

**GRACE AND ELECTION IN THE THEOLOGY OF
JOHN WESLEY AND T. F. TORRANCE**

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Abstract: *The theme of grace is an important one in the theology of John Wesley and in the theology of T. F. Torrance. Since most readers of Participatio are likely to be less familiar with Wesley, we shall begin by looking at two contemporary studies of his thought which highlight the theme of grace, and then look back into the Arminian tradition in which he professed to stand. That will then allow us to look at the more specific characterization of Wesley as an evangelical Arminian (as opposed to other kinds), and we shall then in conclusion compare and contrast his doctrines of grace and election with those of T. F. Torrance.*

Grace: The Theme of Wesley's Theology

Two major works on the theology of John Wesley published in recent decades highlight his understanding of grace. Randy L. Maddox entitled his work on Wesley, *Responsible Grace*.¹ For Wesley, he argued, the aim of theology was a practical one. It was not the refining of an elaborate system of Christian truth claims, but "nurturing and shaping the worldview that frames the temperament and practice of believers' lives in the world."² What gives consistency to a theological tradition, Maddox argues, is not an unchanging doctrinal summary, nor a theoretical idea

¹ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 1994).

² Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (1994), 17.

from which all truth is deduced, but a “basic orienting perspective or metaphor.” For Maddox, Wesley’s “orienting concern” was “to preserve the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity,” that,

Without God’s grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God’s grace *will not* save.³

Maddox called this “responsible grace” by which he implied two things. First, it was grace that makes human response possible, but also, secondly, that the grace of God required the human response which it enabled. His book presents the argument that this orienting concern gives coherence to Wesley’s thought over the three phases of his ministry (the “early,” “middle,” and “late” Wesley) despite the tendency of some to present a “Protestant” Wesley and of others a more “Catholic” Wesley. He portrays Wesley as more influenced by what he calls the “therapeutic” view of grace in the Eastern Fathers than the “juridical” emphasis of Western Christianity.⁴

Kenneth J. Collins presented a somewhat different view in *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*.⁵ He agreed in describing Wesley as a practical theologian, whose thinking is not characterized by a grand systematic principle, but by “what Outler has called an axial theme.”⁶ Wesley’s sophistication was to be seen in the way he held a diversity of truths in tension and it was therefore misleading to view him through the lens of one theological tradition – “Calvinism for Cell, Lutheran Pietism for Hildebrandt, Puritanism for Rupp, and the

³ Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (1994), 19.

⁴ See my critique of that polarization in Thomas A. Noble, “East and West in the Theology of John Wesley,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 85.2 & 3 (2002), 70-87.

⁵ Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

⁶ Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (2007), 3. The reference is to Albert Outler, who largely initiated the mid-century rediscovery of Wesley as a theologian.

Eastern Fathers for Maddox.⁷ Rather he should be understood as a “conjunctive theologian” who preferred the “both/and” to the “either/or.” But while that was the “style” of his theology, what was more methodologically significant was his “axial theme.” Outler had suggested that for Wesley that was grace. Maddox refined this to “responsible grace.” But Collins argues that Wesley’s axial theme was the conjunction of “holiness and grace.”

Within that conjunction Collins sees two further conjunctions. First, the element of holiness was itself a tension or conjunction between holiness and love. Holiness could not be reduced merely to love in Wesley’s thought (as argued by some). Rather “holy love” involved “a conjunction between the ideas of separation for the sake of purity and communion for the sake of love.” This was particularized in a subsidiary conjunction between law and grace, for while salvation was by grace, this could quickly dissolve into antinomian licence unless it were held in tension with the continuing role of the law. Secondly, the other half of the axial theme, grace, was also a conjunction or tension between free grace and co-operant grace. Those who saw Wesley only within the Arminian tradition emphasized the element of co-operant grace so that salvation results from the synergism of God and the believer. But in Wesley’s thought, this was only half of the picture. He also contends for the role of “free grace.” Collins concludes: “Consequently, more accurate readings of Wesley’s theology suggest that a synergistic paradigm, which contains both divine and human acting, must itself be caught up in an *even larger conjunction* in which the Protestant emphasis on the sole activity of God, apart from all human working, is *equally* factored in.”⁸

It is clear from both of these analyses of Wesley’s thought that grace was an important theme, but also that his understanding of the grace of God was within the context of the debate which had been raging since the Reformation on the doctrine of election. It will help to grasp Wesley’s theological perspective therefore

⁷ Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (2007) 4, referring to George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt), 1935; Franz Hildebrandt, *From Luther to Wesley* (London: Lutterworth, 1951); Ernest Gordon Rupp, *Methodism in Relation to the Protestant Tradition* (London: Epworth Press, 1954; and Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (1994).

⁸ Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (2007), 12-13: italics original.

if we briefly review his heritage in what came to be called the “Arminian” tradition in order to distinguish it from scholastic federal Calvinism.

The Arminians

Wesley was not directly influenced by the writings of Jacob Harmensoon (1560-1609), the Dutch theologian whose Latinized name was Jacobus Arminius.⁹ The “Arminian” tradition in the Church of England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to which Wesley belonged, traced its origins back not to Arminius, but to contemporaries of Arminius in the Elizabethan church who rejected the new doctrines which were coming from Geneva. These came with the exiles from the Marian persecution who returned to be appointed bishops by Queen Elizabeth. In the seventeenth century (particularly after the Synod of Dort, 1619) the group opposing the new doctrines included Archbishop Laud, bishops Lancelot Andrewes, Jeremy Taylor, and Thomas Ken, and clergymen such as George Herbert. They became known as “Arminians” because of their rejection of the new “federal” Calvinism favoured by most (though not all) Puritans.

The Dutch “Arminian” tradition similarly had its origins in the original adherents of the Reformation who resisted the new doctrines coming from Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Jerome Zanchius (1516-1590), and others of the generation after Calvin. The spokesman for these Dutch lay people and pastors was James Arminius, pastor in Amsterdam, and then professor at Leiden.¹⁰ Like others in this post-Reformation generation, Arminius adopted the notion of a series of decrees and covenants unknown to Calvin, but he resisted particularly the supralapsarian view that God had decreed first the salvation of the elect (and the rejection of the reprobate) before or “above” (supra) the decrees to create the world and the decree of the fall (lapsus). Not long before his untimely death he formulated his own version of the decrees in his Declaration of Sentiments, an

⁹ In English he came to be known as James Arminius.

¹⁰ For the classic biography, see Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971). See also Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

address given to the States of Holland at the Hague in October, 1608.¹¹ Rejecting the supralapsarian scheme of double predestination of elect and reprobate as contrary to Scripture and the Fathers, repugnant to the nature of God, dishonourable to Christ, and hostile to the ministry of the gospel,¹² Arminius proposed his own version of the decrees, beginning with Christ:

The first specific and absolute divine decree regarding the salvation of sinful humanity: God decreed to appoint his Son, Jesus Christ, as Mediator, Redeemer, Savior, Priest, and King in order that he might destroy sin by his own death, so that by his own obedience he might obtain salvation lost through disobedience, and by his power communicate this salvation.¹³

For Arminius, election began with Christ. The second decree was “to accept those who repent and believe in Christ, and for Christ’s sake and through him to effect the final salvation of penitents and believers who persevere to the end in their faith.” Simultaneously, God decreed “to leave in sin under divine wrath impenitent persons and unbelievers.” The third divine decree was to institute “the necessary means for repentance and faith.” The fourth was “to save and damn certain particular persons”:

This decree has its foundation in the divine foreknowledge through which God has known from all eternity those individuals who through the established means of his prevenient grace would come to faith and believe, and through his subsequent sustaining grace would persevere in the faith.

¹¹ See W. Stephen Gunter, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments: An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012). For the older translation see *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols (London: Longman et al, 1825), Vol. 1, 516-668. My copy of the three volumes of the Nichols edition of Arminius’ *Works* was given to me by T. F. Torrance from his own library.

¹² These are the most theologically significant of twenty objections to double predestination.

¹³ The translations are from Gunter, *Arminius* (2012), 135.

PARTICIPATIO

Following the death of Arminius in 1609, his followers drew up the Remonstrance of 1610, setting out their view that election to salvation was consequent upon God's foreknowledge of whether any one person would believe. In view of the doctrine of original sin asserting the "total depravity" of humankind since the fall, prevenient grace was required to give the freedom to believe.¹⁴ But notably, the Remonstrance shows that *the Christ-centred shape of Arminius's doctrine had already been lost*, and although their view was that election was consequent upon God's foreknowledge, it is worth noting that their *system was still one of double predestination*. As Arminius had said in his fourth decree, God pre-ordained each individual to salvation or damnation depending on his foreknowledge of their free response made possible by grace.

It was in response to the Remonstrants that, after their advocates in the Dutch state were defeated in the civil war with the triumph of the Prince of Orange, the Synod of Dort was called to establish the official doctrine of the church on election and predestination. The Synod formulated their doctrine in the famous five points which generations of students memorized according to the mnemonic, "Tulip": total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints.

The development of the tight logic of this system can be traced back historically to Augustine's twin doctrines of grace and original sin. It was in reaction to Pelagius's doctrine of free will that Augustine insisted on the priority of grace. Such was the nature of humanity's fallen condition in original sin that only God's grace could free or heal the will in such a way that the individual would believe (*voluntas praeparatur a deo*). But of course if the will was genuinely healed, then it would necessarily exercise its freedom to believe! That implied that, since not all believed, God must have chosen to give this saving grace preveniently to those who

¹⁴ See Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 189-92.

did.¹⁵ Calvin drew the conclusion that that implied *double* predestination. God had not only passed over those he did not choose, but by doing so, he in fact actively reprobated them to damnation.¹⁶ It was the generation after Calvin, including Beza, Zanchius, and others, who set out clearly the further conclusion in this logical development, the doctrine of “particular redemption” or “limited atonement,” that Christ only died for the elect. The key to the whole logical development of the system was the concept of grace as an influence or force from God acting internally within the individual.

The Dutch Arminians or Remonstrants were banned after the Synod but eventually tolerated and allowed to establish a theological college in Amsterdam with Simon Episcopius (1583-1643) as its first professor of theology. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), the jurist who laid the foundations for international law, was their most influential intellect, but in the eighteenth century, under the leadership of Philipp van Limborch (1633-1712), the friend of John Locke, the tradition became deeply influenced by the thought of the Enlightenment. A distinction therefore has to be made between the “classical Arminianism” of Arminius himself and later developments.¹⁷ In England, the Puritan John Goodwin (1594-1665) was unusual in taking an Arminian position, and Richard Baxter was so appalled by the pastoral results of Calvinist preaching as a chaplain in Cromwell’s army that he rejected the antinomianism which seemed to him to be the consequence of the Calvinist system and tried to balance the virtues of the Calvinist and Arminian doctrines.¹⁸ The “holy living school” (as it is known) in the Church of England laid great emphasis on

¹⁵ This aspect of Augustine’s theology is developed in the Anti-Pelagian writings most easily accessible in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 4*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974). For a brief introduction see J. Patout Burns, “Grace,” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Alan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 391-98; also Mathijs Lamberigts, “Predestination,” *idem*, 677-79.

¹⁶ *Institutes*, III, xxi, 5; III, xxiii, 1-14.

¹⁷ See the older history by A. W. Harrison, *Arminianism* (London: Duckworth, 1937) and more recent works such as Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

¹⁸ For Wesley’s publication of extracts from Baxter and Goodwin, see Herbert Boyd McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley’s Evangelical Arminianism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 161-166 and 231-34. I am indebted in this section to my colleague, Herbert McGonigle, for his exhaustive study of Wesley’s Arminianism.

Christian holiness, and it was that strain of Arminianism which shaped the theology and piety of John Wesley's parents, Samuel and Susanna Wesley. But after the Revolution of 1688, a new generation of "Arminian" bishops such as Burnet, Stillingfleet and Tillotson became associated with Latitudinarianism and the moralism of Deism and were regarded by Puritans and Nonjurors alike as semi-Pelagians and Socinians.

The Development of Wesley's Arminianism

The brief sketch we have just drawn of Arminianism in the seventeenth century is the necessary background to John Wesley's context in the eighteenth century, and particularly to understanding his doctrines of grace and election. We will trace briefly the development of his thinking on this through several controversies through the decade of his ministry from 1738 to his death in 1791.¹⁹

In the "great awakening" or evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, the Methodist leaders included both the "Arminians" John and Charles Wesley and the leaders of "Calvinistic Methodism," George Whitefield and Howell Harris of Wales.²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, heir to the Calvinist Puritan tradition, was the leading figure in the earlier revivals in New England and possibly the greatest theologian of the century.²¹ Whereas Puritan New England was uniformly in the Calvinist tradition at this point, in England a division emerged into open controversy right from the beginning of the revival movement, which is usually dated to Wesley's conversion at the meeting in Aldersgate Street in the old city of London on 24th May, 1738.

The first controversy began in 1739 when Whitefield (who had been a member of the "Holy Club" at Oxford, led by the Wesleys) invited John Wesley to take his place "field preaching" for the first time in Bristol while he went to New England. Wesley discovered a strong strain of Calvinism among Whitefield's Bristol

¹⁹ For the definitive biography of Wesley (also a history of early Methodism) see Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

²⁰ See Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (eds), *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²¹ See Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Methodists, and trenchantly denounced it in his provocative sermon, "Free Grace."²² What repelled him was the doctrine of the decree of reprobation: that God had created a certain portion of the human race in order to damn them. In the sermon he declared that the grace of God which brings salvation is "free in all" (not dependent on any previous "good work"), and "free for all" (not for only a select portion of humankind). In the course of the subsequent debate, it appears that his mother, Susanna Wesley, wrote anonymously to defend him, but in doing so denied that he was an "Arminian," a denial which has to be seen in the context that Arminianism was associated with Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism.²³

The controversy stirred up in 1739 continued for several years. Wesley published extracts from the moderate Calvinist, Isaac Watts, who argued that Calvin taught that Christ died for all, and from the Quaker, Robert Barclay. He was opposed by Whitefield himself, and his assistant, John Cennick. In 1741, after reading Episcopius, Wesley published *A Dialogue between a Predestinarian and His Friend*.²⁴ Herbert Boyd McGonigle summarizes his purpose in this tract as "to show the deterministic nature of Calvinism and in particular the corollary he believed inevitable to this, viz. that God is the author of sin."²⁵ He finished by defining positively what he meant by election and reprobation:

First, God did decree from the beginning to elect or choose (in Christ) all that should believe to salvation. And this decree proceeds from his own goodness, and is not built upon any goodness in the creature. Secondly, God did from the beginning decree to reprobate all who should obstinately and finally continue in unbelief.²⁶

²² Sermon 110, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 542-63. See also the context and analysis in McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 107-119.

²³ The twenty-six page pamphlet, *A Letter from a Gentlewoman to Her Friend*, was almost certainly written by Susanna Wesley. See McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 127-8.

²⁴ *Works*, Vol. 13, *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, eds Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 227-38.

²⁵ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 137.

²⁶ *Works*, Vol. 13, 238.

PARTICIPATIO

This is the equivalent of the second decree of Arminius, and it includes both election and reprobation, but Arminius's fourth decree, to save and damn particular persons, does not appear here. It did appear however in a tract extracted from the writings of Henry Haggar, a seventeenth-century Baptist, and published by Wesley the same year. It included the words:

God from the foundation of the world foreknew all men's believing or not believing: and according to this his foreknowledge, he chose or elected all obedient believers, as such, to salvation; and refused or reprobated all disobedient unbelievers, as such, to damnation.²⁷

The same tract goes on to assert that Christ died for all, and refutes the objection that this doctrine implies that we are saved because of the exercise of our free will. Wesley rejects that:

We believe that in the moment Adam fell, he had no freedom of will left; but that God, when of his own free grace he gave the promise of a Saviour to him and his posterity, graciously restored to mankind a liberty and power to accept the proffered salvation.²⁸

Wesley was beginning to articulate his own version of what the whole Augustinian tradition called *gratia praeveniens*, prevenient grace. It was a gift of the *freedom*, not a compulsion, to believe. And it was given to all from Adam onwards.

Herbert McGonigle concludes that Wesley's position was not directly derived from Arminius or the Dutch Arminians. Although he had read Hugo Grotius in 1725, some extracts from Arminius himself in 1731, and Episcopius in 1741,

There is no evidence that these writings were important in formulating his theological convictions. Instead the entire evidence points to Wesley's anti-Calvinism stemming from the influence of his Epworth upbringing, his wide reading at Oxford between 1725 and 1735, especially in the Anglican theologians, and more latterly the congenial

²⁷ Quoted in McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 141, referencing J. Wesley, *A Preservative Against Unsettled Notions in Religions by the Rev. John Wesley* (London, 1839), 181, originally published in 1758.

²⁸ Quoted in McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 142.

rebuttals of reprobation and the “horrible decree” he found in writers like Isaac Watts, Robert Barclay, and Henry Hagger.²⁹

In 1743, Wesley tried to modify his views to come as close as possible to his Calvinist allies.³⁰ He acknowledged that there was a scriptural basis for unconditional election and that grace was irresistible at the moment it brings salvation to the soul (though not before or after that point). He was prepared to say that there was “a state attainable in this life from which a man cannot finally fall.” We can see here that he was trying to find common ground on three of the “five points.” There were no concessions however on the extent of the Atonement, and no need to discuss original sin or “total depravity” since they largely agreed on that. That *eirenicon* was as close as Wesley ever came to a rapprochement.

The next year, Wesley held his first annual conference with four sympathetic clergymen. They did not discuss election and predestination, but agreed that faith, preceded by repentance, was the “condition” of justification.. The following year, 1745, the conference revisited this question and debated whether repentance and works as well as faith were conditions of justification. The problem, as McGonigle comments, was with the word, “condition.”³¹

Wesley had just published extracts from Richard Baxter’s *Aphorismes of Justification* in which Baxter was reacting against *Free Grace*, a book written by John Saltmarsh arguing that, for the elect, salvation is not even conditioned on faith. Baxter came to the conclusion that the kind of Calvinism he had earlier espoused encouraged antinomianism and he developed the doctrine that we must distinguish between first justification and final justification. The first was by faith, but the second was on condition of good works as well as faith. In Wesley’s apologetic work published the same year, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, he set out quotations from the liturgy, articles, and homilies and concluded that the doctrine of the Church of England was “that no good work, properly so called can go *before* justification”; “that as the *meritorious cause* of

²⁹ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 146.

³⁰ See McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 153-56.

³¹ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 161.

justification is the life and death of Christ, so the *condition* of it is faith, faith alone"; and "that inward and outward holiness are consequent on this faith, and are the ordinary stated condition of final justification."³²

The *Minutes* of Wesley's conference of 1745 strove to come as close as possible to the Calvinistic Methodists. The question, "Wherein may we come to the very edge of Calvinism?" received a threefold answer. First, they ascribed all good to the grace of God, thus rejecting any Pelagian notion of salvation by works. Secondly, they denied all natural free will: only the grace of God enabled us to make moral and spiritual choices. Thirdly, no merit is acquired from any good work.³³ In 1746, Wesley published a sermon, *The Righteousness of Faith*, which emphasized *sola fide* so strongly as to verge on language he had criticized as antinomian.³⁴

There the dispute between "Wesleyan" and "Calvinistic" Methodists rested from some years, but it was renewed in a second round of controversy when Wesley published *Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints* in 1751.³⁵ Seeing the Calvinist doctrine as an invitation to antinomian licence, he presented a fully biblical, exegetical argument for a doctrine of conditional perseverance. True faith must produce holy obedience. A reply defending the Calvinist doctrine came the next year from the Baptist minister, John Gill, and Wesley responded to that with a booklet of eight-three pages, *Predestination Calmly Considered*.³⁶ Faced with an uncompromising supralapsarian, there was a hardening in tone.³⁷ No matter how hard Calvinists tried to avoid it, the decree of unconditional election inevitably implied the unconditional reprobation of a portion of the human race.

Wesley outlined positively the doctrine of election which he saw in Scripture. There was the election of specific people (such as Cyrus) to complete specific tasks,

³² Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 11, ed. Gerald R. Cragg (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 115.

³³ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 168.

³⁴ *Works*, Vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 200-16.

³⁵ *Works*, Vol. 13, 239-57.

³⁶ *Works*, Vol. 13, 258-320.

³⁷ See McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace*, 186-98.

and that election was absolute and unconditional. But election to salvation was conditional. Any doctrine of unconditional election necessarily implied unconditional reprobation.³⁸

Wesley addressed the fear of the Calvinists that letting go the doctrine of unconditional election will open the door to Pelagianism and “free will,” but asserted that he does not go even so far as the Westminster Confession in his doctrine of natural free will:

I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which ‘enlightens every man that cometh into the world.’³⁹

McGonigle comments that this is an indication of Wesley’s progressive development of his doctrine of prevenient grace, “a key element in his *ordo salutis* by which he sought to subscribe to a near-Augustinian understanding of original sin, yet deny unconditional election on the one hand and universalism on the other.”⁴⁰

The controversy continued with a dispute about *Theron and Aspasio*. Written by a former member of the Oxford “Holy Club,” James Hervey, and published in 1755, this was a series of nine dialogues and twelve letters between Theron, a gentleman with scientific interests and broadly deistic views and Aspasio, a gentleman who espoused biblical Christianity. Although Wesley thought highly of it, Hervey was offended at his criticism of his doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Wesley affirmed the doctrine,⁴¹ but at the same time he was critical of the way it was used by antinomians to excuse sin. In a letter to James Hervey, he advised: “. . . do not dispute for that *particular phrase*: ‘The imputed righteousness of Christ.’ It is not scriptural: it is not necessary . . . But it has done immense hurt.” He had “abundant proof” that instead of “furthering men’s progress in vital holiness” it has made them “satisfied with no holiness at all; yea, and encouraged

³⁸ *Works*, Vol. 13, 268-69.

³⁹ *Works*, vol. 13, 287.

⁴⁰ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace*, 193.

⁴¹ See his later affirmation of it in a later sermon of 1765, “The Lord our Righteousness,” *Works*, Vol. 1, 444-65.

them to work all uncleanness with greediness."⁴² A year later, Wesley further explained his views in *A Letter to a Gentleman at Bristol*, in which he distinguished between initial and final justification, and criticized talk of the imputed righteousness of Christ which was made a cover for sin and "a blasphemous Antinomianism."⁴³ Hervey died in 1758, but his *Eleven Letters* to John Wesley were published posthumously in 1765 and Wesley responded with *A Treatise on Justification*, including extracts from the Arminian Puritan, John Goodwin.⁴⁴

A third bout of controversy began with the publication of the *Minutes* of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference of 1770 at which the concern had been to emphasize the importance of good works.⁴⁵ This arose out of Wesley's increasing concern with the danger of antinomianism, but the minutes were so loosely worded that Wesley appeared to be endorsing some form of Pelagianism. The main contestants on the Calvinist side in this third phase of the controversy were Montague Augustus Toplady, vicar in Devon, and famous as the writer of "Rock of Ages," along with the Shropshire squire, Sir Richard Hill, and his brother, Rowland Hill. Toplady restated the predestinarian position of Jerome Zanchius. Wesley's views were defended by John Fletcher, the Swiss clergyman who was vicar of Madeley in Shropshire. Fletcher's contribution was his seven short treatises, *Checks to Antinomianism*, published from 1771 to 1775.⁴⁶

Wesley himself played a lesser role, but for the first time he identified himself as an "Arminian" in a little work of 1770, *Question. 'What is an Arminian?'* *Answered by a Lover of Free Grace*.⁴⁷ "To say, 'This man is an Arminian,'" he began, "has the same effect on many hearers as to say 'This is a mad dog'. It puts them in a fright." Some even confuse "Arminian" and "Arian." He asserts that Arminians do

⁴² *Works*, Vol. 13, 323-24: see Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (2007), 174ff. on Wesley's doctrine of imputation.

⁴³ *Works*, Vol. 13, 359-66.

⁴⁴ McGonigle (2001), 235f.

⁴⁵ See Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast* (1989), 454-57, and McGonigle (2001), 267f.

⁴⁶ John Fletcher, *Five Checks to Antinomianism*, ed. Jeffrey I. Wallace (Brookfield, MO: Apprehending Truth Publishers, 2011).

⁴⁷ *Works*, Vol. 13, 404-09.

not deny either original sin or justification by faith, but they do deny absolute predestination, irresistible grace, and affirm that a believer may fall from grace. Wesley did not reply to the vitriolic writing of Toplady, but in 1774 published *Thoughts upon Necessity*, replying to the claims of philosophic determinism which he attributed to Manichaeans, Stoics, and his contemporary, the Enlightenment philosopher, Lord Kames.⁴⁸ He found determinism too in the Westminster Confession and Jonathan Edwards. In 1776, he published a sermon "On Predestination" on Romans 8:29 and 30. He denied that these verses present a chain of cause and effect. The statement, "Them he did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son," he understands to refer to all who believe in Christ. This is by virtue of God's irreversible decree: "He that believeth shall be saved: he that believeth not shall be damned."⁴⁹ In 1778, Wesley fully adopted the term, "Arminian" when he launched the *Arminian Magazine*, which he edited until his death in 1791.

Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism: Summary and Assessment

From this brief synopsis of the development of Wesley's Arminianism over six decades of ministry, we may sum up his doctrine in the following points. First, it is clear that he was motivated by his horror at the doctrine of God which resulted from the scheme of scholastic "high" Calvinism. His initial response in the sermon of 1739, "Free Grace" could hardly express more trenchantly his opposition to the doctrine of double predestination, and particularly the supralapsarian doctrine that God created creatures in order to damn them:

This is the blasphemy clearly contained in 'the horrible decree' of predestination. And here I fix my foot. . . . You say you will 'prove it by Scripture.' Hold! What will you prove by Scripture? That God is worse than the devil? It cannot be. Whatever Scripture proves, it never can prove this. . . . No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Works*, Vol. 13, 526-46.

⁴⁹ *Works*, Vol. 2, 413-21.

⁵⁰ *Works*, Vol. 3, 556.

Wesley reflected here the theology of his mother, in a letter of 1725, where she appears to be referring to the doctrine that God preordained the fall:

The doctrine of predestination, as maintained by the rigid Calvinists, is very shocking, and ought to be utterly abhorred; because it directly charges the most holy God with being the author of sin.⁵¹

Secondly, it is clear that Wesley was motivated like Richard Baxter by the fear of antinomianism. Here we are reminded of Randy Maddox's point that, for Wesley, theology was not merely the refining of an elaborate system of Christian truth claims, but "nurturing and shaping the worldview that frames the temperament and practice of believers' lives in the world."⁵² This was not merely a theoretical concern, but a concern arising from his own wide pastoral experience of the consequence of the rigid predestinarian doctrine. His concern was to be repeated in the next century by the pastoral concern of John McLeod Campbell at the fatalism of his parishioners.⁵³

Thirdly, the key to Wesley's doctrine of election is his doctrine of grace, and particularly of *gratia praeveniens*, prevenient grace. The phrase goes back to Augustine and the doctrine was an essential part of his response to Pelagianism. Original sin and prevenient grace implied each other. Only the concept of grace healing the will (*voluntas praeparatur a deo*) could rule out the notion that we were saved by the exercise of our own naturally free will. Wesley agreed in rejecting Pelagianism and the notion that we were saved by the exercise of our naturally free will.⁵⁴ He took the view of the Arminian tradition that, as Augustine insisted, we are saved by grace alone (*sola gratia*). But the grace of God did not compel us to believe: it *enabled* us by restoring that freedom.

⁵¹ *Works*, Vol. 25, ed. Frank Baker, 179.

⁵² Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (1994), 17.

⁵³ See the Introduction by James B. Torrance in J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁵⁴ Confusion has been caused by those who have argued for natural free will but have erroneously and falsely claimed to be "Arminians."

But we must note the limitations of Wesley's doctrine. We cannot blame him for being a thinker of the eighteenth century still caught in the debates of the seventeenth century. But like the whole Arminian tradition, his doctrine still reflected the logical shape of the supralapsarian Calvinism it was opposing. Like all the theologians of his day, and indeed like the whole Augustinian tradition, he thought of grace and election, and hence predestination, in individualistic terms. Whereas the Synod of Dort affirmed their belief in the absolute unconditional double predestination of the elect to salvation and the reprobate to damnation, the Remonstrants affirmed *conditional* predestination. Election depended on the faith of the believer, but since this was foreknown by God, both the elect and reprobate were predestined from eternity to salvation or damnation. In this they followed the fourth decree set out by Arminius, but this (as we noted) is also a system of *double predestination*, although it has to be said that that fourth decree is rather muted in Wesley's presentation.

Wesley did however affirm Arminius's second decree more clearly: the decree to accept those who would believe, and reject those who would not. This was his understanding of the vital role of faith: *sola fide* implied that faith was a *condition* of salvation. In Sermon 43, he addresses the question how we are justified by faith:

I answer, faith is the condition, and the only condition of salvation. It is the condition: none is justified but he that believes; without faith no man is justified. And it is the only condition; this alone is sufficient for justification.⁵⁵

He qualifies that a little by saying that faith alone is "immediately" necessary to salvation, but that the fruits of repentance are also necessary "if there be time and opportunity for them." But when he speaks of faith as the "condition" of justification, he does not mean that faith *merits* justification. The death of Christ is the only *meritorious cause* of salvation:

By affirming that this faith is the term or *condition* of justification, I mean, first, that there is no justification without it. . . . As 'there is no other name given under heaven than that of Jesus of Nazareth,' no

⁵⁵ Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Works*, Vol. 2, 162.

other merit whereby a condemned sinner can ever be saved from the guilt of sin, so there is not other way of obtaining a share in his merit than 'by faith in his name.'⁵⁶

That raises the question whether this is a system of conditional grace, which would surely be a contradiction in terms. At this point Wesley employs the medieval scholastic view of "graces" revived by the post-Reformation Protestant scholastics. Preaching on the text, "Work out your own salvation" (Phil. 2:12), he sketches his view of the *ordo salutis*:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) 'preventing grace,' including the first wish to please God . . . Salvation is carried on by 'convincing grace,' usually in Scripture termed 'repentance,' which brings a large measure of self-knowledge . . . Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation, whereby 'through grace' we 'are saved by faith,' consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification.⁵⁷

The picture then is of a series of "graces." Elsewhere, Wesley denotes conscience as not a natural ability, but due to the prevenient grace of God.⁵⁸ Here he also attributes conviction of sin or repentance to prevenient grace. That is followed by the grace by which we are saved, effecting both justification and sanctification. This scholastic motion of a series of "graces" is highly artificial, but Wesley's point could be made without that. His point is simply that at every point, God in his gracious generosity is at work in us, drawing us so that we are without excuse, but never compelling us, to respond in faith.

⁵⁶ Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith," *Works*, Vol. 1, 195.

⁵⁷ Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," *Works*, Vol. 3, 203f. "Preventing," which has since changed its meaning, means the same here as "prevenient."

⁵⁸ See Collins, *Theology of John Wesley* (2007), referring to *Thoughts upon Necessity* (1774), *Works*, Vol. 13, 526-46, and Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" (1765), *Works*, Vol. 2, 153-69, and 156; also Sermon 105, "On Conscience," (1788), *Works*, Vol. 3, 479-490.

An Evangelical Calvinist

If John Wesley may be designated an *evangelical* Arminian, to distinguish him from the later Remonstrants, the Latitudinarians and other Pelagians and semi-Pelagians who have claimed the designation, then it is surely appropriate to designate T. F. Torrance as “an evangelical Calvinist.”⁵⁹ The implication is that he is to be seen within the tradition he himself traced in Scottish theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell in distinction from the scholastic federal Calvinist tradition.⁶⁰ It is a claim to follow in the footsteps of Calvin, but not of Beza, Zanchius, and the tradition of Dort and Westminster. Yet it is not simply a continuation and repetition of that tradition, for Torrance represents a great leap forward, which we can only indicate briefly under the following points.

First, Torrance wants to define grace carefully as “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” His published doctoral thesis documents the way in which the Pauline and New Testament understanding of grace had been largely lost already in the writings of the generation after the apostles, the so-called “Apostolic Fathers.”⁶¹ Again and again, they failed to grasp the centrality of Christ and the cross, and understood the Christian life only in terms of repentance and obedience. Instead of linking grace primarily with Christ as in the New Testament, they tended to link grace with a sub-personal language about the Holy Spirit, thought of apart from Christ as a kind of pneumatic power (*dynamis*). “At first it was thought of as a saving influence or effluence, but then its connexion with salvation become severed and it was regarded as pneumatic and divinising power, and at times was more or less hypostasized and made into a distinct divine or supernatural entity.”⁶²

⁵⁹ With reference to Myk Habets and Bobby Grow (eds), *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012).

⁶⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996).

⁶¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1948).

⁶² Torrance, *Grace*, 140f.

This tendency to hypostasize grace into a divine force or energy was further advanced in later centuries in the Augustinian theology of the West.⁶³ J. Patout Burns sees the theme of grace as central to Augustine, but it is conceived in terms of the Neoplatonic theory of emanation: "Grace is, therefore, the divine presence and power working and thereby present in the world, upon which the creatures' own operations are totally dependent."⁶⁴ This was the concept of grace which developed in the West in later centuries into the notion of a multiplicity of kinds or types of grace, but Torrance emphasized that this was not the biblical concept. In neither the Old nor the New Testament is "grace" an entity sent by God nor an operation of God in "the soul" supplanting the Holy Spirit, nor are there different kinds or types of grace as scholastic theology imagined. It is not a thing called "grace," nor different influences such as "prevenient grace" or "saving grace," which work within us. It is the Holy Spirit who works *personally* within us, and "grace" should rather be thought of more as an adverb than a noun, an action and not an entity. It is the character of God's action toward us. The rejection of this scholastic notion of grace also meant that grace was not to be construed in the "logico-causal" way characteristic of the Dort and Westminster system. Here the concept of contingency was a key one for Torrance.⁶⁵

Secondly, we need to note that the defining of grace as "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is really part of a much larger revolution affecting the whole shape of theology. For Torrance, as for Barth, grace and election are not to be seen as distinct self-contained doctrines, but have to be recast Christocentrically. It is true (as we commented earlier) that from his "conversion" at Aldersgate Street in 1738, Wesley's theology became much more centred on Christ. And yet Outler, Maddox and Collins all characterize his theology in terms of "grace" as the "axial theme." According to Maddox, Wesley's two truths "co-definitive of Christianity" are that without God's grace we cannot be saved, and without our response, God will

⁶³ See Barth's note on the "Romanist" notions of grace in *CD*, IV, 1, 84-88.

⁶⁴ J. Patout Burns, "Grace," *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, Gen. Ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 391-398.

⁶⁵ This is a major point which cannot be developed here. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981).

not save. But for Torrance, such abstract principles cannot define Christianity. Christianity is Christ. Grace is Christ. Election is Christ. Principles of “grace” and “faith” and doctrines of “sin” and “salvation” all have to be understood within the *solus Christus* and therefore within the Trinitarian shape of the gospel.

Torrance sets this out with reference to election in two sections in his Edinburgh lectures, published as *Incarnation*.⁶⁶ In a chapter on “The Mystery of Christ,” he addresses not only the meaning of *mystērion*, but also the significance of the word *prothesis*, referring to the eternal “purpose” of God (Rom. 8:28ff.; Eph. 2:22-23), but also having the meaning of “setting forth” (Romans 3: 24-25). He writes:

We may sum up the significance of *prothesis* by saying that it refers both to the divine election or eternal purpose in Christ who is in himself God and man, and it refers to the fact that the eternal purpose is set forth in the Incarnation, and continues to be set forth in the midst of the church in its *koinonia* through word and sacrament.⁶⁷

Later in the chapter in a section on the mystery of Christ and the Holy Trinity, he expands his comments on *prothesis* as election. Starting from 2 Timothy 1:9-10 and Ephesians 1, he states the thesis: “Election is the eternal purpose of God that is identical with Jesus.” He expands on that:

That *prothesis* is manifested or set forth in the Incarnation in which God himself has come to make our lot his own, to choose us and love us in our actual situation in spite of our sin and guilt. Election means, therefore, that Christ assumes our flesh, assumes our fallen estate, assumes our judgement, assumes our reprobation, in order that we may participate in his glory, and share in the union of the Son with the Father.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes: Paternoster and Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 168-171 and 177-180.

⁶⁷ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 171.

⁶⁸ Torrance, *Incarnation* 178.

The implication then is that Jesus Christ “is identical with the eternal purpose of God that has gone into action in choosing to live and die for all, and in his life and death to set his love upon all humanity, and therefore to choose all men and women for himself by pouring out his love for all.” As in Barth, the only reprobation here is God’s reprobation of himself in Christ in the “wondrous exchange” which results in our election.⁶⁹

Election is therefore not an abstract principle. There is no “decree” apart from the One Word of God who demonstrates and enacts and embodies what the purpose (*prothesis*) of God is, and his purpose is that none should perish, but that all should come to a knowledge of the truth. Here at last *double* predestination and the decree of reprobation (whether Calvinist or Arminian) is denied and dismissed. God’s will and purpose and election is “to unite and sum all things (*anakephalaiōsasthai ta panta*) in heaven and earth” (Eph. 1:10). Every human being is elect in Jesus Christ. And that election is being carried into effect right now in the *koinonia* of the Church. Election is therefore to be thought of not in individualistic terms but in corporate terms in the body (*corpus*) of Christ.⁷⁰ Of course that does not mean universalism. There are those who deny their election, but “even if you refuse him and damn yourself in hell his love will never cease.”⁷¹ So no one is lost because God has destined them to be reprobate, but only because they have rejected their election in Christ.⁷²

Would Wesley have been happy with such an understanding of election? It is of course impossible to say. But what to him would no doubt have been a breathtaking proposal certainly dispenses even more radically than he did with the notion of God as (in Torrance’s phrase) a dark predestinarian figure behind the back of Jesus. Where he might have been more prepared to disagree would have been with Torrance’s emphasis, developed in *The Mediation of Christ*, that Christ made

⁶⁹ Barth, *CD*, II/2, 94-194.

⁷⁰ See *Incarnation* (2008), 171-74.

⁷¹ Torrance, *Mediation* (1992), 94.

⁷² See the early article by Torrance in answer to the universalism of J. A. T. Robinson: “Universalism or Election?” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2 (1949), 310-19.

the perfect response for us.⁷³ Torrance contrasts two ways of preaching the gospel. One was the message of “conditional grace”: “Jesus Christ loved you and gave his life for you on the cross, but you will be saved only *if* you give your heart to him.” The other was to say: “Jesus Christ loved you and died for you and will never let you go even if you damn yourself in hell: therefore repent and believe.” Quite clearly, Wesley preached in the first way (rather effectively!), and insisted that faith, although it was a gift, and although it did not *merit* salvation (only the death of Christ did that), yet it was the “condition” of salvation. Wesley would have been afraid that Torrance’s way of preaching the gospel would result in antinomianism. But might he have viewed this similarly to his view of the imputed righteousness of Christ – accepting the theological legitimacy of Torrance’s emphasis, but being wary of its pastoral consequences.⁷⁴

Torrance would similarly have been moved by pastoral concerns, but in his case, the concern was that people would be “thrown back on themselves” and their own resources. For him, the “logic of grace” was to be seen in that the Word took our common (*anhypostatic*) humanity in such a way that he freely chose as a human being (*enhypostatically*) to trust and obey the Father.⁷⁵ Here the Augustinian language of “prevenient grace” appropriated by Wesley (but interpreted as freedom, not compulsion) is seen to have its Christological basis in the actuality of the Incarnation. May it not be said that beneath their differing emphases on invitation and warning in the preaching of the gospel there is fundamental theological agreement?

What may be true to say is that Barth and Torrance developed the Christocentric doctrine of grace and election which Arminius was pointing to in his

⁷³ Torrance, *Mediation* (1992), Chapter Four, 73-98.

⁷⁴ On the pastoral implications of Torrance’s theology, see Alexandra S. Radcliff, *The Claim of Humanity in Christ: Salvation and Sanctification in the Theology of T. F. and J.B. Torrance* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

⁷⁵ See Christian D. Kettler, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1985), 139-42; and Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 117-123.

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first "decree," but which even *evangelical* Arminians (such as Wesley) subsequently lost.