate life and propitiatory death as vicariously fulfilling “the rigour of the moral law” and securing a perfect righteousness that can be imputed to them by faith.

Tilly’s approach is, in fact, markedly synergistic: “Both the grace of God and our own endeavours must strike in together, and are inforc’d and made effectual by each other”; and “the continued supplies of, and necessary improvements in the divine grace are suspended upon our own care and diligence, and are liable to be withdrawn wholly from us, upon our fault and misbehaviour.”

While Wesley would have accepted that any doctrine latent in Philippians 2:12-13 was creedally true, it cannot be concluded that he yet appreciated the evangelical implications of Philippians 2:12-13 and that he understood good works to be the product and not the meritorious cause of a salvation which is by faith alone (see Ephesians 2:8-10).
Wesley’s words to Burton (above) explained that he anticipated his endeavours in Georgia would hopefully lead to him being “fully converted” and help him achieve a higher degree of holiness in Georgia than could be achieved in Oxford. This outcome would occur, as Wesley wrote, by “[learning] the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen.” All these are the sentiments of a seeker of righteousness through good works rather than of a finder of righteousness by faith.

In fact, there was during this period another influence at work in Wesley’s psyche. This was the memory of his father’s death nearly seven months earlier, on 25 April 1735. That event was clearly still on his mind when he preached his first sermon in Savannah on 7 March 1736 (Sermon 139, “On Love”), since he used his father’s death as the climax of his sermon, illustrating how love makes death “comfortable.” In rehearsing this, John would have recalled his father’s words uttered “more than once” in his “last illness”: “The inward witness, son, the inward witness. That is the proof, the strongest proof, of Christianity” (Journal, 179, 222 fn). Wesley had not yet shown evidence of experiencing this “inner witness.”

Based on his own words, John Wesley’s mission to Georgia was intended to obtain from God something he did not yet have, “the hope of saving my own soul.” Works-righteousness was his motivation, even if unrecognised. The Georgia mission was not an outworking of faith, but a search for faith.

Success or failure?

John Wesley’s mission in Georgia (excluding the voyages to and from Georgia) lasted from 6 February 1736 to 2 December 1737. Hammond gives a detailed historiographic taxonomy of evaluations of the success or otherwise of Wesley’s Georgia mission. His categories include a failure; a “preface to victory”; and neither calling the mission a success or failure (“Success or Failure,” 297-298). Hammond then argues the mission should be viewed as a success and not the failure Wesley implied it was when he wrote, “All the time I was at Savannah I was thus beating the air … In this vile, abject state of bondage to sin, I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering” (Journal, 470).

Hammond justifies his thesis by reference to Wesley’s steady and sincere commitment as an SPG missionary to parishioners of all nationalities; Wesley’s steady praise of the pastoral progress of some of his parishioners; his pioneering translation of German hymns and his Collection of hymns for
the colonists’ use; the increased attendances at his communion services; and his innovative use of men and women as lay workers. Hammond sees Wesley’s Primitivism as extending in a modified form into his ministry beyond Georgia (Hammond 2014: vii, viii, 2-3, 76, 190-194). Also, Wesley developed in Georgia the system of small group ministry that he began in Oxford and would later employ in Methodism to good effect (Journal, 198-205, 426).

Hammond is not alone in his positive evaluation. George Whitefield arrived in Georgia on 7 May 1738 after receiving correspondence from John Wesley and Benjamin Ingham. A few weeks later Whitefield wrote: “The good, Mr John Wesley has done in America, under God, is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people; and he has laid such a foundation that I hope neither men nor devils will ever be able to shake. Oh, that I may follow him, as he has Christ!” (1738: 77, 79, 157). Whitefield’s generous words about his former mentor were unrepresentative of all the colonists, and perhaps reflected the views of Wesley’s inner circle. They were no doubt written in ignorance of Wesley’s own negative evaluation of his time in Georgia.

While Hammond’s analysis highlights helpfully what Wesley’s ministry did achieve, it fails to interact convincingly with Wesley’s relentlessly self-critical entry at the close of his final Savannah Journal. Hammond accepts that Wesley was “in a state of spiritual anxiety during his voyage to England” but qualifies this admission with the statement that “during the whole of the Georgia mission there were few signs of the spiritual doubts that plagued him” on his journey home (“Success or Failure,” 300, 304).

However, a lack of direct data in Wesley’s Diary and Journal concerning any spiritual doubts in Georgia does not rule out their existence. Although the traumatic experiences in Georgia arising from his friendship with Sophia Hopkey and Mrs Hawkins’ behaviour quite frequently spilled into these two documents, the Journal and Diary are mainly objective in focus and were clearly not intended as continuous commentaries on Wesley’s state of mind, neither in Georgia nor at other times.

**Wesley’s self-analysis**

It is therefore reasonable, in the absence of directly contrary evidence, to give due weight to what Wesley chose to disclose in detail about his inward state in Georgia. These “pessimistic” thoughts concerning
his mission were written on 24 January 1738, on the home-bound Samuel, while over 400 miles from England:

I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near. But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, “To die is gain!”... (Journal, 418)

A few days later he continued:

This, then, have I learned in the ends of the earth — that I “am fallen short of the glory of God”; that my whole heart is “altogether corrupt and abominable”; and, consequently, my whole life (seeing it cannot be, that an “evil tree” should “bring forth good fruit”): that, “alienated” as I am from the life of God, I am “a child of wrath,” an heir of hell: that my own works, my own sufferings, my own righteousness, are so far from reconciling me to an offended God, so far from making any atonement for the least of those sins, which “are more in number than the hairs of my head,” that the most specious of them need an atonement themselves ... I have no hope, but that of being justified freely, “through the redemption that is in Jesus”; I have no hope, but that if I seek I shall find Christ, and “be found in him not having my own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” (Journal, 423-424)

These emphatic statements were not the product of transient depression, but the result of a revolution taking place in Wesley’s understanding of what faith is and does. He had attained a new appreciation of the importance of justification by faith for salvation, even though he was not yet saying that he had personally received it.

The footnotes in his 1774 Journal edition apparently contradicting these “pessimistic” statements cannot mean Wesley fundamentally resiled from this self-analysis, since he never erased the original journal entries from the later journal editions. While the footnotes invite caution and further analysis in interpreting Wesley’s autobiographical account, they do not justify scholarly scepticism.

Nor did Wesley’s self-critical evaluation signal that he had collapsed under the weight of adversities in a pioneer colony. Wesley did not shirk
hardship in doing God's will, but embraced that will, as he saw it. His willingness to suffer is exemplified by uncomplaining *Journal* entries relating to his rugged pioneer lifestyle (for example, *Journal*, 191-192, 267-268, 308-309). Wesley welcomed suffering. He had written, shortly before embarking for Georgia, probably to John Robson (b.1714, graduated BA in 1735) at Lincoln College, Oxford (see footnote 8, which refers to the same letter), explaining his unyielding commitment to Holy Club principles at Oxford: “Till a man gives offence he will do no good; and the more offence he gives by adhering to the gospel of Christ the more good he will do, and the more good he does the more offence he will give” (Letter, 30 September 1735). But, even with a willingness to suffer, Wesley’s experiences in Georgia had so changed his thinking as to lead to his “pessimistic” self-evaluations of January and May 1738 (*Journal*, 418-424, 465-472).

**Wesley’s message in Georgia**

Necessary for evaluating Wesley’s Georgia mission is not only his effectiveness in gathering and retaining congregations of regular communicants and adherents, but, fundamentally, the validity of the message that he proclaimed in the colony. Theologically and pastorally speaking, a ministry with a radically wrong message must be considered a failure, objectively speaking, even if accompanied by an increase in congregational numbers.

Hammond calculates an increase of ten worshippers at Wesley’s daily morning and evening prayer, and an increase of seventeen parishioners attending his three Sunday services at Savannah’s parish church between 1736 and 1737 (Hammond 2014: 191). But, even if an increase in congregational numbers is the criterion of ministerial success, then his mission rates only as slightly successful.

There is little extant data to be unequivocal about what Wesley preached and taught in Georgia, but that which is available points to a works-righteousness message. For example, Wesley records his conversation with “a young negro,” 14 months into his mission, on 23 April 1737:

Finding a young negro who seemed more sensible than the rest, I asked her how long she had been in Carolina. She said two or three years; but that she was born in Barbados and had lived there in a minister’s family from a child. I asked whether she went to church there. She said, “Yes, every Sunday, to carry my mistress’s
While the ensuing conversation demonstrates Wesley's skill as a catechist, it also reveals his profound conviction that “being good” is a necessary precursor for receiving God’s blessing:

I asked, “But don’t you know, that your hands and feet, and this you call your body, will turn to dust in a little time?” She answered, “Yes.” “But there is something in you that will not turn to dust, and this is what they call your soul. Indeed; you cannot see your soul, though it is within you; as you cannot see the wind, though it is all about you ... Do you know who God is?” “No” ... “He made you to live with himself above the sky. And so you will, in a little time — if you are good. If you are good, when your body dies, your soul will go up, and want nothing, and have whatever you can desire. No one will beat or hurt you there. You will never be sick. You will never be sorry any more, nor afraid of anything ... for you will be with God.”

Wesley continued: “The attention with which this poor creature listened to instruction is inexpressible. The next day she remembered all, readily answered every question; and said she would ask Him that made her to show her how to be good” (Journal, 350-351).

Wesley’s only extant Georgia sermon is on love. He preached it in Savannah a few weeks after arriving from England. It did include this brief call to faith: “Thus saith the Lord God, ‘Whosoever thou art who wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.’ (In order to this, ‘believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved’).” But from there on the sermon was marked by a sustained emphasis on the necessity of good works, with spiritual power to perform these works arising from eating the bread and drinking the cup of Communion:

“Forsake not the assembling together, as the manner of some is.” In secret, likewise, “pray to thy Father who seeth in secret” and “pour out thy heart before him.” Make my word “a lantern to thy feet, and a light unto thy paths.” Keep it “in thy heart, and in thy mouth, when thou sittest in thy house, when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” “Turn unto me with fasting,” as well as prayer; and, in obedience to thy dying Redeemer, by eating that bread and drinking that cup, “show ye forth the Lord’s death till he comes.” By
the power thou shalt through these means receive from on high, do all the things which are enjoined in the Law, and avoid all those things which are forbidden therein, knowing that “if ye offend in one point, ye are guilty of all.” (Sermon 139, “On Love”)

If this was representative of Wesley’s teaching in Georgia, then the doctrine of faith he preached in the colony was almost drowned out by his emphasis on good works.

It is, therefore, no surprise that, when back in England on 6 March 1738, at the urging of Moravian missionary Peter Bohler, Wesley began preaching “salvation by faith,” he thought it a “new doctrine,” from which his “soul started back” (Journal, 442). But, impelled by his experiences in Georgia, his conversations with Moravians and German pietists there, and with Moravians in England, Wesley’s ministry was radically transformed from early 1738. His spiritual motivation had ceased to be one of works-righteousness; it had become one springing from faith in the merits of Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

End notes

1 “Higher Criticism” often means “biblical criticism” from the same philosophical viewpoint as Baruch Spinoza (1632-77), who urged that the Bible should be treated like any other book and that its truth (or untruth) recognized by the light of natural reason (without need of tradition or ecclesiastical interference), and its miracles interpreted in terms of the physical laws of nature.

2 Thomas Cranmer, attrib. “A Sermon of the Salvation of Mankind, by only Christ our Saviour from Sin and Death Everlasting.” Homily.

3 Wesley later modified his views concerning Christian assurance.

4 Kenneth J. Collins lists American Methodist scholars whose work “suggests that later Wesley significantly modified or even repudiated his basic understanding of what constitutes ‘real Christianity’” (1996: 15).


6 Samuel Quincy resigned from his ministry at Savannah in October 1735.
Although Wesley acquiesced to the Trustees, he recorded that this appointment was “without either my desire or knowledge,” since his preference was to minister to the indigenous Americans (Journal, 298).

Geordan Hammond says this letter was written to Richard Morgan Jnr. (“John Wesley’s Mindset,” 19). John Telford’s edition of Wesley’s letters says it was written probably to John Robson (b. 1714, graduated BA in 1735) of Lincoln College, Oxford.

“Preventing” is more or less synonymous with “prevenient.”

Objectivity was a marked element of Wesley’s personality. As a boy, his father had noted in him an unusual rationality, remarking that “Our Jack’ would do nothing (non etiam crepitare) unless he could give a reason for it” (A. Gordon).

Hammond calculates that Wesley was present at Moravian worship about eighty percent of the days he spent in Savannah (2014: 82, 85).

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