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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

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# Evangelical Quarterly

**An International Review  
of Bible and Theology**  
in Defence of the Historic Christian Faith

Vol. LXXXIII No. 2 April 2011

Editors: I Howard Marshall, John-Paul Lotz,  
John G F Wilks



**Paternoster:**  
*thinking faith*

# Evangelical Anglicanism: John Wesley's dialectical theology of baptism

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Key words: Anglicanism; Wesley; baptism; paedobaptism; new birth; means of grace; sacrament; Methodism; baptismal regeneration.

This article can begin with one certainty: John Wesley loved the Church of England. Any cursory reading of the theologian's works will find his references to his Anglican tradition and its *Book of Common Prayer* more than sporadic. Indeed, a Methodist seminarian is likely to learn in the first day of her course on Methodist History and Tradition that Wesley sought not to create a new denomination or theologically dismantle the Anglican tradition but to renew the Church of England and, as he saw it, return it to its historical biblical roots of evangelical practice. Wesley himself emphasized that Methodist preachers were 'not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.'<sup>1</sup>

John Wesley's evangelical enthusiasm was undoubtedly a result of his religious participations with the Moravians and his ultimate 'heart-warming' experience at Aldersgate. Regardless of whether he was 'converted' on May 24, 1738, or whether this was merely a time of significant religious reflection and affirmation of a *sola fide* soteriology and the significance of human iniquity, Wesley underwent a profound religious alteration. In his superb biography of John Wesley Henry D. Rack observed that

before the end of April 1738 Wesley had accepted intellectually that salvation was by faith alone, through an instantaneous experience, on the testimony both of Scripture and living witness. But he had not actually experienced this happening to himself. The event on 24 May appears to represent this truth becoming a part of his own experience. It also appears

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1 This short quote originated as an answer to the question, 'What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?' as part of the Minutes of *Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others; from the Year 1744, to the Year 1789*. It became the clarion call and first mission statement of early American Methodism. The 'Church' here is not to be interpreted as the Methodist Church but the Church of England. The quote was included in a tract usually denominated 'The Large Minutes' containing the discipline as practiced in the Methodist Connexion during John Wesley's lifetime. For a copy of its final revision, see Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 299.

to have been combined with an explicit ‘assurance’ of the change having happened – if anything, this is perhaps the dominant aspect of the experience. In any case, Wesley seems to have felt that the fact of the change and an assurance that it had happened had occurred in the same moment of experience.<sup>2</sup>

Wesley’s Anglican upbringing and doctrine was then intersected by this evangelical experience. Thus, one would later find Wesley’s zeal to ‘spread scriptural holiness’ and his infatuation with Anglican tradition and doctrine to appear to manifest paradoxical theological articulations. This is no more evident than in Wesley’s doctrine of baptism.

Wesley always maintained his Anglican orthodoxy. Even as late as 1780, he wrote, ‘I am fully convinced that our own Church [of England], with all her blemishes, is nearer the scriptural plan than any other in Europe.’ And three years later he remarked that ‘if ever the Methodists in general were to leave the Church, I must leave them.’<sup>3</sup>

Wesley continually held to the idea that his theology and that of his Methodist movement were always in keeping with Anglican doctrine. In 1739, a questioner had asked Wesley which doctrines differed in Methodism from the Church of England. The Methodist founder wrote back, ‘To the best of my knowledge, in none. The doctrines we preach are the doctrines of the Church of England; indeed, the fundamental doctrines of the Church, clearly laid down, both in her Prayers, Articles, and Homilies.’<sup>4</sup>

Yet the careful reader of Wesley’s theology will come upon seemingly contradictory statements between his Anglican tradition and belief system and his Methodist experiential faith. In such cases, we are undoubtedly encountering the two sides of John Wesley. It seems that in the sacraments in general and in baptism in particular such theological dialectic or ambivalence becomes most pronounced. Thus, this article will attempt to address this paradoxical doctrine in Wesley to test whether it is capable to withstand a systematic examination.

Such an inquiry into baptism seems appropriate and even necessary today. Currently, Protestantism is drawn to concepts and approaches to Christian initiation, as if searching for her ancient heritage, in both ecumenical dialogue with one another and within denominational traditions themselves. Such a circumstance can be explained by the fact that baptism seems to be touchstone to the rest of Christian doctrine. How one sees the place, proper time, mode, importance and meaning of baptism will at least indirectly influence the rest of one’s theology. A tradition’s soteriology, concepts of providence and predestination,

2 For further discussion of interpretations of the May 24th experience, see Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 147-49.

3 Both citations are originally cited in Wesley’s *Letters*, VII, 28 and 163; here cited in John R. Parris, *John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Sacraments* (London: The Epworth Press, 1963), 1.

4 Originally cited from Wesley’s *Journal*, II, 274-75; here cited in Parris, 1-2.

and ecclesiology can all be affected by a particular stance on baptism.

It may not be that baptism is the starting point for these other doctrines, but it serves as a powerful sign for how a tradition approaches both God and humanity. Yet, in many of these baptismal sojourns, various Christian traditions are quick to conclude that baptism is either solely a high sacrament representing the objective divine action of God, or the other extreme of baptism being exclusively a human response to God's calling for, or offer of, salvation. Wesley, on the other hand, appears to have emphasized both sides, leading one to believe that he is either theologically schizophrenic or attempting to take a middle ground. If we presume the latter, Wesley then presented a theology which appropriates both objective workings of God and subjective human response simultaneously. As such, his doctrine of baptism paired his Anglican heritage with his Aldersgate evangelicalism. The result is both intriguing and confusing, unique and dialectical.

Much ambiguity exists regarding Wesley's doctrine of baptism. The primary reason for this theological uncertainty is the paucity of material one may find in Wesley's writings directly addressing baptism. Paul S. Sanders writes of Wesley's work: 'His writings were nearly all the by-product of a busy life as a Christian preacher. Some of the treatises were frankly pieces of propaganda, and the sermons were written, not primarily to expound theology, but to convince listeners of the necessity of being justified through faith and brought to a new life of righteousness in Christ.'<sup>5</sup>

This was not to say that Wesley had no interest in theology. Quite to the contrary, he had been educated at Oxford and was very well-read in theology, Greek, Latin, the Patristics, creeds of the Church, and classical literature. Nevertheless, he rarely had the opportunity to address such questions as proper baptismal theology in his regular duties as a clergyman. Sanders again remarks,

He would have had little occasion for preaching on [baptism]. Most of his hearers had been baptized already; and in any case, Wesley was not seriously concerned with baptizing them. The instances of his doing so are so rare as to exclude the notion that he considered it a normal part of his mission. Such persons as needed baptism would ordinarily have been directed to parish church or Nonconformist chapel.<sup>6</sup>

Sanders' observation explains why Wesley so rarely addressed issues in sacramental theology. Like other ministers who feel deeply about their calling, his responsibilities, regardless of his academic interests, permitted him time only for pastoral theology in preaching. His objective, at least through much of his ministry, was not to found a new sect; thus he came not to baptize but to preach the gospel of salvation.

This is not to say that Wesley was silent on such a significant ecclesial matter

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5 Paul S. Sanders, 'John Wesley and Baptismal Regeneration', *Religion in Life*, vol. 23 (1954), 591.

6 Sanders, 592.

either. But the careful researcher must relish each direct and incidental reference made by the Oxford don to baptism in his sermons and treatises in order to reconstruct Wesley's thoughts on the sacrament.<sup>7</sup> Parris concurs, 'Most of Wesley's theological writing was controversial in nature, and as Baptism was never in the forefront of the doctrinal disputes in which he engaged, we are forced to piece together isolated statements and hints, inferring their meaning often from the context in which they occur.'<sup>8</sup>

Most of Wesley's references to baptism come indirectly in his sermons on the nature of justification, New Birth, and sanctification. As such, this essay will not attempt to extract Wesley's sacramental theology from his soteriology but consider it instead as rooted in it, particularly given that salvation plays such a key role in Wesley's preaching. Only then will we be able to ascertain whether his notion of baptism is consistent with the rest of his theology and consistent with itself.

### The Anglican influence

To better comprehend the development of this paradoxical tension between 'high church' Anglican doctrine and evangelical Arminianism that we find in Wesley's baptismal theology, Wesley's Anglican background should first be analyzed. It is of little doubt that Wesley's pre-Aldersgate theology was characteristic of a 'high church' Anglican.<sup>9</sup>

The High Church party of the Church of England emerged towards the close of the sixteenth century. More Arminian than their Puritan counterparts, high church supporters insisted that God's sovereignty of grace was compatible with human freedom and that a person's ultimate destiny depended in part upon the way in which he or she used that God-given freedom. Appealing more to the early and medieval church periods for authority than did the sixteenth century reformers, high church proponents found more in common with Rome than with Protestants. Though also critical of the Roman Church, high churchmen found themselves sharing more in common with their approach to liturgy than other Protestants as well. In worship, the high churchman wanted to heighten sacramental observances in the church to a more elaborate practice.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this article will later analyze Wesley's work, *A Treatise on Baptism*, a work which was originally published by John's father, the Reverend Samuel Wesley, a high church Anglican. John's appropriation of this high church sacramentality in his early theology will then be examined.

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7 Ibid.

8 Parris, 36.

9 John C. English, 'The Heart Renewed: John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Initiation,' *Wesleyan Studies*, no. 4. (Macon, GA: Wesleyan College, 1967), 12-13.

10 For a more extensive development of 'High Church' history and theology, including an outline of High Church notions of faith and soteriology, see English, 'The Heart Renewed', 13f.

## John Wesley's practice of baptism

We know very little regarding the young John Wesley's baptismal theology. Nevertheless, we get a glimpse into his thinking during his stay as an Anglican missionary in the colony of Georgia by his adherence to a certain baptismal mode. In 1733, Wesley set sail for the American colony, commissioned by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Here he preached to Native Americans and residents of Savannah and St. Simons Island. English observed: 'Wesley's ministry in Georgia is characterized by an exact and punctilious observance of the rubrics set out in the *Book of Common Prayer*'.<sup>11</sup> This dogmatic observation was no more evident than in his insistence on immersion even for infants. Children were dipped in a triune fashion<sup>12</sup> in keeping with the First Prayer Book of Edward VI (1549),<sup>13</sup> an order which required infants to be dipped in the font if they were physically healthy. This was contrary to the 1662 book, which was the official prayer book in Wesley's era, which, based upon the subsequent revisions to its baptismal rite made in 1552, allowed for pouring and dipping. Wesley was undoubtedly drawn to the older rubric of triune immersion for its support in patristic and Eastern church documents, a sign of high church influence in the youthful preacher. Interestingly, this was a point where John's practice differed from his father's own theology. Samuel Wesley recorded in his *Pious Communicant* that since Scripture did not specify a certain mode, baptism could be practiced by 'washing, dipping, or sprinkling'.<sup>14</sup> In his *Journal*, however, John Wesley noted of the baptism of a newborn:

Sat. 21 [Feb. 1736]. – Mary Welch, aged eleven days, was baptized according to the custom of the first church, and the rule of the Church of England, by immersion. The child was ill then, but recovered from that hour.<sup>15</sup>

Some three months later he recorded:

Wed. May 5 [1736] – I was asked to baptize a child of Mr. Parker's, second Bailiff of Savannah; but Mrs. Parker told me, 'Neither Mr. P. nor I will consent to its being dipped.' I answered, 'If you *certify that your child is weak it will suffice*' [the rubric says] 'to pour water upon it.' She replied, 'Nay, the child is not weak; but I am resolved it shall not be dipped.' This argument I could not confute. So I went home; and the child was by baptized by another person.<sup>16</sup>

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11 English, 'The Heart Renewed', 23.

12 Maxwell E. Johnson notes that this threefold baptismal 'dipping' would have involved immersing 'first the right side of the infant, then the left, then face down into the font with the trinitarian formula'. See Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 343.

13 Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Gift of Water* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 18.

14 Here cited in English, 'The Heart Renewed', 23.

15 Wesley, *Journal*, vol. 1 (*Journal from October 14, 1735, to February 1, 1737-80*), see Jackson, ed. *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, 25.

16 *Ibid.*, 30-31.

These two episodes reveal certain characteristics in the thought and practice of baptism of the young Wesley. First, though it is uncertain whether the Welch family had insisted on immersion for their child or not, Wesley baptized her by dipping, even though she was ill. Thus, even when he was given an ecclesial 'out' of the necessity for immersion by his beloved 1549 Prayer Book, Wesley proceeded with dipping. Secondly, though Wesley seemed to concede to the family's wishes for mode of baptism, he would not perform by another rubric himself. Wesley would later be indicted in 1737 for introducing 'novelties, such as dipping infants, etc., in the Sacrament of Baptism and [that he refused] to baptize the children of such as will not submit to his innovation.'<sup>17</sup> Thus, although immersion was officially authorized by the Church of England, its use, instead of pouring, was so rare that Wesley was perceived by colleagues to be concocting some baptismal contrivance.

Interestingly, Wesley also insisted that the godparents of the baptizand be Anglican communicants. He encouraged the public practice of baptism before the congregation over private ceremonies and would provide a public reception for those children who had been baptized privately. He disregarded the Anglican tradition of confirmation of the baptized by the bishop and ignored the rite itself completely. Instead, he catechized the baptized children himself and admitted them to the Eucharist.<sup>18</sup> In all of these factors, Wesley was rigidly following the older *Book of Common Prayer* and his interpretation of apostolic and patristic witnesses.

Yet, another occurrence reveals more about the young missionary's mindset. On at least one occasion Wesley could be accused of practicing rebaptism. He recorded that he baptized a man who 'had received only lay baptism before.' For a high church Anglican priest, 'lay baptism' did not mean only baptism by an unordained person but by one not ordained to ministry by a bishop standing in apostolic succession.<sup>19</sup> Such an assertion for Wesley is supported by the circumstance in which Wesley refused communion to Rev. John Martin Boltizius, minister of the Salzburg refugees in Georgia, because Botizius was 'not baptized by a Minister who had been episcopally ordained.'<sup>20</sup> Wesley at this point was following the high church party line. Baptism by non-episcopal ministers was not efficacious and must be viewed as void. He even recorded of himself, apparently later, in his *Journal* on the Botizius episode, 'Can any one carry High Church zeal

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17 Originally recorded in Wesley's *Journal*; here cited in Felton, 18-19.

18 The *First Book of Edward VI* stipulated that those desiring to be confirmed proceed to the Table before receiving the laying on of hands from the bishop. Interestingly, this practice was also executed by Samuel Wesley who admitted young John to communion before confirmation. See English, 24.

19 John C. English makes this argument, 'The Heart Renewed', 24. He also claimed to have later baptized an Anabaptist. In theory, this candidate also was previously administered some form of baptism. See Wesley's *Journal*, (Jan. 25, 1739), *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 2, 172.

20 Wesley, *Journal* (9/30/49), see *The Works of John Wesley*, Jackson edition vol. 2, 160.



higher than this?’<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Wesley’s practice of *triple* immersion is not outlined in the Prayer Book but was encouraged by high churchmen. Thus we see in the early Wesley an avid proponent of high church Anglican practice regarding baptism.

Over the ensuing years, Wesley’s rigid stance on baptism began to moderate. After his return to England, he reported to the Bishop of Bristol, ‘several persons have applied to me for baptism.... They choose likewise to be baptized by immersion, and have engaged me to give your Lordship notice, as the Church requires.’<sup>22</sup> At this point, Wesley seemed to give volition to the parishioner as to desired mode. This alteration of position is further explained and confirmed in his *Thoughts upon Infant Baptism* in 1751:

With regard to the mode of baptizing, I would only add, Christ no where, as far as I can find, requires dipping, but only baptizing; which word, many most eminent for learning and piety have declared, signifies to pour on, or sprinkle, as well as to dip. As our Lord has graciously given us a work of such extensive meaning, doubtless the parent, or the person to be baptized, if he be adult, ought to choose which way he best approves. What God has left indifferent, it becomes no man to make necessary....

Besides, pouring or sprinkling more naturally represents most of the spiritual blessings signified by baptism, (viz.) the sprinkling the blood of Christ on the conscience, or the pouring out of the Spirit on the person baptized, or sprinkling him with clean water, as an emblem of the influence of the Spirit; all which are the things signified in baptism as different representations of the cleansing away of the guilt or defilement of sin thereby.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, he wrote in his *Treatise on Baptism*,

Baptism is performed by ‘washing’, ‘dipping’, or ‘sprinkling’ the person.... I say, by *washing*, *dipping*, or *sprinkling*; because it is not determined in Scripture in which ways it shall be done, neither by any express precept nor by any such example as clearly proves it; nor by the force or meaning of the word *baptize*.<sup>24</sup>

To demonstrate his newly found modal flexibility, Wesley related that in March of 1759, he ‘baptized seven adults, two of them by immersion’, in Colchester.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the mature Wesley had certainly changed his beliefs on the legitimate mode for baptism after his return to England. Parris notes of this change:

In the early period of his ministry... Wesley did not commit his baptismal

21 Ibid.

22 See Wesley, *Works*. Jackson edition, vol. 12, 56.

23 For full text, see Wesley, *Works*. Joseph Benson, ed., vol. 13 (London: Thomas Cordeux, 1812), 428-9; here cited in Felton, 19.

24 Wesley, ‘A Treatise on Baptism’, *Works*. Jackson, ed. vol. 10, 188 (italics his).

25 See Wesley, *Journal*, vol. 2, 469; here cited in Felton, 20.

views to writing, and his beliefs can only be inferred from his practice in Georgia. There can be no doubt, however, from his insistence on the observation of the sacrament and his practice of re-baptism, that he placed a high value on Baptism as necessary for Church membership and for salvation.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, we can infer that a change in Wesley's beliefs on the mode of baptism would necessitate some alteration in his *theology* of baptism as well.

Naturally, many scholars point to the Aldersgate experience and its aftermath as a formative time in Wesley's theological development. But whether Wesley completely abandoned his high church sacramental interpretation of baptism being a definite means of grace for some evangelical Dissenter-like notion of baptism has been a matter of heated debate. This scholarly discussion has become particularly acute when one addresses the apparent inconsistencies between Wesley's fairly evangelical notion of adult baptism with his rather sacramental approach to infant baptism. Whether he held onto his high church Anglicanism in the latter while he presented his pietistic condition of confession for the former has been the greatest point of contention in this study. Such apparent tension leads scholars to ask, 'Can one reconcile John Wesley's acknowledgment of infant baptism as a saving and renewing sacrament with his constant insistence that the new birth must be a conscious transformation of one's life?'<sup>27</sup> Scholars over the centuries and in this day disagree as to whether Wesley's notion of sacramental mediation and receptive faith in regeneration ultimately manifest a paradoxical baptismal theology. Scholars in the first part of the twentieth century typically argued that Wesley's 'evangelical conversion' coerced him to reject a strong notion of baptismal regeneration and that he retained the practice of infant baptism only to be in keeping with Anglican tradition.<sup>28</sup> Yet many scholars today hold that Wesley clearly affirmed a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, at least as an ordinary means of new birth, consistently both for the baptism of infant and for adults.<sup>29</sup> Still, other scholars argue a mid-

26 Parris, 35.

27 This question in particular was asked by G. Stephen Blakemore, 'By the Spirit through Water: John Wesley's 'Evangelical' Theology of Infant Baptism', in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 31 (1966): 167.

28 Indeed, William R. Cannon argues that Wesley merely showed a reluctance to leave Anglicanism and in so doing confounded the influences of sacramentalism with pietism. See his *Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1946), 125. At the same time, John C. English argues that Wesley reviewed his baptismal theology in light of his 'thoroughgoing adherence to the principle of justification by faith', in his article, 'The Sacrament of Baptism According to the Sunday Service of 1784', in *Methodist History*, vol. 5, 15.

29 In his excellent work on John Wesley's sacramentology, Bishop Ole Borgen maintains that Wesley's theology of the sacraments was completely consistent with his soteriology. See Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), esp. 152-182.

dle ground: Wesley's theology of baptism was an 'intentional creative tension' between evangelicalism and baptismal regeneration.<sup>30</sup> Finally, most scholars today believe that his dialectical statements are simply an unresolved ambiguity.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in order to come to a conclusion on this matter, the second part of this article will examine each type of baptism separately and then determine whether their differences might be reconciled so that a suitable theological marriage might take place. Yet, Wesley's meaning of 'sacrament' and its benefits must initially be addressed.

### The means of grace: sacramental baptism

An inexorable theme throughout Wesley's theology is the notion of salvation being the free gift of God. Though the life of faith is a divine gift, God provides outward means as the ordinary channels of grace. Wesley explains this further in his great sermon against Moravians and Methodist 'quietists', titled *The Means of Grace*:

By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end – to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.

I use this expression, 'means of grace,' because I know none better, and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages: in particular by our own church, which directs us to bless God for the 'means of grace and hope of glory'; and teaches us that a sacrament is 'an outward sign of inward *grace*, and a *means* whereby we receive the same.'<sup>32</sup>

Wesley here is taking on the quietist notion of spontaneous assurance of conversion and baptism of the Spirit as superseding all outward observances, including baptism and the Lord's Supper. He is supported in the argument by the 1661-2 *Book of Common Prayer* which first used the phrase 'means of grace' for the Anglican Church. Likewise, the Catechism composed for the Prayer Book of James I and re-incorporated in the 1662 version asks: 'What meanest thou by this word Sacrament?', and is then answered: 'I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof.'<sup>33</sup>

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30 Though Randy L. Maddox does not necessarily argue for the 'intentional creative tension', I have borrowed his phrase. See his *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. (Nashville: Kingwood Books, 1994), 221. Colin W. Williams notes that '[H]ere in his teaching on baptism, we see again that creative tension between the Catholic and Protestant views of the Church and the Sacraments which is of great importance in the present ecumenical struggle.' See Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 121.

31 John R. Parris and Paul S. Sanders both seem to come to this conclusion.

32 Wesley, 'The Means of Grace', in *The Works of John Wesley*. Outler ed. vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 381; Jackson ed. vol. 5, 187-88 [italics mine].

33 PBC citations here taken from Outler's introduction to 'The Means of Grace', *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1: 377.

Once again Wesley resounded this theme of the shortcomings of completely inward, quietistic religion in a letter to Rev. William Law:

This is most true that all externals of religion are in order to the renewal of our soul in righteousness and true holiness. But it is not true that the external way is one and the internal way another. There is but one scriptural way wherein we receive inward grace – through outward means which God hath appointed.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Wesley maintained that Christians depend on the outward means in order to experience the inward grace. God ordinarily used baptism as the means by which he enters the life of the believer to bring new life. At the same time, Wesley did not always maintain that it was the exclusive means to God's action in the believer. In a letter to Gilbert Boyce in 1750, Wesley wrote:

You think the mode of baptism is 'necessary to salvation.' I deny that even baptism itself is so; if it were, every Quaker must be damned, which I can in no wise believe. I hold nothing to be (strictly speaking) necessary to salvation but the mind which was in Christ.<sup>35</sup>

Again, he emphasized in his sermons that God is above all means:

[I]t behooves us, First, always to *retain a lively sense, that God is above all means*. Have a care, therefore, of limiting the Almighty. He doeth whatsoever and whensoever it pleaseth him. He can convey his Grace, either in or out of any of the means which he hath appointed. Perhaps he will.<sup>36</sup>

Regardless, Wesley saw the sacraments as God's ordinary means of grace: 'And, in spite of all, that great truth must stand unshaken, – that all who desire the grace of God, are to wait for it in the means which he hath ordained.'<sup>37</sup> Thus it seems Wesley paradoxically argued that baptism is necessary as a means of conveying God's grace, but not necessarily. Here, we may assume that the Methodist founder was arguing for the necessity of baptism for the Christian as the responsibility of the Church while also maintaining the overarching sovereignty of God. God's sovereignty must be maintained, even in the use of the divinely given sacraments. Christian believers, for Wesley, cannot limit God's operation to the normal channels of his inbreaking to humanity. Colin W. Williams brilliantly points out that it was from this point that Wesley was enabled 'to seek unity in mission with those he believed to be wrong on vital points of faith and practice, but in whose lives the presence of Christ was manifest.'<sup>38</sup> Thus, Wesley's emphasis on divine sovereignty afforded a position of ecumenism. This is a sig-

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34 Originally cited in his *Letters*, vol. 3:366-67; here cited in Ole E. Borgen, 'No End Without the Means: John Wesley and the Sacraments', in *Asbury Theological Journal*, vol. 46 (1991): 70.

35 Wesley, *Letters*, III, 36.

36 Wesley, 'The Means of Grace', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 5: 200 [italics mine].

37 *Ibid.*, 198.

38 Williams, 118.

nificant Wesleyan contribution to theological and ecumenical dialogue: though Christians may see divergence which they cannot endorse in the practice of various Christian traditions, they are still capable of recognizing Christ's presence in one another. God's sovereignty is a strong foundation for the mission of Christian unity.<sup>39</sup>

Wesley recognized this importance of taking account of divine freedom and sovereignty, but he saw the sacraments as the conventional means for which God conveys grace, and the Church is required to observe these means.<sup>40</sup> Wesley emphasized again in his letter to William Law in 1756:

Vain philosophy! The plain meaning of the expression, 'Except a man be born of water,' is neither more nor less than this, 'Except ye be baptized.' And the plain reason why he ought to be thus born of water is because God hath appointed it. He hath appointed it as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; which grace is 'death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness.'<sup>41</sup>

Wesley then still regarded baptism as an obligatory means of grace, exemplified by Christ Jesus who himself was baptized. '[Baptism] was instituted by Christ, who alone has power to institute a proper sacrament, a sign, seal, pledge, and means of grace, perpetually obligatory on all Christians.'<sup>42</sup> Since baptism was included in the whole design of Christ's Great Commission, it must therefore remain in Christ's Church until his return.<sup>43</sup>

This is not to suggest that Wesley was arguing for any *ex opere operato* effect in baptism. For Wesley, the means are merely God's channels or instruments for bestowing divine grace. Wesley wrote: 'We know there is no inherent Power, in the Words that are spoken in Prayer; in the Letter of Scripture read, the Sound thereof heard, or the Bread and Wine receiv'd in the Lord's Supper: But that it is God alone who is the Giver of every good Gift, the Author of all Grace.'<sup>44</sup> Thus, while he maintained a high church view of sacramentality, Wesley was equal-

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Wesley, *Letters*, IV, 357.

42 Wesley, 'A Treatise on Baptism', *Works*, Jackson ed. vol. 10: 188.

43 Indeed, Wesley notes, 'this [baptism] appears also from the original commission which our Lord gave to his Apostles: 'Go, disciple all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost;'

... Now, as long as this commission lasted, as long as Christ promised to be with them in the execution of it, so long doubtless were they to execute it, and to baptize as well as to teach. But Christ hath promised to be with them, that is, by his Spirit, in their successors, to the end of the world. So long, therefore, without dispute, it was his design that baptism should remain in his Church.' See Wesley, 'Treatise on Baptism,' *Works*, Jackson ed. vol. 10: 193.

44 Originally cited in Wesley's *Sermons on Several Occasions*, vol. 1:230; here cited in Borgen, 'No End Without the Means: John Wesley and the Sacraments', 70.

ly concerned that the sign be separated from the thing signified.<sup>45</sup> He strongly protested against the making of sacraments magical: 'The grace does not spring merely *ex opere operato*: It does not proceed from the mere elements, or the words spoken; but from the blessing of God, in consequence of his promise to such as are qualified for it.'<sup>46</sup>

Thus, superficially, a person is saved by water, but in truth it is the Holy Spirit's work through the water that is salvific:

We allow, likewise, that all outward means whatever, if separate from the Spirit of God, cannot profit at all, cannot conduce, in any degree, either to the knowledge or love of God. Without controversy, the help that is done upon earth, He doeth it himself. It is He alone who, by his own almighty power, worketh in us what is pleasing in his sight; and all outward things, unless He work in them and by them, are mere weak and beggarly elements. Whosoever, therefore, imagines there is any intrinsic power in any means whatsoever, does greatly err, not knowing the Scriptures, neither the power of God.<sup>47</sup>

The Holy Spirit, then, works through interpersonal relationship and does not bring inward grace merely through some mechanical mediation. The water simply serves as God's chosen means to convey such a relationship. The means of grace have no power apart from the divine Mover; 'God is above all means'.<sup>48</sup> And to be certain of his clarity, Wesley again admonished the parishioner to

remember also, to use all means, *as means*; as ordained, not for their own sake, but in order to the renewal of your soul in righteousness and true holiness. If therefore, they actually tend to this, well; but if not, they are dung and dross.<sup>49</sup>

These are God's sacramental instruments and are not the ends to salvation themselves. Their value completely relies upon their use by God's hand.

Yet Wesley found himself caught between two difficult theological pitfalls as he made such an argument. First, he was constantly arguing against the misconception of the 'enthusiasts', even those he encountered in the society in Fetter Lane. So contentious were these fights that he and his brother Charles ultimately withdrew from the society. He asserted, 'Enthusiasts observe this. Expect no ends without the means.' Still, another time he wrote, in his 'Minutes of Several Conversations', a form of catechism:

Q. 34. Why are not we more holy? Who do not we live in eternity; walk with God all the day long? Why are we not all devoted to God; breathing the whole spirit of Missionaries?

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45 John Chongnam Cho, 'John Wesley's View of Baptism', in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 7: 62.

46 Wesley, 'Popery Calmly Considered', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 10: 149.

47 Wesley, 'The Means of Grace', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 5: 188.

48 *Ibid.*, 200.

49 *Ibid.*, 201 [*italics his*].

A. Chiefly because we are enthusiasts; looking for the end without the means.<sup>50</sup>

But at the same time, Wesley felt compelled to correct those committing the opposite error of placing their entire trust in the *means* in place of the end. With his poetic knack, he wrote:

Long have I seem'd to serve Thee Lord,  
With unavailing Pain;  
Fasted, and pray'd and read Thy Word,  
And heard it preach'd, in vain.

But I of Means have made my Boast,  
Of Means an Idol made;  
The Spirit in the Letter lost,  
The substance in the Shade.

Yet, Wesley concluded, one does not correct this error by abandoning the means but only by using them properly:

I do the Thing thy Laws enjoin,  
and then the strife give o'er:  
To Thee I then the whole resign:  
I trust in Means no more.<sup>51</sup>

Instead of concerning themselves solely with the means of salvation, Wesley urged his congregants to lay stress on the 'weightier matters of the Law'. These matters include faith, mercy, holiness, and love and constitute the end of the means. But Wesley was quick to add that these are of no use without divine grace added to the means.<sup>52</sup>

Wesley listed three different kinds of means of grace: general, prudential, and instituted means of grace. General means include universal obedience, keeping the commandments, self-denial, and taking up the cross daily. These general means are the way by which God has ordained for Christians to receive the sanctifying grace.<sup>53</sup>

Prudential means vary according to the needs and circumstances of each Christian and can amount to almost anything. Borgen notes that 'whatever is conducive to holiness and love becomes, to that extent, a means of grace.'<sup>54</sup>

Instituted means of grace are of the greatest importance to Wesley. He listed five chief instituted means of grace: prayer, the Word, fasting, Christian confer-

50 Wesley, 'Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others; from the Year 1744, to the Year 1789', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 8: 316.

51 Originally cited in John Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, vol. 1 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868-1872), vol. 1: 233ff; 4: 451ff; here cited in Borgen, 'No End Without the Means: John Wesley and the Sacraments', 71.

52 Borgen, 'No End Without the Means', 71.

53 Ibid. See also Wesley, *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 8: 286, 323.

54 Borgen, 'No Ends Without the Means', 71.

ence (the Christian fellowship), and the Eucharist.<sup>55</sup> While fasting and prayer are useful as well as preparatory, God's Word is a convicting, converting and confirming ordinance. The Lord's Supper, the first of all confirming ordinances, could also be utilized by God to be converting as well. Lastly, the Christian fellowship provides the proper context in which the other instituted means might be exercised.<sup>56</sup>

Yet, notably missing from these all-important means of grace is the ordinance of baptism. Nevertheless, Wesley seemed eager to use the same terminology when addressing this sacrament:

By water, then, as a *means*, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again; whence it is also called by the Apostle, 'the washing of regeneration.' Our Church therefore ascribes no greater virtue to baptism than Christ himself has done. Nor does she ascribe it to the outward washing, but to the inward grace, which, added thereto, makes it a sacrament.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, while Wesley did not list baptism among his five chief instituted means of grace, it serves the same function as the others. God's grace is channeled to the candidate according to the particular state and needs of that person. Baptism is not listed among those chief means of grace because it functions only in an initiatory fashion and is not repeated, while the others means of grace are capable of preserving and developing faith and holiness. Borgen writes: 'While the other means are used by God as converting as well as confirming ordinances, the task of baptism is to be a starting point on the road to salvation.'<sup>58</sup> Because of their iniquity, all people stand in need of God's justifying grace. For Wesley, baptism serves as the vehicle to that end:

It is true, the Second Adam has found a remedy for the disease which came upon all by the offense of the first. But the benefit of this is to be received through *the means which he hath appointed; through baptism in particular, in which is the ordinary means he hath appointed for that purpose; and to which God hath tied us, though he may not have tied himself.*<sup>59</sup>

Thus, baptism is the ordinary way by which God brings about salvation. Baptism here is necessary for salvation on our part, but Wesley is open to God's objective grace that may come through different means. Baptism then is subjectively necessary but is not objectively absolute.

This outward sign of washing, which is only to be administered by the episcopally ordained ministers of the Church, utilizes water as the physical element of the sacrament. It has no inherent power to affect a spiritual alteration in the human soul without the work of the Holy Spirit. For Wesley baptism should be

55 Ibid. For the development of Wesley's thought on these five means, see particularly his sermon, 'Working Out Our Own Salvation', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 6: 510-11.

56 Borgen, 'No End Without the Means', 73.

57 Wesley, *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 10: 192 [italics added].

58 Borgen, 'No End Without the Means', 74.

59 Wesley, 'Treatise on Baptism', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol 10: 193 [italics mine].



accompanied with the Anglican prayer of consecration in asking God to ‘sanctify this water to the mystical washing away of sin.’<sup>60</sup> God answers such prayers, according to Wesley, by adding his Spirit to the water to affect spiritual change. David Ingersoll Naglee observes that for Wesley, ‘the only power inherent in water, apart from the Spirit’s addition, is a natural power to affect physical cleansing. This natural power, however, is symbolic of the mystical power of the Holy Spirit to cleanse the soul in the blood of Christ.’<sup>61</sup> Thus, the dynamic, inherent alteration in the soul affected by inward grace is divinely communicated by the outward sign of baptism.

Thus far we have found that John Wesley held both to Anglican and to evangelical theology, a dialectic most demonstrable in his baptismal theology. His Anglican upbringing was conjoined with the experience of his evangelical transformation in early adulthood and now both experiences influenced Wesley’s understanding of baptism. He attempted to carve a middle ground between Catholic *ex opere operato* and radical quietism. In so doing, Wesley revealed the extent to which he continually held to his Anglican practice. God works through water by the power of the Holy Spirit, but God’s freedom and sovereignty to work in other means must be held intact. Nevertheless, to evaluate more thoroughly whether he was completely consistent in his Anglican doctrine we must now examine separately how he understood this theology when applied to infant baptism on the one hand and adult, believer’s baptism on the other. Can the apparent incongruencies in his teaching be harmoniously merged?

### Infant baptism

To the consternation of some, John Wesley’s commitment to the Anglican practice of infant baptism wavered little throughout his lifetime. This was in large part due to the warrant Wesley saw in it not only in the tradition of his beloved Church of England but also and more importantly in early Church practice and as a biblical mandate.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Wesley maintained that ‘the Baptism of young children is to be retained in the Church.’<sup>63</sup>

Much of what students of Wesley know of his doctrine of infant baptism can be found in his work, ‘A Treatise on Baptism’. First published by his father, the Epworth rector, in 1700, John revised and reissued the treatise under his own name in 1756. Though some scholars have observantly noted that John Wesley continually reprinted other baptism extracts until late in life and did not repub-

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60 Originally found in the 1662 version of the Sunday Service, BCP, 142, 148; see also Ole Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Zurich: Publishing House of the United Methodist Church, 1972), 71; and David Ingersoll Naglee, *From Font to Faith: John Wesley on Infant Baptism and the Nurture of Children* (New York: Peer Lang, 1987), 109.

61 Naglee, 109-10.

62 Maddox, 223.

63 Wesley, *Sunday Service*, Art. 17, ‘Of Baptism’, 312.

lish the treatise after 1770,<sup>64</sup> we have no record that Wesley ever repudiated this tract. Indeed, the Father of Methodism even included it in his definitive collection of his works.<sup>65</sup>

In the second section of this treatise, Wesley outlined baptism in terms of its five major benefits. The first benefit received in baptism is the ‘washing away of guilt or original sin, by the application of the merits of Christ’s death.’<sup>66</sup> Wesley argued from the witness of scripture and the ancient Church that all of humanity is subject to original sin, but Christ has erased the penalty of Adam’s transgression. Baptism then becomes God’s ‘ordinary instrument’ for the Christian’s justification.<sup>67</sup> From this point Wesley argued:

Agreeably to this, our Church prays in the baptismal office, that the person to be baptized may be ‘washed and sanctified by the Holy Ghost, and, being delivered from God’s wrath, receive remission of sins, and enjoy the everlasting benediction of his heavenly washing;’ and declares in the rubric at the end of the office, ‘It is certain, by God’s word, that children who are baptized, dying before they commit actual sin are saved.’ And this is agreeable to the unanimous judgment of the ancient Fathers.<sup>68</sup>

To be clear, Wesley’s understanding of original sin and its consequences are more nuanced than one might at first perceive. While he differentiated between the guilt of original sin washed away in baptism and the *vitium* or condition of inbred sinfulness which abided in each human irrespective of baptismal regeneration, Wesley still upheld the notion of baptism as a means of canceling the guilt of inherited sin. Every person stands under a condemnation of inherited sinfulness, and no person is capable of overcoming this inbred iniquity apart from God’s grace.<sup>69</sup> He stated this just as strongly for children:

If infants are guilty of original sin, then they are proper subjects of baptism; seeing, in the ordinary way, they cannot be saved, unless this be washed away by baptism.... This therefore is our First ground. Infants need to be washed from original sin; therefore they are proper subjects of baptism.<sup>70</sup>

Here Wesley seemed to be upholding not only the necessity of washing for infants but the salvific effect baptism has for the child. He repeated this emphasis in his sermon, ‘The New Birth’, by stating:

It is certain our Church supposes that all who are baptized in their infancy are at the same time born again; and it is allowed that the whole Office for

64 Randy L. Maddox, for one, offers this evidence as indicative of a change in Wesley’s baptismal theology. See particularly 224f.

65 Sanders makes this observation, 592.

66 Wesley, ‘Treatise on Baptism’, *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 10: 191.

67 Parris, 39.

68 Wesley is here cited in Sanders, 593.

69 Sanders, 593.

70 Wesley, ‘Treatise on Baptism’, *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 10: 193.

the Baptism of Infants proceeds upon this supposition. Nor is it an objection of any weight against this, that we cannot comprehend how this work can be wrought in infants. For neither can we comprehend how it is wrought in a person of riper years.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, we see the Anglican side of Wesley in his emphasis on the washing of the guilt of original sin. Nevertheless, as Wesley upheld the appropriateness of infant baptism, its soteriological significance is partly diminished by his notion of prevenient grace. If the atonement effectuated by Christ removes the penalty of original sin (i.e., eternal death) from all humanity, believers and non-believers, infants and adults alike, then no one is eternally punished for inherited iniquity.<sup>72</sup> Thus, in November 1776, Wesley wrote John Mason, stating:

That 'by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men' (all born into the world) 'unto condemnation,' is an undoubted truth; and affects every infant, as well as every adult person. But it is equally true, that, 'by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men' (all born into the world, infant or adult) 'unto justification.' *Therefore no infant ever was or ever will be 'sent to hell for the guilt of Adam's sin,'* seeing it is canceled by the righteousness of Christ as soon as they are sent into the world.<sup>73</sup>

Nevertheless, Wesley argued that the washing of original sin is the first benefit in baptism for both infants and adults. Thus, one may only conclude that Wesley's identification of the purpose of infant baptism may have changed in this area during his lifetime. In his extract, *Thoughts Upon Infant Baptism*, Wesley did not stress this benefit which was such a leading benefit in his *Treatise*. While he maintained the basic point of the washing of original sin in this extract, he removed the characterization of this guilt as 'damning'. Maddox then notes that 'the uncomfortableness that this deletion suggests led Wesley by 1776 to affirm that any inherited guilt of Original Sin was universally canceled at birth by Prevenient Grace.'<sup>74</sup>

It is equally relevant to broach the topic of post-baptismal sin at this juncture. Those who only read Wesley in a cursory fashion are quick to misinterpret Wesley as saying that baptism removes the punishment of original sin. To the contrary, Wesley maintained that fear, pain, sorrow, and death remain in the life of the baptized. Moreover, while baptism is an instrument for justification in the infant, it is not to be understood as a means to instantaneous sanctification. Human freedom still exists after the baptismal waters have dried and the baptized may and probably will commit sin. Wesley reflected in his *Journal* for May 24, 1738, of his own life experience: 'I believe, till I was about ten years old I had not

71 Wesley, 'The New Birth', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 10: 192.

72 Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 128.

73 Wesley, 'Letters to Mr. John Mason', DXXIV (Nov. 21, 1776), Jackson ed., vol. 12: 453 [italics mine].

74 Maddox, 224.

sinned away that 'washing of the Holy Ghost' which was given me in baptism.<sup>75</sup>

Children then seem to reach an age of accountability in which the innocence bestowed on them through the objective gift of grace in baptism is worn down as they eventually sin away their baptismal regeneration. Though Wesley maintained an Anglican sense of sacrament for infant baptism, this notion of 'sinning away' baptism's effects is where Wesley began to part from the Church of England and allowed for a subjective sense of soteriology to dominate.

Because the baptizand does not 'live answerable thereto', the gracious gift of baptism seems to be nullified. Those who were made children of God by baptism become in effect 'children of the devil'. Wesley wrote in his sermon, 'The New Birth',

And hereby it appears too plain to be denied, that divers of those who were children of the devil before they were baptized continue the same after baptism; 'for the works of their father they do': They continue servants of sin, without any pretence either to inward or outward holiness.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, those who rely upon their previous baptisms for salvation make baptism an end instead of a means, an error addressed earlier in this essay. Wesley wrote:

Do you glory in this, that you once belonged to God? O be ashamed! blush! hide yourself in the earth! Never boast more of what ought to fill you with confusion, to make you ashamed before God and man!... You have already denied your baptism; and that in the most effectual manner. You have denied it a thousand times; and you do so still day by day. For in your baptism you renounced the devil and all his works. Whenever therefore you give place to him again, whenever you do any of the works of the devil, then you deny your baptism.... [Therefore,] be you baptized or unbaptized, you must be born again.<sup>77</sup>

In his 'Farther Appeal', Wesley even warned that those baptized who do not live holy lives accordingly will in fact increase their culpability:

Baptism is the outward sign of the inward grace, which is supposed by our Church to be given with and through that sign to all infants, and to those of riper years, if they repent and believe the gospel. But how extremely idle are the common disputes on this head! I tell a sinner, 'You must be born again.' 'No,' say you: 'he was born again in baptism. Therefore he cannot be born again now.' Alas, what trifling is this! What, if he was then a child of God? He is now manifestly a child of the devil; for the works of his father he doeth. Therefore, do not play upon words. He must go through an entire change of heart. In one not yet baptized, you yourself would call that change, the new birth. In him, call it what you will; but remember, mean-

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75 Wesley, *Journal* (May 24, 1738), *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 1: 98.

76 Wesley, 'The New Birth', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 6: 74.

77 *Ibid.*

time, that if either he die or you die without it, *your baptism will be so far from profiting you, that it will greatly increase your damnation.*<sup>78</sup>

Thus, we may conclude that Wesley assumed that everyone baptized as an infant would likely fall away from the washing of his original sin. This was not the result of any insufficiency of baptismal grace but of the baptizand's neglect of that grace.<sup>79</sup> But the spiritual washing of inherited iniquity remains a great benefit in infant baptism.

Wesley suggested that the second benefit of baptism is that baptism enters the candidate 'into a covenant with God, into that "everlasting covenant" which 'he hath commanded forever'.<sup>80</sup> Wesley saw a strong parallel between the Jewish custom of circumcision of children as the sign of the covenant and infant baptism as admitting children to the new covenant: 'And as circumcision was then the way of entering into this covenant, so baptism is now.... The Jews were admitted into the Church by circumcision, so are the Christians by baptism.'<sup>81</sup> Paul Sanders notes that Wesley's Anglicanism caused him to give primacy of infant baptism over adult baptism in such a paradigm. Consequently, he observes, 'this entering into covenant relationship with God cannot be interpreted in the sense of believers' baptism. It is not the sectarian but the Catholic interpretation of baptismal covenant which is intended.'<sup>82</sup>

The third benefit of baptism for Wesley was the spiritual initiation into the body of Christ: 'By baptism we are admitted into the Church, and consequently made members of Christ, its Head.'<sup>83</sup> Through such an initiation, Christians are spiritually united with Christ, and Christ's influence of grace is released to accompany them: 'From which spiritual, vital union with him, proceeds the influence of his grace on those that are baptized; as from our union with the Church, a share in all its privileges, and in all the promises Christ has made to it.'<sup>84</sup>

The fourth benefit of baptism is that Christians are made into the children of God. Here Wesley explained:

By baptism, we who were 'by nature children of wrath' are made the children of God. And this regeneration which our Church in so many places ascribes to baptism is more than barely being admitted into the Church, though commonly connected therewith; being 'grafted into the body of Christ's Church, we are made the children of God by adoption and grace.'<sup>85</sup>

Lastly, baptism makes the Christian an heir to God's everlasting kingdom. Wesley wrote:

78 Wesley, 'A Farther Appeal to Mean of Reason and Religion', *Works*, vol. 5: 36 [Italics mine].

79 Maddox, 225.

80 Wesley, 'A Treatise on Baptism', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 10: 191.

81 Ibid.

82 Sanders, 594.

83 Wesley, 'A Treatise on Baptism', 191.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 191-2.

In consequence of our being made children of God, we are heirs of the kingdom of heaven. 'If children', (as the Apostle observes,) 'then heirs, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.' Herein we receive a title to, and an earnest of, 'a kingdom which cannot be removed.' Baptism doth now save us, if we live answerable thereto; if we repent, believe, and obey the Gospel: supposing this, as it admits us into the Church here, so into glory hereafter.<sup>86</sup>

Paul Sanders argues that for Wesley these five benefits add up to one reality in infant baptism: baptismal regeneration. If baptism takes away the guilt of inherited sin, making us children of God from children of wrath, entering us into a divine covenant, a community of faith, and an everlasting inheritance, 'in short, baptism offers salvation; though, admittedly, we must live as becomes those who profess to be children of light.'<sup>87</sup>

Infant baptism is then a means by which God works his regeneration into our hearts. Wesley, though, is no Calvinist on this point; God does not work irresistibly, and humans possess freedom to receive or resist the subsequent gifts of grace. On this point, Wesley wrote:

The question is not, what you was [sic] made in baptism (do not evade); but, what are you now? ... I allow you was 'circumcised with circumcision of Christ' (as St. Paul emphatically terms baptism); but does the spirit of Christ and of glory now rest upon you? Else, 'your circumcision is become uncircumcision.'<sup>88</sup>

While Sanders raises an important observation, he may have overstated the case. Strictly speaking, Wesley does not identify baptism as regeneration or new birth, but he does strongly associate the two in infant baptism. Kenneth J. Collins more precisely observes that

Wesley does indeed *associate* baptism with the new birth, and it appears that this association is strongest, if not exact, in terms of infant baptism. Wesley, being the good Anglican that he was, apparently never repudiated the teaching of his church that moved along these lines.... In other words, though infant baptism is not to be equated with the new birth, it is always associated with it.<sup>89</sup>

Thus we see in Wesley's doctrine of infant baptism a strong tie to the sacramental view of regeneration. At the same time, he did not go so far as to hold that paedobaptism is a means by which God's work of regeneration takes place. Yet, such a strong sacramental view of infant baptism requires a study into Wesley's understanding of the effects of baptism for adults. Whether Wesley is capable of remaining consistent in this rite or whether a necessary tension emerges in his soteriology will be a matter to explore.

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86 Ibid., 192.

87 Sanders, 595.

88 Wesley, 'The Marks of the New Birth', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 5: 221.

89 Collins, 127 [italics his].

## Adult baptism and its effects

Wesley insinuated a different theological paradigm for adult baptism than for paedobaptism. He provided a glimpse into what he viewed as the benefits of adult baptism in his *Journal* entry in January 1739:

*Thurs. 25.* – I baptized John Smith (late an Anabaptist) and four other adults at Islington. Of the adults I have known baptized lately, one only was at that time born again, in the full sense of the word; that is, found a thorough, inward change, by the love of God filling her heart. Most of them were only born again in a lower sense; that is, received the remission of their sins. And some (as it has since too plainly appeared) neither in one sense nor the other.<sup>90</sup>

Wesley presented a two-tiered system of benefits here for adult baptism. First, adults may be conferred the forgiveness of sins through the rite. This, as could be observed above, is the lower benefit for this type of baptism.<sup>91</sup> The higher the benefit of adult baptism may be the regenerating effect of the Holy Spirit. Wesley presented his therapeutic focus in this type of baptism: Its purpose is not to bestow juridical pardon but to initiate a spiritual transformation in the life of the baptizand.

But any careful reader of this portion of Wesley's theology will find the Father of Methodism's skepticism about any benefit taking place in the life of an adult. What is manifested here is a certain cleavage between Wesley's infant sacramentalism and the rite of adult baptism. He clearly stated this fact:

Whatever be the case with infants, it is sure all of riper years who are baptized are not at the same time born again.... A man may possibly be 'born of the water', and yet not be 'born of the Spirit'.<sup>92</sup>

In regards to adult baptism, Wesley did not argue for the necessity of the *res* (thing signified) to follow the *signum* (sign). In his sermon, 'The New Birth', Wesley stated as much:

From the preceding reflections we may, secondly, observe that as the new birth is not the same thing with baptism, so it does not always accompany baptism; they do not constantly go together. A man may possibly be 'born of water', and yet not be 'born of the Spirit'. There may sometimes be the outward sign where there is not the inward grace.<sup>93</sup>

90 Wesley, 'Journal from August 12, 1738, to November 1, 1739', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 1: 172.

91 A powerful example of this lower benefit was recorded in Wesley's *Journal* on Oct. 2, 1758: 'I preached at Bradford, (noon and night,) and met the stewards of the Wiltshire and Somersetshire societies. In the evening I baptized a young woman, deeply convicted of sin. We all found the power of God was present to heal, and she herself felt what she had not words to express', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 2: 459.

92 Here cited in John Chongnahm Cho, 'John Wesley's View on Baptism', in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 7: 65.

93 Wesley, 'The New Birth', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 6: 74.

What is necessary to connect these benefits to the rite is that baptism be 'duly received'. Again, he recorded an episode in his *Journal* in February 1760 which reveals the necessity of ready belief in adult baptism:

*Tues. February 5.* – I baptized a gentlewoman at the Foundery; and the peace she immediately found was a fresh proof, that the outward sign, duly received, is always accompanied with the inward grace.<sup>94</sup>

The move from objective grace to subjective response in adult baptism for Wesley is unmistakable. Thus, while the grace of baptism is sufficient for initiating the Christian life, it becomes efficient only as baptized people participate in faith and holiness.<sup>95</sup>

In his *Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained*, Wesley described baptism in a different light from that which he previously outlined for paedobaptism. Instead of being a sacrament which incorporates the baptizand into the body of Christ and grants a status of co-eternality with Christ, baptism is now viewed as the marks of nominal Christianity.<sup>96</sup> He bemoaned the state of the national church by writing:

And, (1), none can deny that the people of England in general are called Christians. They are called so, a few only excepted, by others, as well as themselves. But I presume no man will say that the name makes the thing, that men are Christians barely because they are called so. It must be, (2), allowed that the people of England, generally speaking, have been christened or baptized. But neither can we infer: these were once baptized, therefore they are Christians now.<sup>97</sup>

Wesley was displeased with the lack of piety he saw in the lives of those 'Christians' he encountered. He became frustrated at the level of iniquity to which so many congregants fell, leading him to exclaim:

Say not then in your heart, 'I was once baptized, therefore I am now a child of God.' Alas, that consequence will by no means hold. How many are baptized gluttons and drunkards, the baptized liars and common swearers, the baptized railers and evil-speakers, the baptized whoremongers, thieves, extortioners. What think you? Are these now children of God?<sup>98</sup>

Thus, Wesley again arrived at his polemic against the Catholic notion of *ex opere operato* and laid the groundwork for his doctrine of New Birth, 'a vast inward change, a change wrought in the soul, by the operation of the Holy Ghost.'<sup>99</sup> Again he warned, 'Lean no more on the staff of that broken reed, that ye were born again in baptism.'<sup>100</sup> Wesley strove to underscore the importance of a real,

94 Wesley, 'Journal' (Feb. 5, 1760), *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 2: 523.

95 Maddox, 222.

96 Collins, 128.

97 Here cited in Collins, 128.

98 Wesley, 'Marks of the New Birth', *Works*. Jackson ed., vol. 5: 221.

99 See his sermon, 'The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God', 224.

100 Wesley, 'Marks of the New Birth', 223.



vital inward change in the heart of the believer.

Many scholars have argued that so significant was this emphasis on new life in the believer for Wesley that he actually abandoned his Anglican sacramentalism of baptismal justification in infant baptism as he revised the Sunday Service of 1784. John C. English, for instance, points out that while Wesley's *Treatise on Baptism* stipulated that the child baptized is also justified, the founder of Methodism cut out all references to godparents and vicarious confessions of faith of sponsors on behalf of the child in Wesley's own Sunday Service. English notes:

By means of this radical surgery, Wesley eliminated a major defect in the Prayer Book service. After all, faith, if it is to be a meaningful category, must be a personal act. One man cannot believe for another, as the Prayer Book implies.<sup>101</sup>

Likewise, Wesley altered the service for adult baptism in this manual. The *Book of Common Prayer* calls the officiant to pray before the water is applied to the candidate that regeneration will be effected in the baptism. The written material which follows the baptismal rite then implies that the baptizand is undoubtedly now regenerate. Wesley, on the other hand, made no assumption in his Sunday Service. While he retained the prayer which hopes for regeneration, he dropped all references following the rite to regeneration taking place. With omitted material italicized, the following changes may be observed:

Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren, that these persons are *regenerated and grafted* into the body of Christ's Church, let us give thanks to Almighty God for these benefits.... Give thy Holy Spirit to these Persons; that being *now* born again, and made heirs of everlasting salvation... they may continue thy servants....<sup>102</sup>

Thus, Wesley revised the *Book of Common Prayer* in light of his adherence to the principle of justification by faith. Yet, are we to assume that this means Wesley actually changed his mind regarding baptism, or was he simply acting circumspectly against abuse of the rite? Maddox suggests that 'his apparent purpose was not to reject the possibility of regeneration, but to avoid the impression of its inevitability – apart from our responsiveness.'<sup>103</sup>

### Baptismal marriage?

We are presented, then, with a theological paradox: Wesley's Anglican, sacramental doctrine of infant baptism and his evangelical doctrine of the responsive adult. Enabling the Anglican and the evangelical to coincide seems to require adroit theological gymnastics. Paul Sanders notes that 'the fact is, Wesley's

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101 John C. English, 'The Sacrament of Baptism According to the Sunday Service of 1784', in *Methodist History*, vol. 5: 11.

102 Here cited in English, 'The Sacrament of Baptism According to the Sunday Service of 1784', 14.

103 Maddox, 224.

teaching is not at all clear and conclusive. He had done rather more to muddle the situation than to clarify it.<sup>104</sup> In order to make some sense of systematic doctrine from these two dialectical approaches, some scholars have attempted to fill in the gaps that Wesley seemed to have left. The best attempt to reconcile this apparent discrepancy is to suggest that Wesley held two notions of regeneration in his soteriology.

We are presented here with two types of regeneration, an elemental or preliminary regeneration and a full or pragmatic regeneration. In infant baptism, Wesley presented the Anglican tradition of elemental regeneration, an objective work wrought by God through the Holy Spirit by means of sacramental grace. Built upon the passivity of the recipient, this is entirely a preliminary work of grace: the guilt of original sin is cancelled, the individual is placed in covenant, initiated into the Church, and infused with a 'principle of grace' to be used in building a life towards holiness and sanctification.<sup>105</sup> This preliminary regeneration can only be bestowed upon those completely dependent, young children (and presumably the mentally challenged).

Full regeneration, on the other hand, fully encompasses Wesley's notion of New Birth. This more pragmatic approach looks for the empowering reception of the Holy Spirit which truly converts the person and produces subsequent fruits of faith. This paradigm requires a more subjective change in the heart and will. Though still dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit, full regeneration perceives conversion to be a process in which the recipient is completely conscious of and co-operative with the Witness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>106</sup> The New Birth then may coincide with the baptism of adults, but it does not accompany the rite for children.

Nevertheless, we are still left with certain theological cul-de-sacs. First, it is not certain that Wesley ever assumed that *all* baptized children would fall away. While he seemed to imply that this was a reality of our sinful natures, the two regenerations theory does not account for Wesley's use of 'infused grace' language regarding infant baptism.<sup>107</sup>

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104 Sanders, 600.

105 Ibid.

106 See particularly Felton, 42, 173; and Sanders, 600f.

107 Maddox, 225. At the same time, Henry H. Knight, III argues that studies of Wesley's doctrine of initiation should never even start with a comparison between infant and adult baptisms in Wesley's theology, for this only leads to confusion. Instead, students of Wesley should approach this issue from the perspective of Wesley's notion of 'growth in the Christian life within the context of means of grace'. Here Knight argues that the new born adult is Wesley's normative model for Christian life and not the baptized infant. As such, one should consider Wesley's soteriology through this approach. Yet, Knight's conclusion is just as frustrating and inconclusive: that baptism is a one-time initiatory event; once completed, it apparently has no further role to play in the Christian life. Although a sacrament, baptism is intentionally never included by Wesley on a list of those means of grace. Thus, Knight simply achieves a consistent soteriology by down-playing the importance of baptism, and the reader is left wondering what continuing significance the sacrament has in the

We are left to conclude that Wesley did not present a completely consistent doctrine of baptism. This is in large part due to the fusing of Wesley's Anglican upbringing which emphasized the objective in-breaking of God through the means of sacraments with the subjective religion Wesley subsequently experienced while among the Moravians. Wesley's own pattern of editing the prayer book, Methodist manuals, and his own works on baptism seem to imply his own uncertainty in this dialectic. Thus, while he provided a basis of ecumenical tolerance based on the sovereignty of God, Wesley's own baptismal doctrine ironically becomes a microcosm of the great historic struggle within ecumenical dialogue in search of some basis for theological unity. John Wesley's adherence to both sides of the tension, paired with the paucity of literature he left behind to his successors, have resulted in a great deal of confusion for Methodism since his death.<sup>108</sup>

Regardless, Wesley's paradoxical baptismal theology simply mirrors the inner, theological struggles all Christians experience between their reliance on a sovereign God accompanied by objective faith and their understanding of faith requiring a Christian ethic and response to God's gracious action in subjective understanding. Kenneth Cain Kinghorn concludes well:

In sum we can say that Wesley was both a catholic churchman and an evangelical evangelist. He always maintained the importance of the church and her sacraments as well as the necessity of a vital and personal faith in Christ. Incorporation into the church through baptism was significant and critical for Wesley. Once baptism had taken place, there remained an anticipation that the baptized person would grow in the environment of covenant, where the Holy Spirit promises to work so that one may come into an adult confirmation of the grace of baptism. In doing so, one appropriates the grace of God that leads into holiness of life and ultimately to final salvation.<sup>109</sup>

Baptism is then viewed by Wesley as more than a one-time event but as a continuing process of two paradoxically yet interrelated elements. Emphasizing both the objective, Anglican side and the subjective, evangelical side, Methodism holds both aspects as theological truth. Each serving as a check to the other, the irreducible dialectic of Wesleyan baptism testifies to the potential of ecumenical tension and unity.<sup>110</sup>

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life of the Christian. See Henry H. Knight, III, 'The Significance of Baptism for the Christian Life: Wesley's Pattern of Christian Initiation', in *Worship*, vol. 63 (1989): 134.

108 Williams, 123.

109 Kenneth Cain Kinghorn, 'The Wesleyan Understanding of Baptism', in *A Celebration of Ministry: Essays in Honor of Frank Bateman Stanger* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Publishing Co., 1982), 64.

110 Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 144-45.

## Abstract

John Wesley's upbringing as an Anglican and his subsequent 'evangelical conversion' as a young adult played significant roles in his mature theological formation. This duality and tension is no where more present than in his baptismal theology. The article traces in Wesley the development of this dialectic and the role of baptism as a means of grace. It then investigates his understanding of both infant baptism and believer's baptism, and how both apply, but in somewhat differing ways, to his 'evangelical Anglican' theology. The Anglican Wesley seemed to argue consistently for infant baptism and the divine effects transmitted through the rite. Conversely, the evangelical Wesley subsequently underwent his Aldersgate 'conversion' whereby he insisted that every person must experience the New Birth by receiving the Holy Spirit in maturity as the effects of infant baptism are eclipsed by adult iniquity. While rebaptism was wholeheartedly rejected by Wesley, adults who had not heretofore been baptized should do so following their individual, evangelical experiences. However, the benefits of adult baptism differ from Wesley's Anglican paedobaptism and require the baptizand's receptivity in faith and holiness. Thus, Wesley is left with an objective grace in paedobaptism and an adult baptism contingent upon the subjective human response. The Anglican foundation of Wesley's faith, then, does not completely adhere to his later evangelical experientialism, producing a dialectical baptismal theology.

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*978-1-84227-513-9 / 229 x 152mm / 260pp / £19.99*

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Milton Keynes, MK8 0ES**