REAL CHRISTIANITY AS INTEGRATING THEME IN WESLEY'S SOTERIOLOGY: THE CRITIQUE OF A MODERN MYTH

KENNETH J. COLLINS

The work of several American Methodist scholars suggests that the later Wesley significantly modified or even repudiated his basic understanding of what constitutes "real Christianity." For example, on the occasion of the two hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience Albert Outler made the unsettling though largely unsupported claim that "Aldersgate was not the time when John Wesley became a 'real Christian.'" In a rather interesting move, Theodore Jennings actually obviated the whole question by claiming that it made little difference to John Wesley whether he served God as a servant or as a son. Randy Maddox, for his part, repeatedly criticized the "reigning" standard interpretation of Aldersgate which has contended, among other things, that Wesley was converted in 1738 "from a pre-Christian moralist into a true Christian believer." And most recently, John Cobb maintained—in the absence of very much argumentation—that Wesley was a (real) Christian prior to Aldersgate.

Some of the evidence which is crucial to this contemporary reevaluation is found in John Wesley's "depressing" letter to his brother Charles in 1766 where the elder brother states: "I do not love God. I never did. Therefore I never believed in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore I am only an honest heathen, a proselyte of the Temple, one of the 'fearers of God.'" Other evidence can be garnered from Wesley's journal emendations of 1774 which represent a reassessment of the Methodists' leader's early idiom of the "almost Christian" in terms of the following two variables: A) a more developed and "nuanced" understanding of Christian assurance and B) in terms of the important distinction between the faith of a servant/the faith of a child.

Though modifications of the preceding two variables clearly resulted in some important changes in Wesley's soteriology, recent scholarship goes on to conclude that Wesley eventually put aside the distinction between an almost and an altogether

Kenneth J. Collins is professor of church history at Asbury Theological Seminary.

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL
FALL 1996 • VOL. 51 • NO. 2
Christian. Indeed, the general—though erroneous—view among some Methodist scholars today seems to be that Wesley either outright abandoned the language of real Christianity in his later years as he developed his views on assurance and the faith of a servant, or else he reduced this language so greatly as to include the latter. But the preponderance of evidence, as will be demonstrated shortly, suggests otherwise.

Since the whole matter of Wesley's 1766 letter and his later journal emendations has already been treated in my earlier writings, this present work will naturally focus on what has been largely neglected in recent assessments, namely, the motif of real Christianity itself, a motif which is not only valuable in its own right but which is also integral to a proper interpretation of Wesley's soteriology in general and to his understanding of Christian assurance and the faith of a servant in particular. Indeed, it will be maintained throughout that what Wesley understood by Christian assurance as well as the faith of a servant is not properly conceived except in terms of this salient motif. Observe that this present approach is quite the opposite of recent scholarship: that is, instead of ignoring the significance of real Christianity in the face of Wesley's changing soteriological views, those changing views will be interpreted precisely in terms of this ongoing motif.

Now in order to be historically sensitive and accurate, all of the theological themes just cited (real Christianity, the faith of a servant, and Christian assurance) will be tracked in terms of three major periods which range from 1725 to 1791. The results of this effort will then serve as the basis for a critical assessment of the continuity of particular soteriological elements in Wesley's writings—a task which should issue in a renewed appreciation for the salience of inward religion, the importance of spirituality, and the relatively high valuation of regeneration in Wesley's overall theology. Beyond this, the subtle shifts and nuances in Wesley's own theological vocabulary—the discontinuous elements—especially in terms of assurance and differing understandings of faith—will of course be considered as well. Some of the major questions to be addressed will include the following: 1) What did Wesley mean by the phrase "the faith of a servant"? Did this phrase also embrace non-Christian communities? If so, what are the theological implications? 2) What is the relation between the faith of a servant and the whole matter of assurance? Are all who lack assurance suitably described as having the faith of a servant, or are there exempt cases? 3) What are the implications of 1 and 2 for the motif of real Christianity as Wesley developed this theme throughout his life? 4) And lastly, what does the preceding reveal about Wesley's own estimation of the importance of spirituality and inward religion?

In a real sense, the interpretive task projected here is remarkably similar to that of literary criticism. In other words, the world of Wesley's texts—in terms of its idioms, rhetorics, and motifs—will become the principal interpretive framework for his changing soteriological doctrines. Wesley's thought, in other words, will be assessed in terms of his own vocabulary, his own theological themes, as he developed them over time. Other approaches, though valuable as well, are more akin to historical and theological criticism which may move beyond the world of the text to the historical precursors of Wesley's thought or to its contemporary relevance. The danger in each of these transitions is that we may learn more about what Wesley read than what he said, more about contemporary judgments than about his own. The present approach, then, will grapple with Wesley's theological judgments in terms of his own literary constructs, the themes which weaved their way throughout his entire literary
corpus. What will emerge from such labor should prove troubling to many popular beliefs, but it will, no doubt, further the debate among contemporary Methodist historians and theologians by employing an interpretive lens which heretofore has hardly been explored.

I. **Significant Modifications in the Theme of Real Christianity: 1725 - 1747**

Even as a young man, John Wesley realized that great national churches, like the Church of England, though they insured the numerical predominance of a particular version of the faith, often left nominal Christianity in their wake. Indeed, for many in the eighteenth century, to be an English person was to be a Christian. However, as early as 1725, the year in which Wesley clearly saw the end or goal of religion which is holiness, he challenged such glib assumptions among his compatriots and entreated John Griffiths, for example, "to let me have the pleasure of making him a whole Christian, to which I knew he was at least half persuaded already."7 And a few years later, in 1734, in an important letter to his father, Samuel, the young son complained that the infamy of piety is "the company of good sort of men, lukewarm Christians (as they are called), persons that have a great concern for, but no sense of, religion."8

While he was in Georgia, Wesley not only employed the distinction of an almost/altogether Christian (to Mrs. Hawkins of all people, in a rather favorable way), but he also proclaimed a gospel so rich and full that it sparked one observer to note: "Why this be Christianity, a Christian must have more courage than Alexander the Great."9 Not surprisingly, then, during the year 1738 in which Wesley encountered a gracious and redeeming God, he exclaimed: "Oh how high and holy a thing Christianity is, and how widely distant from that (I know not what) is so called..."10 But it was not until John wrote to his brother Samuel on October 30, 1738 that we begin to get a clearer indication of just what the younger brother deemed integral to the real Christian faith. In this letter, Wesley states:

"By a Christian I mean one who so believes in Christ as that sin hath no more dominion over him; and in this obvious sense of the word I was not a Christian till May 24th last past. For till then sin had the dominion over me, although I fought with it continually; but surely then, from that time to this, it hath not, such is the free grace of God in Christ."

To be sure, so concerned was John Wesley with the idea of being a real Christian in his early years that he noted in retrospect in 1739 that his reason for undertaking the arduous work of a missionary in Georgia as well as his subsequent visit to the Moravians at Hermus was his "desire to be a Christian."11

Though, in light of the preceding evidence, Wesley's early definition of real Christianity obviously went far beyond the nominal Christianity typical of eighteenth-century England, to include such necessary elements as justification and the new birth, it appears that his definition went too far. For example, on January 4, 1739 Wesley reflected in his journal:

"Though I have constantly used all the means of grace for twenty years, I am not a Christian. Yes, though I have all other faith, since I have not that faith which 'purifieth the heart.' Verily, verily I say unto you, 'When I must be born again.' For except I, and you, be born again, we cannot see the kingdom of God."14
At this juncture, Wesley had apparently confused the characteristics of the entirely sanctified, that is, freedom from the being of unholy tempers and affections, with the marks of the new birth. In fact, earlier evidence of this tendency, a consequence of what Wesley had thought the Moravians taught him, can be found in a desire which the young missionary expressed as he returned from Georgia: "I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it... For whosoever hath it is 'freed from sin,' 'the whole body of sin is destroyed in him.'"

Moreover, this same kind of confusion with respect to real Christianity surfaced in Wesley's sermon, "The Almost Christian," produced a few years later in 1741. Indeed, the traits of the altogether Christian displayed in this piece more aptly describe not the children of God, but only those who have been perfected in love. Wesley states:

Now whosoever has this faith which 'purifies the heart,' by the power of God who dwelleth therein, from pride, anger, desire, 'from all unrighteousness,' from all filthiness of flesh and spirit...whosoever has this faith, thus 'working by love,' is not almost only, but altogether a Christian."

As will be apparent shortly, much of what Wesley had to say about "altogether Christians" in the preceding sermon was later modified. Nevertheless, the theme of real Christianity remained a vital one for him during this period as demonstrated by its repeated emergence in his writings during the 1740s. In 1746, for example, in his Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained, Wesley rejects the argument that because the English were baptized as infants that they were all, therefore, Christians now. And in a somewhat caustic vein, giving some indication of his sentiments on this subject, Wesley adds: "Consequently, [they] are no more scriptural Christians than the open drunkard or common sweate." The next year, Wesley continues this theme and cautions against "that abundance of those who bear the name of Christians [whom] put a part of religion for the whole—generally some outward work or form of worship." 16

During this early period, then, Wesley was right in searching for a standard to distinguish nominal from real Christianity. Indeed, such a normative judgment was vital to the success of the eighteenth-century revival. The problem was, however, that Wesley had set that standard much too high.

A. The Faith of a Servant: 1725-1747

Though such a course has not been taken recently in Wesley studies, it is perhaps best to consider the issue of "the faith of a servant" as well the doctrine of assurance not only in terms of the whole Wesley but also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of the motif of real Christianity—a motif which undergirds and informs these issues to a significant degree. But first of all it must be asked how did Wesley define the faith of a servant during the years 1725 to 1747? Remarkably, the exact phrase "the faith of a servant" is hardly developed during this initial period, though one reference associates it with sincerity and with the precursor of Christian faith. For example, the Methodist Conference of 1746 queried: "Who is a few inwardly?" And it replied: "a servant of God: One who sincerely obeys him out of fear. Whereas a Christian, inwardly, is a child of God: One who sincerely obeys him out of love." 17 More importantly for the task at hand, the Conference then went on to declare that
a person can be both sincere and penitent and still not be justified, indicating that the elements most often associated with the faith of a servant do not necessarily issue in justification.  

The greatest development during this period, however, concerns not so much the direct explication of the phrase "the faith of a servant," but how Wesley linked this phrase with a key distinction which he did indeed explore in some detail at this time, namely, the distinction between the spirit of bondage and the spirit of adoption. In particular, the identification of the "faith of a servant" with the "spirit of bondage" is revealed in the late sermon, "The Discoveries of Faith," produced in 1788. In it, Wesley observes:

Exhort him to press on by all possible means, till he passes from faith to faith; from the faith of a servant to the faith of a son; from the spirit of bondage unto fear, to the spirit of childlike love.  

What then are the traits of the spirit of bondage displayed in the sermon "The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption," written in 1746, and which were later identified with the faith of a servant? Those under a spirit of bondage, Wesley argues, feel sorrow and remorse; they fear death, the devil, and humanity; they desire to break free from the chains of sin, but cannot, and their cry of despair is typified by the Pauline expression: "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" In fact, in this sermon Wesley specifically identifies "this whole struggle of one who is 'under the law'" with the spirit of bondage and with the spiritual and psychological dynamics of the seventh chapter of Romans. More to the point, these traits just cited are hardly the attributes which constitute real Christianity according to John Wesley since he defined true Christians, at the very least, as those who believe in Christ such that "sin hath no more dominion over him."  

B. The Doctrine of Assurance: 1725-1747

Among contemporary Methodist scholars today, it is well known that when John Wesley was under the strong influence of the English Moravians, he closely identified justifying faith with full assurance. However, at least by the summer of 1740, and possibly earlier, he began to realize that there are both degrees of faith and degrees of assurance and that a child of God may exercise justifying faith which is mixed with both doubt and fear. Nevertheless, a second issue, which can be differentiated from the one just cited, concerns the question of whether Wesley ever lowered or abandoned the standard of real Christianity in light of his newly articulated distinctions. This time, however, the question will be considered not with respect to the spirit of bondage, and its implications, but with respect to the whole matter of assurance.

On the one hand, the initial answer to this question must be "yes" since Wesley obviously modified his earlier erroneous views in two key respects: First of all, the English Moravians, who exercised a strong, early influence on Wesley, propounded a view of redemption which, according to Heitzenrater, "essentially equated conversion with perfection." In time, however, Wesley distinguished freedom from sin in terms of its guilt, power, and being, and thereby repudiated the Moravian doctrine on this score. Simply put, for Wesley, redemption or initial sanctification entailed freedom from the guilt (justification) and power (regeneration) of sin, but not freedom from its being (entire sanctification). In other
words, the carnal nature or inbred sin remained even in the children of God.

Second, and more importantly for the present theme, Wesley likewise modified his earlier view, noted above, which had associated full assurance with justifying faith. Indeed, less than a year after he began the practice of field preaching, Wesley conceived the doctrine of justification by faith no longer in terms of full assurance but in terms of a measure of assurance. But is this qualified assurance, occasionally marked by doubt and fear, necessary for redemption, for what constitutes real Christianity? Here the picture becomes somewhat complicated. For example, in a letter to John Bennet on June 1, 1744 Wesley states, among other things, that none is a Christian who does not have the marks of a Christian, one of which is "the witness of God's Spirit with my spirit that I am a child of God." Similarly, at the first Methodist conference that same year it was affirmed by those present that "all true Christians have such a faith as implies an assurance of God's love." However, by the time of the next conference in 1745 the question was reconsidered and a slightly different answer was offered. Wesley wrote:

Q. Is a sense of God's pardoning love absolutely necessary to our being in his favor? Or may there be some exempt cases?
   A. We dare not say there are not.

Q. Is it necessary to inward and outward holiness?
   A. We incline to think it is.

In a similar vein, the conference Minutes of 1747 noted that there may be exempt cases, that justifying faith may not always be accompanied by a measure of assurance. But the conference then offered this caution: "It is dangerous to ground a general doctrine of a few particular experiments." In addition, although this conference, like the one in 1745, recognized that there are, after all, exceptional cases, it nevertheless clarified its meaning and affirmed: "But this we know, if Christ is not revealed in them by the Holy Spirit, they are not yet Christian believers." In fact, in 1745, though this was a year of many changes, Wesley had not retreated from his teaching that assurance is a vital ingredient of the true Christian faith as evidenced by his following remarks made in a letter to John Smith that same year:

No man can be a true Christian without such an inspiration of the Holy Ghost as fills his heart with peace and joy and love, which he who perceives not has it not. This is the point for which alone I contend, and this I take to be the very foundation of Christianity.

Moreover, in 1747, Wesley continued this emphasis, once again in a letter to "John Smith," and stated: "The sum of what I offered before concerning perceptible inspiration was this: Every Christian believer has a perceptible testimony of God's Spirit that he is a child of God.

In light of the preceding evidence, it is clear that Wesley even after 1745 still identified, for most part, the assurance that one's sins are forgiven as integral to the proper Christian faith. Not surprisingly, then, in a revealing letter to his brother Charles, written a month after the 1747 conference, John illustrates his doctrine of assurance by pointing out: "(1) that there is such an explicit assurance; (2) that it is the common privilege of real Christians; (3) that it is the proper Christian faith, which purifieth the heart and overcometh the
world. In other words, the observation that there are exceptions to Wesley's normal association of justification by faith and a measure of assurance is accurate; however, that he identified this faith which lacks the witness of the Spirit with real, proper Christianity is not.

II. THE THEME OF REAL CHRISTIANITY DEVELOPED: 1748 - 1770

John Wesley's preoccupation with the theme of real Christianity, historically speaking, was undoubtedly reminiscent of the work of Johann Arndt and of such early German Pietists as Spener and Francke. Arndt, for instance, had highlighted the themes of personal reform, the repudiation of stale intellectualism, criticism of doctrinal provincialism, and the importance of sanctification more than a century prior to Wesley in his Wahres Christenthum (True Christianity), a work which the latter saw fit to include in the first volume of his Christian Library in 1749. In particular, observe the opening lines of Arndt's work and the emphasis which they place on the practice of the Christian life.

Dear Christian reader, that the holy Gospel is subjected, in our time, to great and shameful abuse is fully proved by the impudent life of the ungodly who praise Christ and his word with their mouths and yet lead an unholy life that is like that of persons who dwell in heathendom, not in the Christian world.

In a similar fashion, Wesley cautioned against nominal or "mouth Christians" and was not above sarcasm as evidenced by the following account which appeared in his journal during the year 1755:

One spent the evening with us who is accounted both a sensible and a religious man. What a proof of the Fall! Even with all the advantages of a liberal education, this person, I will be bold to say, knows just as much of heart religion, of scriptural Christianity, the religion of love, as a child three years old of algebra.

Moreover, during this period, in a way characteristic of Continental Pietism, Wesley linked the motif of real Christianity to inward religion, to those dispositions and tempers of the heart which mark the regenerate believer. For example, in his piece "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Sixth," Wesley underscores that Christ "has laid before us those dispositions of soul which constitute real Christianity: the inward tempers contained in that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord..." This linkage, however, is even more emphatic (and perhaps more significant) in terms of Wesley's notes on Luke 17:21 ("For the kingdom of God is within or among you") where the English evangelical states not only that the kingdom of God is present "in the soul of every true believer," but also that "it is a spiritual kingdom, an internal principle." Beyond this, in his observations on Matthew 13:28, Wesley once again displays the connection between inward religion and real Christianity but this time more articulately as he develops a distinction between "outward" Christians and open sinners. Accordingly, in his Notes Upon the New Testament Wesley observes:

Daniel, in the church, is properly outside Christians, such as have the form of godliness, without the power. Open sinners, such as have neither the form nor the power, are not so properly damsel, as thistles and brambles.
So then, open sinners lack both the form and power of godliness; outside Christians have the form but lack the power; real Christians, on the other hand, have both the form and the power of godliness.

A second emphasis which emerges during this era is Wesley’s expanded use of the terminology “the almost/ altogether Christian.” Such a rhetoric has not dropped out of his writings, as is sometimes mistakenly supposed, though it has, of course, been modified. To illustrate, Wesley counsels John Trembath in 1760 that he must “recover that power and be a Christian altogether, or in a while you will have neither power nor form, inside nor outside.” Elsewhere, in his journal of 1762, Wesley points out that at Newtown he left between “thirty and forty members full of desire; and hope, and earnest resolutions not to be ‘almost, but altogether Christians.’” And a couple of years later, while he was in Madeley, the one-time Oxford fellow took great comfort in conversing once more with “a Methodist of the old stamp, denying himself, taking up his cross, and resolved to be ‘altogether a Christian.’”

The third major emphasis during this middle period as Wesley developed the motif of real Christianity was his insistence, to the consternation of some of his Anglican peers, that a Christian “while he keepeth himself...dost not commit sin.” In fact, in his sermons “The Marks of the New Birth” and “The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God,” both produced in 1748, Wesley refused to depreciate this standard of teaching. In the former piece, for instance, he reasoned that “an immediate and constant fruit of this faith whereby we are born of God...is power over sin: power over outward sin of every kind...” And in the latter sermon he declared: “But whatsoever is born of God, while he abideth in faith and love and in the spirit of prayer and thanksgiving, not only doth not, but cannot thus commit sin...he cannot voluntarily transgress any command of God.”

With this standard of teaching in place, during the 1760s Wesley not only maintained that one could abstain from all evil, use the means of grace at every opportunity, and do all possible good (which is, in effect, to keep the General Rules of the United Societies) and yet be “but a Heathen still,” but he also declared in a letter to Lawrence Coughlan in 1768, indicating a need for both seriousness and caution on this subject, that “many think they are justified, and are not.”

Other elements of interest during this period include Wesley’s reflections, on two occasions, of his Oxford days. He stated, for instance, not only that the very design of the Oxford Methodists was “to forward each other in true, scriptural Christianity,” but he also revealed in a letter written in 1769, to use his own words, that “when I was at Oxford, I never was afraid of any but the almost Christians.” Moreover, the distinction between nominal and real Christianity was beginning to take on a paradigmatic flavor such that Wesley now began to speak not only of half Christians but also of half Methodists! Note his comments to Lady Maxwell in 1764:

And I entreat you do not regard the half-Methodists—If we must use the name. Do not mind them who endeavour to hold Christ in one hand and the world in the other. I want you to be all a Christian;...
A. The Faith of a Servant: 1748-1770

Interestingly enough, it was not until this second period that the exact phrase "the faith of a servant" was explored in any significant detail. In 1754, for example, in his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, Wesley defines the faith of a servant in terms of the spirit of bondage and fear that cleaved to the old covenant. Elsewhere he associates the phrase with those who "fear God and worketh righteousness" as in his commentary on Acts 10:35. However, this latter usage makes clear that the faith of a servant was conceived in a very general way by the English leader and included all those believers of whatever religious tradition who endeavored to worship God according to the light and grace which they had. Wesley explains:

But in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness...is accepted of him—through Christ, though he knows him not.... He is in the favour of God, whether enjoying his written word and ordinances or not.

Continuing this line of thought, since those who fear God and work righteousness are accepted even though they may be ignorant of Christ, the Holy Scriptures, and the sacraments, this demonstrates that such acceptance is not indicative of the real, proper Christian faith, as is often supposed, but instead is an important implication of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace which is both universal and Christologically based. In fact, in this same commentary, but this time on the book of Romans, Wesley cautions his readers and affirms that "real Christians have not the spirit of bondage."

Moreover, when the Conference Minutes of 1770 are critically examined, it appears that Wesley explored two "tracks" of redemption: one for those who believe in Christ and another for those who have never heard of the Savior. In this and similar contexts, however, it should be borne in mind that Wesley never uses the word "justified" or its cognates. The "acceptance," then, of those who never heard of Christ may mean that they are "in process" so to speak; they are on the way of salvation. That is, they have received prevenient grace and so will be responsible for more. But they are hardly redeemed. And though Wesley did not speculate in this area, perhaps there will come a time when such God-fearers will be confronted in a more direct fashion with the claims of Christ and the gospel.

In light of these distinctions, a level of faith which issues in a degree of acceptance must not be confused with saving faith. For example, when Wesley explored the issue of the "unbelief" of the Disciples, their inability to cast out an evil spirit, as recounted in Matthew 17:14-21, he made the following observation:

But it is certain, the faith which is here spoken of does not always imply saving faith. Many have had it who thereby cast out devils, and yet will at last have their portion with them.... Now, though I have all this faith, so as to remove mountains yet if I have not the faith which worketh by love, I am nothing.

So then, if even the disciples at this point did not have saving faith, though they followed Christ and were in some sense accepted of Him—as Wesley seems to intimate—then again how is it possible that those who are ignorant of both Christ and the gospel can have redeeming faith—a faith which is not informed by fear but by nothing less than the salvific power of love? Indeed, for Wesley, the very substance of salvation is holiness, that is, the
love of God reigning in the human heart, but how can this love have its place as the foundation of human affections unless people first of all know that God has loved them in Jesus Christ—"We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). And that this line of reasoning is descriptive of Wesley's own judgment is demonstrated by an appeal to a journal entry which he made in 1760. He writes:

The fundamental doctrine of the people called Methodists is, whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the true faith, the faith which works by love; which, by means of the love of God and our neighbour, produces both inward and outward holiness.

Moreover, Wesley's letters to Ann Bolton in 1768 and in 1770 illustrate the ongoing theme that the faith of a servant, though earnest and virtuous, falls far short of the promises which pertain to all real Christians. "I am glad you are still waiting for the kingdom of God," he writes to Ms. Bolton in 1770, "although as yet you are rather in the state of a servant than of a child." In short, the acceptance of those who fear God and work righteousness must not be confused with the proper Christian faith. That is, though there are degrees of faith as well as degrees of acceptance (and each degree is important), not all faith is saving faith. Saving faith is energized not by the power of fear, but by the power of love.

B. The Doctrine of Assurance: 1748-1770

In his correspondence with Richard Tompson during 1755, Wesley clarified his doctrine of assurance in two key respects: on the one hand, he argued that there is an intermediate state between a child of the devil and a child of God and that those who are not assured that their sins are forgiven may have a degree of faith and, therefore, may be admitted to the Lord's Supper. On the other hand, Wesley continued to emphasize the importance of assurance for the Christian faith and asserted: "But still I believe the proper Christian faith which purifies the heart implies such a conviction." Indeed, in this same piece Wesley pointed out with regard to assurance that "the whole Christian Church in the first centuries enjoyed it." And again he exclaimed: "If that knowledge were destroyed, or wholly withdrawn, I could not then say, I had Christian faith." In fact, in his summary sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," published in 1765, Wesley actually linked saving faith with assurance by maintaining: "And it is certain this saving faith necessarily implies an assurance that Christ loved me, and gave himself for me."

Wesley's subsequent letters to Richard Tompson the next year contained even further clarification on this topic and one significant, though seldom understood, exception. Concerning this last point, Wesley admitted to Mr. Tompson on 18 February 1756, in a way reminiscent of the 1745 and 1747 conferences, that one may be in a state of justification and yet lack assurance. These are the exempt cases or exceptions as noted earlier. Thus, when Wesley posed the question in his letter, "Can a man who has not a clear assurance that his sins are forgiven be in a state of justification?" he replied, "I believe there are some instances of it." However, it was not until much later that Wesley indicated the reason for this exception. In a letter to Dr Rutherford in 1768, Wesley elaborates:

Yet I do not affirm there are no exceptions to this general rule (of the association of a measure of assurance with justification). Possibly some may be in the favour of
God, and yet go mourning all the day long. But I believe this is usually owing either to disorder of body or ignorance of the gospel promises."

Two issues need to be separated here which are often confused by contemporary scholars. On the one hand, the elderly Wesley still did not identify nor confuse the faith of a servant, and its measure of acceptance, with the assurance that one's sins are forgiven; since being under "the spirit of bondage," a servant, properly speaking, lacks justifying faith. On the other hand, the Methodist leader recognized that in some exceptional cases those who are justified and regenerated (and hence children of God) may lack an assurance that their sins are forgiven due to either ignorance or bodily disorder. This means, then, that Wesley actually defined the faith of a servant in at least two key ways: The first, which is a narrow usage and which occurs repeatedly in Wesley's writings, excludes justification, regeneration, and assurance and corresponds to the spirit of bondage, noted earlier. The second, which is a broad usage and which seldom occurs, corresponds to the exempt cases and exceptions noted above and it includes justification and regeneration but not assurance. Interestingly enough, although the faith of a servant in this second sense is obviously Christian (saving) faith since it includes justification and regeneration, Wesley still did not refer to it as the proper Christian faith since it lacks assurance. This is a subtle distinction, to be sure, but no less important for its subtlety. Unless otherwise indicated, then, the remainder of this essay will employ the phrase "the faith of a servant" in the narrow sense—a sense which is at the very heart of the debate in Wesley studies today.

The preceding discussion of Wesley's distinctions pertaining to assurance can now be outlined into three major groups as follows:

**Faith of a Child of God**
(Real Christianity)
A. Under the Spirit of Adoption
B. Have the Witness of the Spirit
C. Justified and Born of God
D. Have the Witness of the Spirit Due to Sanctifying Grace

**Faith of a Servant: Narrow Sense**
A. Under the Spirit of Bondage
B. Lack the Witness of the Spirit
C. Not Justified and Born of God
D. Lack the Witness Due to Sin (many instances)

**Faith of a Servant: Exceptional Cases (Broad Sense)**
A. Not Under the Spirit of Bondage
B. Lack the Witness of the Spirit
C. Justified and Born of God
D. Lack Due Not to Sin but to Infirmities (few instances; exceptions)

Two views which offer a different picture by contending that the faith of a servant is, after all, justifying faith are found in the writings of Scott Kisker and Randy
Maddox. The former, for example, attempts to solve the difficulty surrounding the soteriological status of the faith of a servant by distinguishing two kinds of justification, a broad and a narrow sense, and by arguing that the former includes regeneration and assurance, but the latter does not. This distinction, which by the way is never specified in Wesley's writings, permits Kisker to contend that those who have "the faith of a servant" are in fact justified (in the narrow sense), although they are not properly designated as "the children of God" since they have neither been born of God nor have they received an assurance that their sins are forgiven. This view, which separates justification and regeneration, in order to solve the soteriological problem, is nevertheless beset with difficulties.

First of all, Wesley repeatedly links justification with regeneration in his writings. To illustrate, beyond the evidence in the sermon "The New Birth," Wesley notes in the Conference minutes of 1745 that inward sanctification (the new birth) begins in "the moment we are justified." Much later, in 1762, he criticizes Thomas Maxfield precisely for severing the connection between justification and the new birth as revealed in the following critical remarks:

I dislike your directly or indirectly depreciating justification: saying a justified person is not 'in Christ,' is not 'born of God,' is not 'a new creature,' has not a 'new heart,' is not 'sanctified,' not a 'temple of the Holy Ghost'..." 

Second, Kisker confuses the degree of acceptance which pertains to those who have the faith of a servant with justification which, as noted earlier, is quite a different matter. Indeed, the servants of God, those who have not yet received freedom from the guilt and power of sin (which is received at justification and the new birth), are therefore yet under the convincing grace of God in terms of actual sins. Nevertheless these believers have a measure of grace. Put another way, Wesley realized that these sinners were on the way to redemption, so to speak; that is, though not justified, they were responding—painfully no doubt—to the convincing grace of God. Moreover, if they continued to respond to this grace, they would move, as Wesley puts it, from the porch through the very door of salvation.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the separation of justification from the new birth almost invariably leads to the kind of antinomianism which Wesley impugned throughout his career. For although it is true that only sinners are justified, one cannot remain under the power of sin, typical of the faith of a servant, and yet be justified. Indeed, with the linkage between justification and regeneration severed, it comes as no surprise to learn that Kisker's interpretation suggests that one can be "justified" even while one continues in the practice of sin. He writes:

The sinner is justified. However, that sinner does not necessarily perceive that fact, either by the direct witness of the Spirit or by evidences which stem from the new birth.... Thus the sinner is continually under conviction of sin and fear of God."

However, if sinners are "continually under the conviction of sin" as Kisker suggests, then it is clear that although they have a measure of grace (convincing) and a degree
of acceptance (as they respond to the grace of God) they can hardly be deemed justified. Indeed, it must be borne in mind that for Wesley the forgiveness of sins pertains to those sins which are past, not to the ongoing practice of sin. Dissociating justification from the new birth and its marks, then, can easily undermine the central theme of Wesley’s theology which is holiness. Linking the new birth with justification, on the other hand, will maintain the proper balance: first, that it is only sinners who are justified; and second, that men and women cannot remain justified if they continue in the practice of sin. Wesley held both these ideas together and without contradiction.

In some respects the position of Randy Maddox is similar to Kisker’s. Accordingly, he, too, identifies the “servants of God” as justified, but he does so not on the basis of a distinction between justification in a broad and narrow sense, as Kisker does, but on the basis of a “gradualist” reading of Wesley’s via salutis. Maintaining that “human salvation—viewed in Wesley’s terms—would be fundamentally gradual in process,” Maddox argues for a view of incremental growth and development which positions justification remarkably early in the via salutis. That is, it occurs in the “initial penitent responses to God’s awakening work in their lives.” Awakening, however, and even conviction of sin for that matter, do not necessarily issue in justification. To illustrate, the believer typified in Romans Chapter Seven is clearly both awakened and convinced, but he or she can hardly be said to be justified, as Wesley himself indicates, in light of the ongoing practice of sin.

Second, Maddox also applies his gradualist reading of Wesley’s soteriology to the notion of regeneration, and this move allows him to affirm that the servants of God, those awakened by the power of grace, are regenerated as well! As with justification, regeneration occurs early in the via salutis; it is associated not with sanctifying grace—as one would expect—but with prevenient grace. Maddox elaborates:

The best beginning place is to recall the increasing stress that he [Wesley] placed on Prevenient Grace. Wesley understood this grace to effect a rudimentary regeneration of the basic human faculties in all persons from the moment of their birth.... As such, even the faith of a servant of God is possible only because of the presence of a degree of regenerating power of God’s grace.

In this very idea of “degrees” of regenerating grace, of course, the mature Wesley was denying that regeneration per se occurs instantaneously.

There are several problems in this passage. First of all, it is perhaps better to use Wesley’s own vocabulary of the new birth (initial sanctification) and entire sanctification in the discussion of these matters since Maddox’s vocabulary of “rudimentary regeneration” is problematic in either of one or two ways. On the one hand, this definition leaves the impression that one is holy from the moment of (natural) birth! But this is hardly satisfactory given Wesley’s doctrines of sin and grace. If, on the other hand, “rudimentary regeneration” does not imply holiness at all but simply the “restoration of faculties” as a result of prevenient grace, then the situation is equally troubling, for such a definition would indicate that the regeneration typical of the faith of a servant does not entail holiness—an odd use indeed! This means, of course, that Maddox’s interpretation would face the same problem as Kisker’s, namely, that people
who remain unholy (in their regeneration) are yet justified.

Second, contrary to Maddox, the new birth for Wesley must occur instantaneously. Here the issue is not so much chronology—although this is how it is often read—but soteriology. In other words, believers are waiting for something to be done first, then this reveals, to Wesley at least, that they are expecting salvation by works. If, on the other hand, the new birth, that act of grace which makes one holy, is a prerogative not of humanity but of God, then it can occur now. Put another way, the instantaneous elements of Wesley’s via salutis are his principal vehicles for underscoring the crucial truth that it is God, not humanity, who both forgives sins and makes holy. This means, of course, that Maddox’s suggestion that the instantaneous elements of the Wesleyan via salutis pertain to juridical themes while processive elements pertain to therapeutic (sanctification) themes is not quite accurate. Indeed, for Wesley, both justification and the new birth (and entire sanctification as well) are suitably described in terms of instantaneous elements (as well as processive elements) for the reasons already suggested.  

So then, Maddox’s use of the ideas of degrees of justification and regeneration allows him to claim that the servants of God are both justified and regenerated, but we must remember that this is a justification and a regeneration which falls far short of the standards which the seasoned Wesley set for scriptural Christianity, for it falls far short of holiness.

III. The Motif of Real Christianity Resplendent: 1771-1791

It is well known among Methodist historians and theologians that when John Wesley was on his way to Georgia aboard the Simmonds the powerful Atlantic storms revealed to the young aspiring missionary his fear of death. What has been less noticed, however, is that it was precisely the mature Wesley who continued to identify fearlessness in the face of death with being a real Christian. On December 27, 1772, for example, the Methodist leader made the following entry in his journal:

I dined with one who in the midst of plenty is completely miserable through ‘the spirit of bondage’ and in particular through the fear of death. This came upon him not by any outward means, but the immediate touch of God’s Spirit. It will be well if he does not shake it off till he receives ‘the Spirit of adoption.’

Even more emphatically, Wesley wrote to Ms. Cummins on June 8, 1773 and made the connection between real Christianity and fearlessness in the face of death explicit:

O make haste! Be a Christian, a real Bible Christian now! You may say, ‘Nay, I am a Christian already.’ I fear not. (See how freely I speak.) A Christian is not afraid to die. Are not you? Do you desire to depart and to be with Christ?

So then, if the elderly Wesley affirmed in 1770s that a real Christian is one who is not afraid to die, then what does that make him while he was in Georgia? The implication is clear.

Yet another characteristic of real Christianity which Wesley developed during this
last period was that of "[having] the mind which was in Christ and [walking] as He walked." Real Christians, in other words, are those whose inward (and outward) lives have been transformed by the bountiful grace of God. "Unless they have new senses, ideas, passions, landl temps, " Wesley counsels, "they are no Christians." Indeed, when the English cleric was in Ireland during 1773 he asked himself the question concerning the citizens of Galway, among whom were twenty thousand Catholics and five hundred Protestants: "But which of them are Christians? Have the mind that was in Christ and walk as he walked?"—a question which amply supplies his yet lofty standards for being a real Christian. And of his own people, the "English Christians in general," Wesley wryly noted in 1776, that they "know no more of Christian salvation [and hence of inward transformation] than Mahometans or heathens." And two years later, in a letter to Mary Bishop, Wesley made it abundantly clear what was at the heart of the gospel in his following observation:

Let but a pert, self-sufficient animal, that has neither sense nor grace, bawl out something about Christ and His blood or justification by faith, and his hearers cry out, 'What a fine gospel sermon!' Surely the Methodists have not so learnt Christ. We know of no gospel without salvation from sin."

Beyond this, during the decade of the 1780s Wesley continued to highlight the distinction between nominal and real Christians, and pointed out in his sermon, "The New Creation," employing a familiar rhetoric by now, that the former "have the form of godliness without the power." Clues, by the way, as to when Wesley himself determined in his own mind to be a real Christian are found in a late sermon, "In What Sense We are to Leave the World," where he indicates, once again, the significance of the year 1725: "When it pleased God to give me a settled resolution to be not a nominal but a real Christian (being about two and twenty years of age) my acquaintance were as ignorant of God as myself." Moreover, as in an earlier period, Wesley reflected back on the Oxford Methodists, but this time in a letter to Henry Brooke in 1786, where he averred that their design was nothing less than to be "Bible Christians." The next year, in his sermon "Of Former Times," the one-time Oxford fellow revealed that the goal of "the Holy Club" was above all to help each other to be "real Christians." But perhaps the most noteworthy accent during this late interval of Wesley's life was his strong identification of real, scriptural Christianity with the new birth and, therefore, with all the marks of the new birth such as faith, hope, and love. For example, in a pastoral letter to his nephew Samuel Wesley, who had converted to Roman Catholicism (though he later renounced this move), Wesley cautioned: "...except a man be born again...he cannot see the kingdom of heaven; except he experience that inward change of the earthly, sensual mind for the mind which was in Christ Jesus." Furthermore, in his sermon, "Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith," produced in 1788, Wesley proclaimed:

How short is this description of real Christians! And yet how exceeding full! It comprehends, it sums up, the whole experience of those that are truly such, from the time they are born of God till they remove into Abraham's bosom. For who are the 'we' that are here spoken of? All that are true Christian believers. I say
'Christian', not 'Jewish' believers. All that are not only servants but children of God.  

And a year later, in 1789, Wesley's strong identification of real Christianity with regeneration, with the children of God, is again unmistakable. "How great a thing it is to be a Christian," he declares in his sermon On a Single Eye, "to be a real, inward, scriptural Christian! Conformed in heart and life to the will of God! Who is sufficient for these things? None, unless he be born of God."  

A. Outler's Claim Considered  

Perhaps the most serious objection to the foregoing argument comes from Albert Outler himself who has claimed that Wesley's perspective changed over the years and that he greatly modified his earlier distinctions of almost/altogether a Christian, and nominal/real Christianity. In his prefatory to 'The More Excellent Way,' for example, he claims:  

This is a practical essay in Christian ethics that also illustrates how far the later Wesley had moved away from his earlier exclusivist standards of true faith and salvation. It should be read alongside 'The Almost Christian,' the startling contrast between the two reflects a half-century's experience as leader of a revival movement and also a significant change in his mind and heart.  

For the sake of clarity, it is best to divide Outler's claim into two separate issues: one concerning the definition of an almost Christian, the other, of an altogether Christian. Of the former term, Wesley writes in his sermon, "The Almost Christian," written in 1741, that these believers have a form of godliness; they possess the outside of a real Christian, and they utilize all the means of grace. Furthermore, if one compares these early descriptions with many of Wesley's writings during the 1780s, an essential continuity emerges.  

What does change in time, however, is the latter part of the equation; that is, what it means to be an "altogether Christian." In 'The Almost Christian,' for example, altogether Christians are described as those who love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength—and their neighbors as themselves. Moreover, they have a faith "which purifies the heart, by the power of God who dwelleth therein, from pride, anger, desire, from all unrighteousness, from all filthiness of flesh and spirit." But the preceding are obviously apt descriptions not of the new birth, what it means to be a real Christian, but of entire sanctification. However, in 1741, as noted earlier, Wesley still mixed these ideas together, and it would not be until towards the end of the 1740s that he would clearly distinguish the graces of Christian Perfection from those of initial sanctification. So in this sense what Outler argues is, in fact, correct.  

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to contend (and I'm not suggesting that Outler did this) that because Wesley clarified his thought and distinguished initial and entire sanctification that he then lowered the threshold for the new birth which in turn eventually became his standard for what constitutes real Christianity. In his homily "On a Single Eye," for instance, written late in his career, Wesley not only still uses the language of a "real Christian" in 1789, but he also correctly identifies it with regeneration and not with entire sanctification as he once did. In other words, almost Christians, those who lack the marks
of the new birth, are almost Christians still: in 1741, in 1747, and in 1789 as well.

Given this line of argument, Outler's call for a comparison of "The Almost Christian" and "The More Excellent Way" is in one sense invalid, for he appears to assume that the distinction almost Christian/altogether Christian of the earlier sermon "The Almost Christian" corresponds to the distinction of the generality of Christians/the more excellent way as found in the later sermon "The More Excellent Way." However, the two sets compared in these homilies are not the same. To illustrate, in the first sermon, the "almost Christian" is a person who lacks the evidences of both justification and regeneration as set forth in "The Marks of the New Birth." The "altogether Christian" on the other hand is at the very least justified and regenerated (and possibly entirely sanctified—because Wesley set the standard much too high at this time). In light of this, is the phrase the "generality of Christians" as found in the later sermon, "The More Excellent Way" actually equivalent to "the almost Christian" as Outler seems to suggest? Not really. Observe how Wesley defines "the generality of Christians" in this later production:

"The Christian" is a person who is justified, has then the choice of walking in the higher or the lower path.

In other words, these Christians are already justified and born of God and are about to embark either upon the higher path of entire sanctification or not. Simply put, in the sermon "The Almost Christian," Wesley is comparing almost-Christians, though virtuous, with those who have at the very least been born of God. In his later sermon, he is comparing justified and regenerated (real) Christians with the entirely sanctified—or with the possibility of entire sanctification. Therefore, those who appeal to a comparison of these pieces in order to show that those who lack the marks of the new birth are indeed real Christians (and again I'm not suggesting that Outler did this) have failed to pay significant attention to Wesley's own theological vocabulary. Once again, almost Christians remain almost Christians. The former part of the equation had never really directly changed.

B. The Faith of a Servant: 1771-1791

In a letter to Alexander Knox during 1777, Wesley, once again, clearly articulates an intermediate state between a child of God and a child of the devil, namely, a servant of God: "You are not yet a son," Wesley advises Mr. Knox, "but you are a servant; and you are waiting for the Spirit of adoption." Similarly, in his sermon "On Faith," the Methodist leader displays, in part, what constitutes the difference between a servant and a child of God: "He that believeth as a child of God hath the witness in himself. This the servant hath not." Moreover, as in the preceding period, Wesley maintains that one who is a servant of God, who "feareth God and worketh righteousness," enjoys the favor of God and is, therefore, accepted "to a degree" as illustrated in his sermon "On Friendship with the World," produced in 1786:

Those on the contrary 'are of God' who love God, or at least fear Him, and keep his commandments. This is the lowest character of those that 'are of God,' who are not properly sons, but servants.
To be sure, in his early ministry, John Wesley had not fully appreciated the notion that those who fear God and work righteousness are indeed accepted of him, and because of this failure in understanding, he and his brother, Charles, caused great harm among those who were attentive to the early Methodist preaching. And in 1788, reflecting on this unfortunate situation, Wesley confessed:

Indeed nearly fifty years ago, when the preachers commonly called Methodists began to preach that grand scriptural doctrine, salvation by faith, they were not sufficiently apprised of the difference between a servant and a child of God. They did not clearly understand that even one 'who feared God, and worketh righteousness,' is accepted of him.16

That Wesley during the decade of the 1780s (and much earlier) had a greater appreciation of the faith of those ‘who feared God and worked righteousness’ is clear, but, once again, this last point of acceptance must not be mistaken for justification or with being a real Christian. Observe that Wesley holds two ideas together: on the one hand, he or she who fears God is not a rank unbeliever, but on the other hand, “One that fears God is (still) waiting for His salvation.”17 In fact, late in his career, as noted in passing earlier, Wesley associated the faith of a servant, the spirit of fear, with the spirit of bondage. Additional evidence of this association is found in a letter to Thomas Davenport, drafted in 1781. Wesley states:

You are in the hands of a wise Physician, who is lancing your sores in order to heal them. He has given you now the spirit of fear. But it is in order to the spirit of love and of a sound mind. You have now received the spirit of bondage. Is it not the forerunner of the spirit of adoption? He is not afar off. Look up! And expect Him to cry in your heart, Abba, Father! He is nigh that justifies!18

Accordingly, this excerpt demonstrates that in this late period Wesley still did not confuse the issue of “acceptance” (for the light and grace which they have), with justification, for those under “the spirit of fear” are still waiting for the One who justifies. This means, of course, that these believers are in the way of salvation; consequently, if they continue in this grace, and unfortunately some will not, then the One “who is nigh” will justify.

Though, in light of the preceding considerations, the servants of God obviously lack the proper Christian faith—and hence cannot enjoy the privileges of the sons and daughters of God—they yet have a measure of faith which arises from the prevenient and convincing grace which precedes it, and are for that reason not to be discouraged. Therefore, Wesley’s seasoned and relatively favorable estimation of the faith of a servant probably emerged from his consideration that such a faith, in the normal course of spiritual development, would in time become the faith of a son. In fact, in his sermon “On Faith,” Wesley highlights just such a consideration:

And, indeed, unless the servants of God halt by the way, they will receive the adoption of sons. They will receive the faith of the children of God by his revealing his only-begotten Son in their hearts.... And whoever hath this, the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit that he is a child of God.”19
Likewise, Wesley's appreciation of a degree of acceptance and his exhortation to the servants of God to improve the rich grace of God is revealed in a sermon produced in 1788, "On the Discoveries of Faith," in which Wesley counsels:

"Whoever has attained this, the faith of a servant, ... in consequence of which he is in a degree (as the Apostle observes), 'accepted with him.' ... Nevertheless he should be exhorted not to stop there; not to rest till he attains the adoption of sons; till he obeys out of love, which is the privilege of all the children of God."^10^ 

Simply put, the faith of a servant of God is valued not only for the measure of faith that it is, but also for what it will soon become: the qualitatively different faith of a child of God. Indeed, for Wesley all soteriological distinctions are not one of degree—as is sometimes supposed—since a child of God who has been renewed through grace is holy, but a servant of God, on the other hand, is not. That is, for Wesley holiness begins at justification and initial sanctification (the new birth) as noted earlier. And the crucial nature of this redeeming grace is highlighted, indicating something of a soteriological turning point, by Wesley's ongoing distinction between the value of works both before and after justification (and the new birth). On the one hand, works prior to justification are not "splendid sins" but on the other hand neither are they "good," properly speaking. And it is precisely this transition from "not good" to "good" works which amply demonstrates that the transition from the faith of a servant to the faith of a child of God is not simply a change in degree but one of quality. As not all faith is justifying faith, so too not all faith is sanctifying faith.

C. The Doctrine of Assurance: 1771-1791

By 1771, Wesley had distinguished full assurance, which excludes doubt and fear, from initial assurance which does not;^11^ he had come to a greater appreciation of the faith of a servant and its degree of acceptance; and he had realized that in exceptional cases one may even be justified and yet lack assurance due to either ignorance of the gospel promises or due to bodily disorder. Nevertheless, the theme which Wesley chose to develop during this last period of his life was none other than a strong identification of assurance with the proper (real) Christian faith. To illustrate, in his sermon, "On the Trinity," Wesley declares:

"But I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till he hath (as St. John speaks) 'the witness in himself'; till 'the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God—that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of the Son..."^12^ 

Similarly, in January 1787, Wesley acknowledged that "To believe Christ gave Himself for me is the faith of a Christian,"^13^ and a year later he not only once again clarified the distinction between the faith of a servant and that of a son, but he also maintained that assurance is an integral component of the proper Christian faith. In his sermon, "On Faith," Wesley reasons:

"Thus the faith of a child is properly and directly a divine conviction whereby every child of God is enabled to testify, 'The life that I now live, I live by faith in
the son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.' And whosoever hath this, the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit that he is a child of God.\textsuperscript{14}

Even more significantly, there is nothing in Wesley’s often-quoted letter to Melville Horne in 1788 which detracts from this identification and emphasis. Thus, in this correspondence, Wesley maintains that the servants of God who lack assurance are not thereby condemned, a commonplace by now, but he then goes on to assert—and this is what has been missed by current scholarship—that “we preach assurance as we always did, as a common privilege of the children of God...”\textsuperscript{15}

IV. \textsc{Some Concluding Observations}

For the sake of greater clarity and also in order to display the comprehensive view which emerges from this brief study of the motif of real Christianity in the writings of John Wesley, the following theses are offered for consideration:

\textbf{Theses Relevant to Future Discussions:}

1. The Faith of a Servant

A. Wesley employed the phrase “the faith of a servant” in at least two distinct ways. The first, the \textit{narrow} usage, does not include justification, regeneration, and assurance, and it represents the clear majority of cases. The second, the \textit{broad} usage, includes both justification and regeneration but not assurance, and it corresponds to Wesley’s exempt cases or exceptions. It represents the minority of cases.

B. The mature Wesley specifically identified the faith of a servant (in the narrow sense) with the spirit of bondage.

1. The characteristics of the spirit of bondage are sorrow and remorse; fear of God, death, the devil, and humanity; and the desire but not the ability to break free from the chains of sin.

C. The faith of a servant in both the narrow and broad senses lacks assurance (the witness of the Spirit) the one due to sin, the other to infirmity.

D. Though Wesley eventually came to realize that the faith of a servant (in the narrow sense) involves a degree of acceptance such faith does not constitute justifying faith (See thesis \# II.B.2 below).

1. Indeed, Wesley’s soteriological language distinguishes between “acceptance” for those who are at the very beginning of the way of salvation and “justification” for those who are not.

2. The identification of Wesley’s inclusive notion of “acceptance” (see his notes on Acts 10:35) with the proper Christian (saving) faith may move in the direction of a universalism which the Methodist leader rightly deplored.
Therefore, a distinction must be made between acceptance (according to the light and grace which they have; that is, according to prevenient and convincing grace) and saving faith which redeems by making one holy.

E. Wesley taught that the faith of all servants, in the normal course of spiritual development, should in time become the "proper Christian faith." They are, therefore, not to be discouraged.

II. Assurance

A. By the summer of 1740, and possibly earlier, Wesley realized that justifying faith does not imply full assurance since it is often marked by both doubt and fear.

B. At least by 1747 (and possibly as early as 1745), Wesley maintained that assurance does not always accompany justifying faith.

1. These exceptions pertaining to assurance, servants in a broad sense who are both justified and regenerated, are not many but few since Wesley repeatedly affirmed that assurance is the common privilege of the children of God. The faith of a servant in the narrow sense, on the other hand, which lacks justification, regeneration, and assurance, is characteristic not of a few believers but of many. Nevertheless even these are not without favor since they are under the leading of both prevenient and convincing grace.

2. In 1768, Wesley reasoned that the exceptions to the normal association of justifying faith and assurance (broad sense) are usually the result of bodily disorder or of ignorance of the gospel promises; that is, due not to sin but to infirmity. The faith of a servant in the narrow sense, on the other hand, lacks assurance not due to infirmity but to sin since they are under the spirit of bondage.

III. Real Christianity

A. Wesley developed the motif of real Christianity from the time he saw the goal of religion in 1725 until his death in 1791.

B. Through the influence of the English Moravians, Wesley initially placed the standard of real Christianity much too high so as to include elements which properly pertain to Christian perfection.

1. Eventually Wesley distinguished between the power and being of sin; the former relates to the new birth (and real Christianity); the latter to entire sanctification.

C. Wesley made a distinction between open sinners, outward Christians, and inward Christians in several places in his writings; the first lack both the form
and power of vital religion (open sinners); the second have the form but not the power (servants in the narrow sense); the third have both the form and the power (real Christians).

I. Wesley defined the purpose of the United Societies as being a fellowship of those who have the form of religion and who are seeking its power. This level of faith, therefore, does not constitute what Wesley called the proper Christian faith.

D. At its minimum, real Christianity entails regeneration (and therefore freedom from the power of sin), as one of its principal characteristics. In fact, it was precisely the mature Wesley who stressed this identification in his sermons “Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith” (1788) and “On a Single Eye” (1789).

E. Since Wesley taught that justification occurs simultaneously with regeneration (although they can be distinguished logically), then real Christianity must also entail justification by faith (and therefore freedom from the guilt of sin).

F. In almost every instance where the seasoned Wesley employed the phrases “real Christianity” or “proper Christianity” or “scriptural Christianity” he was referring to the theological complex of justification and regeneration by faith (the latter as evidenced by the marks of the new birth) and a measure of assurance. In other words, the Methodist leader almost never identified a faith which lacks assurance (the faith of a servant in both senses) with the real, proper Christian faith. Nevertheless, since the servants of God in a broad sense are both justified and born of God, and since they lack assurance not due to sin but to infirmity, they may suitably be called the children of God.

G. Since virtually all Methodist scholars agree that Aldersgate was the time of John Wesley’s assurance and that he was justified and regenerated at least by this time, and since these theological elements are the very ingredients which the seasoned Wesley deemed to constitute the proper Christian faith, then Aldersgate must be the time when Wesley became a real Christian by his own mature definition—Albert Outler’s unargued claim notwithstanding.

Given the preceding evidence which has been carefully culled from Wesley’s entire literary corpus, recent—and some not so recent—pronouncements on the subject of Wesley’s understanding of the motif of real Christianity as well as the value he placed on his Aldersgate experience in light of this motif must now be reassessed by the scholarly community. Indeed, since the elderly Wesley continually defined real Christianity in terms of justification, regeneration, and a measure of assurance, then his Aldersgate experience, contrary to Albert Outler, must now be viewed as the time when Wesley became a real, true, scriptural Christian. In fact, even if Aldersgate is simply deemed the time when the last piece of the puzzle, so to speak, was put in place, namely, assurance, as Maddox and others seem to suggest, the conclusion
remains the same: that is, 24 May 1738 was the time when John Wesley had the faith, not of a servant, but of a son; when he had the faith, in other words, of one who had finally entered into "the kingdom of God." 12

NOTES
8. Ibid., 25:400. Though Wesley was a faithful son of the Anglican church, he was critical of state churches which often mixed religion and politics to the detriment of the former. Indeed, Wesley criticized the emperor Constantine, in several places in his writings, as the initiator of this unfortunate trend. Cf. Thomas Jackson, ed., The Works of John Wesley, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), 6:261, 7:26, 164, and 276.
10. Ibid., 18:499-500. In particular, what had sparked this response was Wesley's scriptural proclamation that "Whosoever is born of God overcometh the world, even our faith." 1 John 5:4.
12. Ibid., 1:264. The significance of Aldersgate, at least as it appears in this letter, lies not so much in the matter of assurance (Indeed, Wesley claims at this point that "the seal of the Spirit, the love of God shed abroad in my heart...this witness of the Spirit I have not; but I patiently wait for it."); but in freedom from the power of sin. Again, Wesley exclaims: "Some measure of this faith, which bringeth salvation or victory over sin, and which implies peace and trust in God through Christ, I now enjoy by His free mercy."
15. Ibid., 18:216. Emphasis is mine. It would take Wesley a few more years to articulate clearly the distinctions between the guilt, power, and being of sin as these distinctions relate to the justified, the regenerate, and the entirely sanctified.
20. Ibid., 8:288-89. In this setting, the Conference defined sincerity as “a constant disposition to use all the grace given.” The Conference’s judgments about sincerity and justification, then, remind one of Wesley’s teaching that “a person can be saved if he will, but not when he will.”
22. Ibid., 1:258.
23. Ibid. Observe that the servants of God are awakened, but they see not a God of love, but One of wrath. It is, therefore, important not to confuse the issue of awakening with regeneration (and conversion).
24. Baker, Letters, 25:575. Also note that although Wesley eventually made the distinctions between freedom from the guilt (justification), power (regeneration), and the being (entire sanctification) of sin, as evidenced in his sermon On Sin in Believers, he continually maintained that even a babe in Christ has freedom from the power of sin. Cf. Outler, Sermons, 1:314 ff.
26. Ibid., p. 89.
27. Ibid., pp. 68-69.
29. In his sermon, “Free Grace,” written on April 29, 1739, Wesley argues that “the assurance of faith which these enjoy excludes all doubt and fear.” However, by the end of the year, as Heitzenrater aptly notes, this emphasis was gone. Cf. Outler, Sermons, 3:550 and Heitzenrater, “Great Expectations,” p. 81.
30. Earlier, in June 1738, Wesley had been thrown “into much perplexity,” by a letter which maintained that “no doubting could consist with the least degree of true faith; that whoever at any time felt any doubt or fear was not weak in faith, but had no faith at all.” Such a claim so disturbed Wesley that he immediately engaged in a round of bibliography and hit upon 1 Cor. 3:1ff, a passage which soothed his mind—at least for the time being. Cf. Ward, Journals, 18:254.
32. Jackson, Wesley’s Works, 8:276. The biblical evidence to which the Conference of 1744 appealed in substantiation of its position included the following: Romans 8:15; Ephesians 4:32; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Hebrews 8:10; and 1 John 4:10, 19.
35. Ibid. Bracketed material is mine.
37. Ibid., 26:246. Emphasis is mine. In an earlier letter to “John Smith” Wesley had main-
tained that "Every one that is born of God, and doth not commit sin, by his very actions saith, 'Our Father which art in heaven'; the Spirit itself bearing witness with their spirit that they are the children of God." Cf. ibid., 26:232.

38. Ibid., 26:254-55. Emphasis is mine. It is also interesting to note that Wesley's thinking on the issue of assurance and real Christianity led him to conclude that "the Apostles themselves had not the proper Christian faith (since they lacked the witness of the Spirit; at the very least) till after the day of Pentecost." Such a conclusion undermines the argument, often made by some Holiness scholars, that the Apostles were "real Christians" prior to the resurrection of Christ such that Pentecost represents their entire sanctification! Cf. Jackson, Wesley's Works, 8:291. Notice also that Wesley in commenting on Acts 1:5 reveals that all true believers, not simply the entirely sanctified, have been baptized with the Spirit: "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost—and so are all true believers to the end of the world." Cf. John Wesley, Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament (Salem, Ohio: Schmoll Publishers), p. 275.


40. Ibid., p. 21.


42. Part of the problem with some contemporary assessments of Wesley's doctrine of regeneration is that the Methodist leader's understanding of the degrees of this work of grace is misconstrued with the result that regeneration is linked, at its minimum, not with the new birth, as it should be, but with prevenient grace. Here the concept of regeneration becomes so broad that it even includes the initial restoring activity of grace, the awakening of faculties, in terms of unrepentant sinners. To illustrate, Randy Maddox, who is typical of this scholarship, writes: "Wesley came to emphasize that there was a crucial degree of regeneration prior to the New Birth: the universal nascent regenerating effect of prevenient grace." John Wesley, on the other hand, though he did indeed postulate degrees of regeneration, linked its lowest degree not with prevenient grace, as is sometimes supposed, but with the new birth and with power over sin—characteristics which do not typify the unawakened sinner. Cf. Randy L. Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1994), p. 159.


45. Wesley, NT Notes, p. 188. See also Wesley's notes on Rom. 14:17 where he indicates that "true religion does not consist in external observances; but in righteousness, the image of God stamped on the heart..." Cf. ibid., p. 401.

46. Ibid. For an excellent treatment of the cruciality of inward religion in terms of the dispositions and temperaments of the heart (as well as their soteriological significance) cf. Gregory S. Clapper, John Wesley on Religious Affections: His View on Experience and Emotion and their Role in the Christian Life and Theology (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1989); and "Orthodordia: The Practical Theology of John Wesley's Heart Religion," Quarterly Review 10 (Spring 1990): 49-66.

47. Telford, Letters, 4:103. Emphasis is mine. For a treatment of John Wesley's doctrines of


49. Ibid., 21:481. Compare this with Wesley's letter to the editor of *Lloyd's Evening Post* on March 26, 1767, where he links being a 'true Methodist' with real Christianity: 'These are the principles and practices of our sect; these are the marks of a true Methodist (i.e. a true Christian, as I immediately after explain myself.' Ward, *Journals*, 22:72.


52. Ibid., 1:436.


55. Ibid., 4:120. Moreover, in *A Plain Account of the People called Methodists* Wesley maintains that the Methodists had one point in view, namely, 'to be altogether, scriptural, rational Christians.' Cf. Telford, *Letters*, 5:153-54.

56. Ibid., 5:137.

57. Ibid., 4:263-64.

58. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishers), p. 646. In this commentary on Jude, Wesley also defines a servant in a second sense as one who has the spirit of adoption, but note that this is a definition which is rarely used and is not the one which forms the first prong of the distinction the faith of a servant/the faith of a son since only the latter prong is marked by the spirit of adoption. Cf. Wesley, *Notes*, p. 646.

59. Ibid., p. 304.

60. Ibid.


65. See Wesley's notes on 1 John 4:19 where he points out that "This is the sum of all religion, the genuine model of Christianity," in Wesley, *NT Notes*, p. 638.

66. Ward, *Journals*, 21:286. This journal entry is actually a part of a letter which Wesley sent to the Editor of *Lloyd's Evening Post* in order to offer a defense of Methodism.


68. Baker, *Letters*, 26:575. Observe, however, that Wesley slipped back into his all or nothing language a few years later in 1759 when he wrote: "Is He not still striving with you? Striving to make you not almost but altogether a Christian? Indeed, you must be all or nothing—a saint or a devil, eminent in sin or holiness!" Cf. Telford, *Letters*, 4:52.

69. Ibid. Emphasis is mine.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

that, in this context, there are echoes of Luther's *pro me* description of his own faith. For evidence concerning the several distinctions which Wesley made in terms of assurance (full assurance of faith, full assurance of hope, etc.) cf. Telford, *Letters*, 2:385, 3:161; Wesley *NT Notes*, pp. 575, 632, and 638; Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 9:32, and Davies, *Studies*, 9:375-76.

73. Telford, *Letters*, 3:163. Emphasis is mine. Nevertheless, not even this significant exception undermined Wesley's strong association of real Christianity and assurance. Indeed, a month later, in March 1756, Wesley wrote to Richard Tompson: "My belief in general is this—that every Christian believer has a divine conviction of his reconciliation with God." Cf. Telford, *Letters*, 3:174. See also Wesley's letter to Mr. Tompson on February 6, 1756.

74. Ibid., 5:358. Bracketed material is mine.


76. This sermon, in part, reads: "In the moment we are justified by the grace of God...we are also born of the Spirit." Cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 2:187.


79. The real distinction in Wesley's soteriology is not between a narrow and a general sense of justification, but between "acceptance" and "justification." Accordingly, the problem with Kisker's interpretation, and others like it, is that it does not interpret "acceptance" in relation to its pastoral context, as it should be (that those to whom this term was applied were on the way to justification and regeneration and therefore should not be discouraged); instead, it views "acceptance" in terms of Wesley's theological context of justification, regeneration and other normative doctrines. This is a subtle shift, to be sure, but no less important for its subtext. Its consequence, again, is to undermine holiness.


84. Cf. Wesley, *Notes*, p. 379. Wesley points out that although this believer is "sincerely...striving to serve God, to have spoken this of himself [Paul], or any true believer, would have been foreign to the whole scope of his discourse...."

85. Maddox, "Continuing," p. 238. Bracketed material is mine. Oddly enough, Maddox apparently renounces the connection between justification and regeneration at the end of this piece by rejecting my call for a "conjoined experience of initial justification and regeneration." If this is the case, Maddox's position would then face the same prospects of antinomianism as does Kisker's. Cf. p. 241.

86. To highlight the instantaneous aspect of the new birth Wesley draws an analogy with natural birth: "In like manner, a child is born of God in a short time, if not in a moment." But when he underscores the instantaneous element of entire sanctification, he appeals not to the image of birth but of death: "And if sin cease before death, there must, in the nature of the thing, be an instantaneous change; there must be a last moment wherein it does not exist, and a first moment wherein it does not." Cf. Outler, *Sermons*, 2:198, and Jackson, *Wesley's Works*, 8:329.
42. Ward, Journals, 22:357.
87. Telford, Letters, 6:31. Emphasis is mine. As is also characteristic of this period, Wesley asked Ms. Cummins if she had “power over all sin.” See also Wesley’s journal of March 17, 1772 for an example of his ongoing use of the distinction almost/ altogether Christians; his entry of August 12, 1772 for the use of the term “notional” believers; and his letter to Patience Ellison in 1777 where he links the distinction between almost/altogether Christian with being an outside/inside Christian. Cf. Ward, Journals, 22:311 and 22:345, and Telford, Letters, 6:274.
88. Outler, Sermons, 2:467. Bracketed material represents a change of verbal form.
90. Ibid., 4:175. Bracketed material is mine.
91. Ward, Journals, 22:367. In this same year, Wesley was not beyond calling the Christianity of Henry VIII, Oliver Cromwell and even a pope (Sextus Quintus) into account. Cf. Ward, Journals, 22:384. For an additional reference to Wesley’s association of real Christianity with having the mind of Christ cf. Outler, Sermons, 2:467.
92. Telford, Letters, 6:201. Bracketed material is mine. Oddly enough, during this period, some people were deprecating inward transformation and placed all their emphasis on social change. Wesley responded to this impoverishment of Christianity in his following observation: “That the regulation of social life is the one end of religion is a strange position indeed. I never imagined any but a Deist would affirm this.” Cf. Telford, Letters, 6:205.
93. Ibid., 6:326-27.
97. Outler, Sermons, 3:452-453. See also Wesley’s “Thoughts on a Late Phenomenon,” where he reveals that the goal of the Oxford Methodists was to be “scriptural Christians.” Cf. Davies, Societies, 9:553.
99. Outler, Sermons, 4:49. Observe, in this late period, that Wesley links the faith of a servant not with the Christian faith but with Jewish (or legal) faith.
100. Ibid., 4:121-22. Emphasis is mine. Though Wesley distanced himself from the English Moravians in terms of their association of continual joy with the new birth, the elderly Wesley apparently reverted back to such a linkage, at least on some level, as evidenced by his following remarks to his niece Sarah Wesley in 1790: “Perpetual cheerfulness is the temper of a Christian... Real Christians know it is their duty to maintain this, which is in one sense to rejoice evermore.” Cf. Telford, Letters, 8:234.
101. Ibid., 3:152. Note #40.
102. Ibid., 3:262.
106. Ibid., 1:137.
107. Ibid., 1:139.
110. Ibid., 3:266.

111. Naturally, if a change is made in terms of what constitutes an altogether Christian, this indirectly affects what it means to be an almost Christian. Nevertheless, the basic characteristics which Wesley employs to describe almost Christians hardly change. The real changes lie elsewhere. Cf. Outler, Sermons, 1:131-37.


113. Ibid.


115. Ibid., 3:130. Observe that Wesley reveals in the notion that the Methodist societies build on a "broad foundation," for he notes in his journal that these societies require of their members "no conformity either in opinions or modes of worship, but barely this one thing, to fear God, and work righteousness." Now if "fearing God and working righteousness," is the foundation of the Methodist societies, then this cannot be the proper Christian faith, otherwise Wesley would be requiring those who entered the Methodist societies to be Christians before they entered or to become Christians immediately thereafter in order to continue in the society—thereby putting the power to become a Christian in human hands, essentially equating it with the decision to enter or remain in a particular religious society. Cf. Curnock, Journal, 8:5.

Moreover, this constitutes Wesley's "narrow" use of the phrase "fear God and worketh righteousness." For the "broad use" of this phrase, where Wesley ties it to the "exceptional cases" noted in the earlier chart, cf. Telford, Letters, 5:262-63; Outler, Sermons, 2:543, 3:130.


117. Telford, Letters, 7:157. Albert Outler, however, pushes these tensions in the other direction and concludes that Wesley's mature understanding of degrees of faith "comes closer to an explicit statement of his vision of universal saving grace than anything else in the Wesley corpus." My own position, on the other hand, highlights the universality of grace (like Outler), but then goes on to note that not all grace is saving grace; that is, preventive grace must not be mistaken for redeeming grace. Cf. Outler, Sermons, 3:491.

118. Ibid., 5:95.

119. Outler, Sermons, 3:497-98. The first emphasis is mine.

120. Ibid., 4:35.

121. For two important references to Wesley's doctrine of full assurance, cf. Outler, Sermons, 3:549, and 4:36.

122. Ibid., 2:385. Emphasis is mine.

123. Telford, Letters, 7:361-62. Wesley's response to Mr. Fleury, who had claimed that Wesley pretended to extraordinary inspiration, was to associate the witness of the Spirit (assurance) as vital to the Christian faith: "I pretend to no other inspiration than that which is common to all real Christians, without which no one can be a Christian at all." Cf. Davies, Societies, 9:392.


125. Robert Southey, The Life of John Wesley (New York: W. B. Gilley, 1820), 1:258. Emphasis is mine. That Wesley maintains that assurance is the common privilege of the sons and daughters of God suggests that it is rare when assurance, marked by doubt and fear, does not soon follow the new birth.

126. Maddox, Aldersgate, p. 145.
