

Giving the Arminian Babel a Shake

Rev. Bill Langerak

An Historical and Doctrinal Review of the Wesley-Toplady Controversy (2)

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).

PART 2: The Gangrene of the Protestant Churches.

Earlier, we promised that we would “briefly relate the ... doctrinal issues in the Wesley-Toplady controversy to demonstrate their continued relevance in the present Reformed ecumenical climate.” Because the doctrinal and practical issues remain, this 18th century battle continues to be relevant. For one thing, it verifies what Dordt established long ago: Arminianism is a rebellious bastard child that despises its theological heritage. Also, it is a trumpet-blast that warns Calvinists to take seriously the threat of Arminianism within their ranks. This presence is real. As the late Presbyterian theologian, John Murray, once observed

A very cursory survey of present-day conditions in the church will disclose that fact [that Arminianism is not dead], for there are multitudes in the Protestant church who hold and avow the tenets given vogue by James Arminius. This is true whether they are aware of it or not ...¹

This presence continues to be a serious threat to Calvinism. Wesley worked within a confessionally Reformed church in the hope his Arminianism would “... leaven the whole church.”² Arminians continue to hold this hope. Yet, few Calvinists would agree anymore with Toplady, that “Arminianism ... is the gangrene of the Protestant Churches and the predominant evil of the day.”³ Instead, growing numbers press for tolerance under the flag of catholicity, and

¹John Murray, *Arminianism in the Pilgrimage of the Soul*, as found at www.graceonlinelibrary.org/calvinism/

²Wesley, *Works*, vol. 8, p. 318.

³Toplady, “A Caveat Against Unsound Doctrine,” *Works*, p. 312.

many of the doctrines of Wesley are taught as Reformed truth.

As demonstrated earlier, the main issue in the Wesley-Toplady controversy was absolute predestination. It was the main issue because John Wesley viciously attacked predestination even though his church's Reformed confession affirmed it. As noted earlier, he believed the *Thirty-Nine Articles* only mentioned the term. He also considered the Synod of Dordt's declarations on predestination to be based on ignorance and partiality.⁴ Although Wesley himself would use the term "predestination," he limited it to a divine foreknowledge that had no consequence for salvation. As he put it, "God, looking on all ages ... knows every one that does or does not believe, in every age or nation. Yet ... faith or unbelief is in nowise caused by his knowledge."⁵ This is the typical Arminian evasion.

His opponent, Augustus M. Toplady, loved predestination, especially as it was developed in the *Canons of Dordt*. He believed election to be

God's everlasting love ... his eternal, particular, most free, and immutable choice of [some men] in Christ Jesus, without the least respect to any work, or works, of righteousness, wrought, or to be wrought, or that ever should be wrought in them or by them ...⁶

In keeping with his infralapsarian viewpoint, he considered reprobation to be God's eternal decree to allow others to remain in sin. Toplady opposed Wesley primarily because he believed that any notion of salvation severed from a decretal source must be dependant upon the will of man for its realization. Thus, it was neither salvation nor grace, but pure idolatry.

My business now is with those who endeavour to save appearances by admitting the word [election], while in reality they anathematize the thing. These profess to hold an election: but then it is a conditional one ... It proceeds on a supposition that ... the resolutions of God's will are absolutely dependent on the will of his creatures ... What is this but atheism in a mask?⁷

⁴Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 427. Among other things, he said the Synod of Dordt was "not so numerous or learned, but full as impartial (*sic*) as the Synod of Trent." See also *Works*, vol. 1, p. 357, where he says that it was nearly allied with the Synod of Trent in the purity of doctrine which each established and the spirit in which each was conducted.

⁵Wesley, *Works*, vol. 6, p. 256.

⁶Toplady, "An Account of the Life and Writings of the Author," *Works*, p. 35.

⁷Toplady, "A Caveat Against Unsound Doctrine," *Works*, p. 312.

Wesley's attack of God's predestinating decree was rooted in pure hatred. "I abhor the doctrine of predestination," he declared.⁸ There were two main reasons that Wesley abhorred the doctrine—reasons that are familiar to those who continue to know the *Canons of Dordt*. First, he considered it a blasphemous notion that made God the author of sin, hypocritical in the gospel call, and unjust in the distribution of salvation.⁹ Furthermore, it implied that God coerced men contrary to their wills. In his words, "The elect were saved, do what they will: The reprobate damned, do what they can." Secondly, he hated predestination because he believed it made evangelism impossible. "If predestination be so," he said, "then is all preaching vain."¹⁰ Even if it were true, he thought predestination should not be preached because it was divisive. "Convince me that it is my duty to preach on controverted subjects, predestination in particular, and I will do it. At present I think it would be a sin ... it would create still more divisions."¹¹ And he thought predestination should not be preached because it was a breeding ground for Antinomism. "Absolute predestination," he said, "naturally leads to the chambers of death ... [because the hearer will say] I may safely sin a little longer, for my salvation cannot fail."¹²

Because it remains a common tactic today, it is worth noting that Wesley assailed predestination by focusing upon what he called "the cloven hoof" of reprobation.¹³ Shrewdly, Wesley knew that election and reprobation stand or fall together, and that reprobation was the weak link because it was naturally offensive. "If, for the sake of election, you will swallow reprobation, well. But if you cannot digest this, you must necessarily give up unconditional election."¹⁴ He knew reprobation was difficult to stomach because it could not be reconciled with the common perception of God's goodness and mercy. "Ill does election which implies reprobation agree with the Scripture account of God's justice ... [And] how is God good or loving to a reprobate? ... He is, in truth and reality, only fattening the ox for the slaughter ..."¹⁵

Contrary to Iain Murray's assertion that Wesley "preached the gospel and

⁸Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, p. 426.

⁹Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 426.

¹⁰Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, p. 418.

¹¹Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 425.

¹²Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 303.

¹³Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 246.

¹⁴Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 270.

¹⁵Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, pp. 266-269.

honoured Christ,” Wesley’s hatred of predestination exposed him as an enemy of the Reformed faith—a man who placed the free-will of man above the glory of Christ.¹⁶ As John Murray noted some time ago:

Everyone who denies unconditional election denies an aspect of truth that is of the essence of Reformed doctrine ... every failure to recognize and appreciate the absolute sovereignty of God in His saving grace is an expression of the pride of the human heart ... In its ultimate elements it means that the determining factor in salvation is what man himself does, and that is tantamount to saying ... it is not God who saves but man saves himself.¹⁷

Wesley’s objections to predestination were not original. Pelagius raised them against Augustine, and Pighius against Calvin. The *Canons of Dordt*, which Toplady so loved, note that these same calumnies were raised by the Remonstrants. Dordt attributes the source of this hatred of predestination to unbelief:

Satan abhors it; the world ridicules it; the ignorant and hypocrite abuse, and heretics oppose it; but the spouse of Christ hath always most tenderly loved and constantly defended it as an inestimable treasure (*Canons of Dordt* 5.15).

There was one more notable reason Wesley abhorred predestination: it directly contradicted his most cherished belief, namely, that God loved and sincerely desired the salvation of all men. In fact, this was his main objection to predestination. Contrary to the wildly popular opinion among professedly Reformed men today, Wesley knew it was utterly impossible that God both desired to save all men and did not desire to save all men. Furthermore, he knew it was ridiculous to preach such a thing. Besides being hypocritical, it is a contradiction that even the Almighty can not resolve. Toplady would have agreed. Many today who claim to be Reformed do not agree. Valiantly, but foolishly, they try to hold both—with devastating consequences.

Significantly, Wesley’s doctrine that “God willeth all men to be saved,” was no secondary doctrine, but fundamental to his Arminian theology, a claim he made in the very first issue of his magazine.

¹⁶Iain Murray, *Wesley and Men who Followed*, p. 79.

¹⁷John Murray, *The Reformed Faith and Arminianism*, as found at www.graceonlinelibrary.org/calvinism/.

In *The Arminian Magazine* a very different opinion [from absolute predestination] will be defended in a very different manner. We maintain that “God willeth all men to be saved” ... Our design is to publish some of the most remarkable tracts on the universal love of God and his willingness to save all men from all sin which have been wrote in this and the last century.¹⁸

Wesley did not claim the purpose of his journal was to defend conditional election, resistible grace, a general atonement, or the falling away of the saints—doctrines usually considered ear-marks of Arminianism. For Wesley, the *raison d’etre* of Arminianism was its belief that “God willeth all men to be saved.” It was the heart that beat life into all the rest of its theology, for it was the very gospel message it preached. “Who is the Gospel preacher?” Wesley asked.

Promise-mongers [his epithet for predestinarians] are no Gospel preachers ... He, and he alone [although Wesley also ordained women] ... that does declare the whole counsel of God ... This honorable title is therefore vilely prostituted when it is given to any but those who testify “that God willeth all men to be saved”¹⁹

In a twist of irony only the devil could fully appreciate, most Reformed now say, “Amen. Mr. Wesley.” Preaching of the whole counsel of God has now become preaching that “God willeth all men to be saved.” This gospel message has become the *sine qua non* of Calvinism. And predestination, if it is believed at all, is stripped from the gospel and relegated to seminary classrooms or hospital beds. As one enthusiastic proponent of this gospel wrote:

... not ... every point of so-called Calvinistic belief is equally vital to the prosecution of evangelism and the conversion of sinners. Belief in predestination, for example, will comfort Christians but it is not a prerequisite for evangelism. Nor is preaching on the extent of the atonement essential for evangelism; evangelism calls men to come to Christ not because they have been saved but so that they may be saved. The seeking soul is not, after all, to be presented with systems of theology.²⁰

¹⁸*The Arminian Magazine*, vol. 1, 1778, p. iv.

¹⁹Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, pp. 539-540.

²⁰Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), p. 363.

At the same time, many Reformed wonder why their leaders seek ecumenical ties with Arminians. They seem mystified that the fundamentals of Calvinism—limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance, and justification by faith alone—are being challenged or rejected in their midst, especially as regards the covenant. Strangely, few question whether this rampant apostasy is related to their insistence, an insistence shared with Wesley, that the gospel message is that “God willeth all men to be saved.” But if this is their gospel, the heart of Arminianism beats in their breast. As Toplady will demonstrate, its blood cannot nourish their Calvinistic limbs. Gangrene will set in, transforming a lively body into a putrid mass.

Wesley claimed his doctrine that “God willeth all men to be saved” was thoroughly biblical. Not surprisingly, he used the same texts as Pelagius, Pighius, Arminius, and modern proponents of the free offer.

Why are not all men saved? Not because of any decree of God; not because it is his pleasure they should die; for “As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth” (Eze. 18:3, 32) ... it cannot be his will if the oracles of God are true; for they declare, “He is not willing that any should perish ...” (II Peter 3:9).²¹

This was also the gospel he claimed Jesus sincerely preached.

To say [Christ] was not willing that all men should be saved, is to represent him as a mere hypocrite and dissembler ... To say then, he did not intend to save all sinners, is to represent him as a gross deceiver of the people ... This is the blasphemy clearly contained in the horrible decree of predestination! And here I fix my foot.²²

Significantly, Wesley based his doctrine of an unlimited atonement upon the notion that “God willeth all men to be saved.” He, of course, worked this out in the context of a semi-Pelagian notion of God’s justice. According to him, the justice of God would not allow anyone to be condemned only for the imputed sin of Adam.²³ God’s justice also demanded that everyone be given the possibility of salvation—which is why the atonement must likewise be intended for all

²¹Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, p. 423.

²²Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, pp. 424-425.

²³Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 263.

men. “You [Calvinists] say Christ did not die for these men. But if so, there is an impossibility ... that they should ever savingly believe.”²⁴ Wesley therefore concluded, correctly, that if all men were to be extended the possibility of salvation in the gospel offer, then the cross must be as comprehensive as God’s intentions—a doctrine he felt verified by Scripture.

To tear up the very roots of reprobation and of all doctrines that have a necessary connection therewith, God declares in his word these three things ... 1) Christ died for all ... 2) He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world ... 3) He died for all that they should not live unto themselves.²⁵

Wesley also realized that his doctrine “that God willeth all men to be saved” had significant implications for the covenant. He realized that the blood Christ shed was covenant blood and that the gospel conveys covenant promises. Many modern Calvinists will find Wesley’s notion of the covenant familiar—especially among those who concur with his gospel: The covenant is a bi-lateral agreement that God established unilaterally by promising certain blessings to men upon the fulfillment of conditions, notably faith and repentance.²⁶ In other words, he taught a conditional covenant. Much like the Reformed who hold to a similar covenant today, Wesley saw no absurdity in saying that faith and repentance are both the blessings promised in the covenant, and conditions that God demanded in order to receive the promised blessings.

The gospel is both a revelation of grace and mercy, and a proposal of a covenant of terms and conditions ... Repentance and faith are privileges and free gifts. But this does not hinder their being conditions too ... It is therefore no contradiction to say, “We are justified freely by grace, and yet upon certain terms or conditions” ... For we are not accepted, nor are we qualified for, or capable of, acceptance without repentance and faith.²⁷

However, Wesley—like the Reformed who hold to a conditional covenant—was sensitive that this conditional notion of faith in the covenant implied salva-

²⁴Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 264.

²⁵Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 266.

²⁶Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, pp. 228-231, 280; vol. 6, pp. 280-282.

²⁷Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, pp. 368-369.

tion by works, which he knew the Reformation soundly rejected. To deflect the charge that “condition” implied salvation by works or merit, he employed a number of arguments. First, he noted that certain Reformed fathers used the term “condition.” Secondly, he insisted that due to the depravity of man, faith was a *necessary means* in order to appropriate salvation—which he knew was the meaning of the term “condition” when the Reformed happened to use it.

Repentance and faith are privileges and free gifts. But this does not hinder their being conditions too. And neither Mr. Calvin himself, nor any of our Reformers, made any scruple of calling them so ... Can then God give that freely, which he does not give but upon certain terms and conditions? Doubtless he can; as one may freely give you a sum of money, on condition you stretch out your hand to receive it. It is therefore no contradiction to say, “We are justified freely by grace, and yet upon certain terms or conditions.”²⁸

Thirdly, as stated above, Wesley insisted that faith was always a gracious gift of God. Wesley was quite proud of his affinity with the Calvinists in this regard.

Wherein may we come to the very edge of Calvinism? 1) In ascribing all good to the free grace of God. 2) In denying all natural free-will, and all power antecedent to grace. And, 3) In excluding all merit from man; even for what he has or does by the grace of God.²⁹

Despite this valiant attempt to explain “conditions” in an orthodox sense, Wesley taught salvation by works because both the reception and continuance of faith were completely dependant upon the will of man. It was the logical result of the fact that he had severed every grace of salvation from an absolute decree of God, notably, because it ran counter to his belief that “God willeth all men to be saved.” Much the same thing is done today, especially in covenant theology. In the covenant, we are told, God promises every baptized member that God wills to save them on condition of faith. Yet, because membership in the covenant is not determined by the predestinating will of God, the blessings of the covenant are not determined by the predestinating will of God. Thus, the reception and

²⁸Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 368.

²⁹Wesley, *Works*, vol. 8, p. 324.

continuance of faith are determined not by the will of God, but by the will of man. This is salvation by works.

Resistible grace is the smoking gun. Wesley admitted that because he severed salvation from an absolute decree of God, every grace was resistible, i.e. dependent upon the will of man. According to him, faith and all consequent blessings it receives, were forms of resistible grace that God offered to all men alike, to be accepted or rejected at their pleasure, or taken away by God due to sin.

Is faith the condition of justification? Yes ... Are works necessary to the continuance of faith? Without doubt; for a man may forfeit the free gift of God, either by sins of omission or commission ... Is faith the condition or instrument of sanctification? It is both.³⁰

Significantly, this notion of conditional, resistible grace, severed from any decretal source, led Wesley to deny justification by faith alone.

We have received it as a maxim that “a man is to do nothing in order to justification (sic).” Nothing can be more false ... Is not this salvation by works? ... Not by the merit of works, but by works as a condition.³¹

Alas, this also is now being taught in Reformed churches on the same basis, that God in the covenant “wills all men to be saved.” Yet, the pundits tell us there is no connection.

The first gift of resistible grace was prevenient (or preventing) grace, a term Wesley borrowed from the Puritans.³² Prevenient grace was not the only grace Wesley said was resistible; rather, because it continues to be a necessary component of all who share Wesley’s notion of the gospel. According to Wesley, prevenient grace was given by the Spirit and common to all men.

³⁰Wesley, *Works*, vol. 8, pp. 310-314.

³¹Wesley, *Works*, vol. 8, p. 397.

³²Wesley demonstrates an astounding knowledge of Puritan writers, which he loved for their emphasis upon the experiential aspect of salvation. Of the theological writings he published in his massive, 50-volume work, *The Christian Library*, over half are Puritan, which he edited not only for clarity and brevity (something often lacking in the Puritans), but also to fit them within his own theological paradigm. It is also noteworthy that Wesley was quite fond of Richard Baxter and John Goodwin, who, as one writer observed, “freed [justification] from the straightjacket of rigid Calvinism” (Robert C. Monk, *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966], p. 78).

There is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, preventing grace. Every man has a greater or less measure of this ... everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray ...³³

Although Wesley insisted that prevenient grace was not saving grace, salvation depended upon it. Therefore, prevenient grace had the same amazing power as saving grace. “The preventing grace of God, which is common to all, is sufficient to bring us to Christ.”³⁴ It drew men to Christ, by accompanying the preaching of the gospel, so that dead, unregenerated sinners are able to understand and accept the conditional gospel offers that are proposed.

At first curiosity brings many hearers: At the same time God draws many by his preventing grace to hear his word, and comforts them in hearing ... He now offers grace to all that hear; most of whom are in some measure afflicted, and more or less moved, with approbation of what they hear, desire to please God, and goodwill to his messenger.³⁵

This grace was resistible. For all men received it through the preaching, it enabled them to react positively to the gospel, yet could fail to save them.

In fact, no grace that Wesley taught was saving grace. Although he insisted there were saving graces, none could actually do so, because all were resistible by the will of the sinner. Perseverance, therefore, was as doubtful as any of Wesley’s proposed graces. Again, Wesley was honest enough to admit this. Although the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of his own church affirmed perseverance, Wesley claimed no one could be certain of their salvation. There could be no perseverance of salvation in general. “If the oracles of God are true, one who was purchased by the blood of Christ may go thither (to hell) ... one who was sanctified by the blood of Christ may nevertheless go to hell ...”³⁶ Nor, he asserted, could there even be perseverance within the covenant—the promises of God be damned.

³³Wesley, *Works*, vol. 6, p. 565.

³⁴Wesley, *Works*, vol. 8, p. 440.

³⁵Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, p. 424.

³⁶Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, pp. 354-355.

“Is not the faithfulness of God engaged to keep all that now believe from falling away?” I cannot say that ... One who is endued with the faith that purifies the heart, that produces a good conscience, may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly ... “But how then is God faithful?” I answer, In fulfilling every promise which he hath made, to all to whom it is made, all who fulfill the condition of that promise ... unless you fulfill the condition, you cannot attain the promise ... God is the Father of them that believe, so long as they believe ... those who live by faith in the Son of God; those who are sanctified by the blood of the covenant, may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly.³⁷

Alas, this doctrine too, is now being taught within Reformed churches. And Wesley teaches us why. Will the Reformed of the 21st century listen?

Even though he was a member of a Reformed church, Wesley placed the highest priority upon the doctrine that “God willeth all men to be saved,” with significant implications. Wesley would do practically anything to defend this doctrine. He would lie, plagiarize, and slander. He would maintain logical contradictions. He would sacrifice any biblical truth or the comfort of the believer. He was willing to dishonour the Triune God. With straight face he could say, “Christ died not only for those that are saved, but also for them that perish.”³⁸ Likewise, he could strip the Father of his decrees, and the Spirit of his effectual grace. What mattered most to John Wesley? That “the God of love is willing to save all the souls that he has made ... But he will not force them to accept it; he leaves them in the hands of their own counsel.”³⁹ Note well: When the counsel of God does not determine salvation, the counsel of man determines it. There are no other alternatives (to be continued ...).

³⁷Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, pp. 286-291.

³⁸Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, p. 423.

³⁹Wesley, *Works*, vol. 7, p. 355