The Arminian

A PUBLICATION OF THE FUNDAMENTAL WESLEYAN SOCIETY

VOLUME 40 SPRING 2022 ISSUE 1

ARE THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN MADE PERFECT IN LOVE STILL SINNERS? HELPFUL RESPONSES FROM JOHN WESLEY AND JOHN FLETCHER

Joseph D. McPherson

Just prior to his death John Wesley was heard to say, "I have been reflecting on my past life: I have been wandering up and down, between fifty and sixty years, and endeavoring, in my poor way, to do a little good to my fellow-creatures: and now it is probable that there are but a few steps between me and death: and what have I to trust to for salvation?" With words of certainty he concludes: "I can see nothing which I have done or suffered that will bear looking at. I have no other plea than this,

I the chief of sinners am,
But Jesus died for me."

In his *Journal* dated November of 1738, Wesley writes: "In the evening I proclaimed mercy to my fellow-sinners at Basingshaw church." In a letter written to the Rev. Mr. Church dated June 17, 1746, John Wesley testifies that "God hath been pleased to use me, a weak, vile worm, in reforming many of my fellow-sinners, and making them, at this day, living witnesses of 'inward and pure religion.'"

Wesley is not alone in his use of such terminology. In a letter written to Miss Hatton, dated November 1, 1762, John Fletcher opens with these words: "Madam, — I thank you for the confidence you repose in the advice of a poor fellow-sinner. May the Father of lights direct you through so vile an instrument!" [Fletcher, *Works*, 4:369].

Not only here, but throughout his writings one will find Fletcher repeatedly referring to himself as a "fellow-sinner." To the candid inquirer who believes in the gracious power and ability given regenerated believers to live above sin, these words of John Wesley and John Fletcher may appear problematic. We must understand that both Wesley and

THE ARMINIAN MAGAZINE

Volume 40 SPRING 2022 Issue 1

ISSN 1085-2808

Fletcher did, indeed, believe and teach that all regenerated believers are given sufficient grace to live without intentionally committing sin.

In his comments on 1 John 3:9 Wesley writes: "*Whosoever is born of God* — By living faith, whereby God is continually breathing spiritual life into his soul, and his soul is continually breathing out love and prayer to God, *doth not commit sin.* For the divine *seed* of loving faith *abideth in him*; and, so long as it doth, *he cannot sin*, *because he is born of God*—Is inwardly and universally changed." Likewise, John Fletcher's *Checks to Antinomianism* will persuade the reader of his total opposition to the Calvinistic view that all are bound to commit sin in thought, word and deed daily until death. How then are we to find a satisfying clarification of this apparent paradox? It is hoped that the following search within the teachings of these saintly men will provide a satisfactory understanding.

All regenerated believers are given sufficient grace to live without intentioinally committing sin

In conference with his preachers, Wesley explained to all present that "(1) Every one may mistake as long as he lives. (2) A mistake in opinion may occasion a mistake in practice. (3) Every such mistake is a transgression of the perfect law. Therefore (4) Every such mistake, were it not for the blood of the atonement, would expose to eternal damnation. (5) It follows, that the most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ, even for their actual transgressions, and may say for themselves, as well as their brethren, 'Forgive us our trespasses'" [Wesley, *Works,* 12:241].

In a personal letter written from Bristol on the 13 October 1762, Wesley speaks of a "proposition" which he personally held: "A person may be cleansed from all *sinful tempers*," says he, "and yet need the atoning blood. For what? For negligences and ignorances; for both words and actions (as well as omissions) which are, in a sense, transgressions of the perfect law. And I believe no one is clear of these till he lays down this corruptible body."

The founder of Methodism assures us that "the best of men still need Christ in His priestly office, to atone for their omissions, their shortcomings (as some not improperly speak), their mistakes in judgment and practice, and their defects of various kinds. For these are all deviations from the perfect law, and consequently need an atonement. Yet that they are not properly sins, we apprehend may appear from the words of the Apostle Paul, 'He that loveth hath fulfilled the law; for love is the fulfilling of the law' (Rom. 13:10)." He plainly shows that "mistakes, and whatever infirmities necessarily flow from the corrupted state of the body, are no way contrary to love; nor therefore, in the Scripture sense, sin" [Wesley, *Works*. 11:396]. To explain himself a little further on this subject he writes:

"Not only sin, properly so called (that is, voluntary transgression of a known law), but sin, improperly so called (that is, an involuntary transgression of a Divine law, known or unknown), needs the atoning blood." He goes on to say that he believed "there is no such perfection in this life as excludes those involuntary transgressions which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality.… I believe, a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions" [Wesley, *Works,* 11:396].

Let us turn now turn to John Fletcher for further assistance. In his *Last Check to Antinomianism* he writes: "An address to perfect Christians," or believers who have attained Christian perfection. He emphasizes "humble love" to be one quality of such perfection and says, "If humble love makes us frankly confess our faults, much more does it incline us to own ourselves sinners, miserable sinners,

before that God whom we have so frequently offended" [Fletcher, *Works*, 2:662]. Laying a foundation for his argument, he continues:

> I need not remind you that your "bodies are dead because of sin." You see, you feel it, and therefore, so long as you dwell in a prison of flesh and blood, which death, the avenger of sin, is to pull down; so long as your final justification, as a pardoned and sanctified sinner, has not taken place; yea, so long as you break the law of paradisiacal perfection, under which you were originally placed, it is meet, right, and your bounden duty to consider yourselves as sinners, who, as transgressors of the law of innocence and the law of liberty, are guilty of death — of eternal death. St. Paul did so after he was "come to Mount Sion, and to the spirits of just men made perfect." He still looked upon himself as the chief of sinners, because he had been a daring blasphemer of Christ, and a fierce persecutor of his people. Christ came to save sinners, of whom I am chief. The reason is plain. Matter of fact is, and will be matter of fact to all eternity. According to the doctrines of grace and justice, and before the throne of God's mercy and holiness, a sinner pardoned and sanctified must, in the very nature of things, be considered as a sinner; for if you consider him as a saint absolutely abstracted from the character of a sinner, how can he be a pardoned and sanctified sinner? To all eternity, therefore, but much more while death (the wages of sin) is at your heels, and while ye are going to "appear before the judgment of seat of Christ, to receive" your final sentence of absolution or condemnation, it will become you to say with St. Paul, "We have all sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely [as sinners] by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ:" although we are justified JUDICIALLY *as believers*, through faith; *as obedient believers*, through the obedience of faith; and *as perfect Christians*, through Christian perfection [Fletcher, *Works,* 2:662-663].

Wesley and Fletcher identify the sinner in two ways.

Fletcher was mindful of objections Calvinists had to the doctrine of Christian perfection. One of them was expressed as follows: "Your doctrine of perfection makes it needless for perfect Christians to say the Lord's prayer; for if God vouchsafes to 'keep us this day without sin,' we shall have no need to pray at night, that God would 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us'"[Fletcher, *Works,* 2:502].

In answer to this Fletcher declared that, "Though a perfect Christian does not trespass voluntarily and break the law of love, yet he daily breaks the law of Adamic perfection through the imperfection of bodily and mental powers: and he has frequently a deeper sense of these involuntary trespasses than many weak believers have of their voluntary breaches of the moral law" [Fletcher, *Works*, 2:502].

Fletcher continues by asserting that "Although a perfect Christian has a witness that his sins are now forgiven in the court of his conscience, yet he 'knows the terror of the Lord:' he hastens to meet the awful day of God: he waits for the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the character of a righteous Judge." For these stupendous reasons "he keeps an eye to the awful tribunal, before which he must soon 'be justified or condemned by his words:' he is conscious that his final justification is not yet come; and therefore he would think himself a monster of stupidity and pride, if, with an eye to his absolution in the great day, he

scrupled saying to the end of life, 'Forgive us our trespasses'" [Fletcher, *Works*, 2:502].

In conclusion we find that both Wesley and Fletcher identify the sinner in two ways. First, one is identified as a sinner who knowingly breaks the moral laws of the Almighty. Of this, all the members of the human race have been guilty. Secondly, all are considered sinners, even after attaining Christian perfection, because, as a member of Adam's fallen race they have suffered physical and mental impairment, making them incapable of keeping the perfect law of God.

"Thus adult believers [those perfected in love] are," according to Fletcher, "still sinners, still imperfect according to the righteous law of paradisiacal innocence and perfection: and yet they are saints, perfect according to the gracious law of evangelical justification and perfection" [Fletcher, *Works*, 2:607].

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THE PECULIARITIES OF METHODISM *Part 4*

William Burt Pope

But we must be careful to learn from our enemies what those evils are in our teaching that fairly expose the doctrine to misconstruction. We must preach what we find in the Scripture on this subject, and as we find it there. There is no one point on which we ought to be more careful of that precise fidelity to the Word of God which is our safeguard. Where a tenet is disputed, let us adhere to Scriptural phraseology: then we are safe. And in this case the Bible is our strength. Let us not establish peculiarities beyond those which are forced upon us. Let us not erect the means of attainment, the instantaneousness or otherwise, the evidences which seal it, into doctrines of our faith. Suffice that we know that the body of sin is to be destroyed; that the perfected operation of the love of God within us may enkindle perfect love in return, and that the Word of God acknowledges a state of perfect holiness as the result. The most exact New Testament exposition will defend us at all points; and we need not be afraid of any argument that may be brought against us. Entire sanctification from sin, perfect consecration to God, and Christian or evangelical perfection of holiness, are terms we need not be afraid boldly to maintain. The word "perfect" is not one that any Christian would use of himself; but the term "perfection" we need not shrink from, when protected by those two adjectives. With God all things are possible.

But the matter of supreme importance here is, to vindicate our doctrine by making the attainment of this entire redemption from sin, consecration to God, and holiness of life, the object of our steadfast pursuit. We may theologically sustain our positions; and it is our duty to defend this most precious provision of the covenant of grace from the hands of its enemies. But the best argument in its defense is the silent assertion of its truth in our lives. We must make a distinction here between the assertion of the doctrine and the profession of the experience: we cannot too earnestly and openly profess our faith in the truth; but none among us should be in haste to make redemption from the corruption of the heart, or his perfect love to God, the subject of his confession. The great point is to reach this state; not to declare that we have reached it. The only confession it admits is the negative one: that of a life not inconsistent from the fact. Let us resolve, by Divine grace, to take courage from the promises and perfect holiness in the fear of God. Let us not despond

because of many failures; we have failed, possibly, because we have not sought our privileges in the right way. Either we have expected too much from the instant act of the Spirit, or we have thought too much of our own effort. We must look for the consummation of grace to the more abundant effusion of the love of God in our hearts, even to perfection; and this is the sovereign act of Divine grace. But we must look for it in the way of entire obedience, self-renouncing imitation of Christ in charity, and the habitual dwelling in God by the devotion of living faith. "Herein," says St. John, our great teacher on this subject, when speaking of these three methods, "is our love made perfect:" made perfect, that is, not by our own effort, but by Divine power. Strong in the assurance, brethren, that our doctrine is true, let us each intently resolve this day to prove its truth.

Between the peculiarities of our doctrine, and the peculiarities of our fellowship, there is a strict connection; the term fellowship being used in the wide acceptation in which it is found in the Scripture. Here again we are marked out among the communities of Christendom; standing alone in many things, whether for admiration or for reproach.

The first use of the word in the history of the New Testament Church requires us to understand it of the bond that binds ministers and people in the ordinances and polity of the Christian religion. It is our privilege to combine in our system most of the advantages of other systems, without their exaggerations and incongruities. We protest vehemently, and cannot too vehemently protest, against the hierarchical theory with its assumptions; but we have an organization of our own that in some respects, and taken as a whole, its evils balanced by its good, is as fine and finished a specimen of evangelical church order as the world has seen. Far from perfect, either in the things or in the names given them, it is as near the ideal as it has been permitted to visible Christian polities to go. The best of every several forms meets in this. We have an episcopacy which is more like that of the Epistles and first Christian century than the diocesan episcopacy of later times. Yet we are thoroughly Presbyterian, as witness our present synodical assembly. We are not Congregationalists: we are very far removed from their theory; and yet every one of our societies has its own internal self-governing functions and prerogatives. Whatever opinion may be formed of the aggregate result, or of the nomenclature adopted, we have every reason to rejoice over the combination of elements. We avoid the extremes, and lose nothing that belongs to the mean between them. We have no priesthood; we have no lay-eldership. We have not three orders; but we have the threefold office. Let us rejoice over our peculiarities, as they serve well the common interest of the one kingdom that is more than all organization.

The great point is to reach this state of Christian perfection; not to declare that we have reached it

We have, however, our own conventional idea of fellowship, of which, doubtless, all are thinking while I speak. Throughout the world, but especially in Great Britain, the Methodist people hold fast the tradition of a Christian communion which confesses the name of Jesus not only before men generally, as in the Eucharist, but in the assemblies of the brethren themselves. Not that we have a monopoly of this kind of fellowship. Meetings for mutual confession, and edification, and counsel, have been always aimed at in the purest ages and purest forms of the Church; but we are the only community that has incorporated them in the very fibre of our constitution. Growing out of our society character, this institution we have aimed to interweave with the organization of the Church also: not yet with perfect success, but with results that encourage the hope of perfect success. As it is rooted in our ecclesiastical economy, so it is rooted in the affections of our people. No from in which

the social element of Christianity has found expression has enlisted more universal enthusiasm in its favor than the old class meeting. Other forms of confederation have been gloried in, lived for, and sometimes died for, in the history of Christendom. But I question if any institution, grafted on Scriptural precept, has ever commanded such widespread and pervading homage of all orders of the devout, or approved itself by such practical and irresistible evidences of good, as the Methodist class-meeting. This is of itself, or ought to be, its sufficient defense. Incautious and unskillful hands have been meddling with it of late; bin in vain. It may admit of much improvement in detail and in administration, but its foundations are secure and inviolable.

In our zeal for this characteristic of our fellowship, we are, perhaps, in danger of forgetting another; that, namely, of the common bond that unites our members in the service of religion. This is that "fellowship unto the Gospel" of which St. Paul to the Philippians speaks. It has been our peculiarity from the beginning to make all our people fellow-laborers in our general work. The entire machinery of our system is set in motion by one Spirit, who gives to every man a "manifestation to profit withal." We hold that the differing gifts of the Holy Ghost are distributed throughout the Church; and that every man, and every woman too, has a distinct vocation, and a distinct responsibility. We always remember that the Pentecostal symbol which rested upon each became to each a tongue of fire: that all who were sealed, were sealed for service. Not that we stand alone in this, or suppose ourselves superior to others. It is a peculiarity which we rejoice to share with many other churches; some of which have, perhaps, learned our lesson and in some respects may have "bettered their instruction." Be that as it may, we must never forget our law of fellowship for universal service. As ministers we must mark and use our people's gifts, as well as watch over their souls. As members of the general body, we must seek to consecrate our several abilities to the common good. This has been hitherto our strength, and in this may our glorying never be made void!

A WESLEYAN THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

Vic Reasoner

John Miley's *Atonement in Christ* (1879) was a watershed moment in Methodist theology. It has been hailed as the first full-length treatment of the atonement by a Methodist. Those who make this claim are unaware of Richard Treffry's *Letters on the Atonement* (1839).

Prior to Miley, Methodist theologians had affirmed penal substitution and satisfaction. However, they understood the atonement to be universal in scope and conditional in application. Miley argued that if the atonement was substitutionary and if Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of the world, we were forced either to accept universalism, that all the world was saved, or limited atonement, that only the elect were saved. For God to require anything else amounted to a kind of double jeopardy. Thus, he adapted the theology of Hugo Grotius, an Arminian lawyer and statesman, who had formulated the governmental theory in 1636. However, around 1602 Arminius himself taught that God

> rendered satisfaction to *his Love for Justice and to his Hatred against sin,* when he imposed on his Son the office of Mediator by the shedding of his blood and by the suffering of death; and he was unwilling to admit him as the Intercessor for sinners except when sprinkled with his own

> blood in which he might be made the propitiation for sins. . . . In this respect also it may with propriety be said, that God rendered satisfaction to himself, and appeased himself in "the Son of his love."

From 1879 forward, almost every Wesleyan theologian got on Miley's bandwagon and adopted his governmental view — except for Thomas Summers, Henry Sheldon, Miner Raymond, and Olin Curtis. The list of those who agreed with Miley includes R. S. Foster, Daniel Steele, A. M. Hills, H. Orton Wiley, Kenneth Grider, Ray Dunning, Richard S. Taylor, and Larry Shelton. Hills declared that Miley was "the master theologian of Methodism."

In his *Systematic Theology*, Miley devotes 188 pages to the doctrine of the atonement. He begins with a definition of the atonement that is misleading.

> The vicarious sufferings of Christ are an atonement for sin as a conditional substitute for penalty, fulfilling, on the forgiveness of sin, the obligation of justice and the office of penalty in moral government.

Initially, he also affirms propitiation and substitution, but eventually he begins to qualify what these terms mean in "a consistent Arminian theology." Eventually, after surveying numerous theories of the atonement, he declares that there are really only two theories: absolute or conditional substitution. I would counter that there are really only two theories: objective or subjective.

The atonement had to first be objective before it could have a subjective influence

A subjective view holds that God could have dealt with sin any way he chose. Thus, the atonement was arbitrary. It is directed toward mankind in order to evoke a loving response. In this move away from total depravity, guilt and penalty are not transferrable and freedom is made a separate doctrine. Although the alleged purpose of the atonement is to insure moral government, the premise that God does not have to uphold his own law or can relax it if he chooses tends to antinomianism. God's law is a reflection of his nature, not simply an expediency in deterring mankind.

Penal satisfaction is *objective*. Its object is to satisfy the justice of God. The atonement is necessary for our salvation. It originates outside ourselves and is directed toward God as its object apart from any human response. The thrust of R. W. Dale in *The Atonement* (1875) was to demonstrate that the atonement had to first be objective before it could have a subjective influence.

Miley rejects the concept of a conditional penal substitution. Instead, Miley says that the atonement was a substitute *for* penalty. He argues that satisfaction is impossible by substitution. But satisfaction was the purpose of substitution! And so he eventually begins to show his hand by rejecting the concept of satisfaction. Miley is adamant that Jesus suffered, but was not punished.

Some theologians prefer to say that he *suffered* for us, but that seems ambiguous since he suffered tremendously *before* he ever arrived at Calvary. Other theologians worry that if we say he was *punished* for our sins, it implies that he became a sinner. If we say that the *penalty* for our sin was imputed to him, them some theologians argue that either the whole world or the elect are automatically saved. But all of these errors can be avoided without throwing out the basic concept of penal substitution.

The question begging an answer then is *why* was it necessary for Jesus to suffer? Yes, he took our place but for what reason? Did he die in order to obtain merit? Did he die as a martyr in order to inspire us to continue the revolution? Did he die as a great moral example in order to inspire us to do better? Did he die as a messenger declaring the love of God?

Miley rejects the idea that it was neces-

sary for the satisfaction of divine law. "Did the necessity arise out of an absolute justice which must punish sin, the theory of satisfaction would be in accord with it, but without power to answer to its requirement, because such a necessity precludes substitutionary atonement."

This logic is convoluted. Yes, God had to punish sin because he said he would do so! The only reason why this decree of God cannot be satisfied through a substitute is because Miley rejects that option. Apparently he does so because he does not think penal substitution and penal satisfaction can be accomplished without our sin being imputed to Christ. But Jesus became a sin offering, not a sinner! In order to refute the doctrine of satisfaction, Miley quotes from Charles Hodge, the Calvinist. But he could have quoted from Arminius and Wesley who held to satisfaction without the additional Calvinistic baggage. Thus, Miley concludes, "Nothing could be punished in Christ which was not transferred to him, and in some real sense made his." But Isaiah 53:5-6 teaches otherwise. The penalty for our sin *was* transferred to him, yet he did *not* become a sinner.

God has offered to accept the suffering of Christ in lieu of the eternal punishment of the human race

Having dismissed a more adequate explanation, Miley instead insists that Christ's suffering was necessary in order to enforce moral government. Thus, the purpose of the atonement was to provide a restraint or deterrent against sin. Apparently, Jesus suffered in order to teach us a lesson. But why did Jesus need to go to the cross in order to suffer, since his suffering began with his Incarnation?

After Miley ruled out all other options, including the traditional Methodist explanation, he begins to defend the governmental theory. He argues that his theory maintains substitution. But this assurance is misleading because he rejects penal substitution. He is never very clear in his explanation as to why Jesus had to suffer for us. Millard Erickson observed that while Miley cited scriptures which speak of divine wrath, divine righteousness, and atonement through suffering, he does not mention texts which deal with or define the idea of atonement itself.

The editor for Thomas Summers' *Systematic Theology*, John Tigert, had first mounted a strong reaction in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* (1884) and then in the footnotes of Summers' *Systematic Theology* (1888). He argued that Miley's views were not Methodist and that the teaching of Watson, Pope, and Summers is nearer the truth of Scripture. He could have also listed John Wesley, Benjamin Fields, John Banks, Thomas Ralston, and Samuel Wakefield, who all wrote before Miley.

However, Miley's view was accepted as the only consistent Wesleyan option based on the false dilemma of either universalism or Calvinism. But Richard Treffry, in his *Letters on the Atonement* (1839) explained the terms of the covenant:

- That there shall be no obligation on the sufferer
- That he shall himself be the subject of reward
- That the ends of justice shall be more fully answered by the suffering of the substitute than by that of the actual offender
- That the offended party shall be satisfied with the substitute and shall afford sufficient evidence of his admission of it
- That the offender shall accept the suffering of the substitute upon such terms as he shall be pleased to propose.

Essentially, God has offered to accept the suffering of Christ in lieu of the eternal punishment of the human race. Christ offered himself as our substitute. In return, he becomes the lord over a redeemed race. However, each person must also accept the terms individually in order for God to declare him justified.

There must be a voluntary agreement among all parties in this covenant of salvation. While a covenant is unconditional in the sense that it cannot be negotiated, it is conditional in the sense that is must either be ratified or rejected.

In contrast, the governmental view held that the atonement was not absolutely necessary. If God is sovereign, he has the prerogative to grant clemency to whomever he desires to forgive. He could forgive sin if the sinner said he was sorry. However, he sent Jesus to the cross as a declaration of his love and the seriousness of sin. His suffering and death amounted to an expediency which helped in "crowd control." God could have chosen other alternatives, and it is a mystery as to why he chose this option. But Christ he has provided a shining moral example and we all need to try harder.

Of course, this presumes that we have the ability to choose what is right and the humility to say we are sorry when we choose what is wrong. But if man is totally unable to save himself, it becomes vague how this inspirational act of Jesus on the cross plays into our salvation. If the purpose of the atonement was governmental, then the act is reduced to a diplomatic gesture and its value is measured by how much life on earth has improved.

The atonement was the heart of early Methodist theology

As a young pastor who was taught theology from Miley's viewpoint, I found that I could not actually explain the significant of the atonement to my congregation. Ultimately, I realized that without the concepts of substitution and satisfaction my hands were tied. Later I read John Stott's observation that "no two words in the theological vocabulary of the cross arouse more criticism than 'satisfaction' and 'substitution.'"

As I have continued to discover the early Methodist fathers, I found them aligned with an objective view of the atonement that was first articulated by Athanasius and then Anselm. They too fought Calvinism on the one hand and liberalism (Socianism) on the other hand. And they affirmed elements of the governmental view as a consequence of the atonement.

According to Eldon Dunlap, the entire theological enterprise of early Methodism

> was motivated by an evangelical zeal. The salvation of souls was their passion, and salvation rooted firmly in the reality and efficacy of the Atonement. The Atonement was the heart of their theology; it was the theme of their preaching; and it was the practical ground of their Christian living and hope of glory.

But as I have surveyed the Methodist and holiness theologians after Miley, the atonement becomes less important and more vague. Methodist theologians such as Henry Sheldon, Milton S. Terry, Albert Bledsoe, Albert Knudson, Vincent Taylor, and John Lawson argue that there is no catholic doctrine on the atonement and therefore they are free to make whatever adjustments they deem necessary. They appear more concerned to defend Christianity from what Fosdick called "a slaughterhouse religion." They are very concerned that no one think God is angry with sin. They are very thorough in ridding Wesleyan theology from any traces of substitution. For example, Dunning even expressed frustrated with Wiley's inconsistency.

But after they have cleared the ground of everything that would be an offense to modern man, they tend to be very indefinite in their articulate of what the atonement actually does mean. By 1999 Richard S. Taylor had grown alarmed over the lack of understanding his students had about the atonement. He confessed that he himself had always harbored unanswered questions. And so, in a little known book, *God's Integrity and the Cross*, Taylor abandoned the governmental theory for a penal satisfaction view that is provisional

and conditional. He wrote,

> If Christ's blood was not primarily penal in nature and directly a means of satisfying the moral and legal claims against the sinner, but rather merely a means of proclaiming God's wrath against sin for the sake of upholding moral government, then the connection between Christ's death and the Old Testament breaks down.

As the dean of classical Arminians, Robert Picirilli replied to part of my review of his book in which I said, "Beginning with John Miley and Daniel Whedon, who were eighteenth-century Methodists, there was a shift toward semi-Pelagianism. They abandoned prevenient grace for an emphasis on free will that taught we can choose salvation through our natural ability. Thus, Picirilli also articulates the orthodox Wesleyan-Arminian position, without adopting that label, while many "Wesleyan" theologians today are actually semi-Pelagian or open theists." He wrote, "I was especially pleased by what you said concerning your own Methodist heritage, and (as little as I know about it) I think you're right.

Vic is the executive assistant for the Francis Asbury Institute in Wilmore, Kentucky. Editorial Note: We are very pleased that Schmul Publishers has just reprinted Richard Treffry's Letters on the Atonement *for $11.99. It can be ordered from them by calling 8007726657.*

SINS, MORTAL AND VENIAL: JOHN WESLEY'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN SINS AND MISTAKES IN HIS DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

Henry Volk

The doctrine of Christian perfection distinguishes believers in the Wesleyan heritage from those in the broader Reformed/Protestant landscape. The latter, holding to the view known as progressive sanctification, generally believes that Christian perfection is only realized eschatologically. Wesley, on the contrary, holds that Christian perfection can be attained to in this life. He shares this insistence with the Roman Catholic tradition. Wesley's doctrine, while bearing similarities to the Roman Catholic doctrine, is nevertheless fully Protestant. It could be said that Wesley reforms the doctrine of Christian perfection. This is so, partly, because he retains and reinterprets the distinction between mortal and venial sins. Wesley's distinction between sins and mistakes functions in an analogous way to the scholastic distinction between mortal and venial sins.

Christian perfection, according to John Wesley, "is only another term for holiness."This holiness or perfection is not static. It is a state, but it is a state that admits progress. He says,

> Thus every one that is perfect is holy, and every one that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect. Yet we may, lastly, observe, that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no perfection of degrees, as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase. So that how much soever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree so-

> ever he is perfect, he hath still need to "grow in grace," [2 Pet 3:18] and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Savior. [see Phil 1:9].

While Wesley believes in growth in holiness, his doctrine is distinct from progressive sanctification. Wesley says, "[Sanctification begins] in the moment a man is justified. (Yet sin remains in him, yea, the seed of all sin, till he is sanctified throughout)." Wesley departs from the Reformed view in two important ways: 1). He claims perfection, which is a full deliverance from sin, can be attained in this life. "Christian perfection is that love of God and our neighbor, which implies deliverance from all sin." 2). Perfection is received instantaneously, not gradually. He states: [perfection] is received merely by faith. … it is given instantaneously, in one moment."

Wesley defines Christian perfection as, "loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies, that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions, are governed by pure love." By defining his doctrine of sanctification as an act of divine love, Wesley makes an important connection to the Roman Catholic doctrine of perfection. The *1911 Catholic Encyclopedia* defines Christian perfection as follows:

> Christian perfection is the supernatural or spiritual union with God which is possible of attainment in this life, and which may be called relative perfection, compatible with the absence of beatitude, and the presence of human miseries, rebellious passions, and even venial sins to which a just man is liable without a special grace and privilege of God. This perfection consists in charity, in the degree in which it is attainable in this life.

The Wesleyan account of Christian perfection shares three important points of agreement with the Roman Catholic view. 1). Perfection consists in divine love. 2). Perfection excludes mortal sin. 3). Perfection coexists with venial sin, what Wesley often terms mistakes.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the preeminent theologian of the Roman Catholic tradition, sin is a sickness of the soul. For Aquinas, and the Roman Catholic tradition, sins are valued according to their teleological effects. Every principle is ordered to an end, and, according to Aquinas, "the principle of the spiritual life, which is a life in accord with virtue, is the order to the last end (i.e., the beatific vision)" [*ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 1]. Therefore, a mortal sin is one that disrupts the process of salvation and causes irreparable harm to one's spiritual wellbeing. By the term *irreparable*, Aquinas does not mean that salvation is immutably lost on account of such acts. Rather, the spiritual life is so damaged by the act that a reapplication of divine grace is needed to restore right fellowship with God. Venial sins, on the other hand, are true disorders, but the harm caused by them is not irreparable. Aquinas states this is the case because venial sins do not disrupt the order of the principle to its end, meaning that the Christian through the principle of indwelling spiritual life still progresses toward final salvation in spite of such acts.

The difference between mortal and venial sins are the objects to which they are ordered and the inner disposition of the actor. Aquinas says that love is what directs us to our main end (the beatific vision). Therefore, when an agent commits an act contrary to love, "the sin is mortal by reason of its object" [*ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 2]. Yet, it is possible to commit sins that are not inherently contrary to the love of God and neighbor. Aquinas says:

> Sometimes, however, the sinner's will is directed to a thing containing a certain inordinateness, but which is not contrary to the love of God and

> one's neighbor, e.g. an idle word, excessive laughter, and so forth: and such sins are venial by reason of their genus [*ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 1].

In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley forms an argument for his own distinction between sins and mistakes and follows a similar line of thought to Aquinas. For Wesley, sins, proper, involve a voluntary act of the will. Sins which are committed involuntarily, he calls mistakes.

> Now, mistakes, and whatever infirmities necessarily flow from the corruptible state of the body, are no way contrary to love; nor therefore, in the Scripture sense, sin. To explain myself a little farther on this head: (1.) Not only sin, properly so called, (that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law,) but sin, improperly so called, (that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown,) needs the atoning blood. (2.) I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the Ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality. (3.) Therefore sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself. (4.) I believe, a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. (5.) Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not, for the reasons above-mentioned.

Wesley adopts the Protestant distinction between justification and sanctification

Wesley acknowledges a category of sin that does not affect the state of perfection. In the above text, he calls them "involuntary transgressions." Wesley does not use the term venial sins, but the terms he employs function in an analogous fashion. These represent a category of human shortcoming, resulting from the fall, which do not impede the work of Christian perfection. On this point, Wesley and Aquinas reach a consensus on the nature of venial sin, which, according to Wesley, are acts that are in "no way contrary to love."

The principal difference the Wesleyan and the Roman Catholic doctrines of Christian perfection, is how the distinction between mortal and venial sins functions in their theological frameworks. Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is fundamentally Protestant, because he adopts the Protestant distinction between justification and sanctification. In Roman Catholicism committing a mortal sin places one outside of the state of grace (i.e., Aquinas' irreparable harm). Once the state of grace is lost, along with sanctifying grace and forgiveness of sins, only the sacrament of penance can heal the injury incurred. Wesley affirms the truly lethal nature of such sins, since as an Arminian, he believes, not only sanctification, but, justification can be forfeited and salvation finally lost. He also departs at this point, since, as an Anglican, he rejects the idea that sins are only remitted if confessed to a priest [see *Popery Calmly Considered*]. For Wesley, the guilt of sin (both mortal and venial) is forgiven in justification where the believer is made righteous before God by Christ's own merits. Unlike in Roman Catholic theology, where there is no real distinction between justification and sanctification (in the Protestant sense), Wesley properly divides the two works of grace. He says, "And it is evident, from what has been already observed, that it [justification] is not 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," [*Justification by Faith*].

Wesley agrees with Aquinas and the Ro-

man Catholic tradition that mortal sin inhibits the work of sanctifying grace. Hence, it is possible to fall from the state of Christian perfection.

> I am well assured they can [fall from a state of christian perfection]; matter of fact puts this beyond dispute. Formerly we thought, one saved from sin could not fall; now we know the contrary. We are surrounded with instances of those who lately experienced all that I mean by perfection. They had both the fruit of the Spirit, and the witness; but they have now lost both. Neither does any one stand by virtue of anything that is implied in the nature of the state. There is no such height or strength of holiness as it is impossible to fall from. If there be any that cannot fall, this wholly depends on the promise of God [*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*].

Likewise, he believes it possible for this state to be restored. When asked whether perfection can be recovered, Wesley says, "Why not? We have many instances of this also. Nay, it is an exceeding common thing for persons to lose it more than once, before they are established therein." In employing his distinction between sins and mistakes, Wesley articulates an authentically Protestant interpretation of the historical and biblical teaching of gradation of sins. Since his soteriology is thoroughly Protestant, Wesley employs the distinction between mortal and venial in a way that does not rob the believer of the assurance of forgiveness in Christ, as in Roman Catholicism. At the same time, Wesley is able to seriously reckon with the devastating effects of certain sins upon the soul in a manner that Reformed theology simply cannot. In this way, he reforms the doctrine of Christian perfection, expunging the errors of Roman Catholic excess, and he integrates the distinction between mortal and venial sins into a Protestant framework.

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Wesley Stories

Joseph Beaumont Wakeley

Mr. Wesley was for a time the most persecuted man in England and Ireland. Some of the persecutors descended to very mean things. In 1769 he preached near Bedford. The audience was tolerably quiet till he had nearly finished his discourse. Then some bawled at the top of their voices, and it was a perfect Babel. One man, a little more vile than the rest, full of malicious mischief, had filled his pockets with rotten eggs to throw at the preacher. A young man saw what mischief he intended. Unperceived, he went up behind him, clapped his hands on each side of his pockets, and mashed the eggs all at once. Mr. Wesley says; "In an instant he was perfume all over, though ti was not so sweet as balsam." How frequently those who dig a pit for others fall into it themselves!

REVIEWS

40 Questions About Arminianism. J. Matthew Pinson. Kregel, 2022. ISBN 978-0-8254-4685-6 395 pages

In 2011 I sat in an audience in a beautiful Presbyterian church in Orlando, Florida. Before us was R.C. Sproul (1939-2017) in conversation with fellow preachers, ministers, and scholars [https://www.ligonier.org/learn/conferences/autobiography-god-2011-fall/questions-answers-2011-fall]. At some point of the discussion, he was asked to critique John Wesley's theology, comparing it to John Calvin's. "Dr. Sproul," said the moderator, "is there a *great gulf* or a *small stream* between Wesley and Calvin?" As a hardcore, fire-breathing, Arminian-defending, Calvin-stomping, Wesley-loving CHRISTIAN, my ears perked up. While Dr. Sproul wasn't overtly uncharitable to Wesley, his answer disappointed me. First, he wasn't even too eager in affirming Wesley's salvation, saying that it was his "*opinion*" that he was saved. Eventually, Dr. Sproul arrived at the most offensive statement of the night, stating that when people ask him if an Arminian can be saved, he always responds, "Oh yes… *barely*."

After the event, I had a few minutes of privacy with Dr. Sproul himself, for which I was happily surprised since there wasn't a person interrupting us. I told him that I was an Arminian and that I did not like his comment. Dr. Sproul was very gracious to me but stood his ground — no surprise there. When I told him I was an Arminian, he immediately responded "You've got to get out of that! You guys deny the sovereignty of God!" to which I kindly responded, "No, Dr. Sproul, we just don't *define* it the same way you guys do. That's different from *denying* it." We went on for a few more minutes. The end results? Dr. Sproul is now in glory (I didn't sent him there), I'm still a Wesleyan (though *in my opinion*, John Calvin was a saved man), and Arminianism is as misrepresented and misunderstood today as it ever was, despite the many efforts of Arminians to clarify what we believe.

Enter J. Matthew Pinson

Dr. Pinson's *40 Questions About Arminianism*, is nothing short of a fantastic (and long-overdue!) defense of Arminianism. Having read several books in this "40 Questions" series, I am overjoyed that *Kregel Academic* decided to add this topic to their list of what is now nearly twenty books. When I first heard of this book, I thought "Dr. Pinson sure has his work cut out for him!" especially since there is so much confusion about Arminianism, most of it propagated by Calvinists, but — truth be told — there are many Arminian culprits muddying the waters as well! Consequently, Dr. Pinson begins his encyclopedic book where he should — with Jacob Arminius (1559-1609).

Most Christians are unfamiliar with Carl Bangs' impressive work on Arminius, *Armimius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation (1971)*. While I do still wish that at least every Arminian would read Bangs' book, Dr. Pinson does a great job taking the information there and distilling it into one chapter. But the chapter is no mere biography of Arminius. Rather, Dr. Pinson has no problem making his chapter part biography and part apologetic — and that makes it all the better! Take, for example, the following statement:

> Arminius was a self-consciously Reformed pastor and professor who represented a broader approach to Reformed soteriology that was tolerated in his day but came under increasing scrutiny as Reformed theology began to be increasingly influenced by Genevan Calvinism. (p. 24)

Right on, Dr. Pinson!

Many Calvinists speak of the Synod of Dort as if the heroic full-of-the-Holy-Spirit Reformers held those heretical scripturally-inept Arminians to account and easily defeated Arminianism after a quick 10-minute Bible Study. Calvinists often ignore all the other factors (e.g., politics, governmental power, Arminius' death, etc.) involved in the complex story of what happened as the Synod of Dort. Dr. Pinson refutes this idea, documenting and footnoting everything, and ends the chapter with these haunting and

sad words: "One wonders if Dort may have, in that case allowed for more diversity in expressions of Reformed theology that it did".

Such statements reflect one of the many strengths of this book, namely, Dr. Pinson seems to fire his guns at all important targets and not just the obvious ones. Are you an Arminian that knows nothing of Arminianism? Read the book! Are you a dismissive Calvinist that thinks Arminianism is the opposite of Reformed theology? Read the book! Are you a theologian seeking help to wade through the old soteriological debates that often divide us? Read the book!

Stand-Out Chapters

Reading Dr. Pinson's book sometimes feels like drinking from a fire hose. But in the case of such a profoundly misrepresented topic, this is a good thing. Too often, Arminianism is defined in light of the now famous TULIP theological paradigm; Arminianism is discussed only when debating the so-called "Five Points of Calvinism." This is tragic because Arminianism is a theological system that addresses just as much as Calvinism does. However, Dr. Pinson does not shy away from the usual TULIP debate. He addresses all of it in various parts of his 5-part book:

- Total Depravity *(Part 3)*
- Unconditional Election *(Part 4)*
- Limited Atonement *(Part 2)*
- Irresistible Grace (Part 3)
- Perseverance of the Saints *(Part 5)*

I point this out because, as I stated, it is unfortunate that Arminianism is often only considered whenever Calvinists are bored and want — not a brother to learn some theology from — but a sparring partner to strengthen what they already made their minds up about. However, Dr. Pinson provides them with a sparring partner that packs a punch, and many won't know what hit them! Take, for example, Dr. Pinson's statement that "The words 'Calvinism' and 'Reformed' mean many different things. Calvinism is a subset of the Reformed movement" (p.25). That thought alone will be new to many Christians and will surely be a rude awakening to many who cut their theological teeth in the '*Young, Restless, Reformed*" movement of yesteryear.

The Book's Weakness

There is certainly something I find lamentable about the book, though not about its author. Dr. Pinson is a *Reformed Arminian* and as such he writes from a decisively *Classical Arminian* perspective (If you don't know the difference, what are you waiting for to get Dr. Pinson's book?!). Dr. Pinson is not a Wesleyan. Is this a problem? Not necessarily. To his credit, Dr. Pinson is not only friendly to us but also fair. That notwithstanding, there are a few occasions when a *Wesleyan* Arminian reader can clearly see that Dr. Pinson is no longer defending a "mere Arminianism" (if I may borrow from C.S. Lewis), and is defending a more specific *Classical* Arminian position. When exploring the implications of the doctrine of imputation, Dr. Pinson says,

> A denial of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer results in a view of perseverance and assurance that is dependent on the ebb and flow of one's sanctification. At lower points in sanctification, believers fall from grace because of their sins and must regain it through penitence. This results in what I call a "light switch" soteriology — on and off, on and off — and thus provides a tenuous assurance of Salvation." (p.105)

Really? An assurance that depends on "the ebb and flow of one's sanctification?" Regaining grace through "penitence?" A "Light switch" soteriology — on and off, on and off — in a "tenuous" assurance? As a Wesleyan-Arminian, I can assure my reader that *none* of that sounds recognizable to our theology! But that's what happens when you hire a professional cake maker to write the *only* book on baking in general.

All of that notwithstanding, I am very happy with Dr. Pinson's work and I hope all theologians read it. Having read the book from cover to cover, I can say without flinching that this is a keeper. It's one of those books that has dense and thorough information of a reference book or an encyclopedia, yet reads like a layman's guide to theology. Not many writers can pull this off. Dr. Pinson does! The icing on the cake? It's Arminian!

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NOTICE!

CHANGE IN FORMAT FOR *THE ARMINIAN MAGAZINE*

The original *Arminian Magazine* was founded by John Wesley in 1778 and was published under that title until 1798. Wesley served as the editor until his death in 1791. Wesley intended it to be an alternative to current Calvinistic magazines. His design was for it to deal with theological controversy. He described the magazine as "principally as an engine of polemical theology." The original Arminian magazine was described as more of a sword than a trowel and Wesley's preface in the premiere 1778 issue was described as a declaration of war. Its title was changed in 1798 to the *Methodist Magazine* and in 1822 to the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*. In 1833 it once again became the *Methodist Magazine*.

In 1818 the general conference in America also ordered the publication of a monthly periodical, *The Methodist Magazine*. This magazine soon acquired a circulation of 10,000 at a time when popular secular periodicals had circulations between 4,000 and 5,000. *The Methodist Magazine*, later renamed the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, was published continually from 1818 until 1932 and had a longer life than any other religious publication. In 1933 it became *Religion in Life*. In 2009 the *Methodist Review* was relaunched as an electronic journal.

In 1980 the Fundamental Wesleyan Society began publication of *The Arminian Magazine*. The current Arminian does not have editorial continuity with the original magazine with that title, but it is committed to a defense of the same doctrinal positions as was the original magazine. This is our last hard-copy issue. We are shifting to an electronic format. To continue receiving the magazine electronically, please send your email address to <wesleyansociety@gmail.com>

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