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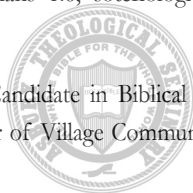
*The Good Work of Justification, Sanctification, and Glorification:  
John Wesley's Soteriological Explanation of Philippians 1:6*

**Abstract**

Numerous scholars have described John Wesley's use of scripture as soteriological in orientation. This article discusses how this soteriological hermeneutic is present in Wesley's explanatory note on Phil 1:6, a well-known Pauline text. The article highlights how Wesley's brief note on this beloved text can provide readers with an entry point into a discussion of three theological themes Wesley held dear, the themes of justification, sanctification, and glorification. In this way, Wesley's explanation of Phil 1:6 presents Wesleyans with a convenient way of reflecting on both Wesleyan hermeneutics and Wesleyan theology.

**Key Words:** Wesley, Philippians 1:6, soteriological interpretation, justification, sanctification

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## Introduction

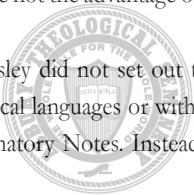
Few biblical texts are as familiar or as cherished as the one found in the sixth verse of the first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians. During the year following my graduation from college I committed the New International Version translation of Phil 1:6 to memory because I, like numerous believers before me, found myself in a season of life in which I wanted to be reminded of God's sovereign lordship over my past, present, and future. That version of this beloved text reads this way: "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."<sup>1</sup> Throughout the ages Christians have turned to these words and found in them a promise from God, a word from the Lord about God's unshakeable faithfulness to accomplish that which God has started in and among God's people.

My purpose in this article is to discuss how this beloved text was interpreted by the famous eighteenth century British preacher and evangelist John Wesley in his celebrated Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament. Wesley's short explanatory note upon this well-known Pauline text underscores what Robert W. Wall (echoing many others) has described as Wesley's "soteriological use of Scripture" (Wall, 2004:51-52).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Wesley's brief explanation of Phil 1:6 can provide readers with an entry point into a discussion of three of the grand theological themes that Wesley held dear, the themes of justification, sanctification, and glorification. For each of these reasons, Wesley's explanation of Phil 1:6 presents Wesleyans with a convenient way of reflecting on both Wesleyan hermeneutics and Wesleyan theology.

### **Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament: An Introduction***

John Wesley was born in 1703 and died in 1791. In the year 1755 at the age of 52 one of his most enduring works, his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament was published. In the preface to this work Wesley provides his readers with a plain account of how the project came to be and who his intended audience is. Wesley begins the preface with a word about his motivation for creating the work: "For many years I have had a desire of setting down and laying together, what has occurred to my mind, either in reading, thinking, or conversation, which might assist serious persons, who have not the advantage of learning, in understanding the New Testament" (1847:3).

In other words, Wesley did not set out to write a biblical commentary for people with facility in biblical languages or with ecclesiastical training when he considered creating his Explanatory Notes. Instead, as he explains further in the preface:



It will be easily discerned, even from what I have said already, and much more from the notes themselves, that they were not principally designed for men of learning; who are provided with many other helps: and much less for men of long and deep experience in the ways and word of God. I desire to sit at their feet, and to learn of them. But I write chiefly for plain unlettered men, who understand only their mother tongue, and yet reverence and love the word of God, and have a desire to save their souls. (1847:3)

It is clear from these comments at the very beginning of this great work that the primary aims of the author of the Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament were not historical or critical, but soteriological and pastoral. Wesley crafted this work for people who loved God, who held the Bible in high esteem and wanted to study it more so that their relationship with God would be deepened as a result. These Bible study helps were designed for “plain unlettered” people who “have not the advantage of learning” and “understand only their mother tongue.” This intended audience and motivation for the whole project must be kept firmly in view by anyone who turns to the Explanatory Notes for biblical insight, but this is perhaps especially the case for biblical scholars trained in higher-critical hermeneutical methodologies. Such people are not the ones Wesley is interested in engaging in this work, nor is he interested in the same kinds of results they typically seek when they employ diachronic and synchronic interpretive methods. Rather, this work is purposed toward those whom Wesley refers to later in the preface as “the ordinary reader,” i.e., the layperson who wants to study the Bible for the benefit of their own walk with God (1847:4).

However, as the quote above from Wesley indicates, Wesley did engage with “men of learning” as he created the Explanatory Notes. His “desire to sit at their feet, and learn of them” is evident throughout the work, and in the preface he identifies precisely who these “men of learning” are who have influenced his explanations. Wesley makes reference to four works he consulted in the creation of the Explanatory Notes, chief among them being the work of “Bengelius,” aka Johann Albrecht Bengel, the great German NT text critic and exegete. Wesley acknowledges this dependence on and high esteem for Bengel in the preface:

I once designed to write down barely what occurred to my own mind, consulting none but the inspired writers. But no sooner was I acquainted with that great light of the Christian world, (lately gone to his reward,) Bengelius, than I entirely changed my design, being thoroughly convinced it might be of more service to the cause of religion, were I barely to translate his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, than to write many volumes upon it. Many of his excellent notes I have therefore translated.

Many more I have abridged, omitting that part which was purely critical, and giving the substance of the rest (1847:4).

In addition to Bengel, Wesley acknowledges a debt to three other scholars for his notes: “Dr. Heylyn’s Theological Lectures: and for many more to Dr. Guyse, and to the Family Expositor of the late pious and learned Dr. Doddridge” (1847:4).<sup>3</sup> Wesley draws from each of these four works, but especially that of Bengel, in order to assist the ordinary reader of the NT with their understanding of scripture. Still, as Gerald Bray rightly notes, “his dependence on J. A. Bengel is obvious, though his own theological interests should not be understated” (1996:235).

The influence of Wesley’s own theological interests on his Explanatory Notes may be nowhere more noticeable than in his note upon Phil 1:6. I will give attention to that note in due course, but before I do it might be helpful to provide the reader with a brief overview of the major interpretive options that have been proposed for this celebrated text throughout the history of its interpretation. This overview will show that Wesley’s interpretation of this text is not the only interpretation available, and may therefore give us a clearer picture of how his own theological interests have influenced his explanation of it.

### Major Interpretive Options for Phil 1:6

Many biblical interpreters have undertaken to give an account of Paul’s familiar words in Phil 1:6. For the past 300 years or so most of these interpreters have approached this text with a different set of motivations and for the benefit of a different audience than that acknowledged by Wesley in the preface to his Explanatory Notes. Seeking above all to discover what Paul himself meant when he (or his amanuensis) scribed the words *ergon agathon*, “good work,” and to discern how these two words might have been understood in their first century context by “all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi” (Phil 1:1), modern interpreters have come up with no less than ten different ways of understanding the meaning of “good work” in this verse. These ten interpretive options have been outlined by John Reumann in his Anchor Yale Bible commentary on Philippians (2008:113-14). Some of these options present very slight nuances on the other options, with the result that most interpreters have only seriously entertained three major options for the interpretation of “good work.”

A first interpretive option might be termed the “financial” or “material” view. For this option, the “good work” in Phil 1:6 is understood to refer specifically to the financial support or material aid that the Philippians provided for Paul and

his ministry. One Philippians commentator who adopted this view is Gerald F. Hawthorne, whose position was that any interpretation other than this constituted a shaking loose of these words from their epistolary context:

What God started Paul describes as [*ergon agathon*] (“a good work”), a phrase that cannot be shaken loose from its immediate context and interpreted primarily in terms of “God’s redeeming and renewing work” in the lives of the Philippians...Rather [*ergon agathon*] finds its explanation in the fact that the Philippians were partners with Paul in the gospel (v 5), and shared their resources with him to make the proclamation of the gospel possible. This “sharing in the gospel” is the good work referred to here (cf. 2 Cor 8:6)... Other interpretations of v 6 such as those that apply its words to “a more comprehensive work of grace in the hearts of believers (in general), affecting both (their) inner disposition and (their) outward activity” (Müller), must be considered secondary interpretations to that given above. The context does not permit any of them to be primary. (1983:21-22)

Interpreting “good work” in this way, in terms of the Philippians’ material support for Paul and his ministry, reckons seriously with what interpreters universally recognize as a basic reason for Paul’s writing this epistle: to thank the Philippians for the gifts they sent to him through their messenger Epaphroditus as Paul experiences detainment (2:25-30; 4:15-18). On this interpretation, Paul is confident of this: that God, who began the good work of impressing upon the Philippians to give material help to Paul in his time of need, will continue to inspire the Philippians to share generously with him until the Parousia, the day of Christ Jesus, which Paul believed would arrive in his own lifetime. Up until that watershed event, Paul is confident that God will keep moving on the Philippians to “shar[e] with [him] in the matter of giving and receiving” (Phil 4:15).<sup>4</sup>

A second interpretive option might be titled the “creational” or “intertextual” view. Those who adopt this perspective read the “good work” in Phil 1:6 as a deliberate echo on the part of Paul to the creation accounts of Genesis. Throughout those accounts creation is acknowledged as “good” (1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), and on the seventh day it is noted that God finished “the work” [*ta erga* LXX] of creation and “rested from all the work [*ton ergon* LXX] that he had done in creation” (Gen 2:2-3 NRSV). A Philippians commentator who interpreted “good work” in Phil 1:6 as primarily echoing God’s creational activity is Ralph P. Martin. After acknowledging the financial interpretation as a possibility, Marin ultimately discounted it:

[M]uch more likely is the view that Paul is supplying a theological undergirding to his confidence that the Philippian church will be preserved to the end-time, the day of Jesus Christ. He is led to this consideration by reflecting on how the church began on the first day and this work of God is described in a way which recalls Yahweh's creation...Moreover, Yahweh's work was pronounced 'very good' (Gen 1:31). Paul knows the OT teaching which unites God's work in the beginning with his purpose to bring it to consummation (e.g., Isa 48:12f.); and he applies this to a community which needs reassurance in the face of threats and fears (1:28, 29). (1976:65-66)

Interpreting “good work” in Phil 1:6 in terms of God’s good work of creation takes seriously the new creation language Paul uses in other letters (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). This interpretive option reads Paul in Phil 1:6 as suggesting that he is confident that God, who began the good work of creation, will bring this good work to its consummation at the day of Christ Jesus and into the new creation.<sup>5</sup>

A third major interpretive option could be labeled the “soteriological” view. This option takes the “good work” in Phil 1:6 to refer to the work of salvation God has initiated and is carrying on to completion in and among the Philippians. In other words, the “good work” is soteriological and spiritually formative in nature. Among the many Philippians commentators who have taken up this option is Ben Witherington III. Witherington comments:

V. 6 focuses on the process of internal sanctification, which will not be completed until they see Christ face-to-face, having a resurrection body like his. Only then will the full process of physical, moral, and spiritual maturation be complete and perfected. Paul makes a deliberate shift from v. 5 to v. 6, from a focus on the Philippians' good work to God's good work still in process in them. The connection is that the generosity of the Philippian is evidence that God is indeed at work in them individually and among them as a group. The sanctification work needs to be complete “by” the day of Christ Jesus, that is, by the time he returns. And God will not stop working until that day arrives. (2011:61)

According to the soteriological view, which is the view most commonly adopted in some form by biblical exegetes, Paul is confident that God, the one who began the good work of salvation in the individual lives of the Philippians and/or among the Philippian Jesus community will continue this salvific, sanctifying work and bring it to its glorious completion by the Parousia. This view typically sees the Philippians' material support for Paul not as the good work itself, but as one very good piece of evidence among many that God's larger work of sanctification is taking place

in and among them. God, the one who initiated this good work, will be faithful to complete it.<sup>6</sup>

Among these three major interpretive options for “good work” in Phil 1:6, John Wesley’s explanation upon this text clearly belongs with the soteriological option. Those familiar with Wesley should not be surprised to learn that this is the case. For a closer look at Wesley’s soteriological explanation of this beloved text we now turn our attention to his explanatory note itself.

### John Wesley’s Soteriological Explanation of Phil 1:6

Wesley’s full explanatory note on Phil 1:6 reads as follows: “6. Being persuaded—The grounds of which persuasion are set down in the following verse; that he who hath begun a good work in you, will perfect it until the day of Christ—That he, who having justified hath begun to sanctify you, will carry on this work until it issue in glory” (1847:506, emphasis in original). Three observations about this brief explanation are especially noteworthy for our purposes.

First, the italicized biblical text Wesley is working from here deviates slightly from the King James Version (hereafter KJV) that served as his base text for the Explanatory Notes. Wesley provided an explanation concerning the English textual basis for his work in the preface to the Explanatory Notes:

I design first to set down the text itself, for the most part, in the common English translation [i.e. the KJV], which is, in general, (so far as I can judge) abundantly the best that I have seen. Yet I do not say it is incapable of being brought, in several places, nearer to the original. Neither will I affirm, that the Greek copies from which this translation was made, are always the most correct. And therefore I shall take the liberty, as occasion may require, to make here and there a small alteration. (1847:3)

For Phil 1:6 Wesley made three such small alterations to the KJV text. First, he substituted the word “persuaded” for the KJV word “confident.” Second, Wesley slightly altered the KJV phrase “he which hath begun” to “he who hath begun.” These two changes are indeed small.

The third change, however, might be more substantive. Whereas the KJV text reads “will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ,” Wesley’s text has “will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ.” This alteration of the word “perform” to the word “perfect” might simply be explained as an attempt on Wesley’s part to bring the KJV “nearer to the original” with respect to the Greek word *epizēleō* used by Paul. However, given Wesley’s strong emphasis on the doctrine of Christian perfection throughout his writings, students of Wesley would surely not

be blamed for at least entertaining the possibility that this alteration might have been additionally motivated by Wesley's own theological interests. It is possible that Wesley remodeled the KJV text of Phil 1:6 at this point because he saw here an opportunity to give a nod to one of the central themes of his theology.<sup>7</sup>

A second observation about Wesley's explanatory note on Phil 1:6 that is noteworthy is how it is both similar to and different from the comment of Bengel on this same verse. As noted above, Wesley's dependence on Bengel throughout the Explanatory Notes is obvious. One example of just how obvious that dependence is may be seen by comparing the remarks of both commentators on Phil 1:4 just prior to those on v. 6. Here is Bengel's full comment on v. 4 in the English translation of his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*:

4. For—Construe with making request. With joy—The sum of the epistle is, I rejoice, rejoice ye. This epistle on joy aptly follows that to the Ephesians, where love reigns; for joy is constantly mentioned, ver. 18, etc. likewise ch. ii. 2, 19, 28, iii. 1, iv. 1, 4. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy. Joy particularly animates prayers. Request—Just mentioned. (1981:425; emphasis in original)

Compare Wesley's Explanatory Note:

4. With joy—After the Epistle to the Ephesians, wherein love reigns, follows this, wherein there is perpetual mention of joy. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy—And joy peculiarly enlivens prayer. The sum of the whole epistle is, I rejoice. Rejoice ye. (1847:506; emphasis in original)

Such clear, nearly verbatim dependence upon Bengel is a regular happenstance throughout Wesley's Explanatory Notes, so it is worth paying attention when Wesley deviates from Bengel, even if only slightly. In the case of his note on Phil 1:6, Wesley's explanation is similar to Bengel's in that Bengel also opts for a soteriological understanding of the "good work" referred to in the text. In fact, because both interpreters read the text soteriologically, one is justified in pondering why Wesley didn't simply translate Bengel's Latin and get on with his explanatory notes upon v. 7.

Bengel's comment on the "good work" of v. 6 is short and to the point: "A good work—God's one great and perpetual work of salvation, ch. ii. 13" (1981:425). In other words, Bengel interprets the text as a statement about the good work of salvation God has begun and will be faithful to complete, the same work of salvation Paul alludes to again later in the epistle when we writes, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act



in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:12-13). The soteriological interpretation of “good work” given here by Bengel seems to be one that would typically have met with Wesley’s satisfaction.

Wesley does indeed join Bengel in interpreting the text soteriologically, but Wesley’s soteriological interpretation deviates from Bengel’s in ways that lead one to believe that Wesley might have thought Bengel’s explanation did not quite say enough. Wesley did not join Bengel in the simple acknowledging that the “good work” in Phil 1:6 refers to God’s good work of salvation, nor did Wesley echo Bengel’s cross-reference to Phil 2:13. Instead, Wesley used his explanatory note to get a bit more specific about what God’s salvific good work entails.

This leads to the third noteworthy observation about Wesley’s brief explanation of “good work” in Phil 1:6. Apparently not satisfied with a highly generalized soteriological reading represented by some interpreters, Wesley devoted the space of his explanatory note on this text to laying out what amounts to a more specific *ordo salutis* for God’s salvific work. That is to say, Wesley reads Paul here as being persuaded specifically of God’s trustworthiness to perfect the good work of justification and sanctification begun in the believer, which will finally result in the glorification of the believer at the day of Jesus Christ. In other words, for Wesley, the “good work” of Phil 1:6 is threefold: God’s good work of justification, God’s good work of sanctification, and God’s good work of glorification in the life of the Christian.

I noted in the introduction to this article that by explaining the “good work” of Phil 1:6 in this way, Wesley’s brief note on this verse provides readers with a convenient entry point into a discussion of these three great themes in Wesley’s theology. The remainder of this article will be devoted to a brief reflection on these themes, in the order that Wesley presents them in his Phil 1:6 explanatory note.

### **“He, Who Having Justified”: The Good Work of Justification**

According to Wesley, in Phil 1:6 the Bible indicates that God will perfect the good work God has begun in the believer, a good work that began with the believer first being “justified” by God. Charles Yrigoyen Jr. lists “justification by faith” as one of “six main themes” that “are central to Wesley’s preaching and writing” (1996:28-33).<sup>8</sup> What did Wesley mean when he preached and wrote on this theme?

In 1746 Wesley published in volume one of his *Sermons on Several Occasions* a sermon he probably first preached eight years prior on May 28, 1738 at the chapel in Long Acre, London. The sermon is simply entitled “Justification by Faith.”<sup>9</sup> In this sermon, which “stands as the earliest full summary of the basic

form of Wesley's mature soteriology" (Outler and Heitzenrater, 1991:111), Wesley preached a four-point message from Rom 4:5 on (1) "the general ground for this whole doctrine of justification," (2) "what justification is," (3) "who they are that are justified," and (4) "on what terms they are justified" (Wesley, 1991:112). In response to the question of "what justification is" Wesley answered:

The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins. It is that act of God the Father whereby, for the sake of propitiation made by the blood of his Son, he 'showeth forth his righteousness (or mercy) by the remission of the sins that are past'...To him that is justified or forgiven God 'will not impute sin' to his condemnation. He will not condemn him on that account either in this world or in that world to come. His sins, all his past sins, in thought, word, and deed, 'are covered', are blotted out; shall not be remembered or mentioned against him, and more than if they had not been. God will not inflict on that sinner what he deserves to suffer, because the Son of his love hath suffered for him. And from the time we are 'accepted through the Beloved', 'reconciled to God through his blood', he loves and blesses and watches over us for good, even as if we had never sinned. (1991:115)

This answer to the question, "What is justification?" indicates that for Wesley, God's good work of justification corresponds with God's act of forgiving a person of their sins and thus not condemning them for those sins. A propitiation for sins has been made by means of the death of Jesus, resulting in the removal of the suffering God would otherwise have inflicted on the unjustified sinner, who, upon being justified, no longer has their sins "imputed" to them. "For Wesley then, justification, quite simply, means pardon, the forgiveness of past sins" (Collins, 1997:90).<sup>10</sup>

In light of this understanding of the doctrine of justification, Thomas C. Oden recognizes that "this is the doctrine that places Wesleyan teaching close to the heart of the magisterial Reformation—Luther, Calvin, Reformed, and contemporary evangelical teaching" (2012:72). So also Timothy J. Crutcher notes that as far as the *ordo salutis* is concerned, "the priority Wesley gives to justification marks him as a Protestant" (2015:151). Whether Paul himself meant by justification what the classic Reformers interpreted him to mean is of course hotly contested, taking a center seat on the stage of the so-called "new perspective on Paul" debate.<sup>11</sup> Whatever Paul meant, Wesley himself appears to have meant basically what the Reformers meant by "justification by faith." Pardon, forgiveness, and acquittal for sins committed constitutes the first step in the good work God has begun and will carry on to completion in the believer until the day of Christ Jesus, the one whose atoning death makes justification possible.

### **“Hath Begun to Sanctify You”: The Good Work of Sanctification**

Having justified the believer, God has also “begun to sanctify” the believer as part of the good work God has begun and will be faithful to bring to completion. Although justification in Wesley may be understood in terms of “initial sanctification,” Wesley also understood sanctification as a next phase in the order of salvation.<sup>12</sup> Wesley distinguishes between justification and sanctification in his 1785 sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation”:

By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God: by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God. All experience, as well as scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified...it gradually increases from that moment, as a ‘grain of mustard seed, which at first is the least of all seeds, but gradually ‘puts forth large branches’, and becomes a great tree; till in another instant the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we ‘grow up in all things into him that is our head’, ‘till we attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’ (1991:488-89)

In Wesley’s view, God’s good work of sanctification in the life of the believer begins at the moment of justification when the believer is forgiven of their sin, and gradually continues on as the believer grows and matures in the faith. This is what is meant by the language of “holiness of heart and life” and “Christian perfection” in Wesley’s writing and preaching. Yrigoyen explains that for Wesley this “holiness” or “sanctification” had two main aspects: (1) “inward holiness [which] involves total commitment to God, singleness of intention, centering one’s life completely on God” and (2) “outward holiness [which] entails the manner in which we show our love for God in our love for neighbors, remembering that the neighbor is anyone and everyone else” (1996:37). Inward and outward holiness, holiness of heart and life, Christian perfection, sanctification—this, in Wesley’s view, is included in the good work God has begun and will carry on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

### **“Will Carry On This Work Till it Issue in Glory”: The Good Work of Glorification**

Finally, Wesley explains Phil 1:6 as a statement about God’s good work in the life of the believer which God will faithfully carry on until it issues in glorification. What Wesley might have included in God’s good work of glorification

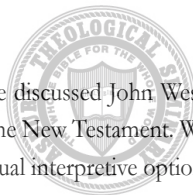
does not figure as prominently in his works as what he articulated concerning justification and sanctification. One place we might turn for clues about what “glory” for him entailed is to another sermon, this one based on Rev 21:5 and entitled “The New Creation.” Wesley concluded that sermon with one of the finest rhetorical flourishes to be found anywhere among his writings:

But the most glorious of all will be the change which then will take place on the poor, sinful, miserable children of men. These had fallen in many respects, as from a greater height, so into a lower depth than any other part of the creation. But they shall hear a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be their God.’ Hence will arise an unmixed state of holiness and happiness far superior to that which Adam enjoyed in paradise...As there will be no more death, and no more pain or sickness preparatory thereto; as there will be no more grieving for or parting with friends; so there will be no more sorrow or crying. Nay, but there will be a greater deliverance than all this; for there will be no more sin. And to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him (1991:500)!

In this moving end to a sermon with a strong eschatological orientation, Wesley leaves a few crumbs for later readers to pick up on their way to grasping what he might have included among God’s good work of glorification. For Wesley, “glory” involves an eschatological transforming of previously fallen persons, and glorification from his perspective “finds its fullest reality in the eschatological recreation of all things” (Maddox, 1994:190). God’s new creation for transformed persons will include an atmosphere of “unmixed state of holiness and happiness” surpassing even the one found in Eden. In “glory” sin will be no more and the incomparable joy of unbroken fellowship with the Triune God will be the reality in which God’s people dwell. Wesley explains Phil 1:6 as a word of apostolic persuasion of this very thing: that the God who began the good work of justification, having begun also to sanctify God’s people, will carry on this work until it issues in a glorious new creation reality for the poor, sinful, miserable children of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article I have discussed John Wesley’s explanation of Phil 1:6 in his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament. We have seen that Wesley did not adopt the material or intertextual interpretive options that some who followed him



would adopt in their interpretation of this beloved Pauline text. Instead, Wesley joined the majority who have assigned Paul's language about "good work" in Phil 1:6 a soteriological meaning. This should come as no surprise since Wesley routinely operates with a soteriological hermeneutic as he interprets biblical texts.

What distinguishes Wesley from many who opt for a soteriological understanding of "good work" in Phil 1:6 is how his explanation highlights the theological themes of justification, sanctification, and glorification. Departing from Bengel's more generalized soteriological reading of this familiar verse, Wesley explains Phil 1:6 in a way that is at least in keeping with his own theological interests, if not altogether influenced by them. In light of this, Wesley's brief note on this cherished text can provide Wesleyans with a convenient point of entry into a larger discussion of important theological themes in Wesleyan theology.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, biblical references in this article are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of Wesley's soteriological hermeneutic see R. Larry Shelton, "John Wesley's Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16.1 (Spring 1981): 38-39; George Lyons, "Hermeneutical Bases for Theology: Higher Criticism and the Wesleyan Interpreter," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18.1 (Spring 1983): 71; Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 135-139; Troy W. Martin, "John Wesley's Exegetical Orientation: East or West?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 26.1 (Spring 1991): 112; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 15-25; Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995), 104-127; Timothy J. Crutcher, *John Wesley: His Life and Thought* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2015), 85-86.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Wesley's dependence in the Explanatory Notes on the Gnomon Novi Testamenti by Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Theological Lectures* by John Heylyn, *The Practical Expositor* by John Guyse, and *The Family Expositor* by Philip Doddridge see Robin Scroggs, "John Wesley as Biblical Scholar," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 28.4 (1960): 417-418.

<sup>4</sup> For scholars who acknowledge some sort of connection between Phil 1:6 and the material support the Philippians have provided for Paul see the ones cited in John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, *Anchor Yale Bible 33B* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 114.

<sup>5</sup> For scholars who acknowledge some sort of connection between Phil 1:6 and the work of God in creation see the ones cited in Reumann, 2008:113.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars who opt for a soteriological interpretation of Phil 1:6 (with various nuances) include Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians: 40th Anniversary Edition*, trans. James W. Leitch, introductory essays by Bruce L. McCormack and Francis B. Watson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 17; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 86-87; Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, *Black's New Testament Commentary XI* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 61-62; Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 46; Dean Flemming, *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), 53-54. Joseph H. Hellerman, *Philippians, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 25.

<sup>7</sup> For Wesley's emphasis on Christian perfection see Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings Volume 2: Christ and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 248-257 and the primary literature cited there. See also Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972), 269-272; Paul M. Bassett and William M. Greathouse, *Exploring Christian Holiness Volume 2: The Historical Problem* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1985), 205-208; Charles Yrigoyen Jr., *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 37-38; Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 171-177.

<sup>8</sup> The other five themes highlighted by Yrigoyen are "the problem of sin," "prevenient grace," "new birth," "assurance," and "holiness of heart and life." For treatments of Wesley's theology of justification see Maddox, 1994:166-172; Oden, 2012:72; Crutcher, 2015:151.

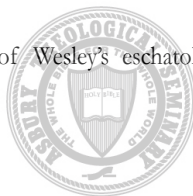
<sup>9</sup> For the background information to the sermon noted here see Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 111.

<sup>10</sup> For a similar equating of Wesley's understanding of justification with pardon and forgiveness see William J. Abraham, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 62; Oden, 2012:72; Crutcher, 2015:151.

<sup>11</sup> For an accessible introduction to the complex and enormous discussion of justification in Paul see Andy Johnson, "Navigating Justification: Conversing with Paul," *Catalyst*, November 1, 2010, <http://www.catalystresources.org/navigating-justification-conversing-with-paul> (accessed September 28, 2017) and the works cited there.

<sup>12</sup> On Wesley's theology of sanctification see Maddox, 1994:176-189; Yrigoyen, 1996:36-38; Collins, 1997:171-190; Oden, 2012:237-266; Crutcher, 2015:151.

<sup>13</sup> For treatments of Wesley's eschatology see Oden, 2012:281-305; Collins, 1997:191-204.



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