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J.T. MacCormack.

The History of the Notes

Wesley wrote for "those who reverence the Word of God and have a desire to save their souls."

His purpose was to "assist serious persons, who have not the advantage of learning, in understanding the New Testament." In England there were eight printings of the Notes during Wesley's lifetime; two of these were revised editions, revisions made by Wesley for the 1760 edition and the 1788 edition. Thus it may be assumed that they had a wide readership; they were certainly important to Wesley. He expected them to be read in the Methodist Societies. In a letter to the Societies at Bristol, he advised: "where you have not an experienced preacher, let one of the leaders read the Notes upon the New Testament or the Christian Library."

All large Methodist Societies were directed to provide a copy for the travelling preachers (Stevens: History of Methodism Vol.3, p.397) (Also Journal V. p.189n). Wesley instructed his preachers to read from the Notes in the meetings of the societies and to expound on the New Testament reading from this beginning. The third edition was of a size convenient for carrying in saddle-bags, whereas the 1st., 2nd., 3rd., 5th., and 6th. editions were in quarto. The comment on Matt 5:9 is aimed at preachers: Wesley comments on the structure of the sermon on the Mount and adds: "Is not this the pattern for every Christian preacher - let them not dare to preach without it " (i.e., without a closely connected structure). By the 1760s preachers who wished to be admitted into "connexion" with Mr. Wesley - a word which dates from early Conferences - were asked: Have you read the Sermons and Notes on the N.T.? This is still required of preachers of the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the Methodist Church in Ireland and the United Methodist Church of the U.S.A.

These two works are the standards set in the Model Deed under which trustees of Methodist property are appointed. This deed forbids any preaching contrary to what is in the notes and the Sermons.

Along these paths the Notes have reached an honoured place in Methodism. Furthermore, because an evangelical movement centres in the Gospel, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament have a natural place in Methodism. They

provide a standard true to Wesley's original purpose - proclaim what he had found, forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ and an assurance of this felt by the believer.

#### Sources of the Notes

Wesley records in the Preface his desire of many years to put into print what he has learned "in reading, thinking or conversation" concerning the New Testament. He began the writing of the Notes in January 1754 while convalescing after a bout of consumption in November and December 1753, which he regarded as "a loud call to arise and go" to heaven.

Wesley acknowledges that he drew upon four people's works for the Notes. First and foremost is Bengel, a German Lutheran. "It might be of more service to the cause of religion, were I barely to translate his Gnomon Novi Testamenti, than to write many volumes upon it." "Many of his excellent notes I have therefore translated, many more I have abridged." The other three sources were Englishmen, Doddridge and Guyse were Dissenting ministers while Heylyn was a prominent Anglican cleric under whom Wesley was pleased to worship.

Wesley gives the impression that the Notes are largely a borrowing of material from Bengel, supplemented by pieces from the other three sources. This impression is confirmed by the contents of the Preface; paragraphs 1-9 are in the first person singular - Wesley speaking. But immediately Wesley writes in the third person singular, the words are Bengel's. For two pages to the end of the Preface where Wesley is writing "Concerning the Scriptures in general" he is quoting from Bengel almost exclusively. Each book of the New Testament is prefaced by an outline of its contents; these outlines are entirely borrowed from Bengel. As for the commentary itself, long notes are taken from Bengel verbatim, allowing for translation from Latin, e.g., 30 lines on John 1: verses 1-3. But the notes on verses 4,5,6 are not from Bengel, while that on v.7 is, all of its six lines. Then there is nothing from Bengel until verse 14. There is dependence on Bengel but also independence of him. Excluding the Book of Revelation for which Wesley acknowledges his total dependence on Bengel and continuing failure "to understand....this

mysterious book," an examination of thirty chapters representative of Gospels, epistles both Pauline and other, indicates that only 26 per cent of the notes are dependent on Bengel. As for dependence on Doddridge, only the commentary on Matt to Acts was published when Wesley writes the Notes. Perhaps 18 per cent of the Notes on these five books are drawn from Doddridge; this is 9 per cent of the total Notes.

Heylyn's work consists of his own translation of the New Testament and commentary on Matt 1-10 to which are added "Select Discourses upon the Principal Points of Revealed Religion." Approximately 7 per cent of the Notes on Mt.1-10 are taken from Heylyn, a very small proportion of the total Notes upon the New Testament.

Guysel's work covers the whole of the New Testament and was completed two years before Wesley began the Notes. John Lawson, the author of the introduction to the Notes in the new edition of Wesley's Works regards Guysel as "responsible for quite a large number of important notes." but because Guysel is a strict Calvinist, Wesley passes over many of his comments. Thus Guysel was "used less extensively than Doddridge." Judging then by Wesley's use of Doddridge, Guysel's contribution would be less than 9 per cent.

On these estimates, less than 50 per cent of the Notes excluding Revelation, is attributable to Wesley's named sources; at least 50 per cent is due to Wesley himself. He is his own man. This can also be seen by looking at the sources themselves. Wesley's Notes occupy one volume of quarto size of 765 pages; the works of Bengel and Doddridge on the New Testament run to five volumes each. Wesley omits a huge amount of material. For example, Bengel's commentary on John 1:1-3 extends to 440 lines; Wesley extracts 30 from these. Bengel's work is more overtly scholarly, directed to the scholarly, examining Hebrew and Greek words and grammar. For example, on Heb.2:7 "who maketh his angels spirits...." Bengel has 12 lines on the Hebrew original and then "But Paul retains the interpretation of the Septuagint." Wesley takes up this point; his note reads: "the apostles constantly cited the Septuagint translation....." Bengel continues his comment: "for the homonymy of the Hebrew word 'Elohim' signifies....."

Wesley knows that homonymy is not of great interest 'to the plain unlettered man who only desires to save his soul.' Thus, from Bengel's comment of 23 lines on Heb 2:7 Wesley extracts less than two. In the sample of 30 chapters, Wesley extracts eight per cent of Bengel's work, and of Doddridge, Guyse and Heylyn even less. His independence is seen in his selectivity.

Wesley's independence is also to be seen in his combining of his sources. An example is to be found in the notes on Matt 1:16 and 17, concerning the words Christ and generations. The notes are composed of five lines from Bengel, followed by nine from Heylyn, then two from Bengel and eleven from Doddridge. Amongst the lines from Heylyn Wesley adds his own significant comment that the title Christ implies the 'prophetic character' - omitted by Heylyn - and that an application of this "We find a total darkness (in ourselves), ignorance of God and the things of God. Here we want Christ in His prophetic office to enlighten our minds and teach us the whole will of God."

A final indicator of Wesley's independence is the use he makes of the words of his sources with a changed meaning in his Notes. On the surprise of the disciples that Jesus "talked with a woman" Wesley explains: "which the Jewish rabbis reckoned scandalous for a man of distinction to do." The words are exactly those of Doddridge, but Doddridge prefaces them with a sentence which shows that he did not believe it to be scandalous! Wesley dependence on his sources is probably less than fifty per cent of the Notes on Matt to Jude. If he is totally dependent on Bengel for the Notes on Revelation, this dependence may be as much as sixty percent. Even on this figure, there remains forty per cent of the Notes from Wesley himself, plus the important factors of selectivity and arrangement. The index of a modern book on the philosophy of religion by a physicist lists 196 references to authors and to the Bible, some of which extend to 12 pages. On average, in this book of 229 pages, there are references to other authors on more than 4 pages out of five. By comparison, Wesley's borrowing requirement is modest!

Simply by looking at the closed book, one characteristic is obvious - brevity. Bengel's Gnomon is more than twice the length of the Notes, and he was chided by a friend who feared that his brevity would obscure clarity. Wesley achieves such brevity by the non-repetition of notes. For example, the notes on Matt 19-27 are more than four times as long as those on the corresponding chapters of Mark (10-15). In Mark, Wesley makes no comment on part of the trial of Jesus by the Jews, and all of the denial by Peter, except at the last verse - "he covered his head." The reason for this silence is to be found in the preface to the four Gospels, copies from Bengel. "St. Mark in his Gospel presupposes that of St. Matthew." In Matthew's Gospel Wesley has said all that he considers necessary and comments in Mark mainly at verses where the second evangelist differs from or adds to the first, as at Mark 15:72.

Another reason for non-repetition and therefore for brevity is the unity of Scripture. This unity is stated in the general Preface to the Notes and in the preface to the four Gospels. "St. Mark in his Gospel presupposes that of St. Matthew and supplies what is omitted therein. St. Luke supplies what is omitted by both the former; St. John, what is omitted by all the three." Following what he believes to be the example of Scripture, Wesley explains the term Christ at Mt. 1:16, but not at Matt. 16:16 - "thou art the Christ" - where we might rather expect the explanation, as the more important text. Because Wesley has no comment about the term Christ as Matt. 16:16, it must not be concluded that he is weak on Christology; the explanation of the term at 1:16 holds for 16:16 also, because Scripture is a unity. Vice versa, it is not permissible to pick out a comment on a particular verse and say "Thus believes Wesley." He may deal with the same point in relation to another verse or verses. His comments and therefore his belief on any particular point must be gathered from the whole Notes.

Another characteristic is indicated by the adjective in the title - Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament. The Notes clarify words or events. For example, "liable to the judgment" of Matt. 5:21 is clarified thus: "this refers to the court of twenty-three found in every city" This prevents any misapplication of the word. Similarly

on John 4:27 "upon this came his disciples and marvelled that he talked with a woman;" The unspoken questions of the disciples are clarified by the note: "yet none said - to the woman "what seekest thou? - or to Christ "Why talkest thou with her?" The second question is clear without a note from Wesley, but the first may not have been clear to "plain unlettered men" of whom I was one until I read Wesley's note.

A distinctive characteristic, and another reason for brevity, is that Wesley wrote to "assist serious persons....in understanding the New Testament."

That the word 'assist' is carefully chosen is proved by its use in letters which Wesley wrote to various people who "want to know God in order to enjoy Him in time and eternity, All that you want to know of Him is contained in one book, the Bible. Therefore your one point is to understand this..... spend at least two hours every day in reading and meditating upon the Bible..... If you would save yourself the trouble of thinking, add Mr. Henry's Comment: you would only be assisted in your thinking, add the Explanatory Notes." (Letter to Margaret Lewen, June 1764) In a letter written at the time when the Notes were being prepared for the first edition, Wesley warned: "you are in danger if you despise or lightly esteem reason.....an excellent gift from God" (Letters Vol.3, p.129) Wesley wishes to assist his readers to understand God; this is essential if they are to love God with all their mind. He will not, cannot, do their thinking for them. An example is to be found at Matt 20:15 where Wesley is refuting Matthew Henry's interpretation. Although he violently disagrees with this interpretation, he is very brief and puts his disagreement in the form of a question "But can it be inferred from hence....?" The answer expected is negative, but Wesley leaves the reader to make it for himself.

As the New Testament is the record of God's supreme revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, Notes on it ought to cover all aspects of Christianity. To review Wesley's teaching on every aspect of Christian faith and practice would be impossible on this occasion; a selection must be made. Wesley was an evangelist first of all; whatever ability he had of organisation was used

to preserve the fruits of his evangelising or to prepare the ground for it. It seems appropriate then to examine first what the Notes say about Christ, who, according to the note on Mark 1:1, is 'both the messenger and the message' of the evangel.

The climax of the opening verses of the first Gospel is the claim that Jesus is Christ. Wesley's note explains the terms Jesus and Christ:

"Jesus who is called Christ" - The name Jesus respects chiefly the promise of blessing made to Abraham; the name Christ, the promise of the Messiah's kingdom which was made to David."

Thus, at the outset Wesley identifies Jesus as the means of universal blessing promised at Gen.12:3, and as the ruler anointed by God, promised at Is. (:7 and 11:1. Then follows a paragraph mainly borrowed from Heylyn

*It may be further observed, that the word Christ in Greek, and Messiah in Hebrew, signify 'Anointed': and imply the prophetic, priestly and royal characters which were to meet in the Messiah. Among the Jews, anointing was the ceremony whereby prophets, priests, and kings were initiated into those offices. And if we look into ourselves, we shall find a want of Christ in all these respects. We are by nature at a distance from God, alienated from Him, and incapable of a free access to Him. Hence we want a Mediator, an Intercessor: in a word a Christ in His priestly office. This regards our state with respect to God. And with respect to ourselves, we find a total darkness, blindness, ignorance of God, and the things of God. Now here we want Christ in His prophetic office to enlighten our minds, and teach us the whole will of God. We find also within us a strange misrule of appetites and passions. For these we want Christ in His royal character, to reign in our hearts, and subdue all things to Himself. (Words underlined - Wesley).*

Wesley's own contribution to this paragraph is unnoticeable because it is couched in the same language as the extract from Heylyn. However, it is significant; Wesley wishes to make clear the full nature of Jesus Christ. This desire is evident again at 1:21 where the note is: "Jesus - that is, a Saviour. It is the same name with Joshua (who was a type of Him) which properly signifies 'The Lord, salvation.'" Yet again at v.23:



thus was He called Emmanuel, which was no common name of Christ, but points out His nature and office: as He is God incarnate, and dwells, by His Spirit, in the hearts of His people. It is observable, the words in Isaiah are, 'Thou' (namely, His mother) 'shalt call'; but here, *They*—that is, all His people, *shall call*—shall acknowledge Him to be Emmanuel, God with us. *Which being interpreted*—This is a clear proof that St. Matthew wrote his Gospel in Greek, and not in Hebrew.

For Wesley, Jesus is God incarnate. It is worth noting that the Christological statement is followed by an experiential statement - he dwells, by his Spirit, in the hearts of His people. And also worthy of note is the observation that "the words in Isaiah are Thou (namely his mother) shalt call, but here They, that is all his people...shall acknowledge him to be God with us." This is also a fact of experience for each believer.

If to the above is added the comment on v.25, referring to virginity of Mary, Wesley's Christological position is made clear at the very beginning of the New Testament as far as the text permits: Jesus is the anointed Saviour, promised in the Old Testament, born of a virgin; He is God incarnate, dwelling and ruling in His people. Other comments gleaned from notes on Matthew's Gospel, proclaim Jesus as Son of God (2:15; 3:2; 3:17; 4:1,4; 4:9; 12:49-50; 17:26;), as Lord (in the O.T. sense and therefore God, 3:3; 5:22) as God (9:3; 10:5; 25:9, 14; 28:18) as sinless (3:16) as Son of Man (3:2; 8:20).

Wesley has more to say about Christology in the notes on John's Gospel, because he considered St. John to have written in order to refute "those who denied His (Christ's) Godhead." At John 1:1 Wesley comments "When at length some began to doubt of His Godhead, then St. John expressly asserted it." This comment extends to 24 lines. It roots the term "word" firmly in the O.T. via the LXX. Jesus as the word, is "supreme, eternal, independent". But as a balance to that strong adjective, Wesley notes that the word rendered "with" denotes a perpetual tendency...of the Son to the Father, in unity of essence. Other Christological statements are to be found throughout the Notes on John's Gospel at 9 places (3:13; 5:19,23; 8:16;10:18, 30; 16:15; 20:17, and remarkable comment at 11:41), at four places in Colossians (1:15,17; 2:9; 3:16) a very long note, by Wesley's standards, on Hebrew 1:2-9.

The note at John 4:26 identifies the Word of John's Gospel with Messiah of Matthew's. Thus Jesus who is the fulfilment of prophecy in Matthew's Gospel, as the Word in John's, is "creator of all things" (1:3) and "foundation of life to every living thing and fountain of wisdom, holiness and happiness" (1:4) The Word "united himself to our miserable nature with all its innocent infirmities" (1:14) and through His whole life the glory of God was revealed (1:14) Jesus is God (John 8:24 Acts 7:59; Roms 9:5; Heb 3:4; 1 Cor.2:8) and Christians pray to Him "as well as to the Father through Him" (1 Cor. 1:2; 8:6).

The humanity of Jesus is also stated, especially at Phil. 2:7-8 - "a real man, like other men...a common man, without any peculiar excellence or comeliness". In the comment on the words "he dismissed His spirit" (Wesley's translation) in Matthew 27:50, he combines the divine and human natures of Christ. "He died by a voluntary act of His own, and in a way peculiar to Himself....dying....like the Prince of Life, and now enthroned in the glory of God the Father" (Phil.2:11).

#### Themes of the Notes

The notes about God would find acceptance by most Christians, at most points. But attention must be drawn to two aspects of Wesley's teaching about God, because these bear on the atonement, which will be considered in a moment.

For Wesley the wrath of God is very real. The note on Roms 5:9 makes it clear that he understood it of God in an analogical sense, but equally so is love attributable to God. Inasmuch as the love of God is real so is His wrath. But God is also love; the note on 1 John 4:8 is without an equal:

"God is love - This little sentence brought St. John more sweetness, even in the time he was writing it, than the whole world can bring. God is often styled holy, righteous, wise; but not holiness, righteousness or wisdom in the abstract, as He is said to be love: intimating that this is His..darling, His reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all His other perfections."

Within this "darling attribute," the righteousness of God is to be understood. It "includes both justice and

mercy and is eminently shown in condemning sin and yet justifying the sinner" (Roms 1:17). The comment on 1 John 1:9 takes this thought a stage further:

*Just—Surely then He will punish: no; for this very reason He will pardon. This may seem strange; but upon the evangelical principle of atonement and redemption it is undoubtedly true; because, when the debt is paid, or the purchase made, it is the part of equity to cancel the bond, and consign over the purchased possession. Both to forgive us our sins - To take away all the guilt of them. And to cleanse us from all unrighteousness—To purify our souls from every kind and every degree of it.*

It is the part of equity, justice, to cancel the bond, to forgive. Hence Wesley can interpret justified at Romans 3:24 as "pardoned and accepted", (and at other verses also).

The necessity of pardon arises from human sin. This is the next theme to be examined.

James 3:9 states that men (are) made after the likeness of God. Wesley notes: "Indeed they have now lost this likeness; yet there remains from thence an indelible nobleness which we ought to reverence both in ourselves and others."

This "indelible nobleness" is the reason why Wesley can read heathen or unbelieving authors and learn from them. This ability to recognise some remnant of God's likeness makes, by contrast, Wesley's account of sin all the more severe. The note on Luke 15:12 is as brief and as explosive as a bomb:

"Give me the part of goods that falleth to me - See the root of all sin - a desire of disposing of ourselves, of independency on God!"

And sin is our own fault, not the Devil's. On James 1:14, Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own desire - Wesley comments:

"In the beginning of the temptation...(he is) drawn out of God His strong refuge. By his own desire - We are therefore to look for the cause of every sin, in, not out of, ourselves. Even the injections of the Devil cannot hurt before we make them our own."

"All have sinned" (Roms3:23) and Wesley comments: "In Adam and in their own person; by a sinful nature, sinful tempers and sinful actions." Sin is a fact of life, as well as a theme of theology. Because "death has reigned over all" as Paul writes in Roms 5:12,14,19. Wesley concludes: that even infants who have "never

sinned in their own persons" are amongst those who "were constituted sinners." The old man which has been crucified with Christ is co-evil with our being and as old as the Fall (Rom 6:6). On Ephesians 2:1 Wesley says: (you are) "dead; absolutely devoid of life, and as incapable of quickening yourselves as persons literally dead." And again on the phrase of John "lieth in the wicked one" - "Void of life, void of sense. In this short expression the horrible state of the world is painted in the most lively colours." Such is "every man that hath not the Spirit." (1Cor2:14) "The corruption of human nature" notes Wesley at Gal.5:21., spreads through all the powers of the soul, as well as all the members of the body." Wesley's phrase for this condition is "entire depravity."

The condition of men and women and the response of God are made clear at John 3:3 -

3. *Jesus answered* --That knowledge will not avail thee, unless thou be born again - Otherwise thou canst not see, that is, experience and enjoy, either the inward or the glorious kingdom of God.

In this solemn discourse our Lord shows that no external profession, no ceremonial ordinances, or privileges of birth, could entitle any to the blessings of the Messiah's kingdom: that an entire change of heart, as well as of life, was necessary for that purpose; that this could only be wrought in man by the almighty power of God; that every man born into the world was by nature in a state of sin, condemnation, and misery; that the free mercy of God had given His Son to deliver them from it, and to raise them to a blessed immortality; that all mankind, Gentiles as well as Jews, might share in these benefits, procured by His being lifted up on the cross, and to be received by faith in Him; but that, if they rejected Him, their eternal, aggravated condemnation would be the certain consequence.

The note on Rom. 8:9 supplements this: "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ - dwelling and governing in him He is none of His - He is not...a Christian."

Salvation comes through Jesus (Matt.1:16,21) whom God set forth "a propitiation - to appease an offended God.. ..To declare His righteousness - To demonstrate not only His clemency but His justice; even that vindictive justice whose essential character and principal office is to punish sin." (Roms 3:25) And on the next verse Wesley comments: God has shown "his justice on His own Son." The death of Jesus shows God "to be strictly and inviolably righteous in the administration of His government, even while He is the merciful justifier of the sinner that believeth in Jesus. The attribute of justice must be preserved inviolate, and inviolate it is preserved, if there was a real infliction of punishment on our Saviour. On this plan all the attributes harmonise; every attribute

is glorified and not one superseded, no, not so much as clouded." Again, at 1 Peter 2:24 Jesus "bore our sins" - that is, the punishment due to them. At least ten other notes interpret the death of Jesus in the same language. The result of His death is explained at Col.1:14 "The voluntary passion of our Lord appeased the Father's wrath, obtained pardon and acceptance for us and consequently dissolved the dominion and power which Satan had over us through our sin. So that forgiveness is the beginning of redemption as the resurrection is the completion of it."

Three points should be borne in mind so that this explanation of the death of Jesus is not distorted. The first is implicit in the word voluntary (at Col.1:14) The same idea occurs at John 17:19: "I devote myself, as a victim, to be sacrificed" - so Wesley interprets the words of Jesus. Jesus is active in this matter of atonement. He endured His sufferings "in obedience to the will of His Father." (Heb 5:7) There are a dozen other notes to the same intent, especially John 12:27, "for His heart was fixed in choosing the will of His Father, " Jesus chose to die.

The second point to be borne in mind is that the result of Christ's death is interpreted in terms of forgiveness and acceptance, not in terms of law. In fact, the death of Jesus has put an end to the law, and ushered in the reign of grace. All are justified, for Wesley this means, all are "pardoned and accepted" (Rom. 3:24). Wesley has similar notes at eight other places (Titus 3:5; Rom. 3:30; 8:30; 1 Cor.6:11; Eph. 2:16; John 1:14; Rom 5:11; 2 Cor 8:12)

Lastly, Wesley regards love as God's "darling attribute, His reigning attribute!" Any attempt to understand his references to punishment and justice must be made in the light of that "darling attribute" and within the limits of that reigning attribute."

This supremacy of love is seen again in Wesley's comments about grace. At 1 Cor 8:9 it is "the most sincere, most free and most abundant love." And at Gal 2:21 it is "the free love of God in Christ Jesus." (Similarly at Eph. 2:5,8; also Roms 3:24). The supremacy of grace which is love, the "darling attribute" is described at Heb. 4:16 The Note reads:

"Let us therefore come boldly - Without any doubt or fear Unto the throne of God, our reconciled Father, even His throne of grace - Grace erected it, and reigns there and dispenses all blessings in a way of mere unmerited favour." (And similarly at Roms 5:21)

Grace is a motion drawing people to the Father (John 6:44) "all men under heaven, even those that despise His love and will for that cause finally perish." (John 3:16) There are similar comments at Acts 10:34 and 1 Tim 2:3. Some "finally perish" because grace though "strong and sweet" is "yet still resistible" (John 6:44) (Also Roms 8:19 and John 3:16) There are some who "thrust salvation from them." (Acts 13:48) And grace can be rejected even after it has been accepted. The note on 1 Cor 9:27 is a clear warning:

*I myself should become a reprobate* - Disapproved by the Judge, and so falling short of the prize. This single text may give us a just notion of the scriptural doctrine of election and reprobation; and clearly shows us, that particular persons are not in Holy Writ represented as elected absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, or predestinated absolutely and unconditionally to eternal death; but that believers in general are elected to enjoy the Christian privileges on earth; which if they abuse, those very elect persons will become reprobate. St. Paul was certainly an elect person, if ever there was one; and yet he declares it was possible he himself might become a reprobate. Nay, he actually would have become such, if he had not thus kept his body under, even though he had been so long an elect person, a Christian, and an apostle.

Wesley denies that Rom. 9 has anything to do with individuals. Jacob and Esau represent two groups of people - Jewish and Gentile. With regard to the phrase "as many as were ordained to eternal life" at Acts 13:48, Wesley notes that "St. Luke does not say foreordained." He is not speaking of what was done from eternity but of what was then done through the preaching of the Gospel. The note on Eph 1:5 where the Authorised Version reads "predestinated us" is remarkably similar to Wm. Barclay's translation of the passage in his Daily Study Bible.

Wesley believes that men and women respond to the offer of God in Jesus. But how can they do this if they are "dea, void of life" and entirely depraved? This is made possible by God's prevenient grace, the grace that comes to us before the act of salvation. The light shines in the darkness says John (1:5) and Wesley adds: "even on fallen man but dark sinful man perceives it not." The light shines in every man "by what is vulgarly called natural conscience." In a sermon on Conscience Wesley

expands this note; "properly speaking it is not natural but a supernatural gift of God above all His natural endowments No; it is not nature but the Son of God that is the 'true light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world.' So that we may say to every human creature "He, not nature, hath showed thee. O Man, what is good." (Williams pp.42-43)\*\*

Thus, at Romans 2:14 when the Gentiles do by nature the things contained in God's law they do it "by preventing grace." On the following verse Wesley proclaims that "the same hand which wrote the commandments on the tables of stone" wrote "the substance" in people's hearts. Wesley describes grace as "the inward power of the Holy Ghost." Thus prevenient grace is another expression for the work of the Holy Spirit as stated in John 16:8-9. He works in unbelievers to convince them of sin and thereby to present them with the choice of accepting or rejecting the righteousness which Christ offers. By His grace "alone we can come to the Father." (2 Cor. 13:13)

Wesley proclaimed himself "a man of one book" and begged - "O give me that book". (Preface to the sermons) In Scotland in 1766 he affirmed: "My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible bigot. I follow it in all things both great and small." (Journal Vol.5pp.169 for 5 June 1766) The Notes at various places make this abundantly clear. The Preface describes Scripture as "a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God." (Para 10). Paul writes to the Corinthians (2:13) "We speak not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit." Wesley adds "such are all the words of Scripture" And later "The apostles wrote nothing which was not divinely inspired." (1 Cor 7:15) Even when Paul says "I speak not after the Lord", Wesley interprets, "not by express command from Him though still under the direction of His Spirit."

As to the nature of inspiration, Wesley has a number of remarks to "assist serious persons..in understanding the New Testament." At John 19:24 - "They parted my garments among them," Wesley observes that there is nothing in the life of David to account for this

\*\* Colin Williams: John Wesley's Theology Today.

(Epworth Press, 1960)

(a quotation from Psalm 22:18) "so that in this scripture as in some others the prophet seems to have been thrown into a preternatural ecstasy, wherein, personating the Messiah, he barely spoke what the Spirit dictated." Wesley limits the idea of dictation to this and some other scriptures. He has no place for a general dictation theory of inspiration according to his next comment on Scripture at Acts 15:7. In the council of Jerusalem, the apostles and elders considered the problem; then Peter rose "after much debate." Wesley notes this phrase: "How really so ever they were inspired, we need not suppose their inspiration was always so instantaneous and express as to supersede any deliberation in their own minds or any consultation with each other." Thus, for Wesley inspiration works through human means - through inner reflection and group consultation.

Inspiration is not verbal. Concerning a quotation from the Old Testament, Wesley says: "The apostles did not always think it necessary exactly to transcribe the passages they cited but contented themselves with giving the general sense, though with some diversity of language."

Concerning the interpretation of Scripture, Wesley comments that our Lord did not turn the other cheek when He was smitten in the judgment scene, and thus the command to turn the other cheek is not to be taken literally (Notes: Matt.5:40-41). Similarly when our Lord commands the apostles - "You ought also to wash one another's feet" - Wesley asks: "And why did they not? - they knew He never designed that this should be taken literally." The meaning of the example and command must be found by the use of commonsense and reason and this is far more important than the literal application of the words.

Wesley recognises that there are inconsistencies in scripture, verses where literal truth cannot be sustained. The very first note addresses itself to this - the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew. "If there were any difficulties in this genealogy or that given by St. Luke...they would rather affect the Jewish tables than the credit of the evangelists; for they act only as historians... These accounts sufficiently answer the end for which they are recited...that Jesus was of the family from which the promised seed was to come." Wesley knows that the statement in the genealogy



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"Jehoram begat Uzziah", is not literally the case; he was his great-great-grandfather. Wesley interprets: "He begat him mediately as Christ is mediately the seed of David." Wesley uses reason to interpret Scriptures even though he has a very high regard for its inspiration, "a most precious system of Divine truth." The genealogy proved to the people of that time that Jesus was in the line of the Messiah, and this is its purpose. Inaccuracies of detail are unimportant; the list is sufficient for the purpose for which it was written.

Nevertheless, Wesley strives to interpret Scripture literally wherever possible. For example, he harmonises the various accounts of Peter's denial (Luke 22:56) and affirms that the beatitudes were given on two occasions, on a mountain in Matthew 5 and on a plain in Luke 6.

The Notes confirm the high regard for Scripture which Wesley shows in his other writings, links their interpretation to commonsense and reason; but limits the use of these two faculties to places where it is impossible to accept the literal meaning of the words or where examples in Scripture show that the literal application was not followed.

Despite this high regard for Scripture, or perhaps because of it, Wesley dares to change the Authorised Version - "revised by His Majesty's special command", and Wesley was a Royalist. The reason is given in the Preface; although he believes "the common English translation is the best", he is also sure that it can be brought nearer to the original; it was made from Greek copies "not always the most correct" and so Wesley makes "here and there a small alteration." (Preface para.4) For example, straight into his English text above the comments, Wesley inserts "happy" for "bless are the poor" in the beatitudes, and in 1 Cor.13, love for charity. The doxology of Jude reads in the text of the notes, "to the only God our Saviour," omitting the word "wise" of the A.V. Wesley knows there is something wrong at 1 John 5: 7-8, the verses about the three witnesses; he changes the order of these two verses in his Text. This is Wesley's idea

of a "small alteration." Again, the A.V. at Hebrews 4:8 reads "If Jesus had given them rest." Wesley corrects this and his text reads "If Joshua had given them rest" and thus it has appeared in English versions from the RV onwards. Wesley has altered the AV at 4000 places; some of these are simply the removal of archaic words e.g., "paralytic" for "palsy" of the AV; some involve the replacement of the AV word by a word Wesley considers more suitable, e.g., Jesus "sat at table" in Matthew's house, not "at meat," of the AV.; some depend on a correct understanding of the Greek, e.g. for "can add one cubit to his stature" Wesley has "can add to his age the smallest measure." Some of Wesley's alterations are not successful, e.g., Peter's appeal to Jesus to think again about going to Jerusalem to death becomes "Favour yourself Lord!" This is not the place to assess the value of Wesley's alterations; the purpose of these references to the alterations is to demonstrate Wesley's attitude to the Text. Wesley was certain of the inspiration of Scripture and its truth. But he will not be fooled by copyists' mistakes, or poor translation, or inadequate regard for the best manuscripts. He must find these and the true meaning of the Greek. Nor can he stop at literal interpretation when the text implies something deeper and wider.

#### The Value of the Notes in the late twentieth century

On this occasion let us address ourselves to the question; what can Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament teach Christians of differing traditions? (1) One of the peculiarities of the Notes is their origin. Wesley, logical and widely read as he was, evangelical and clear as he was concerning what he himself believed, leaned on others, sometimes heavily. Bengel was a Lutheran, an academic and for the last twelve years of his life, a government appointee. Heylyn was an Anglican, the Church which at the time of the writing of the Notes, had closed many of its doors to Wesley. He spent all his ministry in a city church, and was also chaplain to the Court. Both of these men were far removed from the form of ministry which Wesley established for himself and his preachers and far removed from the kind of people which Wesley's movement in general touched. Wesley was thankful for their commentaries. The other two sources, Doddridge and Guyse, were

dissenting ministers, opposed to the Church of England with which Wesley remained in communion to his death. They were also Calvinistic with which view Wesley disagreed strongly.

These sources of the Notes set us an example of accepting truth from others however different they may be from us. This conclusion is supported by the variety of the authors whose works Wesley edited for his Christian Library - early Fathers of the Church, mediaeval mystics, Puritan, Dissenting and also Established churchmen. The truth of God comes to us from many directions of the spiritual compass.

(2) Wesley's attitude to Scripture is instructive, even in the late twentieth century. High opinion as he had of the A.V., he sought the true Greek text. He dared to alter it on the basis of Manuscript evidence mostly provided by Bengel. How much more so today when discoveries of codices and papyri of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are numbered in thousands, and when discoveries of first century commercial and private documents reveal the everyday usage of the Greek words used in the New Testament. The Notes teach us to seek the original words used by God's servants, and the true meaning of these in their context.

(3) As for inspiration of the Scriptures, Wesley is certain that "in the language of the sacred writings God speaks...not as man but as God." (Preface para 12) Nevertheless, he does not jettison reason. "It is a fundamental principle with us" that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand and that all irrational religion is false religion." (Letters Vol.5p.384). When this is applied to a specific Biblical passage, it requires the twentieth century Christian to accept results of geology, biology, astronomy and physics, and allows him at the same time to say, for example, of Genesis 1-2, as Wesley says of Matthew 1, "these accounts sufficiently answer the end for which they are recited. They unquestionably prove the grand point in view" - in this case, that God created the universe, that man is the climax of His creation, made in God's image with responsibility for God's creation. The Bible is to be

understood from the point of view of its own purposes - namely, in Wesley's words, "God hath condescended to teach the way (to heaven). He hath written it down in a book." (Preface to the Sermons). Reason and religion to hand in hand.

(4) The Notes are on the New Testament; they are written on the whole of the NT. They do not omit parts which Wesley did not understand. The Notes, then, as a standard of a Church point to the completeness of teaching concerning the way to heaven. That way lies through the labyrinth of the human mind, the dangerous streets of the political city, the comfortable avenues of social life and the open spaces of the universe. The Bible seen in the light of God's supreme revelation of Himself in the Lord Jesus, has much to say on all aspects of human life.

For Methodists this respect for Scripture as applicable to all spheres of life is re-inforced by the variety of the Forty-four Standard Sermons. These range over matters of faith and of practice - from the New Birth to the Use of Money, and from Salvation by Faith to The Cure of Evil Speaking. The Notes as a standard remind us that the Word of God applies to every aspect of life.

(5) As a standard, the Notes on the N.T. point to the supreme importance of the New Testament of the Lord Jesus. As our Constitution says: "The Notes and the Sermons "are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Redemption." The record of this Gospel is in the N.T. which is thus of supreme importance. Wesley wrote the explanatory Notes " to assist people...in their thinking," not to do it for them. Our interpretation, even Wesley's interpretation, must not be equated with Scripture.

However, this insistence on the supremacy of Scripture is too simplistic an attitude towards doctrine to be left at this point. We are not automated trains on an automated railway system - stopping when the red light shows, proceeding cautiously when the yellow glows, and going ahead merrily when the green shines. The supremacy of Scripture is meaningless without an understanding of it.

However for Wesley Scripture is overwhelmingly clear at certain places, for example, the commandments of our Lord Jesus. To the words of Jesus to the questioner - "This do and thou shalt live" - Wesley adds: "He and he alone shall live forever, who thus loves God and his neighbour in this present life." If our differing understandings of Scripture cause us to part, and then to break this commandment, we are doomed.

One place at which Christians divide often, is the understanding of the Atonement. The Explanatory Notes on Rom. 3:24-26 are very clear as to what Wesley understood to be the meaning of the Atonement. God's justice was shown in this act. However disagreeable this may be to some Christians, a number of points which Wesley makes, if borne in mind, help to an acceptance of this interpretation.

(a) It must be understood in the light of God's love, "His darling, His reigning attribute" (1 John 4:8)

(b) "On this plan all the attributes harmonize...and not one superseded." (Roms 3:26) (c) At the death of Jesus, the judicial age finishes; the age of grace begins. Thus for Wesley, justified means "pardoned and accepted", not judicially acquitted.

(d) The use Wesley made of this interpretation is instructive of its place for him and for us. In the index of the Forty-Four Standard sermons, there is no entry of the words "wrath", "punishment" "substitution". The sermon on Salvation by Faith quotes phrases from Roms 3:25 and Col.2:14 but does not use the word wrath. The reason for this silence may be found in the Minutes of the Conference 1746. "Speaking much of the wrath of God and little of the love of God.... generally hardens them that believe not and discourages them that do."

Wesley acknowledges the truth of this view of the Atonement. Its place in the Notes indicates that preachers and serious students of the Bible should grapple with the truth contained therein. But its absence from the Standard Sermons and the Conference warning indicate that there are better roads along which to lead people to salvation. Perhaps such a view of the atonement can only be appreciated by those who have experienced salvation, for the Notes which contain this view, were to be used in the Society meetings.

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If this is a correct interpretation of the place of Wesley's understanding of the Atonement, in the Methodist movement, can it help us in other matters which divide Christians?

(6) Finally, the Notes were written for those who "desire to save their souls." They were written in the midst of an expanding evangelising and teaching movement - for the evangelists and for the evangelised. They set us a standard of interpreting Scripture, - namely, so to proclaim the message of God given in Christ that the hearers, in the words of Wesley's comment on the new birth, may "experience that great inward change by the spirit."

The Notes set us a standard of urgency. Every now and then the reader is directly addressed. The Markan account of the two great commandments closes with the words of Jesus: "Thou art not far from the Kingdom of God." Wesley continues: "Reader, art not thou? Then go on, be a real Christian; else it had been better for thee to have been afar off." (Mark 12:34)

*Note 1:*

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