

# Our Wesleyan Heritage

## The Scope of the Heritage

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There have been many epochal days in English history, but none more so than May 24, 1738. This was the day of Wesley's evangelical conversion. Of that day and event Lecky, the eighteenth century historian, wrote: "It is surely no exaggeration to say that the scene which took place at that humble meeting in Aldersgate Street forms an epoch in English history."<sup>1</sup> From that upper room there emerged a man with a heart aflame with love to God and his fellowmen; a man of whom Augustine Birrell could write:

You cannot cut him out of our national life. No single figure influenced so many minds, no single voice touched so many hearts. No other man did such a life work for England.<sup>2</sup>

If this event is epochal, then it would be wise to refresh our memories by a description of what took place in the life of John Wesley on that day. At five in the morning he opened his Greek Testament at the words: "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that we should be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Later on, as he was about to leave the house he referred again to his Greek Testament, and this time his eyes rested on the words: "Thou art not far from the kingdom." In the afternoon he was asked to attend a service at St. Paul's Cathedral, which he did. He was deeply impressed by the anthem, "Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice."

During the previous thirteen years, first in Oxford and then in Georgia, God had been preparing him for this memorable crisis, in which he was to receive a deep inward assurance of the regenerating work of God, the Holy Spirit. We must allow him to describe the crisis in his own words. He writes in his *Journal* :

<sup>1</sup> *The Roots of Methodism*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *New History of Methodism*, Vol. 1, p. 371.

In the evening I went, very unwillingly, to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, 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.

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified to all there what I now first felt in my heart.<sup>3</sup>

Here then we see the father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, introducing the one who was to become the leader of the evangelical revival to a living faith in Christ which brought to him regeneration and assurance.

There is no conclusive evidence as to the identity of the reader of the preface to the Romans, but we do have the English translation which was read by this anonymous reader. Here are some of the words which the Spirit of God took hold of and used to enlighten the mind and warm the heart of Wesley:

Faith is an energy in the heart, so efficacious, so lively, breathing, powerful as to be incapable of remaining inactive. Faith is a constant trust in the mercy of God towards us, by which we must cast ourselves entirely upon Christ and commit ourselves entirely to Him.... This firm trust is so animating as to cheer and elevate the heart, and transport it with affections towards God.... This high and heroic feeling, this noble enlargement of spirit, is effected in the heart by the Spirit of God, Who is imparted to believers by faith. It is impossible to separate works from faith, as impossible as to sever light from heat in fire.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Wesley became the recipient of an experience of grace which set in motion the well prepared machinery of mind, heart and will, and sent him forth to a life of itinerant evangelism

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<sup>3</sup> *Wesley's Works*, Vol. 1, p. 103.

<sup>4</sup> *New History of Methodism*, Vol. 1, pp. 199-200.

that was to help change the face of Britain and bring a spiritual revival. And so began a movement of God, the effects of which extend to us today, and the heritage of which we are about to consider.

As we examine the scope of the heritage received from Wesley, it is necessary to point out that this heritage is by no means confined to the Methodist Church. I think that it is fair to say that modern Methodism as a whole has ceased to proclaim some of the truths which were dear to Wesley; however, there are some individuals within the church who do so. This neglect of the truths which were in a particular sense Wesley's legacy to Christendom may be due to the fact that the Methodists of today feel that these truths are irrelevant to the needs of today; or is the reason a deeper one than this? Is it because so few know anything of the experimental realisation of these things?

Part of Wesley's legacy has now passed into other bodies of believers who have discovered in the truths he proclaimed and the heart-warming experience he enjoyed that which alone could meet their own spiritual needs; and they, in their turn, have become those who desire to share with their own generation these truths and this experience.

Dr. Rattenbury has declared that "we often find that ghost of John Wesley in unexpected quarters."<sup>5</sup> Yes, also here in Emmanuel Bible College and Missions: hence the reason for these Memorial Lectures, which are devoted annually to the discussion of truths taught by Wesley.

We would not assume for a moment that The Methodist Church would take much account of an insignificant group such as ourselves, but there is no doubt that we have the right to number ourselves amongst the spiritual children of Wesley. However, we look beyond Wesley for the rediscovery and fresh exposition and exemplification of the basic principles of New Testament Christianity which have given to us not merely a particular brand of theology, but rather a new discovery of the possibilities of grace in the realm of personal and collective experience.

What then is the heritage which we have received through Wesley? The more we consider the matter the clearer it becomes that the legacy is much bigger than most of us have

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<sup>5</sup> *Wesley's Legacy to the World*, p. 196.

realised.

We shall now briefly survey the scope of the heritage, and then in the two subsequent lectures discuss the two important aspects of this heritage which have become a vital part of our own teaching and experience.

### I: Wesley's Legacy of Literature

John Wesley was one of the first leaders of thought to employ on a large scale the printed page as a means of appealing to men and women.

Green's bibliography of the Wesley literature reveals that Wesley produced 233 original works, and extracted or edited one hundred others.<sup>6</sup> There is no wonder that Dr. Fitchett asks: "What time had a man, whose study was the saddle; who traveled 5,000 miles, and preached 500 sermons every year, for reading books; still less for writing and publishing them?"<sup>7</sup>

We have become partakers of this legacy. Its influence is still felt today. Look at his *Journal*, of which one writer has said: "There is no book, I humbly think in all the world like John Wesley's *Journal*. It has very few companions. Indeed it stands out solitary in Christian literature, clear, detached, columnar."<sup>8</sup> It covers Wesley's active life from 1735 to 1790: a record of well over fifty years of Christian experience, observation and service. It is one of the most complete detailed and scientific records of human experience and spiritual phenomenon in the whole range of literature.

In addition to the *Journal* we have his sermons and notes on the New Testament. The sermons were published in five different series; the first of these consisted of fifty-three sermons setting forth for his helpers a simple, clear, definite statement of what Fitchett calls "the theology of the revival."<sup>9</sup> This first collection of sermons became, and still is, the doctrinal standard of The Methodist Church along with his *Notes on the New Testament*.

The sermons as we have them in print are not the discourses as he actually preached them, but only the doctrinal framework, devoid of elaboration or illustration, a kind of condensed

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<sup>6</sup> *Wesley - Philosopher and Founder*, p. 260.

<sup>7</sup> *Wesley and His Century*, p. 473.

<sup>8</sup> *Wesley - Philosopher and Founder*, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> *Wesley and His Century*, p. 475.

statement of theology; but it is theology distinctly related to the practical details and ethical issues of life. At least thirty of the sermons deal with ethics, conduct and duties.

When Wesley wrote these sermons he laid aside all other literature, and had beside him only his Hebrew Bible and Greek Testament. He endeavored to "furnish plain truth for plain people," and to state in the most direct and non-technical language the great truths of evangelical Christianity.

His *Notes on the New Testament* were designed as Eayrs has stated: "...chiefly for plain, unlettered men who understood only their mother tongue; who yet had a reverence and love for God's Word and a desire to save their souls."<sup>10</sup> These notes are little known today; but they still contain treasure for those who will take time to read them.

It is not generally known that Wesley was one of the first men to discover the use of "the tract."

The Religious Tract Society was not organised until 1799; but more than fifty years earlier in 1742 Wesley was busy printing and circulating thousands of brief, pungent appeals to various classes of wrongdoers. . . . By means of his helpers, Wesley scattered these earliest tracts like seed over the soil of the three kingdoms.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to this, he was concerned that his helpers be well instructed men, and so he produced for them what he called "The Christian Library." This consisted of some fifty books which he edited, and in some cases abridged, and then produced in cheap editions so that they could be bought by his preachers. He produced a number of the classics in the same way; thus bringing good literature within the purchasing power of the common people. In a day in which such things are a commonplace happening, it is well to recall that in Wesley's day this was a real innovation and a part of his legacy to us.

There are other aspects of his literary activity which are less known yet of vital importance: his controversial writings, and amongst them his outstanding book, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, to which we shall have cause to refer later: his letters, too, which are a mine of spiritual counsel, full of spiritual discernment and practical wisdom. Then there

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<sup>10</sup> *Wesley - Philosopher and Founder*, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> *Wesley and His Century*, pp. 473, 474.

are his *Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion*, and sundry other publications. All these add up to a remarkable instrument of influence which extends from the eighteenth century until now, and forms a not inconsiderable part of our Wesleyan heritage.

We turn from the prose writings of John Wesley to the poetic writings of the two brothers, John and Charles, only to discover to our amazement that they fill thirteen volumes. Thus we are confronted with another aspect of our heritage.

## II: The Wesleyan Legacy of Hymnology

Comparatively few people ever read the sermons or *Journal* of John Wesley, but multiplied thousands sing the hymns composed, translated and arranged by the two Wesley brothers.

It is not generally realised the important part played by John Wesley in influencing modern hymnology. It was he who took a number of hymns written and sung by the Moravians and others and translated them into English. Such hymns as Gerhardt's "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me," and Tersteegen's "Thou Hidden Love of God," and Zinzendorf's "Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness," and that beautiful hymn by Antionette Bourignon, "Come Saviour Jesus From Above." It was John and not Charles Wesley who gave us the first Wesleyan hymn book in 1737, a year before his upper room experience. This book consisted largely of hymns which he had translated. As yet his brother's gift as a hymn-writer had not manifested itself.

"Perhaps the strangest thing about the poetry of Charles Wesley is that his genius as a hymn-writer only burst forth two days after his conversion, when he wrote his great prophetic hymn, 'Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin!'"<sup>12</sup> During the rest of his life he wrote approximately seven thousand hymns and spiritual songs. These were edited, arranged and introduced by John Wesley. It is impossible to estimate the effect of this volume of sacred theology set to music upon the masses of Christians who have sung them in all parts of the world and in every denomination for well over two centuries.

The standard Wesleyan hymn book was published in 1780. This was the last edition to be edited and corrected by John

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<sup>12</sup> *Wesley's Legacy to the World*, p. 261.

Wesley himself, and is therefore of value in assessing how much some modern versions of some of the hymns have been grievously altered. In the introduction to this edition Wesley describes it as "a little body of experimental and practical divinity." How true this is! Wesley's hymns are both heart-searching and heart-warming; they are theological and practical. What a description we have, for instance, of the Incarnation in a sublime yet simple sentence in one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

Our God contracted to a span,  
Incomprehensibly made man.

It would take a large volume to expound the theology of these hymns, as Dr. Rattenbury says: "They sound the depths and scale the heights of human experience, and they declare the glories, particularly the redemptive glories of the grace of God."<sup>13</sup>

While the age of grace lasts we shall continue to express the message of the gospel in the language of Wesley's "Jesu, Love of my Soul," and our penitence and longing in the words of his greatest of all hymns, "Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown." If, as believers, we are conscious of our lukewarmness and of our need of the "sacred fire," we shall find no better prayer than that of Wesley:

O Thou Who camest from above,  
The pure, celestial fire to impart,  
Kindle a flame of sacred love  
On the mean altar of my heart.

Or, if we are conscious of inward sin, what more appropriate prayer than this:

Oh for a heart to praise my God,  
A heart from sin set free;  
A heart that always feels Thy blood,  
So freely shed for me.

As Christians whose responsibility it is to share with a dying world the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, we can remind ourselves of this responsibility in the words of a Wesley hymn:

A charge to keep I have,  
A God to glorify  
A never-dying soul to save,  
And fit it for the sky.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

To serve the present age,  
My calling to fulfil,  
Oh, may it all my powers engage,  
To do my Master's will.

What shall we say of the varied seasons in the church's calendar? How poverty-stricken our devotional life would be at such times as Easter, Christmas and Whitsuntide without the Wesleyan hymns. We express our joy at the advent of Christ in the words of Wesley's "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." On Good Friday we discover the meaning of the passion of our Lord in his hymn "Would Jesus have the sinner die, why hangs he then on yonder tree?" On Easter day we capture the thrill of the resurrection in Wesley's "Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Halelujah!" and at Whitsuntide we sing a number of hymns on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, of which this is but a sample:

O come and dwell in me,  
Spirit of power within,  
And bring the glorious liberty  
From sorrow, fear and sin.

Even a casual look through the Methodist hymnbook will cause the reader to see how wide was the scope of Wesley's hymns; he has a hymn for almost every occasion, and for every experience of life from the cradle to the grave. This is part of our heritage and will never die whilst time shall last.

### III: Wesley's Legacy As A Church Founder

What was Wesley's legacy as a church founder? We have today The Methodist Church, which is one of our largest denominations; it is a well organised body, and world embracing in its influence. I may appear controversial when I say that Methodism as we have it today was not Wesley's legacy to us as a church founder. It is very questionable whether he would feel at home in it if he were here now. His legacy to us in this realm lies deeper down than the structure we call 'Methodism'; it is in the realm of principles and foundations.

The outstanding thing about Wesley as a church founder is his return to the simplicity of Primitive Christianity in both worship and witness. This has been a characteristic of almost all revivals down the centuries of the Christian era; there has been a turning away from rigid forms and systems of worship to a New Testament simplicity, and Wesley was no exception



in this.

It is all the more amazing that it should be so with him, when we consider the prejudices of his early training; the bonds that bound him to episcopal form of government and worship. Despite these, and many other links with the Anglican church, the Spirit of God led him to a form of worship and government that was closely akin to the New Testament pattern. In apostolic Christianity there were four predominant things: (1) the apostles' teaching; (2) the breaking of bread; (3) fellowship, and (4) prayer. The apostles acted as overseers and travelled around establishing, teaching and counselling the young churches. This was also done by Wesley and his helpers. The class meeting was equivalent in spirit and in purpose to the New Testament fellowship. The love-feast, and later, the communion, was their 'breaking of bread'; and the central factor in every group of believers, however small, was prayer. Elaborate systems of organisation are not usually the creation of the Holy Spirit; these often emerge as the Spirit begins to depart, and instead of remaining flexible under the dominant influence of the Holy Spirit, people tend to become bound to the organisation or system.

Rattenbury says,

Wesley was not a conscious church builder framing a church on the basis of any ecclesiastical theories any more than was St. Paul. Wesley was all the time dealing with life, with living men and women newly illuminated, and he was finding organisations which would secure for them continuous corporate existence. . . . He was led by the Spirit of God, Who is the Holy Spirit, not limited by first century or sixteenth century precedents.<sup>14</sup>

It is also clear that

. . . he was possessed, like the early Christians with a great experience, which had been communicated to thousands of people, and by a great message; and what mattered was the conservation of the corporate and individual Christian life of those who shared the experience, and who desired to disseminate the message. The consequence was that Methodist societies and organisations were a free growth.

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* , p. 139.

Everything was accepted or rejected according to its usefulness to the Methodist experience and message. The societies developed in many ways in a manner analagous to those of the first century.<sup>15</sup>

From this you will gather that the organisation sprang from the life-giving experience. History has revealed that it is tragically possible to sustain and expand the organisation after the experience and message have ceased to be a vital part of it, and for the church to become like the ancient Tabernacle without the shekinah glory, or a body without spirit.

One eminent Methodist declared that, "Methodism is not worth preserving except so far as she preserves her vital experience of God and witnesses to it." It seems fairly evident from the study of church history that God finds it easier to raise up a new movement than to revive an old one. Despite all the efforts of Wesley not to break away from the Anglican communion, in the end he had to do so. Fitchett describes the religion of that day as "a drowsy, slippersed, arm-chair religion." Through Wesley the new wine of the Spirit's activity burst the old bottles of a decadent Anglicanism, and expressed itself in a return to the simplicity of Primitive Christianity.

J. B. Phillips has given us a wonderful description of Primitive Christianity in the introduction to *The Young Church in Action*.

This surely is the church as it was meant to be. It is vigorous and flexible, for those are the days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle-bound by over organisation. These men did not make 'acts of faith,' they believed: they did not 'say their prayers,' they really prayed...they were open on the God-ward side in a way almost unknown today...No one can read this book without being convinced that there is Someone here at work besides mere human beings. Perhaps because of their simplicity, perhaps because of their readiness to believe, to obey, to give, to suffer, and if need be, to die, the Spirit of God found what surely He must always be seeking--a fellowship of men and women so united in love and

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* , p. 138.

faith that He can work through them with the minimum of let or hindrance.<sup>16</sup>

This could just as easily have been written of the early days of Methodism, and it is this, rather than the mere organisation called "Methodism," which is our legacy today.

After two centuries the clarion call still goes forth from Wesley and his followers, calling us back to the recognition and realisation in our church life of the personality, power and presidency of the Holy Spirit.

#### IV: The Wesleyan Legacy of Social Influence

Wesley insisted that "Christianity is essentially a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it."<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Wesley Bready in his great book *England Before and After Wesley* says that the evangelical awakening, which came largely through Wesley, "marks the birth of a new and sensitive social conscience, and is the chief source of our modern liberties."<sup>18</sup>

A number of years ago the late Earl Baldwin declared that "Historians who filled their pages with Napoleon, and had nothing to say of Wesley, now realise that they cannot explain nineteenth century England until they can explain Wesley."<sup>19</sup>

"Probably no prophets of spiritual awakening," writes Paul Rees, "ever had more reason to be intimidated by the bleakness and barrenness of the conditions they faced than did Wesley and Whitfield and their associates."<sup>20</sup> *The Cambridge Modern History* describes the Britain of that day as a land full of "materialism, dim ideals and expiring hopes." Rationalism and the various forms of scepticism were in full bloom; religion was obsolete, thoroughly decadent and dead. The church was thoroughly worldly and tragically sterile. Drunkenness and debauchery of all kinds stalked through the land; not merely amongst the poorer classes, but also amongst so-called "society." Wesley Bready has pointed out that it was not an uncommon thing for Parliament to adjourn early because "the honourable members were too inebriated to

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<sup>16</sup> *The Young Church in Action*, Preface, p. vii.

<sup>17</sup> *Asbury Seminarian*, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

continue the business of state." The pursuits and pastimes of the clergy and laity, the gentry and the peasant, were characterised by bestiality and brazenness.

In such circumstances as these, there were three courses of action open to Wesley and his followers. First, they could compromise with the conditions, and seek to fit into their surroundings and cease to be distinctive. Secondly, they could try to withdraw from these circumstances into some form of monasticism, and become what Paul Rees describes as "piestic islands in a heaving mass of corruption." Thirdly, they could challenge the conditions in the name of Christ and in the power of His Spirit and seek to change them. It was this latter course which they took. To use Chadwick's expression, they not only preached the gospel, they also "hunted the wolf." They vigorously protested against the evils of the day: such as the appalling prison conditions which caused Wesley to marvel whether there could be any worse conditions this side of hell than those in Newgate Prison. By spoken and written words he and his followers gave their whole-hearted support to Wilberforce in his efforts to bring about the abolition of slavery. Wesley too was an effective temperance advocate.

Lord Shaftesbury, who did so much to change our social conditions, was a product of the Evangelical Revival. When Wesley Bready began to study the life of Shaftesbury, he discovered, as he says, "that one could never understand Shaftesbury until one understood the evangelical revival of which he was the product, and which had inspired his every ideal."<sup>21</sup> The Duke of Argyll in addressing the House of Lords declared that "social reforms of the last century have not been due mainly to the Liberal Party, but to the influence, character and perseverance of one man--Lord Shaftesbury."<sup>22</sup>

There is no doubt that Wesley Bready is right in saying that "during fifty-three years of inimitable labour, as a single-minded crusader for God and righteousness, Wesley created character-values, organisations and institutions which at a hundred points were to affect the voluntary heritage of the Anglo-Saxon democracies."<sup>23</sup> "The test of every revival,"

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* , pp. 14,15.

<sup>22</sup> *A Casket of Cameos*, p. 256.

<sup>23</sup> *Asbury Seminarian*, No. 1, p. 15.

said Dr. Dale, "is its ethical result." On looking back over two centuries, it seems fair to say that the revival of the eighteenth century passes the test.

Many evangelicals of our day tend to avoid any teaching on the social implications of the things they believe and proclaim. Wesley demonstrated for us that personal sanctification leads towards social regeneration; that personal holiness and social passion are not antithetical. Our saintliness must have a revolutionising social force--we are to be "holy in all manner of living."

Wesley did not come preaching some economic programme or political doctrine; but the Saviour Whom he and his followers exalted, and the Spirit of God Who indwelt them, so transformed and released them that they became the channels through which a new kind of life began to flow, manifesting itself in an ethical force of invaluable significance; and the same Holy Spirit is eager to do this again today.

#### V: Wesley's Legacy of Theological Truth

In order fully to understand Wesley's teaching it is essential to know something of the theological climate with which he was surrounded. To some extent his teaching was a revolt against the prevailing theological emphasis of his day.

The working creed of orthodox Christianity in the eighteenth century was that of Calvinism in an extreme form; this was taught by both Anglicans and Non-conformists alike. The three dominant notes in the teaching were predestination, election and reprobation.

They believed and taught that in the atonement provision had been made for a limited number only to be saved; and that way back in eternity these specially chosen ones were predestined to salvation. To all such the effectual call would come, which it would not be possible for them to resist; the rest of mankind could not be saved, do what they might. Such teaching, of course, paralysed evangelistic effort, and deadened the spiritual life of the church, and also led in practice to anti-nomianism with its 'live as you like, do as you please' kind of life.

As early as 1725 Wesley felt these views to be unscriptural and unbalanced, and in a letter written to his mother during that year he renounced such views, and she replied ratifying what he had done.

It fell to Wesley to rediscover and restate certain aspects of

divine truth which had been neglected or scorned; and when he did so, he declared the truth with such clarity and passion, that it appeared as something new; instead of which it was merely the re-statement of what was inherent in the apostolic teaching and experience.

In 1739, just twelve months after his conversion, he preached a remarkable sermon on the subject of "Free Grace,!" in which he clearly expresses his views. This sermon served to accentuate the theological differences between himself and Whitfield, and eventually led to a cleavage between them.

Wesley's theological position was based upon what have been called "The five universals."

1. That all men need salvation.
2. That all men might be saved.
3. That all men might know themselves saved.
4. That all should declare their salvation.
5. That all might perfect holiness in the fear of God.<sup>24</sup>

Wesley expressed his views in a permanent way in the *Minutes of the Conference*. This caused some of his friends to attack him, and eventually break away from him. The saintly Fletcher of Madeley hastened to his defence in a series of letters, later compiled into book form and entitled *Checks to Antinomianism*. Fletcher's appraisal of the theological position of the period is contained in a remark found in his *Third Check*. "If I am not mistaken, we stand now as much in need of a reformation from Antinomianism, as our fathers did of a reformation from popery."<sup>25</sup>

Out of Wesley's universals two vital truths emerged, not that either of them were new, but they were stated with the force of a new discovery because they had been lost for years in the mists of a dominant Calvinism. What were these truths?

The first was the doctrine of assurance, or as Samuel Wesley, the father of John Wesley, described it--"The inward witness." The second was the teaching and experience of Christian perfection or perfect love as Wesley liked to describe it. In these two truths we have Wesley's unique contribution to theological thought and Christian experience. It is just here that we discover the most important part of our

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<sup>24</sup> *New History of Methodism*, Vol. 1, pp. 305, 306.

<sup>25</sup> *Benson's Life of Fletcher*, p. 149.

Wesleyan heritage, and it is to the consideration of these matters that we must turn in the subsequent lectures.