



What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us? Free grace – theology with the gloves off

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In 1739 the Wesley brothers were just beginning to work out their theological position. They did this by differentiating themselves from others with whom they had kept company. They separated themselves from the Moravians over the doctrine of antinomianism ('stillness') and from the Calvinism of a number of evangelicals of their day. Nowhere was this search for an identity more passionately argued than in the sharp exchanges between John Wesley and his friend George Whitefield. Their writing is raw; it shows the polemical skills of these exponents; they fight with their gloves off. Here is theology in the making.

GRACE • ELECT • REPROBATION • PREDESTINATION • CALVINISM • DEPRAVITY
• ASSURANCE • FOUNDERY

The first four volumes of the new critical edition of the *Works of John Wesley*, an ambitious project that has taken 30 years to get to its halfway point, are dedicated to the *Sermons* of John Wesley. One hundred and fifty-one sermons make it into this scholarly edition and the one we are about to consider appears in the third of these volumes grouped with others under the intriguing heading 'A Miscellany of Published Sermons', to which is added a note explaining that these are 'sermons not included in any of Wesley's collections of *Sermons on Several Occasions*'. Since we have categorical information about the explosive impact of this sermon on its hearers, and since it seeks to establish and defend a very particular theological world-view with some force, it does seem odd that it has been relegated to the sidelines in this way. It was published by Wesley and, indeed, went through ten or eleven editions during his lifetime, yet he never included it in his collected *Sermons*. It appeared in his *Works* but is found there among what are described as his 'controversial writings'. Albert Outler, the editor of the volumes containing the sermons in the current critical edition, describes this particular piece as 'a useful illustration of Wesley's temper and methods as a polemicist,' a judgement we'll come back to later in this article.¹

It may be interesting here to turn to a historian of Wesley's Chapel for an early account of the way the sermon and the controversy which it aroused was dealt with in its day.² At that time, almost 40 years before the building of the present Chapel, the embryonic Methodist cause was centred on the Foundery – the disused ruin of what had once been a factory for the production of cannons for the British army. There is a reference to the publication of the sermon in 1740 – it was preached two or three times but then filed away and never preached again. Attached to the printed version of the sermon was a hymn by Charles Wesley entitled 'Universal Redemption'. The two items between them constitute a full-blooded argument against Calvinism, conducted in poetry as well as prose. George Whitefield received a copy of the sermon while in America and he wrote a 'somewhat contentious' letter to Wesley taking issue with its argument and rebutting its claims. Some unknown person or persons got hold of this letter and printed it for general consumption. Indeed, it was handed to people gathering for worship at the Foundery. Wesley got hold of a copy and, standing before the congregation, he declared that Whitefield would never have consented to the publication of a letter intended for private use. He then took his copy of the offending article and tore it in pieces in front of the startled congregation who then, 'following their minister's example', tore their own copies in similar fashion and scattered them abroad. A ticker-tape moment in the home of Methodism. A 'fresh expression of church' acted out

long before that idea was minted.³ I must confess that I had never seen or read Whitefield's letter before sitting down to write this article. Now that I've done so, it's clear to me that we can undertake no study of Wesley's sermon without giving similar critical scrutiny to Whitefield's reply before identifying the ongoing importance of the theological issues at the heart of their exchanges.

It is clear that the dividing line between Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon on the one hand and the Wesley brothers on the other was drawn very publicly by this sermon. It led to a dispute that would last for decades and occasion bitter recriminations in both directions. In view of its impact, it may be wise to lay out in some detail the main argument of the sermon. It's important to sense the energy with which it's invested before standing back to evaluate its importance and its continuing relevance.

The sermon

The text Wesley used was Romans 8:32: 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?' The thrust of his argument was as follows (I have used Wesley's own words wherever possible):

The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all, and free for all ... It does not depend on any power or merit in man. And it is free for all.

There are those who hold that the doctrine of predestination amounts to 'an election of grace', that is, an unearned gift received by those whom God chooses to favour. Wesley urges everyone to see the inevitable consequence of such teaching – that there will be countless numbers of people who, not being in receipt of such election, will be doomed to 'die eternally'. And, even more challengingly, it will be just as necessary to attribute this negative outcome to the will of a sovereign God as it is to honour God for the positive offer to those who are privileged to find themselves among the elect. You can't hold on to one aspect of this doctrine without the other. If, according to this teaching, some are chosen for salvation then it is equally true that this is a 'decree of reprobation' for others; and the same God who wills some into his presence also determines that others will 'be damned, hardened, fitted for damnation'.

Wesley presses his point. Can those who say they believe in 'an election of grace' point to anyone in the whole of human history who, not having been thus elected, has known the reality of salvation? If not, then they must conclude that it is God's own will that 'the greater part of mankind [should] abide in death without any possibility of redemption'. It is impossible to 'soften' this argument. It all boils down to one simple, incontrovertible fact: 'By virtue of an eternal, unchangeable, irresistible decree of God, one part of mankind are infallibly saved, and the rest infallibly damned.' And those who subscribe to this doctrine must face up honestly to the consequences of their thinking.

Preaching would have no purpose. If you're already among the elect, why bother to listen to sermons? That becomes an activity without purpose. If you're not so chosen, then no amount of preaching can help you. So 'the end of preaching is void'. Those who hold to such a doctrine, often people of immense charm and of a charitable disposition, will soon find that the way they respond to other people will be conditioned by whether they consider them to be in possession of election or not. Too often it can lead to a sourness of spirit, an arrogance of mind for, in the last resort, why have dealings with those who 'have been hated of God from eternity'? The social consequences of this doctrine are horrendous for it robs such people of hope and comfort. It 'tends to destroy Christian holiness, happiness, and good works' ... indeed, 'to overthrow the whole Christian revelation'. Why did Christ come among us if all has already been decided? According to the Calvinist teaching, he died only for those 'whom God hath chosen out of the world'. The selective and skewed way of using particular verses of Scripture to undergird this line of thinking ignores the main thrust of the New Testament. It seems to set at nought the overarching truths contained in such affirmations as these, that Christ is 'the Saviour of the world'; that we place our trust in 'the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world'; that Christ's death represents a 'propitiation, not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world'. It turns a blind eye to the clear statement that 'He (the living God) is the Saviour of all men'; that 'he gave himself a ransom for all'; that 'he tasted death for every man'.

Wesley is emphatic that his own position on these matters should not be taken to imply that all are saved. Universal salvation, however deeply wanted by a God 'who hath no pleasure in the death of him that dieth', who 'is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance', is far from Wesley's mind. Human beings must choose, must will, must embrace the offer of salvation. What is universal is not salvation itself but the offer of salvation. And some people undoubtedly refuse that offer; they reveal themselves to be

‘stiff-necked’. God’s complaint is heartfelt: ‘How often would I have gathered you together, and ye would not?’

At this point, Wesley moves into overdrive. And here we reach the passage in the sermon that caused most offence. This is a doctrine, Wesley argues, that must be considered nothing less than blasphemy. ‘It overturns both [the] justice [of God], his mercy, and truth. Yea, it represents the most Holy God as worse than the devil; as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust.’ It is a blasphemy because it leads to ‘the supposition of which, if one could possibly suppose it for a moment (call it election, reprobation, or what you please, for all comes to the same thing) one might say to our adversary the devil: “Thou fool, why does thou roar about any longer? Thy lying in wait for souls is as needless and useless as our preaching. Hearest thou not that God hath taken thy work out of thy hands?”’ The devil, with all his principalities and powers is reduced to nothing. It is God who becomes ‘the devouring lion, the destroyer of souls, the murderer of men’. This is a doctrine that brings merriment to hell itself; the population of its halls and chambers is constantly being replenished by none other than God himself. ‘Here, O death, is thy sting! Here, O grave, is thy victory! Nations yet unborn, or ever they have done good or evil, are doomed never to see the light of life, but thou shalt gnaw upon them for ever.’

This is strong stuff indeed. Having reached such a climax, the sermon ends with a plea, a plea from the living God: ‘As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked ... Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?’ And so Wesley lays out his case and brings his argument to its conclusion.

Whitefield’s letter: (a) theology

Whitefield got wind of Wesley’s sermon while he was in America. Since his conversion in 1735, he’d begun to recognise the need for a doctrinal position ‘that emphasised man’s entire depravity, his need of the new birth, and the fact that God can save and God alone.’⁴

Whitefield had been strengthened in these views by his reading of Scripture, his familiarity with the work of the Reformers and the Puritans and, above all, by his personal acquaintance (in America) with Jonathan Edwards, William Tennent and his son Gilbert. He was in America when he received his printed copy of Wesley’s sermon. By then, in his own spiritual development, he had

'grasped the great related chain of truths revealed in the New Testament – the Father's electing love, Christ's substitutionary death on behalf of those whom the Father had given Him, and the Spirit's infallible work in bringing to salvation those for whom it was appointed'. All this, in the words of Murray, amounted to nothing less than a doctrine of 'free grace'. Clearly, Wesley's decision to publish a sermon so at odds with his own theological views and to choose those same two words ('free grace') for its title would have irked Whitefield greatly and prompted him to consider a lively reply. His letter, dated 24 December 1740 from Bethesda in Georgia (but published in February 1741), is the result. I must express my regret that this letter is absent from the critical edition of the *Works of Wesley*, appearing neither in Volume 26, *Letters II: 1740–1755*, nor in Volume 13, *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*. Placing it in contiguity with Wesley's own replies would help students and readers alike to make a great deal more sense of the controversy of which it is an integral part.

Right at the outset, Whitefield seeks to establish his authority. He contemptuously dismisses Wesley's choice of a text. For Whitefield, Romans 8 is the perfect place from which to build an argument in favour of election rather than against it. He accuses Wesley of a wilful abuse of scripture: the very word 'all', so important for Wesley's argument, simply means 'all (and only) those who are really in Christ'. And the grace that God gives so freely to all (ie all saints) is what enables them to persevere in their march towards heaven. So Wesley stands accused from the very outset of special pleading and, to make matters worse, is taken to task for never once referring to his text in the rest of his sermon.

Whitefield counters Wesley's argument that the doctrine of predestination makes preaching unnecessary by suggesting that, on the contrary, since no one knows who has been chosen or rejected by God, it is vital that 'we are to preach promiscuously to all'. Preaching might bring members of the elect to an awareness of their status; it might even do good to others 'in restraining them from much wickedness and sin'. But its main object is to 'quicken and enable' those chosen by God 'to believe' and to an understanding that they 'may be found in that happy number'.

Election turns out to be a much more tantalising matter than anyone might suppose. 'I know that it is unalterably fixed', he writes, 'that I must be damned or saved; but since I know not which for a certainty, why should I not strive, though at present in a state of nature, since I know not but this striving may be the means God has intended to bless, in order to bring me into a state of grace?'

Whitefield goes on the counter attack. He is highly critical of Wesley's belief in 'the assurance of eternal salvation'. He can't begin to understand what good it does to awaken the conscience of a man or woman, to warn them 'in good earnest to seek deliverance from the wrath to come', to feel that his or her sins are forgiven and they are a child of God, 'if not withstanding this, he may hereafter become a child of the devil and be cast into hell at last'.

In a similar fashion, he rejects the notion of universal redemption, suggesting that such a doctrine depends entirely on human free will, 'a sandy foundation' to build on. Those who hold such views are to his mind 'dead and lifeless, dry and inconsistent, in comparison to those on the contrary side ... they might begin in the Spirit, but they end (whatever they may say to the contrary) in the flesh, they build up a righteousness founded on their own free will: whilst the others triumph in hope of the glory of God, and build upon God's never-failing promise and unchangeable love, even when his sensible presence is withdrawn from them.' He then names an impressive list of known Calvinists and dares Wesley to suggest they know nothing of the 'liberties of Christ'. Bunyan, Flavel, Halyburton, New England and Scottish divines are brought forward as evidence at this point.

Now he cuts to the chase. 'Surely Mr Wesley will own God's justice in imputing Adam's sin to his posterity'. All deserve to die and the fact that God, in his own free way, has condescended to save some is to be taken as a sign of his grace. Not to believe this, to cling to the notion of universal redemption, is to place oneself in the company of such arch disbelievers as Deists, Arians and Socinians. If Wesley accused Whitefield of blasphemy, this is where he finds the compliment returned. It is Wesley who is the blasphemer, his doctrine of universal redemption 'is really the highest reproach upon the dignity of the Son of God and the merit of his blood'. And he even taunts Wesley: 'Consider whether it be not rather blasphemy to say as you do, "Christ not only died for those that are saved, but also for those that perish."'

And so, at a theological level, Whitefield brings his rebuttal of Wesley's arguments to a strong conclusion. And that might have been thought enough. But there is a great deal in the tone of the letter that is highly personal and we cannot leave this consideration without recognising it.

Whitefield's letter: (b) personal

The cudgels are thrown down right from the outset. Wesley held back from printing his sermon while Whitefield was in England but felt no hesitation in doing so once he'd sailed for America. That smacked of cowardice on his part.

What's more, he took this decision after drawing a lot – a piece of paper (presumably taken from among others) on which was written the simple instruction 'preach and print'. Whitefield is scathing about Wesley's readiness to 'tempt God' in this way and he goes on to describe another incident that occurred in the early part of 1738. Whitefield was heading for Georgia at the very time that Wesley was returning from America. Their itineraries crossed at Deal, near Dover. Whitefield would have liked to see his friend but Wesley, resorting to lots, drew one that stated 'Return to London'. He sent this as an instruction for Whitefield who was, however, unable to obey it. He was irrevocably committed to his journey. Later, Wesley confessed that he'd been wrong to resort to such a tactic and to put Whitefield's sense of vocation under the stress of such an instruction. Whitefield now used this example, previously known only to the two of them, to suggest that Wesley was just as foolish and wrong in his use of lots to justify the printing of this sermon as he'd been in that earlier example. He was scathingly dismissive of Wesley's readiness to claim such an 'imaginary warrant' to underpin his own very wayward desires. Whitefield's readiness to rake all this up and make it public really got under Wesley's skin.

So too did Whitefield's accusation of blasphemy, putting Wesley in the company of Deists, Arians and Socinians. It led Wesley to put up a spirited defence against such an allegation but it certainly wounded him.⁵ Whitefield was as adamant in his convictions as Wesley. He even expressed the conviction that one day, when this earthly life was over, while in heaven 'casting down his crown at the feet of the Lamb', John Wesley will come to his senses and 'be filled with a holy blushing for opposing the divine sovereignty' in the way he has done. But why wait for eternity? Whitefield hopes his friend can come to that conclusion before he shakes off his mortal coil.

The final thing to remark on in this extraordinary letter is its tone. It seems to play with Wesley, to poke fun at him, to contrive at gentle satire. There are constant references to 'dear Mr Wesley' that feel either patronising or sarcastic. One example must suffice in support of this contention. Whitefield rejects 'dear Mr Wesley's' claim that 'the doctrine of election and reprobation tends to

destroy holiness.' 'Dear Mr Wesley' should know better than that, he declares, and then goes on to accuse his correspondent of manipulating evidence by choosing people to illustrate his contentions whose views are known to be extreme. 'Dear Mr Wesley perhaps has been disputing with some warm narrow-spirited men that held election, and then he infers that their warmth and narrowness of spirit was owing to their principles.' This patronising tone runs through the whole document and it must surely have irked Wesley.

Aftermath

There were some fitful exchanges between Whitefield and Wesley over the following two years. It was clear that each man regretted the way things had turned out. There is clearly a bond of friendship apparent even in the fiercest of exchanges. Wesley ends a letter written in April 1741, a letter in which he has fiercely rebutted the charges made by Whitefield with the injunction (no doubt directed at himself): 'Spare the young man, even Absalom, for my sake.' The young man himself, writing just six months later, expresses regret for having revealed the secret (and private) matter of Wesley's use of lots. 'I am sorry now that any such thing dropped from my pen,' he writes, 'and I humbly ask pardon. I find I love you as much as ever.'⁶ But he recognises that his beloved friend may have been frightened by his outbursts from continuing a correspondence with him. For all that, the intense feeling seems to have petered out by October 1742⁷ when, in reply to a letter from Wesley urging that a line be drawn under their recent dispute, Whitefield writes, 'I can heartily say "Amen" ... and let the king live for ever and controversy die.' This is a letter which ends pacifically with the words, 'In much haste, and with great thanks for your last letter, I subscribe myself, reverend and very dear sir, your most affectionate, though younger brother, in the gospel of our glorious Emmanuel!'

There would have been no desire to keep old wounds open after these tender words had been exchanged. Hence, no doubt, the decision not to publish this sermon with others being gathered together for the general edification of the Methodist preachers and people.

The ongoing importance of this sermon

Calvinism is no longer as contentious an issue as it once was. Even the Church of Scotland has now virtually purged itself of the overt Calvinism that once

determined its theological position. But Calvinism, which under Théodore de Bèze morphed into 'neo-Calvinism', has shown itself capable of further mutation. A world-view where God can (and does) choose some people for his elect (while rejecting others) has been found near the surface of so many of the socio-political troubles of our modern world. I can only mention them here, but they form an impressive and worrying list. Just think, for example, about the troubles in Northern Ireland where a Calvinistic Protestantism defined itself against an infallibilist and exclusive Roman Catholicism. The forces released by the First Vatican Council were ranged against those who held fiercely to the Augsburg and Westminster Confessions. They certainly expressed themselves through social and political groupings which, while ostensibly disavowing their theological roots, bore all the marks of the traditions in which they were grounded. It all amounted to an unstoppable force (*extra ecclesia nulla salus est*) hitting an immovable object (No surrender!).

The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa played a huge role in maintaining the apartheid regime. It held fast to its dogmatic position till the end. It merely equated those doomed for hell with all the non-white populations around them. A similar observation can be made of those who played a key role in the development of the slave trade. Indeed, one could go even further and trace the way American exceptionalism is but an outworking of the Puritanism that came with the earliest settlers. New England congregationalism took a firm hold on emerging American sensibilities. George Whitefield's Calvinism was, after all, strengthened and deepened by his personal contact with the teaching of the American revivalist Jonathan Edwards.

It would be fruitless to go on with these unsubstantiated suggestions – they might make an interesting article for a future edition of this journal. Just one last word on the spat between Whitefield and Wesley remains.

Postscript

In the record of the second Conference held by John Wesley, which took place at the Foundery in 1745, the following detail appears:

Question 22: Does not the truth of the gospel lie very near to Calvinism and antinomianism?

Answer: Indeed it does – as it were, within a hair's breadth. So that 'tis altogether foolish and sinful, because we do

not quite agree either with one or the other, to run from them as far as ever we can.

Question 23: *Wherein may we come to the very edge of Calvinism?*

Answer: (1) In ascribing all good to the free grace of God;
(2) In denying all natural free will, and all power antecedent to grace;
(3) In excluding all merit from man, even for what he has or does by the grace of God.⁸

From this we can only conclude that the questions raised five years earlier in the contentious exchanges between Wesley and Whitefield continued to rumble on. And it seems that Wesley took to heart some of the remonstrations of his opponent and took steps to ensure that his adherence to the Arminian doctrine of grace was not entirely at the expense of the understanding of the sovereignty of God that lay at the heart of the Calvinist view. A mature outcome to a highly charged debate.

Notes

1. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley (Bicentennial Edition)*, vol. 3. Sermons III: 71–114, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, p. 543.
2. George J. Stevenson, *City Road Chapel London and its Associations*, 1872, p. 26.
3. Stevenson, *City Road Chapel*, p. 26.
4. 'Iain Murray on Whitefield and Wesley', an article that first appeared in the 1960 edition of *Whitefield's Journals*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust. What follows, both in these remarks and in the following synopsis of the letter, owes a great deal to Murray, a debt I am delighted to acknowledge here.
5. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley (Bicentennial Edition)*, vol. 2. Sermons II: 34–70, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, pp. 58ff.
6. Wesley, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 66.
7. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley (Bicentennial Edition)*, vol. 10: *The Methodist Societies – The Minutes of Conference*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011, p. 87.
8. Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 153.

