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“Justification by Faith”: Richard Baxter’s Influence upon John Wesley

I. Introduction

Justification by Faith, one of John Wesley’s most soteriologically mature sermons, was first preached on May 28, 1738, and later published in 1746.¹ This homily presented not only his maturing theology of salvation, but also conveyed his affinity for the protestant keystone, *sola fide*. His work, however, was not fashioned without noteworthy influence. Within a year prior to first preaching the sermon, Wesley published in Newcastle upon Tyne an extract of Richard Baxter’s *Aphorisms of Justification*. Originally composed by Baxter in 1640, this vehement work sought to ‘once and for all’ crush the doctrine of antinomianism and fasten in its place a more developed view of human participation in salvation. It was received unfavorably, however, as Baxter’s contemporaries dissected the work with stringent criticism, objecting to the notion that “obeying trust” preconditioned justification.² Yet, not all of his theology would be repudiated. Certain of its elements remained congruent with earlier protestant assumptions. Recognizing the work’s great significance, John Wesley, founder of the Methodist reform movement, extracted and published certain of Baxter’s *Aphorisms*, so that they might, in his words, “once again [be] a powerful antidote against the spreading poison of antinomianism.”³ By putting them to press, Wesley exposed the depth of Baxter’s impact upon his own theology that would later manifest itself in his sermon on *Justification by Faith*. The aim of this particular study is to identify and trace the similarities found in Wesley’s sermon on *Justification by Faith* and Baxter’s *Aphorisms of Justification* (which Wesley later extracted), and to understand the contextual situations that occasioned their respective development and publication.⁴ By doing so, that is, by highlighting the two minister’s commonly held positions, the present study aims to both strengthen and invigorate the bond between Reformed and Wesleyan theology.

II. Likeminded Polemicists

The seventeenth century puritan reform had an overwhelming influence on Richard Baxter’s religious convictions. Having been infected by its contagious religious fervor, he came to question his own long-held ecclesial assumptions. Finding his leanings incongruent with the national church, he

reluctantly bore the label of non-conformist and opposed the Church of England.⁵ In part to propound his newfound message, Baxter became Chaplain of the parliamentary army.⁶ This particular tenure helped him to grow in discernment and, as he put it, to press on "toward the resolution of many theological questions."⁷ However, the army exposed him to a kaleidoscope of personal beliefs, ranging from Arminianism and Dutch Remonstrance to moral laxity and antinomianism. This in turn led Baxter to embrace a polemical attitude towards those who considered themselves unbound theologically to the moral law of righteousness. His contempt for such "libertarianism" swelled into fear and borderline obsession, when he became terribly afraid that "London was apparently being overrun by Antinomians",⁸ a phobic claim, which fueled his ministerial passions, though without substantial socio-religious warrant. Nevertheless, Baxter's commitment to fostering puritan reform resulted in an immense outpouring of theological literature.

Among his writings, *Aphorisms of Justification* (1649) was a piece he thought might equilibrate the swells of antinomianism. His impetus for writing was to challenge any who considered righteous living (subsequent to justification) inconsequential to the process of salvation. Underlying his theology of justification then, was the conviction that human participation and response were needed to actuate God's redemptive offer of salvation. However, many of his contemporaries remained apprehensive. They suspected that his theology refracted glints of Pelagianism. Nevertheless, he strove at length to disassociate himself from any doctrine wherein recipients of God's grace were exempt from the laws of love and morality, especially as regarded the doctrine of imputed righteousness. According to Baxter, such a theology invariably led to lax Christian practice. For, once we are justified by the work of Christ, and receive the exact fruit of his labor, we need not ourselves live accordingly, as the work has already been done for us. On the other hand, he did not intend his *Aphorisms* to warrant the opposite extreme of "moralism." Baxter simply sought to "confound the antinomians who misconstrued the doctrine of justification by faith to mean that works are unnecessary," while acknowledging Christ's atonement as the primary cause of justification.⁹ Amid similar circumstances, John Wesley later shared Baxter's commitment to exploring a *via media* between moralism and antinomianism.

However, before moving on to Wesley's context, it would be wise to carve out the roots of both "moralism" and "antinomianism." To both Baxter and Wesley, these words connoted ravenous depravity. The theological tenets of moralism can be traced far back into the annals of Christian antiquity, finding their base in the teachings of Pelagius. This patristic writer envisioned the morally upright nature of human beings to be a sufficient medium for carrying out righteousness and holy living. To him, God had fastened human

nature with such a capacity at creation, which enabled humans to lead ethically sound lives. We do not *need* any special gift from God to be good, because our nature has already been conditioned to uphold God's statutes. One might posit, to use other words, that a primordial grace has been infused with humanity at the ground of creation, whereby we have been equipped with every tool necessary to carry out our moral responsibilities. To be sure, Pelagius did not abnegate the meritorious work of Christ; rather, he appropriated it differently. God's grace is given to those who strive for the righteous life. It aids them in Christian discernment. Even so, since God has already fashioned humanity with the ability to keep the commandments, soteriological grace becomes unnecessary. It is here that Wesley and Baxter poignantly took issue with moralist doctrine, stressing its usurpation of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Together, they recognized its destructive implications, which more than diminished the efficacy of God's grace and supplanted beneficence with human agency.

Secondly, moralism is contrasted by an opposite extreme, antinomianism, with which both Baxter and Wesley were heavily occupied. If moralism placed too high a priority on human agency in effecting salvation, then the latter moved to the other end of the pendulum swing. According to this teaching, God's righteousness is imputed and imparted, literally handed over to the believer, dismissing them of any responsibility to lead lives of holiness. It excuses them, in the name of righteousness, from charitable practice. In essence, one may well be fortified by God's salvific grace and continue to lead a life of cruelty. This theology is problematic, as it does not reconcile God's justifying grace with an authentic conversion from sin. Wesley and Baxter detested this position as well, as it hindered Christian practice and thwarted any genuine move toward holiness. Baxter and Wesley were loath to accept two such heterodox ideas, which spawned controversy in the latter's context as well.

Like Baxter, Wesley took profound influence from the Puritan reform movement. He was convicted by their zeal for the gospel, and their diligent propensity to evangelize the world over. While embracing certain puritan ideals, however, his sympathies did not move him to abandon his confessions. Even so, while remaining a steadfast Anglican minister, Wesley allowed the puritan emphasis on spirituality both to permeate his theology of faith and Christian living, and to inform his practice of liturgy. An implicit hope was that the fire of reform would rekindle the awareness of *sola fide* Protestantism. Like Baxter, Wesley expressed the need for faith-filled response to God's offer of salvation, which could not be merited by any performed work of righteousness. Wesley's soteriology hinged on this, that faith alone justifies and restores the sinner to right relationship with the Father. In other words, since humans were originally created for communion with God, for concert

and friendship toward this end, the process of justification was one that refashioned human beings into a state reminiscent of their original, created nature (deliverance from culpability). In Wesley's view, to participate in the experience of justification by faith, is to conjointly allow God's presence to manifest in our lives and accompany us on the road to Christian perfection. As with Baxter before him, Wesley's convictions sparked heated polemicism. Not all theologians shared his understanding of the nature of God's grace. According to Alan Clifford, Wesley's "long ministry," as evangelical preacher and minister, "was frequently punctuated by the [Calvinist/Arminian] controversy."¹⁰ Engaged in dialogue with the Calvinistic Methodist, George Whitefield, Wesley defended the freedom of personal response to God's offer of salvation, and labored to illustrate the inadequacy of any position suggesting otherwise.¹¹ He maintained that the grace given to humans by God is "universal," reaching out to the entirety of humankind. Yet, we are justified by God's grace to the extent that we faithfully respond to God's offer of redemption. God is not whimsical or random; God justifies those who approach with contrition and repentance.

Such arguments exposed Wesley's inherent evangelical Arminianism, in which the gift of grace cannot be relegated to a status of particularity, since freely offered to everyone. Being strictly opposed to High Calvinist soteriology—which suggested that Christ's atonement was meant for a select few, and excluded the reprobate—Wesley was fearful of the negative, impractical consequences that would accompany it: "All preaching [would be] in vain. The elected would not need it; the reprobated were infallibly damned in any case and no preaching would ever alter the fact."¹² The effect of such teachings could inadvertently lead to an antinomian theology, which considered any virtuous, loving act of righteousness superfluous and even inconsequential for the Christian life. One needed only happen to "be" a member of the unconditionally elect to reap the benefits of God's grace. That is to say, one could potentially remain in the graces of God while mindfully continuing a life of turpitude.

The Calvinist/Arminian debate shaped Wesley's theology of salvation, and provided a background for his preaching on the topic of justification by faith. Like Baxter, Wesley was concerned for the eternal well being of souls, that all should embrace the merits of Christ's life and atoning death, and likewise be conformed in heart and mind to his genuine example of holiness. Through moralism and antinomianism, the practical consequences of God's justifying grace are compromised and subdued. Attempting to navigate the choppy seas of "divine sovereignty" and "human freedom," Wesley salvaged from his puritan predecessor not only a pastoral spirit committed to fostering authentic, Christian practice, but also an important body of theological writings confronting the same issues plaguing Wesley's ministry. Turning now to the

documents themselves, the breadth of similarity between the respective writings can hardly be overstated. The influence of the earlier on the later is obvious.

III. A Critical Comparison of Wesley's Sermon on "Justification by Faith" and Extract of "Aphorisms of Justification"

The intent of both authors centered on the salient matter of justification by faith. They sought to clarify a severely misunderstood doctrine. Concerning the theological relevance of justification, Wesley stated, "it contains the foundation of all our hope," while angrily continuing, "And yet how little hath this important question been understood."¹³ His corrective mood is addressed to those who suggested that God had designated justification only for the elect, that the reprobate were precluded from receiving the fruits of God's grace. Baxter also warned against this, that God arbitrarily bestowed justifying grace upon unsuspecting individuals: "there is no more required to the perfect irrevocable justification of the vilest murderer or whore-master, but to believe that he is justified, or to be persuaded that God loveth him."¹⁴ Being "persuaded" of one's forgiveness—as Baxter here uses the term—does not imply faithful repentance, but mental assent to a given proposition. Wesley and Baxter were mutual in their contempt for a position where no change in heart, mind, or practice needed to accompany justification, as long as one has been imputed the righteousness of Christ that covered any sinful blemish the elect might incur. Wesley and Baxter starkly countered such a claim in their writings, suggesting that any theology forgoing charitable Christian practice ought to be seriously questioned.

Even so, neither Wesley or Baxter envisioned human beings to be the meriting principle of God's favor, nor that by practicing charity one could earn justification or saving faith. Wesley was adamant in this regard, as he summarized "justification" as God's act of "pardon, [or] the forgiveness of sins."¹⁵ He believed that as sinful human beings, we are unable to cause our own justification, for it "implies what God *does for us* through his Son."¹⁶ Wesley maintained that all of humanity inherited the sin of our first father, Adam, but are regenerated by "the sacrifice for sin made by the second Adam, as the representative of us all," grounded in the reality that "God is so far reconciled to all the world that he hath given them a new covenant."¹⁷ We are justified by the freely offered grace of the Father through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, his Son. No longer bound to the law of sin and death, we become recipients of his grace as we respond in faith to his newly established covenant, and are pardoned from sinfulness and forgiven of all transgressions.

To be sure, this echoed an earlier sentiment put forth by Baxter: namely, the human inability to merit salvation. He affirmed as Wesley would later,

that humanity has fallen short of God's law and moral precepts. Only one can fulfill our need for right-standing by atoning for our sinfulness. "Jesus Christ, at the will of his Father, and upon his own will, being perfectly furnished for this work, with a divine power and personal righteousness, first undertook, and afterwards discharged this debt, by suffering what the law did threaten, and the offender himself was unable to bear."¹⁸ By willingly subjecting himself to our would-be punishment for contravening God's law, Jesus atones for our sins and reconciles us unto the Father. Baxter's theology of justification matched Wesley's in this regard, as both held the person of Jesus Christ to be the redeemer who fulfills God's strict commandments, where we fail. By his atonement, God provisions our righteousness as we respond to the offer of salvation with faithful repentance.

Furthermore, both writers asserted that, prior to God's gift of grace, we cannot exhibit righteousness of any sort, nor can we act charitably toward others. We must first be justified by God's righteousness, be put into a standing of right relationship with the divine, before decent living can be occasioned. Goodness inheres to our works only after we are justified by the Father through Christ's atoning death. By his act of expiation, we are delivered of culpability and made recipients of his favor. Upon reception, we are made able to live as God has commanded. As Wesley maintained, "all our works should be done in charity, in love, in that love to God which produces love to all mankind. But none of our works can be done in this love while the love of the Father is not in us."¹⁹ Until we experience the forgiveness of the Father, we cannot live charitably, for the nature of charitable living assumes life in accordance with the Father's will. To Wesley, we are sinners saved by God's free offer of justifying grace to which we respond and receive with faith. "Without grace we can no more believe than perfectly obey, as a dead man can no more remove a straw than a mountain."²⁰ Grace goes before righteousness and pre-conditions our ability to follow Christ's example of love and self-sacrifice. God does not justify those who are already righteous, for "it is only sinners that have any occasion for pardon: it is sin alone which admits of being forgiven."²¹

Wesley maintained in his sermon that justification was not synonymous with sanctification, the latter being "what [God] works in us by his Spirit" that leads us to holiness and Christian perfection.²² The believer's moment of justification does not entail "the being made actually just and righteous. This is *sanctification*; which is indeed in some degree the immediate *fruit* of justification, but nevertheless is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature."²³ Still, when one is justified unto the Father, God delivers him or her of all blameworthiness. In the strictest sense of Wesley's definition, the believer is pardoned from sin and graced with the possibility of growth and Christian betterment. She is not, however imputed the righteousness of

Christ. Imputation suggests a transmission of Christ's meritorious activity. The substance of his work is different from our own. To assimilate the two, is to run the risk of the antinomian fallacy, which takes Christ's righteousness to be our own, excusing our lives from the decency of moral uprightness. As Woodrow Whidden suggests, "When Wesley speaks of imputation, he always seems to sense the ominous specter of quietistic Moravianism or hyper-Calvinism lurking about."²⁴ As Baxter so avidly pointed out, one must distinguish between the quality of Christ's merits, and the righteousness practiced by those whom the Father justifies. "The primary, and most proper righteousness, lieth in the conformity of our actions to the precept."²⁵ As Baxter maintained, the *first* order of righteousness belongs only to Jesus of Nazareth who modeled his life after the law without committing any sin or moral offense. Our situation is a bit different, however. As humans tainted by willful disobedience, we are unable to follow his perfect example of love. We can only hope for the *second* order, "when, though we have [broken] the precepts, yet we have satisfied for our breach, either by our own suffering, or some other way."²⁶ To him, our hope of righteousness lay in "some other way," as we ourselves have flouted God's demanded perfection. Jesus appropriates the *second* order of righteousness to humankind through his steadfast abidance by the Mosaic Law. Emulating his selfless example of holiness, we too can participate in Christ's first order of righteousness, though it belongs to him alone. Our righteousness, which is of the *second* sort, germinates from Christ's exemplary act of atonement. As Baxter differentiates the two, "the righteousness we have in Christ, is one of the same sort with his; for his is a righteousness of the first kind. But Christ's righteousness, imputed to us, is only that of the second sort; and cannot therefore possibly be joined with our perfect obedience, to make up one righteousness for us."²⁷

We are not imputed the righteousness of Christ, for his is perfect and sinless. Instead, God mends our sinful infirmity when we acknowledge its imperfection and allow his grace to take root in our lives. To Baxter then, second order righteousness is imputed to believers. As he understood it, the righteousness of God was appropriated by God alone, which contoured those enabled ascension to God in faith. God's imputed righteousness is participatory, that is, involves both the divine and human. God is gracious lover and gift-giver, which in turn correlates to our part: to the extent that humans receive God's gift through belief and holiness in and through the expiatory work performed by the Son, we are made righteous. The "righteousness of God" is not merited by any human endeavor (works of the Law), but manifests in those who are justified freely by the grace of God. God's righteousness alone reverses our errant ways; and it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who freely offers himself as the medium unto this profound

reality. Laying groundwork for Wesley and his sermon, Baxter distinguished between Christ's righteousness and ours, the latter of which begins to develop pending our faithful reception of God's gracious offer of pardon.

To both Baxter and Wesley, the process of becoming righteous is not instantaneous, but gradual. It begins in the moment when one is justified, and comes to fruition (holiness) with continued faithful obedience to God's will. Unable to merit the rewards of salvation, we are justified by faith alone. Humanity must recognize its frailty and plead for God's mercy and forgiveness. Baxter further explicated this notion, which was deeply embedded within Wesley's sermon as well. "It is faith which justifieth men, 1. In the nearest sense directly and properly, as it is the fulfilling of the condition of the new covenant, 2. In the remote and more proper sense, as it is the receiving of Christ and his satisfactory righteousness."²⁸ According to Baxter then, one is justified when she repents of her sin and grasps the righteousness of Christ. Not received according to merit but through mercy and grace, God imputes saving faith and unfailingly guides us toward righteousness.²⁹ Baxter's definition of faith was broad and overarching. It included 1) repentance, the pleading for mercy from what we actually deserve, 2) prayer for pardon, closely linked with repentance, and 3) living a life of genuine love and service, which entailed works of charity and forgiveness of others. In short, faith assumes the general quality of Christian practice that causes us to live in accord with the Father's commandments. We are imputed this all-encompassing Christian faith through obedience and servitude, as it is the necessary condition of our salvation: "even to our taking the Lord for our God, and Christ for our Redeemer and Lord, doth imply our sincere obedience to him, and is the sum of the conditions on our part."³⁰ When we are obedient to the will of the Father, and to Christ who atones for our sins, we are justified by faith and made fertile for righteousness.

Likewise, Wesley posited the same in his sermon. Faith was essential to experiencing the righteousness of Christ: "But on what terms then is he justified who is altogether 'ungodly', and till that time 'worketh not'? On one alone, which is faith."³¹ Wesley defines faith as our conviction of the redeeming significance of Christ, and the acknowledgement of our sin and culpability. In Christ, we experience God's forgiving affability and are reconciled to the Father by the Son's meritorious work. In recognizing this objective, salvific reality, we too are justified to the Father by our belief in Christ's atoning sacrifice. As Wesley explained it, "Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself', but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for *my* sins, that he loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*."³² Only by recognizing God's genuine offer of grace, in and through the Redeemer of sins who extends his love even to "me," one is justified to the Father and forgiven of all her past

transgressions. In their respective soteriology then, it is clear that Baxter and Wesley held much in common.

IV. Conclusion

Wesley resonates with Baxter that the Father imputes to the believer justifying faith. Wesley maintained that “[It] is the *necessary* condition of justification.”³³ Since we cannot will our own salvation, the prerequisite to our forgiveness is wrought by the Father alone, who imputes faith to the sinner in the instant of justification. Prior to which, we remain in our sin, lacking the empowerment to respond to God’s loving call. However, in “the very moment God giveth faith (for ‘it is the gift of God’) to the ‘ungodly’, ‘that worketh not’, that ‘faith is counted to him for righteousness’.”³⁴ Convicted of his guilt, and made aware of Christ’s saving presence, “faith is imputed to him for righteousness,” and he is reconciled to the Father.³⁵ By faith alone is one justified and enabled to live the life of Christ, the life of righteousness. God imputes this faith to sinners who look to Christ for forgiveness and redemption. Justification by faith then is both something that God does in and for us which we cannot do ourselves, and an obedient act of contrition by which we recognize our sinful nature.

This rondo resounds throughout the movements of John Wesley’s sermon, and corresponds in detail with much of the material extracted from Richard Baxter’s *Aphorisms of Justification*. As noted, the two shared much in common: a deep disdain for the antinomian doctrine of salvation, a high esteem for Christ’s atonement, a mutual recognition of unmerited grace, a shared valuing of imputed faith as the condition of justification, and a profound emphasis on the call to righteousness which we are presented in and through Christ’s self-sacrificial death. Common throughout the two texts, these features illustrate the influence sustained by Wesley’s sermon from Baxter’s earlier *Aphorisms*. That Wesley incorporated into his own soteriological framework certain theological implications previously held by Baxter is significant. By publishing—and prefacing with positive remarks—his predecessor’s material, Wesley affirmed the text’s validity, and allowed its meaning and intention to contour his own mission and purpose. Moreover, by composing a sermon on the same matter, that incorporated similar language, intentions, and theological content from Baxter’s earlier work, Wesley exposed an indebtedness to the seventeenth century non-conformist, whose immense influence helped to lay the foundations for his sermon on *Justification by Faith*.

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End Notes

¹ Richard P. Heitzenrater and Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1991), 111. Throughout this analysis the title of Wesley's homily, Justification by Faith, will be interchanged with its ordinal designation, "sermon no. 5."

² C. F. Allison. *The Rise of Moralism: the Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966) 156. For a detailed description of the controversy incited by Baxter's theology of Justification, pay special attention to chapter eight.

³ John Wesley, ed. *An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter's Aphorisms of Justification* (4th ed. Dublin, Ireland: Bride-Street, 1802) 3.

⁴ Though it was John Wesley who published the extract, the text itself belongs to Richard Baxter; the brief synopsis provided of the work's historical emergence will reflect this, and be placed within Baxter's 17th century context of debate.

⁵ Alan Charles Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology, 1640-1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 22.

⁶ Hans Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter's Doctrine of Justification in its 17th-Century Context of Controversy* (Zoetermeer, Netherlands: Boekencentrum, 1993), 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸ Tim Cooper, *Fear and Polemic in Seventeenth-Century England: Richard Baxter and Antinomianism* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2001) 92.

⁹ Jeffrey S. Chamberlain, "Moralism, Justification, and the Controversy over Methodism" in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44 (1993) 663. He neatly defines the term, moralism, as "any system which assigns merit or causation in salvation to human effort," 655.

¹⁰ *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology, 1640-1790*, 55.

¹¹ Albert Brown-Lawson, *John Wesley and the Anglican Evangelicals of the Eighteenth Century: A Study in Cooperation and Separation with Special Reference to the Calvinistic Controversies* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Pentland, 1994), 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, 164.

¹³ John Wesley, "Justification by Faith" in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater and Albert C. Outler (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1991), 112.

¹⁴ John Wesley, ed. *An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter's Aphorisms of Justification*, 4th ed. (Dublin, Ireland: Bride-Street, 1802), 47.

¹⁵ Justification by Faith, 115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁸ An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter's Aphorisms of Justification, 6.

¹⁹ Justification by Faith, 117.

²⁰ An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter's Aphorisms of Justification, 13.

²¹ Justification by Faith, 116.

²² *Ibid.*, 114.

²³ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁴ Woodrow W Whidden "Wesley on Imputation: A Truly Reckoned Reality or Antinomian Polemical Wreckage?" in *Asbury Theological Journal* no. 52 (Fall 1997).

²⁵ An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter's Aphorisms of Justification, 20.

²⁶ Ibid., 20.

²⁷ Ibid., 22.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid., 37.

³⁰ Ibid., 39.

³¹ Justification by Faith, 117.

³² Ibid., 118.

³³ Ibid., 119.

³⁴ Ibid., 119.

³⁵ Ibid., 119.