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*“Conversion, Justification, and the Experience of Grace in the Post-Aldersgate Wesley: Towards an Understanding of who is “a child of God.”*

**Abstract**

Aldersgate is highlighted from the angle of its significance on Wesley's theological thinking and subsequent ministry, rather than from an emphasis on his point of conversion. The Post-Aldersgate Wesley developed a soteriological understanding that identified a “child of God” with distinct qualifications, namely justification by faith, the experience of grace, and the indwelling Spirit. A theology of conversion also emerges with definitive markers that constitute a new standing from non-Christian to Christian. Shifts in Wesley's theological understanding of Christian faith are evaluated. Justification by faith remained a strict soteriological principle in the mind of the mature Wesley. As well, the experience of grace continued to be upheld as producing distinguishing marks in a “child of God.” Accordingly a Christian's new filial relationship with God provides a newly found self-understanding. Altogether, the Post-Aldersgate Wesley developed an understanding of Christian faith that portrays how he certified a “child of God.”

**Key Words:** Conversion, justification, grace, Aldersgate, salvation, Wesley, regeneration, soteriology

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At a leading conference commemorating John Wesley's 300<sup>th</sup> birthday Kenneth Collins said: "Indeed, in Wesley studies today, the truth be told, there are many John Wesley's. Take your pick: There is the Cobb Wesley, the Maddox Wesley, the Runyon Wesley, the Wood Wesley, and yes, there is even the Collins Wesley."<sup>1</sup> The need to clarify the soteriological sense of Wesley's meaning when calling someone "a child of God" remains an ongoing task. One area of study which has surprisingly received no depth of focus, and will surely contribute to the discussion, is Wesley's own view of "conversion." Is there a theology of conversion to be developed within the Wesleyan corpus that can reveal his understanding of who indeed is "a child of God"? Can we aspire to establish a common understanding on this important aspect of Wesley's theological thinking? Hopefully, this essay will contribute towards a theological reflection on who did the real Wesley understand to be "a child of God."

A common understanding of Christian faith was what Wesley himself desired. He drafted the *Model Deed* in 1763 as a guide for Methodist preachers to refer to doctrinal standards in the event of theological dispute.<sup>2</sup> In 1988, Thomas Oden wrote *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*, and twenty years later he again wrote *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* and said:

Though the language of ecumenical discourse has shifted in twenty years, the outstanding questions remain the same. . . . Despite the continuing discussions and debates about Wesleyan doctrinal standards, no comparable treatment of the history of doctrinal standards in Methodism has appeared in the intervening years.<sup>3</sup>

The quest for a historiography of Wesley's doctrinal standards and their theological implications continue to beckon our attention. Indeed there are doctrinal standards that Wesley would have us acknowledge as his teaching, particularly in the area of soteriology.

The following study will focus on the Post-Aldersgate Wesley, and his understanding of conversion, justification and the experience of grace. In so doing, a Wesleyan theology of conversion will emerge and provide an understanding of how Wesley understood a person's transition from non-Christian to Christian. What will also emerge is his desire for a child of God to realize his or her self-understanding of Christian faith and of its personal significance. Hence, the format will be as follows: first, a revisit to Aldersgate is necessary in order to show that whether or not Wesley was converted on May 24, 1738 is besides the point of his theological understanding of the event and of the event's impact on his subsequent ministry; second, it will be noted that ironically Wesley hardly ever used the term conversion and yet he developed a theology of conversion that

understood a transformation of life that begins with justifying faith and grace; third, there is abundant evidence that the mature Wesley held steadfastly that a child of God was characterized by an experience of grace with distinguishing marks. In conclusion, meaningful Christian faith in the Wesleyan sense of conversion, justification and the experience of grace will be shown to provide a distinguished self-understanding to “a child of God.”

### Theological Significance of Aldersgate

The debate on Wesley’s Aldersgate experience has polarized many. Perhaps the angle on Aldersgate should be studied from what the event *did* to his ministry and theological thinking, rather than to develop a historiography from the corpus in order to determine whether or not he became a Christian in 1738. The event provided Wesley with a basis from which experience could confirm a doctrine that was based on scripture. As John B. Cobb analyzes:

... experience was consistently the ultimate test of scripture. Especially after his Aldersgate experience, he had great confidence that experience would always confirm scripture. . . . *Until such confirmation occurred, scriptural truth remained abstract and even hypothetical.* The assurance that comes from experience is the most important role of experience for Wesley.<sup>4</sup>

Aldersgate also provided Wesley with a newly found theological understanding that an assurance of faith and of personal trust in Christ, based on scripture, was indeed the common privilege of believers. Likewise one of the greatest students of Wesley, Albert C. Outler, concluded that, “There is ample evidence that fixes the year 1738 as the decisive period in Wesley’s change from a faith in faith to faith itself, from aspiration to assurance.”<sup>5</sup> Wesley confessed and understood something previously unfamiliar to him when on the evening of Aldersgate he said: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”

This seminal experience would influence Wesley’s post-Aldersgate teaching of a distinct and personal reconciliation to God. Even among those who disagree with the standard interpretation of Aldersgate as Wesley’s point of conversion there remains an acknowledgement that the event produced a new theological outlook. For example, Theodore H. Runyon remarks:

I share some of the misgivings about the standard interpretation of Aldersgate that these critics have raised. However, I am not entirely happy with their alternative. They seem all too ready to abandon Aldersgate, or the place of experience, in their reconception of Wesley’s spiritual

biography and his theology. . . . The recognition of an objective divine reconciliation which provided the foundation for a continual relationship between the reconciled and God was what the mature Wesley determined to be the valid content of Aldersgate. Likewise, his chief motive and enterprise from that day forward was to make this gift of grace available to all.<sup>6</sup>

Immediately after Aldersgate his sermons began to emphasize that a person could experience a state of justification by faith as well as a personal trust in Christ, and this view of Christian faith would mature well into the 1780s.<sup>7</sup> In 1790, the senior Wesley affirmed in his sermon *On the Wedding Garment*: “Only about fifty years ago I had a clearer view than before of justification by faith: and in this from that very hour I never varied, no not a hair’s breadth.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1736 at Georgia, Wesley had conversed with August Spangenberg on the Moravian understanding of the faith of a child of God. No doubt that the Moravian witness to Christian faith had intrigued Wesley immensely. So with keen interest he dialogued with Spangenberg on the nature of being a child of God. Wesley recorded the questions asked by Spangenberg:

‘My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?’ I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, ‘Do you know Jesus Christ?’ I paused, and said, ‘I know he is the Saviour of the world. ‘True,’ replied he; ‘but do you know he has saved you?’ I answered, ‘I hope he has died to save me.’ He only added, ‘Do you know yourself?’ I said, ‘I do.’ But I fear they were vain words.<sup>9</sup>

The personal implication of this Moravian “language was new to him.”<sup>10</sup> However, Henry D. Rack points out that Spangenberg’s “own record of the conversation concludes on a very different note: ‘I observe that grace really dwells and reigns in him.’”<sup>11</sup> But when Wesley had replied, “I do,” to Spangenberg’s question, “Do you know yourself?” Spangenberg could not judge Wesley’s self-affirmation. Neither could the Moravian pastor ultimately know whether or not grace actually dwelt in him, and so the merit of Wesley’s own negation should be accepted. Only Wesley himself could have known and so his own confession, “But I fear they were vain words” is what should be taken into consideration. What baffled Wesley when conversing with Spangenberg was the theological and experiential import of the Moravian understanding of a personal relationship with Christ. Moreover, the dialogue intensified Wesley’s interest in his own personal assurance of justifying faith.

So on his way home from Georgia in January of 1738 he exclaimed thus: “I went to America to convert the Indians; but O! Who shall convert

me?”<sup>12</sup> What did he mean here by “convert?” At this point, he was convinced that one could turn to Christ in a very personal way, with an inward assurance and an outward witness of that experience. Justifying faith was beginning to take on an understanding for Wesley that it surely implied a personal experience. John H. Tyson also observes that just prior to Aldersgate, “Wesley came to believe that this faith implies a sense of forgiveness that one can feel tangibly, and that this faith brings with it . . . the witness of the Holy Spirit that one is now accepted as a son or daughter of God. . . . Wesley wrestled with this new conception of justifying faith.”<sup>13</sup>

His preoccupation with a personal assurance of justifying faith seemed to haunt him all the way back to England. At home, he continued to seek out this foreign understanding and experience as was evident by his meeting with Peter Böhler. In February of 1738, Wesley wrote: “I asked Böhler, . . . ‘But what can I preach?’ He said, ‘Preach faith *till* you have it; and then, *because* you have it, you will preach faith.’ Accordingly, . . . I began preaching this new doctrine . . .”<sup>14</sup> By now, Wesley had seriously shifted his understanding of justifying faith from an outward affirmation to an inward assurance. As he said, “I began preaching this new doctrine.” This conversation with Böhler continued to stimulate Wesley’s desire to identify personally with an inward experience of justifying faith.

On May 24, 1738, the Aldersgate experience provided him with a deeply personal revelation that justifying faith entails a special inward experience of saving grace for the believer. Once again his famous testimony: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”<sup>15</sup> Henceforth, his preaching and theology took on the understanding that a believer can know deep within that justifying faith has provided a new relationship with God. The shift from the Holy Club days at Oxford where Christian faith was affirmed by outward acts of piety, and from his time at Georgia where his understanding of Christian faith appeared in crisis, to this newly experienced understanding of salvation at Aldersgate was sharply clear.

Now one should acknowledge Richard P. Heitzenrater’s keen observations when alluding to Aldersgate:

We must assume that what he believed about himself at any given time is true for him at that time. Later reflections upon his earlier conditions must be accepted for what they are, an indication of his self-awareness at a later time. That is to say, neither one is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ absolutely, but simply must be understood in the historical context of his own developing self-consciousness. Thus in 1725, he thought he was a Christian; for a while after 1738, he thought he had not truly

been a Christian in 1725; by the 1770's, he was willing to admit that perhaps his middle views were wrong, and that he could understand himself as having been in some real sense a Christian in 1725.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, the Aldersgate experience “must be understood in the historical context of his own developing self-consciousness.” Indeed Aldersgate emerged from Wesley’s sensitivity to the framework of a Moravian understanding of soteriology. Nevertheless he was quite “self-conscious” at Aldersgate of experiencing something new and this was profoundly special to him “at that time.” So it is fair to say that the event produced a new soteriological understanding for him “at that time” that would arguably mature and define his ongoing ministry.

Immediately in June of 1738, the theological impact of Aldersgate began to take shape in Wesley’s preaching on *Salvation by Faith*, employing the soteriological language of trusting in Christ for an assurance of reconciliation, of receiving the inner witness of being a child of God, and the all sufficiency of justifying faith to save from sin.<sup>17</sup> So after 1738, as Heitzenrater also affirms, “two ideas . . . continued to find a central place in Wesley’s theology even though he modified their explanation: salvation by faith alone and the witness of the Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> Part of the inquiry, then, is whether or not these subsequent modifications redefined his theological understanding of who qualified as a child of God. Thus it becomes helpful to note how the mature Wesley viewed conversion to Christian faith and its consequential implication for a believer’s self-understanding.

### **Wesley’s View of Conversion and Justifying Faith**

There is, however, a well founded acknowledgement that, “Wesley himself did not use the word ‘conversion’ that often.”<sup>19</sup> In his theology, the word portrays “more connotations of conscious change than the synonym of ‘new birth,’ and this emphasis on conscious change had great importance in Wesley’s thought.”<sup>20</sup> Conversion was not used by Wesley as an interchangeable term with justification, regeneration, or even the “new birth.” In fact, the term conversion was rarely used at all. As Wesley referred to the term conversion in a letter of 1750, “A term, indeed, which I very rarely use, because it rarely occurs in the New Testament.”<sup>21</sup> Yet he developed a theology of conversion that began with an initial repentance and an inward experience of grace, and then onward with a gradual transformation of life in Christ. A convert is one who therefore experiences justification by faith and is conscious of a change, and of progressing towards complete holiness. Further, it is “an encounter with God’s love that lays a new foundation relationally and dispositionally, enabling subsequent growth in the Christian life.”<sup>22</sup>

For Wesley, the occurrence of justifying faith was the definitive marker in the conversion from a “child of the world” to a “child of God.” Note what Wesley said in 1767 in *The Witness of the Spirit*:

Everyone therefore who denies the existence of such a testimony does, in effect, deny justification by faith. It follows that either he never experienced this, either he never was justified, or that he has forgotten. . . the experience he then had himself, the manner wherein God wrought in his own soul, when his former sins were blotted out. And the experience even of the children of the world here confirms that of the children of God. Many of them undoubtedly have, in a degree, the testimony of their own spirit, a consciousness of their own uprightness. But this brings them no consciousness that they are forgiven, no knowledge that they are the children of God.<sup>23</sup>

Evidently, the self-witness of one’s own morality outside justifying faith carries no assurance or knowledge of being a child of God. Even so, conversion is not based on an act of identifying with a particular creed, or on a decision to believe certain doctrines. Rather, it results from what God does for and in the believer. All works prior to justifying faith have no merit in Wesley’s theology of conversion. In a 1739 journal entry, Wesley described a moral person outside of justifying faith and grace:

he is not to think well of his own state till he experiences something within himself which he had not yet experienced, but ‘which he may beforehand assured he shall,’ if the promises of God are. That ‘something’ is a living faith: ‘a sure trust and confidence in God, that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven. . .’ And from this will spring many other things, which till then he experienced not; as, the love of God . . . , that peace of God . . . , and joy in the Holy Ghost. . . These are some of those *inward* ‘fruits of the Spirit,’ which must be felt wheresoever they are.<sup>24</sup>

Sixty years later Wesley continued to call into account several people groups whose identification with various denominations came short of conversion:

Having had frequent opportunity of conversing with many of these . . . I am bold to affirm that they are in general totally ignorant both as to the theory and practice of Christianity; so that they are perishing by thousands ‘for lack of knowledge,’ for want of knowing the very first principles of Christianity. . . Namely, the natural corruption of man, justification by faith, the new birth, inward and outward holiness.<sup>25</sup>

A personal conversion beginning with justifying faith and an inward experience of grace is a theological principle that Wesley always maintained.

By this principle, then, a person becomes a child of God through a distinct point of conversion; that is, a distinct spiritual transition from being outside of a justified relationship with God to being in an actual position of justification that is characterized by a lively faith in Christ. Even in 1788 the mature Wesley explained:

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. . . . He will then have 'Christ revealed in his heart,' enabling him to testify, 'The life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me;' the proper voice of a child of God. He will then be . . . inwardly changed by the mighty power of God, from 'an earthly, sensual, devilish mind,' to the 'mind which was in Christ Jesus.'<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless some understand that his descriptive phrase, "the faith of a servant," had matured with Wesley and took on the understanding that it also described one converted by justifying faith. Randy L. Maddox understands Wesley as "finally coming to value the nascent faith of the 'servant of God' as justifying faith."<sup>27</sup> Maddox interprets the mature Wesley as ascribing a state of justification to a person's penitent responses during God's promptings of prevenient grace. Accordingly justification by faith is marked by the "initial penitent responses to God's awakening work in their lives."<sup>28</sup>

This interpretation is based on a person's reaction to prevenient grace whereby a "rudimentary" form of regeneration occurs; accordingly, such a person now has a degree of faith that essentially constitutes a regenerated status and is thereby "a servant of God." "As such," continues Maddox, "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."<sup>29</sup> The implications seem to suggest that the mature Wesley became inclusive as he valued the "faith of a servant of God" with the equivalent salvific status as that of "a child of God," and accordingly a distinct point of instantaneous regeneration became a secondary matter. Heitzenrater also thinks that Wesley came to understand that both "a servant of God" and "a child of God" were converted, albeit the terms distinguish degrees of faith. He says of Wesley, "His later distinctions between two orders of Christians, between the faith of a servant and of a child of God, between the young convert and the mature Christian, between faith and assurance (and allowing for various degrees of both), are all the result of his finally differentiating between



justification and sanctification as theologically and experientially distinguishable steps on the spiritual pilgrimage.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, in 1788 Wesley did say in a sermon *On Faith*:

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.' In consequence of this they were apt to make sad the hearts of those whom God had not made sad. For they frequently asked those who feared God, 'Do you know that your sins are forgiven?' And upon their answering, 'No,' immediately replied, 'Then you are a child of the devil.' No; that does not follow. It might have been said (and it is all that can be said with propriety) 'Hitherto you are only a *servant*; you are not a child of God. You have already great reason to praise God that he has called you to his honourable service. Fear not. Continue crying unto him: 'and you shall see greater things than these.'<sup>31</sup>

The mature Wesley certainly came to appreciate the sincerity of those earnestly seeking God, and he acknowledged their genuine belief in Christ as Saviour; yet he qualified this mature perception by stating that, "Hitherto you are only a *servant*; you are not a child of God." Nevertheless this could still be interpreted to support Heitzenrater's interpretation that a servant of God was justified though not sanctified as a child of God. The point, however, was that a servant of God did not have "the Spirit of Adoption" and so was not justified and not qualified to be a child of God. In a letter of 1777 Wesley wrote: "'You are not yet a son,' . . . but you are a servant; and you are waiting for the Spirit of Adoption."<sup>32</sup> Again, in 1788 *On Faith* Wesley continued:

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. This then is . . . the difference between a servant of God and a child of God. 'He that believeth,' as a child of God, 'hath the witness in himself.' This the servant hath not. Yet let no man discourage him; rather, lovingly exhort him to expect it every moment! . . . There is no reason why you should be satisfied with the faith . . . of a servant: . . . Yet, in the meantime, beware how you rest here: press on till you receive the Spirit of adoption. Rest not till that Spirit clearly witnesses with your spirit that you are a child of God.<sup>33</sup>

Here Collins also contributes to this discussion by emphasizing, “That Wesley during the decade of the 1780’s (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.”<sup>34</sup>

Justifying faith is the event where regeneration also occurs. The former was referred to by Wesley as a “relative” change and the latter as a “real” change. In Wesley’s *via salutis* what distinguishes a child of God is the inward “spirit of adoption” that is imparted at the point of justification and regeneration. Apart from this inward “spirit of adoption” no conversion has taken place, that is, no state of justification and no transition from a servant of God to a child of God. As Wesley elaborated further in 1788 in *Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith*:

All that are true Christian believers. . . . All that are not only *servants* but *children* of God. All that have ‘the Spirit of adoption, crying in their hearts, Abba, Father.’ All that have ‘the Spirit’ of God ‘witnessing with their spirits, that they are the sons of God.’ All these, and these alone, can say, ‘We walk by faith, and not by sight.’ And to all real Christians our Lord saith, ‘Because I live, ye live also:’ ‘ye live a life’ which the world, whether learned or unlearned, ‘know not of.’<sup>35</sup>

### **A Distinguishing Experience of Grace**

Nevertheless Wesley’s letter in 1747 to his brother Charles seemed to suggest that a shift had occurred in how he related one’s experience of assurance with one’s experience of justifying faith. He wrote, “I allow (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. But I cannot allow that justifying faith is such an occurrence or necessarily connected therewith.”<sup>36</sup> The interpretation here could be that Wesley’s thinking was shifting and beginning to allow a state of justification regardless of whether one had an experience of assurance. In one sense this is correct, but in another it is not. It is correct because for Wesley justifying faith was not conditioned upon one’s experience. Some were indeed justified by their faith but the experience of grace was not always immediate. Wesley was realizing that to “connect therewith” experience with justifying faith was to allow a condition for it, or worse, a different ground outside of *sola gratia* on which one is justified. In this sense, Wesley precluded “assurance” as necessarily connected with being in a state of saving grace. Justifying faith remained rooted solely in the unmerited grace of God. Furthermore, in his Post-Aldersgate ministry he continued to maintain that the experience of grace produced distinguishing marks in “a child of God.”

As well, the mature Wesley continued to affirm some sort of consciousness as a distinguishing mark of having been converted by the grace of God; but again, it is not a necessary condition of “being in the favour of God.” When it was insinuated that he required a consciousness of justifying faith as a condition to being pardoned by God he replied in a letter of 1781:

If you remember, I do not insist on the term ‘impression.’ I say again, I will thank any one that will find a better; be it ‘discovery,’ ‘manifestation,’ ‘deep sense,’ or whatever it may. That some consciousness of our being in favour with God, is joined with Christian faith, I cannot doubt; but it is not the essence of it. A consciousness of pardon cannot be the condition of it.<sup>37</sup>

Thus an experience of grace is characterized by an “impression” of the Spirit, or by a “discovery,” a “manifestation,” a “deep sense,” or whatever term portrays such an effect of a newly found awareness upon a believer. It is not the semantic analysis, however, that provides a foundation or a condition, but the actual foundation and condition of conversion is *sola gratia*, and the convert’s consequential consciousness of it. A child of God is aware that grace has provided an adoption from a non-member to a member of God’s family. Without the inward “spirit of adoption” justifying faith remains absent, and to be called a child of God would be an incomplete appellation. So then, a child of God is distinguished by the inward “spirit of adoption” and thereby the consequential privileges and fruits of such a spiritual relationship with God. The necessary and present work of God’s grace that is sealed in a person by “receiving the Spirit of adoption” is what distinguished a child of God. In fact, without a “gracious stroke” from God no one could claim to be a convert to Christian faith, and no one could understand and serve Him without the “spiritual senses” that characterize an experience of saving grace. The senior Wesley elaborated on this “gracious stroke” in his sermon *On Living Without God* (1790) wherein he contrasts two possible spiritual existences, that of a convert with a non-convert:

But the moment the Spirit of the Almighty strikes the heart of him that was till then without God in the world, it breaks the hardness of his heart, and creates all things new. The Sun of righteousness appears, and shines upon his soul, showing him the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He is in a new world. All things round him are become new. Such as it never before entered into his heart to conceive. . . . By the same gracious stroke, he that before had ears but heard not is now made capable of *bearing*. . . . He is no longer deaf to his invitations or commands, to his promises or threatening,

but gladly hears every word that proceeds out of his mouth; and governs thereby all his thoughts, words, and actions. At the same time he receives other spiritual senses, capable of discerning spiritual good and evil. He is enabled to *taste*, as well as to see, how gracious the Lord is. And of consequence . . . , unless they have new senses, ideas, passions, tempers, they are no Christians!<sup>38</sup>

God's grace imparts new life in his adopted children, and within this new relationship a child of God becomes aware that his or her thinking about God, about one's neighbour, morality, and social justice, have been radically changed. The transforming power of grace thus becomes a conscious reality for a child of God. There is an inward assurance that grace has accomplished the adoption, and that what has become a new outlook as a member of God's family is imparted by the Spirit's revelation. This indwelling of the Spirit of adoption is therefore antecedent to any significant understanding of the things of God. In Wesley's theology only an encounter with the grace of God by faith can convert human nature and reveal an illumined understanding that was previously unknown. In a natural state, prior to grace, a person cannot understand the ways of God. "Such is the constitution of our nature," wrote Wesley in 1786, "till nature is changed by almighty grace. . . . Yea, it is freely given to all that sincerely ask it. This remedy is faith. . . . This alone opens the eyes of the understanding to see God and the things of God."<sup>39</sup> One outside of this grace cannot taste, see or comprehend the beauties of the Kingdom, the power of the Atonement, and the reality of Eternity, which are reserved for the adopted children of God.

### **The Self-Understanding of a Child of God**

Of necessity, then, a child of God will possess an intra-mental understanding of actual knowledge of God as "the eyes of the understanding" are opened to comprehend the things of God. Justifying faith and grace provide a child of God with an intra-personal realization that ideas and attitudes towards oneself, God, and others are no longer as they were on account of the newly revealed standing before God. Particularly, a child of God knows intellectually and spiritually that Jesus died for me, for my sins, and the consequential requirements of a holy life are revealed from the new filial relationship with God and the indwelling Spirit. Furthermore, an adopted child of God receives a newly revealed self-understanding of how to mature in the new life and how to be transformed to reflect "the whole image of God." In 1789, Wesley continued to stress the importance of how the Spirit imparts valuable knowledge that is necessary for growth in Christ, as a Christian's "whole body be full of light:"

The light of knowledge is doubtless one thing here intended, arising from 'the unction of the Holy One,' which 'abideth with him,' and 'teacheth him of all things,' all the things which it is now necessary to know in order to please God. Hereby he will have a clear knowledge of the divine will in every circumstance of life. . . . And walking in this light he cannot but grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will continually advance in all holiness, and in the whole image of God.<sup>40</sup>

The revealed information will affect the attitude and behaviour of those who have genuinely converted. In *The New Creation*, Theodore Runyon notes that in Wesley's teaching anyone who truly possesses this revealed knowledge will be transformed by it: "Where there is no transformation of the knower, Wesley questions the authenticity of the religious knowledge. Thus he is suspicious of 'orthodox belief' if it knows information but is not affected by it."<sup>41</sup> The Post-Aldersgate Wesley continued to emphasize that a believer can know inwardly that justifying faith and grace are present, and this work of the Spirit will affect one's relationships in the quest for complete holiness. Conversion in the Post-Aldersgate Wesley is thus a self-understanding that a transformation is occurring by grace, affecting both the inner person and outward actions. This conversion is certified in those who have been justified by faith and have thereby received "the spirit of adoption." Such are the children of God.

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## Endnotes

Kenneth Collins, “The Promise of John Wesley’s Theology for the 21st Century: A Dialogical Exchange,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 59/1,2 (Spring/Fall 2004): 171.

<sup>2</sup> It is also noteworthy that, “Wesley abhorred theological novelty, insisting that anything novel had to be heretical.” Victor A. Shepherd, *Mercy Immense and Free: Essays on Wesley and Wesleyan Theology* (Toronto: Clements Academic, 2010), 235.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 2.

<sup>4</sup> John B. Cobb Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 171.

<sup>5</sup> Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore H. Runyon, “The Importance of Experience for Faith,” In Randy L. Maddox, ed. *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 93, 99.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the Post-Aldersgate message of Wesley should not be ascribed to an emotional appeal or to his newly found zeal to save souls, or to “anything in his talent or technique of preaching, but must refer to something objective . . . to a change of religious principles.” George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*, reprint, (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 170.

Albert C. Outler, ed. *The Bicentennial Works of John Wesley, Sermons*, Vols. 1-4, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), S127, 147. The citation here is to show how Wesley did allude to the early Post-Aldersgate period as a pivotal point in theological outlook. Sermonic citations to this edition will be referenced by WJWB and (S)ermon number.

<sup>9</sup> WJWB, V18, “Feb. 7, 1736,” 145-46.

<sup>10</sup> C. E. Vulliamy, *John Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 68-69.

Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 115. Other interpretations of Spangenberg’s observation believe that he “saw the sovereign power of God already at work in Wesley’s heart. He was assured that what had been thus begun, would not fail of its completion.” A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1978), 55. This interpretation, however, is not conclusive and so is based on conjecture. By Spangenberg’s statement, “grace really dwells and reigns in him,” one cannot derive Wood’s interpretation because Wesley’s confession, “But I fear they were vain words,” afterwards revealed a confused inquirer and to interpret Spangenberg as assuming that Wesley would come to saving faith was highly speculative.

<sup>12</sup> WJWB, V18, “Jan. 24, 1738,” 211.

<sup>13</sup> John H. Tyson, “John Wesley’s Conversion at Aldersgate”: in Kenneth J. Collins, ed. *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 32

<sup>14</sup> WJWB, V18, “Feb. 4-6, 1738,” 228.

<sup>15</sup> WJWJ, “Journal,” V1, 103. Italics are Wesley’s. WJWJ will refer to *The Works of John Wesley*, Vols. 1-14, ed. Thomas Jackson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), one of the ongoing Jackson edition reprints.

<sup>16</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 32. Some of the 1770s comments by Wesley are interpreted by those who disagree with an Aldersgate conversion as reflecting his own acknowledgement of having been a Christian in 1725: “Let me be again an Oxford Minister! I am often in doubt whether it would be best for me to resume all my Oxford rules, great and small. I did then walk closely with God, and redeem the time. But what have I been doing these thirty years?” WJWJ, V12, “December 15, 1772.” In the 1770s, however, Wesley was emphasizing ministerial zeal. Thus the allusion here to Oxford is to remind his brother of the indefatigable ministry they had while at Oxford. There is no real implication that Aldersgate did not change him. That same year he wrote to his brother: “Your business, as well as mine, is to save souls. When we took Priests’ orders, we undertook to make it our one business. I think every day lost, which is not (mainly at least) employed in this thing.” WJWJ, V12, “April 26, 1772.” Thus in the 1770s Wesley began to call for renewed ministerial zeal “to save souls,” with no real implication to his Aldersgate experience. Note as well that in 1775 he preached on Matthew 16:26 (“What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul”), S84.

<sup>17</sup> WJWB, S1.

<sup>18</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences

of Genuine Christianity,” in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 88-91.

<sup>19</sup> Manfred Marquardt, “Christian Conversion: Connecting Our Lives with God” In *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, Randy L. Maddox, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 99-112.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> WJWB, “A Letter to the Author of ‘The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared,’” (Feb. 1, 1749/50), V11, 369.

<sup>22</sup> Henry H. Knight, “The Transformation of the Human Heart: The Place of Conversion in Wesley’s Theology” In *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Kenneth J. Collins, John H. Tyson, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 54.

<sup>23</sup> WJWB, S11, 292.

<sup>24</sup> WJWB, V19, “July 31, 1739,” 85.

<sup>25</sup> WJWB, S122, 89.

<sup>26</sup> WJWB, S117, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 155.

<sup>28</sup> Maddox, “Continuing the Conversation,” *Methodist History* 30/4 (July 1992): 235-41.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>30</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity,” In *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Abingdon Press, 1990), 91.

<sup>31</sup> WJWB, S106, 497.

<sup>32</sup> John Telford, ed. *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), V7:157.

<sup>33</sup> WJWB, S106, 497-98.

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, “Real Christianity as Integrating Theme in Wesley’s Soteriology: The Critique of a Modern Myth,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40/2 (Fall 2005): 81. Cf. Laura Bartels Felleman, “John Wesley and the ‘Servant of God,’” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 41/2 (Fall 2006): 72-86. Felleman understands that, “The Servant of God has experienced justification, but this degree of faith does not include the full promise of sanctification,” 79. Wesley’s sermon On Faith is key to her argument, but she does not deal with Wesley’s challenge to “press on till you receive the Spirit of Adoption.” In the sermon, Wesley makes a distinction “between a servant of God and a child of God” by reference to the latter as having received the “Spirit of Adoption,” and this is not taken into account by Felleman.

<sup>35</sup> WJWB, S119, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Telford, V2:108-109.

<sup>37</sup> Telford, V7, May 21, 1781.

<sup>38</sup> WJWB, S130, 172-75. In his introductory comments to this sermon Outler understood Wesley as presenting “conversion” as a necessary prerequisite to an authentic relationship with God: “What is distinctive here is the heightened emphasis upon intuition as a radical shift from spiritual darkness to spiritual ‘sight’ and,



consequently, upon the importance of 'conversion' as a prerequisite to an authentic visio Dei.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., S54, 368.

<sup>40</sup> WJWB, S125, 123.

<sup>41</sup> Theodore Runyan, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 79.