

Giving the Arminian Babel a Shake:

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A Historical and Doctrinal Review of the Wesley-Toplady Controversy (1)

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears (II Tim. 4:3).

What's the Use of Preaching the Doctrines of Grace? An Introduction

In 1773, while the Americans defiantly tossed King George's tea into the harbour, two theological titans were already engaged in a more important war on English soil. Both were protestant clergymen in the Anglican church and intellectually gifted. Both were known for their hymn writing, sharp polemics, and lively preaching. The similarities end there. The one, John Wesley, was a sprightly 70-year-old preacher without a fixed charge, who traveled throughout the British Isles disseminating his Arminianism. The other, Augustus M. Toplady, was a sickly, young, Calvinist pastor of 32, who rarely left his country parish. Toplady opposed the burgeoning American revolution. Wesley, who at first opposed it, came to support it because it advanced his Methodist cause. Toplady was a committed churchman, who defended the apostolic faith developed through Augustine, Calvin, and embodied in the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England.¹ John Wesley, in his vigorous promotion of rank heresy within the church, stooped to forgery, lying, plagiarism, and slander.

Our purpose is not to document all the gross public sins of Mr. John Wesley. This could be done. It would even be worthwhile, if only to expose his highly touted perfectionism as a sham. Nor do we intend to prove the unorthodoxy of Wesley, because it is unnecessary. Unlike many timid Protestant theologians today, Wesley forthrightly acknowledged his allegiance to James Arminius. Wesley

¹We agree with the assessment of W. Winters (1872): "He was, in fine, a strenuous champion of Calvinistic theology—one of the Martin Luther type. Having inflexible enemies to withstand, he strove with them roughly. His nerves were like steel, his bow like iron; and the force of his pen has been compared to the weight of Hercules' club. However, like Calvin also, he was a polite scholar and complete gentleman, and his feelings were fine and delicate" (cited in George M. Ella, *Augustus Montague Toplady: A Debtor to Mercy Alone* [Durham: Go Publications, 2000], p. 35).

spoke of the Dutchman with fondness and even promoted his doctrine in a periodical aptly named *The Arminian Magazine*.² Wesley was equally frank concerning his abhorrence of Calvinism. Calvinism, he said, was “not the gospel,” but “the greatest hindrance to the work of God,” “the antidote to Methodism—the most deadly and successful enemy it ever had,” and the worst device “Satan threw in the way” for it “strikes at the root of salvation from sin.”³

If we would evaluate this theological battle according to present standards of evangelical success, Wesley won hands down. It ended with Toplady’s death at 37, his frail body battered by an intense schedule of pastoral labor, late-night study, prolific writing, and faithful preaching against the onslaught of Wesley. Wesley lived to be almost 90. His vast writings quickly became the *credo* of the Methodist churches formed soon after his death.⁴ Within 50 years of Wesley’s passing, the Methodist Episcopal Church was the largest denomination in America.⁵ The new holiness movement of Wesley eventually spawned the immensely popular charismatic churches.⁶ Concerning Wesley’s wide influence, Chris Armstrong of *Christianity Today* writes, “Methodists spread Wesley’s Arminian emphasis on the place of human will and responsibility in the religious life—touching and changing almost all other Protestant denominations in America ... Here, perhaps, are the roots of the modern American ‘megachurch.’”⁷ More than Armstrong may be aware, Wesley has influenced even his former enemies, the Calvinists, especially those who jealously eye the growing membership within the modern mega-church.

In two parts, we will briefly relate the history and doctrinal issues in the Wesley-Toplady controversy to demonstrate their continued relevance in the present Reformed ecumenical climate. Calvinists’ attitudes towards Arminianism have reversed since Toplady’s day. Then, influential Calvinists of every fla-

²This periodical was first published in 1788. Significantly, the first article is a biography on James Arminius, the second an extract from Brandt’s *History of the Reformation in the Low Countries*, highlighting the harsh treatment of Remonstrants at the Synod of Dordt. Later, the name of the periodical changed to *The Methodist Magazine*.

³John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, M.A., sometime fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford*, 14 Vols., 3rd ed. (London, 1872), Vol. 13, pp. 59 and 193; Vol. 10, p. 531; Vol. 8, pp. 346 and 395. Hereafter cited as Wesley, *Works*.

⁴Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., “Start the Presses,” *Christian History*, Issue 69 (Vol. XX, No. 1), 36.

⁵Tom Oden, “Weeds in the Garden,” *Christian History*, Issue 69 (Vol. XX, No. 1), 43.

⁶Stanley M. Burgess & Gary B. McGee, eds., *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 268.

⁷*How John Wesley Changed America*, <www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/2003/jun20.html>.

your presented a united front against Wesley. Today, attitudes range from sickening indifference to public sympathy for Wesley, including urgent pleas for evangelical cooperation with Arminians. Although some may wince at Wesley's bold rejection of predestination, or may criticize his wild notion of perfectionism, they are charmed by his supposed evangelistic success. Surely it is no coincidence that where this has occurred, the marrow of Wesley's theology has also been adopted, or viewed simply as an exegetical nuance of one gospel—God loves everyone and desires the salvation of all—and inconsequential for evangelism. While the ranks of Arminians swell to untold millions, most Calvinists now visualize only one enemy, the dreaded specter of hyper-calvinism, which, real or imagined, is blamed for the supposed evangelical failure of Calvinism. Meanwhile, the doctrine of grace defended by Toplady is branded “fanatical” and his manner of defense “unloving.” It now holds true for modern Calvinists what Toplady once attributed only to Arminians: “They ask, What's the use of preaching the doctrines of grace, even supposing them to be true? We respond, Who would wish to go upon thorns when his way may be strewed with roses?”⁸

PART 1—Encountering a Wind-mill in Lieu of a Giant: The History of the Controversy

Although the Wesley-Toplady dispute did not break out in print until 1769, both were well aware of their respective differences long before. Although Toplady's childhood diary exhibits extraordinary Christian piety and godly rearing, he claimed the Word of God was fixed in his conscience by a Methodist preacher at the age of sixteen.⁹ He also claimed that a mere two years later his “Arminian prejudices received an effectual shock.”¹⁰ He writes: “I well remember that in 1758 ... I first began to discern something of the absurdities and impieties of Arminianism ... I shall, when in heaven, remember [that year] with gratitude and joy.”¹¹ Ironically, 1758 was the same year Toplady and Wesley first corresponded. Toplady, forty-four years Wesley's junior and in Ireland completing his

⁸Augustus M. Toplady, *The Complete Works* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1987), p. 541; hereafter, *Works*

⁹“Memoirs of the Rev. Augustus Toplady,” *Works*, p. 2. Many writers refer to this incident as “his Methodist barn conversion.” Toplady never does. Many are unaware of Toplady's childhood diary, which evidences the work of grace in a young Toplady, no doubt due to what he calls his mother's “Christian graces and pious example.” This diary was published in the *Gospel Magazine*, No. 401, May, 1899, 343-354.

¹⁰“The Rev. Mr. Toplady's Dying Avowal of his Religious Sentiments,” *Works*, pp. 34-5.

¹¹“Letter to Ambrose Serle, Esq.,” *Works*, p. 850.

B.A., somehow become acquainted with the Methodist preacher. Later that year, Wesley would inquire into Toplady's future, hinting at a possible career as an itinerant preacher.¹² He would soon learn Toplady was far from considering Methodism, let alone preaching the circuit.

Contrary to common opinion, their controversy did not begin with Toplady's translation of Jerome Zanchius' *Absolute Predestination*. The trouble began two years before, when, in March of 1768, six students were expelled from Oxford, allegedly for not being proper gentlemen. The real reason was that they were Calvinists.¹³ Lady Huntingdon and others took their dismissal as an affront to Calvinism and a battle soon ensued over the theological roots of the church. When Sir Richard Hill defended the students, he was answered by an Anglican divine, Dr. Nowell, who had kept the minutes of the proceedings which expelled the students. In justifying Oxford's actions, Dr. Nowell foolishly claimed Arminianism to be the historical doctrine of the church. When Toplady, an avid student of church history, saw a copy of the tract he entered the fray with his first major publication, *The Church of England Vindicated From the Charge of Arminianism*.¹⁴ In it, he demonstrated that officially the church was indeed Calvinistic and no Arminian could in good conscience subscribe to the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. Incensed his church was attacked by one on her own payroll, Toplady exclaimed:

Good God! What shall we come to at last! A protestant; a protestant divine; a protestant divine of the Church of England; dares ... spatter the doctrines of the reformed church whose bread he eats and whose raiment he wears! ... I only as a protestant and as a churchman, feel a becoming indignation at this part of your conduct and indignation which candor warrants and justice demands.¹⁵

Although specifically answering Nowell, Toplady clearly had kept an eye on

¹²George Lawton, *Within the Rock of Ages: The Life & Word of A.M. Toplady* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1983), p. 29.

¹³See S. L. Ollard, *The Six Students of St. Edmund Hall, Expelled from the University of Oxford in 1768* (Mowbray: no publisher, 1911).

¹⁴Lawton describes Nowell's tract as being a red rag before a bull, the same metaphor with which J. C. Ryle censures Toplady in his *Great Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), a book that, ironically, includes a biography of Wesley and Ryle's conclusion that Wesley "preached the gospel, honored Christ, and did extensive good" (p. 86). With this assessment one recent biographer of Wesley agrees (see Iain Murray, *Wesley and the Men Who Followed* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003], p. 79).

¹⁵"The Church of England Vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism," *Works*, p. 610.

Wesley for some time. Wesley, he claimed in his tract, was “one of the most furious Arminians now living,” a view taken because five years earlier, Wesley had claimed the *Thirty-Nine Articles* did not teach predestination but only defined it.¹⁶ With his brief comment, therefore, Toplady correctly identified both the leading proponent of Arminianism in England and the main doctrinal issue in all future exchanges with Wesley, the doctrine of absolute predestination.

Full scale war broke out later that year (1769), when Toplady published his translation of Zanchius’ magisterial work, *Absolute Predestination*, to which he attached a short biography of Zanchius and a preface explaining his reason for publication.¹⁷ Shrewdly, Toplady recognized that Arminianism gained adherents because it appealed to the Pelagianism inherent in the depraved heart of every man. He also understood that, as he put it, “the Scripture doctrine of predestination lays the axe to the very root of this potent delusion,” namely, “the pride of impotent, degenerate man, who is so prone to consider himself as a being possessed of sovereign freedom, and invested with a power of self-salvation, able . . . to defeat the agency of Omnipotence itself.”¹⁸ Deftly wielding the axe himself, Toplady made two assertions: First, the Arminian rejection of predestination rested on one presupposition, namely, that reprobation was unbecoming a just and loving God, a charge Zanchius proved false;¹⁹ secondly, predestination could not be rejected without rejecting God, who could not be separated from the decrees. “God’s sovereign will is the first link,” he wrote, “his unalterable decree is the second, and his all-active providence the third in the great chain of causes.”²⁰ Thus, the Arminian dethroned providence and set up chance as god. “What is chance?,” he asked. “A name for nothing. Arminianism

¹⁶Wesley writes, “Is it therefore fair, is it honest, for any one to plead the Articles of our Church in defense of absolute predestination; seeing the Seventeenth Article barely defines the term, without either affirming or denying the thing . . .” (*Works*, p. 389).

¹⁷He actually had completed the translation nine years earlier, only one year after his conversion from Arminianism. Concerning the lengthy period in between translation and publication, he writes, “I literally fulfilled Horace’s direction: *Nonumque prematur in annum*” (Let it, i.e. anything you write, be suppressed until the ninth year).

¹⁸“The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination,” *Works*, p. 663.

¹⁹“The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination,” *Works*, p. 665. Jerome Zanchius (1516-90) was born in Italy and orphaned at fifteen. Raised a papist, he was converted under the preaching of Peter Martyr Vermigli, whom he followed into exile to Geneva. He held the chair of divinity at both Strasbourg (after Hedio), where he published his famed treatise on predestination, and at Heidelberg (after Ursinus). Richard A. Muller, who traces Zanchius’ theological developments, labels him “that great theorist of the divine attributes” (*Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], Vol. 3, p. 100).

²⁰“The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination,” *Works*, p. 667.

thor he committed forgery.²⁶

Unsatisfied with carefully and totally suppressing every proof alleged by Zanchius ... a false colouring must likewise be superinduced, by inserting a sentence or two now and then of your own foisting. After which you close the motley piece, with an entire paragraph, forged every word of it by yourself: and conclude all, as you began, with subjoining the initials of my name: to make the ignorant believe that the whole, with your omissions, additions, and alterations, actually came from me.—An instance of audacity and falsehood hardly to be paralleled ... a similar forgery would transmit the criminal to Virginia or Maryland, if not to Tyburn.²⁷

Wesley's tactics, Toplady charged, were also sinful—sinful because Wesley had not only stolen the work, but committed literary butchery.

Zanchius, if you chose to buy him, was yours to read; and if you thought yourself equal to the undertaking, was yours to answer: but he was not yours to mangle ... You ought not, with Ahab, to kill as well as take possession.²⁸

Such tactics Toplady abhorred, not so much out of personal concern, but for two principled reasons. First, he considered them bad form for battle, an indication of theological cowardice, the most despicable behaviour on any battle-ground, especially for a gospel preacher.

I shall have no objection (if life and health continue) to measuring swords, or breaking a pike with you. Controversy properly conducted is a friend to truth, and no enemy of benevolence. When the flint and the steel are in conflict some sparks may issue, which may both warm and enlighten.—But I have no notion of encountering a wind-mill in lieu of a giant. If, therefore, you come against

²⁶Those who censor Toplady for his brisk language against Wesley, usually overlook the fact that forgery was a capital offense at the time. In fact, Dr. William Dodd, with whom both Toplady and Wesley had correspondence, was hanged in 1777 for signing a document with his pupil's name (see Toplady's "Letter to Dr. William Dodd," *Works*, p. 874).

²⁷"A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 720-721.

²⁸"A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 723.

me (as now) with straws instead of artillery, and with chaff in the room of ammunition, I shall disdain to give you battle: I shall only laugh at you from the ramparts.²⁹

Secondly, Wesley's castrated citations were deliberately intended to make the gospel offensive. "Wrench the finest eye that ever shone in a lady's head from its socket," Toplady wrote, "and it will appear frightful and deformed."³⁰ Wesley had made predestination hideous by severing it from the beauty of God's perfections. It is not true, as Lawton asserts, that Toplady could have diffused such a situation with "ironical laughter."³¹ According to Toplady, Wesley made God look worse than sinners. "To say that any shall be saved, do what they will, and others damned, do what they can: is, in the first instance, blasphemy against the holiness of God, and in the second, blasphemy against his goodness."

In August 1771, Wesley fired more "chaff" at Toplady in a tract, *The Consequence Proved*.³² If Toplady was expecting Wesley to confess his transgressions, he would be sadly disappointed. Wesley not only remained unrepentant, but compounded his crime. This tract began where the first left off: "Mr. Toplady, a young, bold man, lately published a pamphlet, an extract from which was soon printed, concluding with these words: 'The sum of all this: One in twenty, suppose, of mankind are elected; nineteen in twenty are reprobated ...'" Again, Toplady never wrote or taught those words, nor did he ever publish such a pamphlet. Wesley knew it. In *The Consequence Proved*, he further implicated himself with almost comical reasoning. On the one hand, he maintained Toplady actually wrote "nineteen in twenty are damned, do what they can ..." On the other hand, the burden of his tract is to prove, that "this consequence does naturally and necessarily follow from the doctrine of absolute predestination." Apparently, he thought it necessary to prove what Toplady supposedly wrote with his own pen.

The Consequence Proved would be the last Wesley published directly against Toplady. Thereafter, he adopted a frustrating tactic Toplady referred to as "the silent sap," whereby he answered indirectly through two associates, whom Toplady

²⁹"A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 722.

³⁰"A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 723.

³¹Lawton, *Rock of Ages*, p. 101

³²Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 10, p. 439. Toplady chided Wesley for leaving three pages blank and charging the usual price for a 12-page tract, thus excessively profiting from his 30,000 followers who would probably have to buy it. "Poor Robin's Almanac, alas!, though twice as valuable, goes for half the price of 'The Consequence Proved'" (*Works*, p. 731).

belittled as “understrappers” or “pertlings.” One man was Walter Sellon.³³ After the Zanchius piece was published, Wesley advised Sellon (at the time writing against Elisha Coles): “Do not make too much haste in dealing with Elisha . . . And pray add a word or two to Mr. Toplady, not only in regard to *Zanchius*, but his slander on the Church of England.”³⁴ A few months later, convinced more must be done, Wesley urged Sellon to publish another pamphlet aimed specifically at Toplady.

Do not make too much haste. Give everything the last touch . . . I believe it will be the best way to bestow a distinct pamphlet on Mr. Toplady. Surely wisdom will die with him! I believe we can easily get his other tract, which it would be well to sift to the very foundation, in order to stop the mouth of that vain boaster.³⁵

Sellon would oblige, but largely by name-calling, among other things labeling Toplady as a malapert boy, hooter, dragon, venomous slanderer, papist, greatest bigot that ever existed, wild beast of impatience, and materialist.³⁶

The hand-picked champion of Wesley, however, was Thomas Olivers, a former cobbler who lived at the Foundry, the hub of Wesley’s operations next to the infamous Bedlam insane asylum. In *The Consequence Proved*, Wesley wrote: “I can only make a few strictures and leave the young man [Toplady] to be farther (*sic*) corrected by one that is full his match, Mr. Thomas Olivers.” But neither Olivers nor Sellon was any match for Toplady’s verbal, intellectual, and polemical skills. Furthermore, Toplady wanted battle only with the old fox himself. “The master does me an injury, by subjoining my name to what I never wrote . . . I publicly call the aggressor himself to account. The aggressor slinks behind one of his dredges [Olivers], who says, ‘Fight me in my master’s stead.’ I answer, No. *Ne sutor ultra crepidam* [He is nothing more than a cobbler wearing sandals].”³⁷

Toplady would publish five more pamphlets directed specifically at Wesley. In late 1771, he published the most important of the five, a work entitled *More Work for Mr. John Wesley*. It would be his most lengthy reply, over three times the

³³Sellon, an enthusiastic Arminian and former baker, was appointed schoolmaster at Kingswood by Wesley in 1748.

³⁴Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 13, p. 69.

³⁵Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 13, p. 70.

³⁶“Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England,” *Works*, p. 50.

³⁷“More Work for Mr. John Wesley: or A Vindication of the Decrees and Providence of God,” *Works*, p. 734.

size of his first publication. The center-piece of it was his assertion that Wesley's supposed consequence of predestination—that the elect shall be saved, do what they will: the reprobate shall be damned, do what they can—was an illusion. The biblical truth, Toplady argued, was that as a consequence of their own depravity the reprobate desire neither salvation nor holiness; conversely, the elect do not live wickedly simply because they know they are saved, since faith and sanctification are consequences of election.

The point of inquiry then is, Whether the elect themselves can be ultimately saved without being previously sanctified by inherent grace ... without evidencing that sanctification ... by walking in the way of God's commandments? ... I affirm with Scripture that they cannot be saved without sanctification and obedience ... that very decree of election by which they were nominated and ordained to eternal life, ordained their intermediated renewal after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness ... Sanctity, therefore, of heart and life is not barely a prelude to, but even a part and initiatory anticipation of the glory which shall be revealed. Election is always followed by regeneration and regeneration is the source of all good works ... Works are not the fountain of grace, but streams flowing from it. Election does not depend upon holiness, but holiness depends upon election. So far therefore is predestination from being subversive of good works, that predestination is the primary cause of all the good works, which have been and shall be wrought from the beginning to the end of time ... As I have elsewhere observed, they [the reprobate] trust in good works without doing them; while the peculiar people [the elect] do good works without trusting in them.³⁸

In 1775, Toplady would publish three more times, the first which was entitled *An Old Fox Tarred and Feathered*. It had nothing at all to do with predestination, but concerned the American Revolution and was prompted by another incident of Wesley's forgery. In it, he rebuked Wesley's treasonous support of the rebellion and documents 31 paragraphs Wesley lifted from Dr. Samuel Johnson's, *Taxation no Tyranny*, and had published as his own under the title, *A Calm Address to our American Colonies*.³⁹ The last two pamphlets Toplady published

³⁸"More Work for Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 735.

³⁹"An Old Fox Tarred and Feathered," *Works*, p. 762.

that year were released together. Both were more philosophical than theological, and written in response to a treatise in which Wesley argued against Jonathan Edwards while defending Thomas Reid. The first was entitled *The Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity Asserted*, and was closely related to Toplady's affirmation of predestination. The second, *A Dissertation Concerning the Sensible Qualities of Matter*, he penned as an afterthought because he felt Wesley's arguments on the subject were "weak and puerile." These would be Toplady's last publications against Wesley, excepting the letter he wrote on his death-bed, *The Rev. Mr. Toplady's Dying Avowal of his Religious Sentiments*.

The background of this final tract is worth recounting, if only to demonstrate Wesley's callous attitude toward the dying Toplady. By this time, Toplady's deteriorating health made it impossible for him to handle the extensive pastoral travel required in his parish of Broad Hembury. When he received permission to transfer his duties there, he left for London, where he remained until only months before his death, a stay of three years. During this time Toplady kept busy editing the *Gospel Magazine* and preaching to huge crowds of enthusiastic listeners—after April of 1776, from the elevated, three-tiered pulpit of the Huguenot Reformed Church on Orange Street. In the spring of 1778, Toplady preached his farewell sermon on Gen. 7:16, "... and the LORD shut him in." He was so feeble that Dr. Gifford and Rev. John Ryland had to help him climb the pulpit.

This, however, was not his last sermon. When the Wesleyan camp circulated the rumour that Toplady had renounced his Calvinism, he immediately wanted to preach again. When told he would probably die in the attempt, he remarked: "I would rather die in the harness than in the stall."⁴⁰ On June 14th, an astonished congregation watched the frail preacher being assisted to the pulpit one more time. Scarcely able to stand and hindered by laboured breathing, Toplady managed to preach on II Peter 1:13-4, "*Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me.*"

Knowing his earthly journey was near its end, Toplady returned to Broad Hembury to put his affairs in order. On Tuesday, August 11, 1778, at thirty-seven years of age, Toplady died. But Wesley refused to let him rest in peace. No sooner had Toplady's body cooled, than jubilant Wesleyan pulpits throughout the land proclaimed that Augustus M. Toplady, great troubler of Israel, had died blaspheming God and doubting his salvation. Respected sources claimed John Wesley was the origin of the evil lie. Writing in a widely circulated newspaper,

⁴⁰"The Rev. Mr. Toplady's Dying Avowal of his Religious Sentiments," *Works*, p. 34.

Richard Hill challenged Wesley to reveal his sources. When Wesley replied that Hill must first provide his own sources, Hill obliged. He not only gave ample evidence Wesley originated the rumor, but also presented testimony of Toplady's convictions, authenticated by thirteen signatures of those present when he died. Wesley never replied, except to remark to two of Toplady's friends one day, "Those that are for peace will let those things alone."⁴¹

Although it is certainly true that, as Iain Murray writes, "Augustus Toplady was particularly provoked," it is misleading to conclude, as does Murray, that Toplady "was to go so far as doubting whether Wesley was a Christian at all."⁴² First, this cannot be concluded from the sharp language that Toplady used, or even the many names he fired at him: lying sophister; bellwether of his deluded thousands; old fox; old plagiarist; and great ghost-raiser. Although they certainly describe Wesley more accurately than the belated accolades bestowed on him nowadays; although current standards of evangelical debate would rule them out; and although we may object to the wisdom of the method; nevertheless, it would be unfair to claim Toplady hated Wesley. Besides, Toplady himself denied such a conclusion.

To those who know me not, it may seem needful to declare that, much as I disapprove Mr. Wesley's distinguishing principles and the low cunning with which he circulates them, I still bear not the least ill-will to his person. As an individual, I wish him well, both here and ever ... If I anywhere, however, express myself strongly, it is owing to the necessity I was under of exposing Mr. Wesley's unmanly and dishonest methods of attack.⁴³

He would echo these words in a letter to John Ryland.

The envy, malice, and fury of Wesley's party are inconceivable. But, violently as they hate me, I dare not, I cannot, hate them in return. I have not so learned Christ.—They have my prayers and my best wishes for their present and eternal salvation. But their

⁴¹Ella, *Op. cit.*, p. 337.

⁴²Murray, *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁴³"More Work for Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 730. Ironically, Toplady appear before the Judge first. And apparently, Wesley viewed Toplady's premature death as divine judgment for he writes (Apr. 27, 1784): "Ministers have taken true pains to frighten the people from hearing us, by retailing all the ribaldry of Mr. Cudworth, Toplady, and Rowland Hill. But God has called one of them to his account already, and in a fearful manner" (*Wesley*, Vol. 4, p. 309).

errors have my opposition also: and this is the irremissible sin which those red-hot bigots know not how to forgive.⁴⁴

Nor can we conclude that simply because he urged Wesley to repent of his sins, he believed Wesley to be unsaved. Toplady was no Antinomian. He certainly believed Wesley to be guilty of gross public sin—the worst being promulgation of false doctrine. And as a good Calvinist, he seriously called him to repentance.

The hour must shortly come, which will transmit you to the tribunal of that God on whose sovereignty a great part of your life has been one continued assault. At that bar I too must hold up my hand. Omniscience can tell which of us shall first appear before the Judge of all. I shortly may, you shortly must. The part you have been permitted to act in the religious world will, sooner or later, sit heavy on your mind ... Depend upon it, a period will arrive when the Father's electing mercy, and the Messiah's adorable righteousness, will appear in your eyes, even in yours, to be the only safe anchorage for a dying sinner. I mean, unless you are actually given over to final obduration. Which I trust you are not and to which I most ardently beseech God you may never.⁴⁵

Even as preaching faith and repentance promiscuously never imply that the preacher believes his hearers to be damned, so also Toplady's words did not imply he believed Wesley an unbeliever. "I condemn no man," he wrote. "I dare not pronounce concerning any man's eternal state. Herein I judge not even Mr. Wesley himself: though I must tell him that if it be (as I most sincerely wish it may) the divine will to save him, he has an exceeding strait gate to pass through before he gets to heaven."⁴⁶ Again, this is nothing less than the attitude required by every gospel preacher. And is it not true that all have a straight gate to pass through?

Although Toplady wielded a rapier pen against Wesley, he refused—contrary to some present Calvinistic zealots—to rail on everyone who espoused Arminian teachings or variations thereof. Although he publicly condemned their doctrine,

⁴⁴"Letter to Mr. Ryland, April 30, 1773," *Works*, p. 840.

⁴⁵"More Work for Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 760.

⁴⁶"More Work for Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 732.

he recognized that some were simply ignorant, others confused. Many were willing to listen or conduct honest debate. Others, in which camp Toplady placed Wesley, are disgraceful hypocrites.

I speak not of all Arminians. Many there are, who, notwithstanding their entanglement in that net, stand entitled to the character of pious, moderate, respectable men. Of these I myself know more than a few and have the happiness to enjoy as much of their esteem, as they deservedly possess of mine. But I speak above of the noisy, factious, malevolent Arminians: restless bigots, whose false fire would shed disgrace on whatever party they might belong to. Who, not content with exercising their own right of private judgment, are for reviling and condemning every individual person who claims the same right of judging for himself and will not sacrifice his creed at their shrine.⁴⁷

We conclude with one anecdote, which must be told for it illustrates the above concerning Toplady's methods and attitude toward his Arminian opponents. This anecdote is the meeting with Wesley's personal champion, Tom Olivers. One day during the heart of the controversy, Toplady went out to call on an old friend. As he passed by the Foundry, he decided to purchase a copy of Wesley's latest. After paying for it, he was recognized by Mrs. Olivers, who immediately left to tell Tom he was there. While waiting, Toplady chatted and took out his snuff-box.⁴⁸ When one of Wesley's employees asked for a pinch, Toplady, who couldn't resist a poke at Wesley's legalism, asked, "Is it not against the law of this place for a believer to take snuff?" The man replied that he had a head-ache. Mrs. Olivers chimed in, "O sir, Mr. Wesley has no objection to people's taking snuff medicinally." Chuckling, Toplady replied, "I am glad you are allowed some latitude: I thought you were tied up by an absolute prohibition, without any loophole of exception."

Olivers, dressed in black, finally arrived. When announced, Toplady promptly greeted him: "What, my famous antagonist? Mr. Olivers, give me your hand: cudgel players shake hands, though they mean to break each others' heads." Olivers bowed and nodded his head. Toplady then asked if he might have 15 minutes to talk. Olivers replied, "With all my heart, sir: I shall be very glad."

⁴⁷"More Work for Mr. John Wesley," *Works*, p. 730.

⁴⁸Toplady's favorite snuff-box was decorated with a portrait of John Calvin.

With that they both proceeded upstairs, where they enjoyed a bottle of wine and conversed for several hours about their various pamphlets, differences of opinion, and of course, Wesley. Inevitably, the subject of free-will arose.

Toplady: “You hold, that men are absolutely independent on God, so far as relates to the management and actings of their own wills?”

Olivers: “I believe it firmly.”

Toplady: “You are honest and consistent: but I cannot call you orthodox ... absolute independent self-determination is an attribute truly and properly divine. If I thought you possessed of it, I should immediately fall down and worship ...”

Olivers: “If man has not free-will, to what end are exhortations?”

Toplady: “Among other useful ends, they are made instrumental, under the influence of God’s Spirit, to convince men that they have, by nature, neither will nor power to do what is good.”

Olivers: “I have many strong objections against that doctrine.”

Toplady: “... let me put one question to you, which a valuable friend, now with God, once put to me.—How was it with you when God first laid hold on you by effectual grace? Had you any hand in procuring it? Nay, would you not have resisted and baffled God’s Spirit, if he had left you to your will? ... What say you? Did you choose God, or did God choose you? Did he lay hold on you, or did you lay hold on him?”

Olivers: “I must own to you that, before my conversion, I was one of the most abandoned swearers and drunkards in England. I received my serious impressions from Mr. Whitefield ...”

Toplady: “Then it is very clear that your conversion, at least, was not conditional.”

Olivers: “I will not say that I procured grace of myself. Nor will I say how far I might have resisted it.”

Toplady: “I plainly perceive that you are not disposed to return a direct answer to my first question. But if you will not answer it to me, let me request you to take an early opportunity of answering it on your knees before God in prayer. Go to your closet, and pour out your heart in his presence, and beg him to shew you whether you were converted by free-will, or by free-grace alone.”

to be continued...

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