

***Reading Wesley in light of the Joint
Declaration on Justification***

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John Wesley is widely regarded as the father of Methodism. Division in the Church of England was clearly not his intention, but appears to have been historically inevitable. Methodists have inherited the earlier breaks with Rome and the Eastern churches from Anglicanism, and find themselves separated from the Calvinist and Lutheran churches almost by accident of language and culture. Thus, as the spiritual descendants of Wesley today look upon the ecumenical movement they are compelled to enter into dialogue with each of these churches. Like many other ecumenical churches, when Methodists enter into dialogue the issues that arise focus upon their core teachings. The core teachings of a church are frequently those that form their identity and declare their continued separation from other churches. As a result of recent ecumenical agreements these core teachings are worth re-examining. In this essay, I will examine Wesley's articulation of the doctrine of justification — and the related doctrines of sanctification and the new birth — from a Catholic perspective and in light of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.¹ The particular goal of this essay is to determine whether a consensus on the basic truths of justification can be found between Wesley and the JDDJ, and thus between Methodists and Catholics.

Martin Luther taught that justification by faith alone is the doctrine according to which the church stands or falls.² The Council of Trent in turn issued a decree on justification that anathematised a number of reformation notions. The conciliar condemnations are matched by similar condemnations in the Lutheran confessions. These mutual condemnations, and the polemical theological articulation that followed them, have formed the relationship between the churches of the reformation and the Roman Catholic Church for almost five centuries. As the twentieth century came to a close, the Lutheran and Catholic churches reached an historic consensus which affirmed that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century no longer apply to the

¹ Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Geneva, LWF, 1999; Vatican, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1999; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000). Abbreviated as JDDJ.

² Justification is the "ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines, *rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum*." *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar, 1883f), 39: I, 205, quoted in JDDJ, § 1.

contemporary teachings on this matter by the other church. It is explicitly declared that the remaining differences of language, elaboration and emphasis are not of a church-dividing character.³ This consensus, expressed in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, was solemnly affirmed by the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) in Augsburg, Germany on October 31, 1999.

While the significance and scope of the consensus remains to be completely realised in the life of the two churches, the significance for the remaining churches of the reformation is self-evident. The doctrine of justification was central to the reformers' theological concerns, and remains central to the theological articulation of the churches of the reformation. Both the Lutheran and Catholic churches are actively engaged in dialogue with numerous churches of the reformation, including Reformed (Calvinist) and Methodist churches. Many Lutheran churches have entered into "pulpit and altar fellowship" or church union agreements with Reformed and Methodist churches. Each of these three dialogue partners has a clearly articulated doctrine of justification that has been significant in their theological development and ecclesial identity. As such, a consensus on the basic truths of justification between Lutherans and Catholics immediately implicates the others, and calls for a serious examination and consideration. The Reformed and Methodist churches cannot merely sit on the sidelines as observers wishing their friends well but with no stake in the accomplishment. Even before the formal signing, the question arose as to whether further churches might be able to become signatories to the *Joint Declaration*. This question was addressed at a consultation held November 26 to December 1, 2001 in Columbus, Ohio at the invitation of the LWF and the PCPCU. Both the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the World Methodist Council (WMC) took up the invitation to the Columbus consultation. In addition, there were observers from the Anglican Communion and the World Council of Churches.

Through the gracious support of the staff of the LWF and PCPCU, I have been able to acquire a number of the papers presented at the consultation. In one of the papers presented, Geoffrey

³ JDDJ, §§ 5, 40-41

Wainwright suggests that the task for a Methodist theologian with ecumenical intentions “is whether the Lutheran-Catholic text ... is compatible with Methodist doctrinal standards.” More importantly from my own perspective is the invitation that he extends: “Lutherans and Catholics for their part would concurrently or subsequently need to ask, contrariwise, whether Methodist teaching is compatible with the *Joint Declaration*.”⁴ This is my task in this essay. However, first a note about method.

The invitation as formulated by Wainwright might be interpreted to imply the use of a comparative method. Such an approach will be unlikely to discover much agreement, although an irenic spirit is to be welcomed. It remains one of the obstacles to ecumenical progress that while dialogues seek consensus; judicatory bodies assess the fruits of dialogue according to criteria that are reminiscent of comparative methods. Wainwright’s invitation thus calls for an irenic reading of Wesley that is firstly open to a positive judgement by the appropriate authorities, and secondly, contributes to the establishment of a foundation for further dialogue. Wainwright insists that his method of studying the JDDJ seeks consensus rather than conformity or congruence. The JDDJ itself uses what has come to be called a “differentiated consensus.” This allows for joint affirmations of the basic truths of the doctrine of justification, while the dialogue partners identify particular differences of language, elaboration or emphasis that are mutually recognised as “no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnation.”⁵ A similar method will need to be used in this essay as I examine Methodist articulations of the doctrine of justification in light of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

As many of the papers point out, the teaching of John Wesley is of particular importance for the development of Methodist theological affirmations. Even today, the doctrinal standards of Methodism consist primarily of the writings of Wesley. Wainwright identifies the commonly recognised Methodist standards as Wesley’s *Articles of Religion*, the first four volumes of Wesley’s

⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright, “The Lutheran-Roman Catholic agreement on justification: Its ecumenical significance and scope from a Methodist point of view.” *Consultation on Justification*, Columbus, Ohio (November 2001). (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, forthcoming), 1. Page references are approximate, based here upon my own printer and software.

⁵ JDDJ, § 5

sermons, and Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. While there is some variety in the formal status of these documents by the various churches of Wesleyan heritage, the authority given to Wesley's writings is one of the distinctive marks of Methodist churches. As such, the question of a Methodist adherence to the JDDJ naturally elicits a Catholic and Lutheran assessment of Wesley's writings on the subject. My task is to offer such an assessment from a Catholic perspective.

The JDDJ deals with the narrow concerns raised by the doctrinal condemnations of the reformation era. These condemnations were embodied in the canons of the Council of Trent and in certain of the Lutheran confessions, though not in the *Augsburg Confession*. Within those writings of Wesley, that constitute the commonly recognised Methodist standards, no comparable condemnations are to be found. Thus, the dialogue regarding Methodist adherence to the JDDJ occurs within a different context than the original Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. The positive affirmations of the JDDJ are the starting point of the new dialogue.

I) Reading Wesley ...

Although his many writings were arranged and presented in a methodical manner, John Wesley was not a systematic theologian. Wesley's primary purpose in writing was to assist the Methodist preachers in their task of spreading the Gospel. He offered them sermons that could be used as a model for their own preaching. Soteriology is his central preoccupation. When he touches upon other doctrinal matters, such as the sacraments, it is always with a consideration of their importance to salvation. The pastoral character of his writings is indicated by their subject matter, particularly his attention to the major issues of theological concern to the general populace. His attention to the widely neglected theme of "assurance" is only one instance of this. One difficulty arises because of his writing method. Various sermons in the collected corpus of Wesley's writings address the related themes of justification, sanctification, the new birth, assurance and Christian perfection. Each of these themes is dealt with in various places throughout his works. The consistency with which he deals with these themes is remarkable considering the extended time

period over which they are written. Nevertheless, one must read a broad selection of Wesley's writings to get the full scope of his concerns. This is perhaps one reason why many contemporary theologians have not given Wesley as much attention as to other major reformers and denominational founders.

Although already familiar with the reformation teaching on justification, Wesley identifies the turning point in his own life as an experience of hearing Luther's *Preface to Romans* read aloud one evening in Aldersgate Road. He describes his experience as follows:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.⁶

Like Luther, who described the experience of reading Romans "as though I had been reborn altogether and had entered Paradise,"⁷ Wesley discovers the doctrine of justification as a conversion experience, albeit through Luther's commentary. Unlike Luther, however, Wesley insisted that justification must be understood as the beginning of the Christian life of sanctification and perfection. And further he insisted, faith must lead to good works:

he held the Revival to his own compounded premise of "salvation, faith *and* good works." This put him into tension with other viewpoints in which, as it seemed to him, the essential integrity between evangelical faith and Christian ethics was split, one way or the other. Against all such disjunctions, he asserted the reciprocal unity of belief and behavior.⁸

Later interpreters have speculated endlessly regarding the position of justification in Wesley's thought. The desire to label him according to the main reformation traditions is unrewarded. His doctrine of justification is not pure Calvinism, as evidenced by his Arminian concern for free will. Nor could he be placed in the Lutheran camp, as witnessed by his emphasis on good works. His teaching on the good works that follow justification cannot be reconciled to the *sola fide* or the *sola gratia* of classical Protestantism. One must situate his notion of justification in relation to

⁶ John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951), May 24, 1738.

⁷ *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 54: 183f, as translated in *The Reformation: A narrative history by contemporary observers and participants*, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 27.

⁸ Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 27.

sanctification. He can be understood, simplistically, as holding a mediating position somewhere between Luther and Calvin's doctrines and that of the Council of Trent. In this sense, he exemplifies the *via media* of the Anglican divines.⁹ Ultimately, Wesley understood salvation in a comprehensive sense as "the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory."¹⁰

A) Justification

The doctrine of justification is dependent upon a theological anthropology that understands humanity to be fallen. This fallen nature is accounted for by the Genesis myth of Adam and Eve and the expulsion from the garden. For Wesley, in order to understand the Fall, we must begin with the creation of humanity in the image of God¹¹.

Not barely in his *natural image*, a picture of his own immortality, a spiritual being endued with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections; nor merely in his *political image*, the governor of this lower world, having 'dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth'; but chiefly in his *moral image*, which, according to the Apostle, is 'righteousness and true holiness.'¹²

Expulsion from the garden represents humanity's loss of the moral image of God. Humankind "'did not abide in honour.' [Adam] fell from his high estate. He 'ate of the tree whereof the Lord had commanded him, Thou shalt not eat thereof'."¹³ The result is that "everyone descended from him comes into the world spiritually dead, dead to God, wholly 'dead in sin'; entirely void of the life of God, void of the image of God, of all that 'righteousness and holiness' wherein Adam was created."¹⁴

⁹ Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (London: The Epworth Press, [1946]), 9-10 describes a number of writers who have emphasised Wesley's High Church tendencies. See especially U. Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville, 1936), 103.

¹⁰ Sermon 43, "The Scripture way of salvation", I.1 in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984-1987). All quotations from Wesley's sermons will be found in this edition.

¹¹ Gen. 1: 26-27; cf. Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith", I.1

¹² Sermon 45, "The New Birth", I.1

¹³ Sermon 45, I.2; cf. Sermon 5, I.5

¹⁴ Sermon 45, I.4; cf. Sermon 5, I.5, I.7

By the sin of the first Adam, who was not only the father but likewise the representative of us all, we all 'fell short of the favour of God,' (Rom. 3: 23) we all became 'children of wrath' (Eph. 2: 3); or, as the Apostle expresses it, 'Judgment came upon all men to condemnation.' (Rom. 5: 18)¹⁵

As a result of the Fall, humanity became subject to the Law. God's justice demanded propitiation and sacrifice. According to Wesley, Christ's atoning sacrifice changed humanity's relationship with God. "The objective fact of the atonement reset the terms within which the divine-human encounter takes place. It appeased the wrath of God and satisfied his justice."¹⁶ The idea — that the terms of the relationship are reset — is continued in Wesley's notion of the various dispensations of the grace of God.¹⁷

Twentieth century Evangelicals, extrapolating Wesley, speak of a varying number of dispensations, each inaugurated by a new covenant. The immediate problem with contemporary dispensation theologies is supercessionism, the implication that the earlier covenant with Israel has been abrogated. Of course, such a critique is not applicable to Wesley. Wesley used dispensationalism to refer to the various stages of coming to faith. Thus, to cite only a few examples that Wesley discusses, a pagan has a certain awareness of the divine, but knows little of God. The ancient Hebrews understood more of God, and so more was revealed to them, and God entrusted them with the "oracles of God." Roman Catholics are said, in Sermon 106: "On faith," to believe more than the revelation of God, but none of these new articles of faith "so materially contradict any of the ancient articles as to render them of no effect." Finally, Protestants believe nothing more and nothing less than the saving faith revealed in the Scriptures.¹⁸ In a polemical age, Wesley's comments regarding Jews and Roman Catholics are each somewhat friendlier than might be expected.

The atonement is understood by Wesley to provide satisfaction, the clearing of the debt of Adam. God's justice required satisfaction, the only payment of which was the perfect life of Christ,

¹⁵ Sermon 5, I.9

¹⁶ Charles W. Brockwell, Jr., "John Wesley's doctrine of justification," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 21-22.

¹⁷ cf. Sermon 106, "On faith"

¹⁸ Sermon 106, I.3-8

the second Adam. By the atonement, God offers freedom from the Law and salvation to each person. By faith, the person comes under the provisions of the atonement. In faith, each person opens themselves to God's grace, and is accounted righteous solely on account of Christ.

This therefore is the general ground of the whole doctrine of justification ... by the sacrifice for sin made by the second Adam, as the representative of us all, God is so far reconciled to all the world that he hath given them a new covenant. The plain condition whereof being once fulfilled, 'there is no more condemnation for us,' (Rom. 8: 1) but we are 'justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.' (Rom. 3: 24)¹⁹

What then is the distinction between the atonement and justification? Atonement is classically understood to refer to the payment of the debt of sin made on our behalf by Christ's passion and death. Justification, as understood by Luther and Calvin, refers to the judgement of God that finds us righteous, on account of Christ. Wesley, however, describes justification as follows:

The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins. It is that act of God the Father whereby, for the sake of the propitiation made by the blood of his Son, he 'showeth forth his righteousness (or mercy) by the remission of the sins that are past.'²⁰

Wesley appears to have conflated the atonement and justification. The atonement occurs once for all people while justification occurs in each of our lives as a personal appropriation of the atonement. As Luther and Calvin before him, Wesley affirms that it is by faith that we are justified. In this way, we each appropriate for our salvation the merits of Christ. After we are justified, we are born again. We experience a new birth. We live according to the precepts of God, and we grow in holiness.

The one [justification] implies what God *does for us* through his Son; the other [sanctification] what he *works in us* by his Spirit.²¹

Since faith is the only precondition to justification, the new birth and sanctification, it is important to address briefly Wesley's concept of faith. From II Corinthians 5:19 he defines faith as "a divine, supernatural *ἔλεγχος*, 'evidence' or conviction 'of things not seen.'" Faith is not conceptual belief, but rather, is God's gift of assurance. "Justifying faith implies, not only a divine

¹⁹ Sermon 5, I.9

²⁰ Sermon 5, II.5

²¹ Sermon 5, II.1

evidence or conviction that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself,' but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for *my* sins, that he loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*."²²

Faith is, for Wesley, primarily confidence or conviction.

It is a divine 'evidence, and conviction of things not seen' [cf. Heb. 11.1]; of things which are not seen now, whether they are visible or invisible in their own nature. Particularly, it is a divine evidence and conviction of God and of the things of God.²³

A major issue that arises when we discuss the meaning of faith is human co-operation in justification. It is important for the purposes of the dialogue between Methodists, Lutherans and Catholics to note that each tradition generally affirms the freedom of the will, as did Wesley. The disagreements over predestination, that arose during the reformation and subsequently, have their roots in John Calvin. For Lutherans, co-operation after the beginning of regeneration is not problematic. At this point in the reception of justification, the person is enabled by the Spirit to respond to the working of God within. Geoffrey Wainwright reminds us that Methodists would account for our co-operative dependence on the action of God in terms of prevenient grace.

Wesley held that "every man has a measure of free will restored to him by grace," and that God generally brings people to faith by non-coercive "assistance."²⁴ It is to the liberating power of prevenient grace and the enabling help of concomitant grace that Methodists would attribute what I like to call an "active receptivity" in the appropriation of salvation that sounds closer to Catholic talk of "consenting to God's justifying action" than to Lutheran talk of a reception "mere passive".²⁵

It might seem that there is a minor inconsistency in Wesley at this point. In light of Wesley's insistence that prior to justification there can be no good work, one would not expect an affirmation that we can consent to God's action. However, in order to be consistent with his notion of free will, Wesley is obliged to affirm that God does not impose justification on an unwilling person. The difference between Luther, Wesley and the Catholic views is in the form that

²² Sermon 5, IV.2

²³ Sermon 106, § 1

²⁴ Wainwright's footnote is as follows: "Remarks on Mr. Hill's Review," in *The Works of John Wesley*, Third edition, ed. Thomas Jackson, (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1872), 10: 392; Sermon 63, "The general spread of the Gospel", § 11: "He did not *force* you; but being *assisted* by his grace you, like Mary, *chose* the better part."

²⁵ Wainwright, 5. Emphasis is Wainwright's.

this consent takes. Wesley affirms that the reception was not merely passive, but active. Thus, Wainwright is correct that he is closer to the Catholic view in this regard.

B) The New Birth

Wesley's Sermon 45 on "The New Birth" provides an interesting commentary on the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3. Like Nicodemus, Wesley asks how it is that a person can be born again. However, Wesley has the answer already. He uses Jesus' response to describe the new birth. To be "born again," means to be:

'born from above,' 'born of God,' 'born of the Spirit,' — in a manner which bears a very near analogy to the natural birth.²⁶

The analogy is important for Wesley. By justification, the individual is made new. The moral image of God, which was taken away by the Fall is given once again. In justification, we return to the moral image of God, experiencing a new relationship with God.

It is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life: when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is 'created anew in Christ Jesus' ... when the love of the world is changed into the love of God, pride into humility, passion into meekness, hatred, envy, malice, into a sincere, tender, disinterested love for all [hu]mankind.²⁷

Instead of the wrath of God, we experience the love of God, and we share that love with the world. Justification shows itself in good works. Following the new birth, we continue to grow in holiness led by the Spirit, and fed by God's grace.

God is continually breathing, as it were, upon his soul, and his soul is breathing unto God. Grace is descending into his heart, and prayer and praise ascending to heaven. And by this intercourse between God and man, this fellowship with the Father and the Son, as by a kind of spiritual respiration, the life of God in the soul is sustained: and the child of God grows up, till he comes to 'the full measure of the stature of Christ.'²⁸

The terminology in Wesley's writings overlaps slightly at this point. In Sermon 5 on "Justification by Faith," Wesley clarifies the meaning of justification by stating what it is not. Justification "is not

²⁶ Sermon 45, II.3; cf. Sermon 19, "The great privilege of those that are born of God", I.2

²⁷ Sermon 45, II.5

²⁸ Sermon 45, II.4

the being made actually just and righteous. This is *sanctification*; which is in some degree the immediate *fruit* of justification, but nevertheless is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature."²⁹ What is the relation between the new birth and sanctification? Are they each the fruit of justification? The new birth:

is a part of sanctification, not the whole; it is the gate of it, the entrance into it. When we are born again, then our sanctification, our inward and outward holiness, begins. And thenceforward we are gradually to 'grow up in him who is our head.'³⁰

The new birth therefore comes as a consequence of justification and leads to sanctification. It is an inward disposition towards God that is outwardly manifest in good works. However, Wesley is insistent that the new birth is of a radically different nature than justification. A rather long quotation from Wesley clarifies the distinction.

But though it be allowed that justification and the new birth are in point of time inseparable from each other, yet are they easily distinguished as being not the same, but things of a widely different nature. Justification implies only a relative, the new birth a real, change. God in justifying us does something *for* us: in begetting us again he does the work *in* us. The former changes our outward relation to God, so that of enemies we become children; by the latter our inmost souls are changed, so that of sinners we become saints. The one restores us to the favour, the other to the image of God. The one is the taking away the guilt, the other the taking away the power, of sin. So that although they are joined together in point of time, yet are they of wholly distinct natures.³¹

It is necessary to consider an important clarification of Wesley's understanding of the new birth, the distinction between the new birth and baptism. Following the Anglican Catechism and the Westminster Confession, Wesley defines a sacrament as having two parts, an outward and visible sign and an inward and spiritual grace. Accordingly, he distinguishes the outward and visible sign of baptism from the inward and spiritual grace of the new birth.³² This distinction is familiar to Roman Catholics who distinguish between sacramental form and matter on the one hand, and sacramental grace on the other. For Roman Catholics, grace always accompanies the sacraments, but may not necessarily be received fruitfully as a result of the interior disposition of the person. Wesley does not challenge the efficacy of the sacraments directly, but he identifies the real fruit of

²⁹ Sermon 5, II.1

³⁰ Sermon 45, IV.3

³¹ Sermon 19, §3

³² Sermon 45, IV.1

God's justifying grace as the new birth. As Wesley puts it: "A man may possibly be 'born of water,' and yet not be 'born of the Spirit.' There may sometimes be the outward sign where there is not the inward grace."³³ This is an important caution for the Roman Catholic who might wish to exaggerate the objective efficacy of the sacraments. At the same time, it is also salutary for the believer's baptism traditions. The visible sacrament experienced as an infant — "yet not" received as an inward grace — may become fruitful later in life. Wesley himself held to the traditional practice of infant baptism, although some of his spiritual descendants have not.

Wesley differs from Luther and Calvin in his emphasis on the life of sanctification that proceeds from justification and the new birth. The role of sanctification in Wesley's soteriology is of considerable interest. I will consider sanctification in more detail next.

C) Sanctification

While Wesley had the highest regard for Luther's teaching on justification, he considered Luther to be completely ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification.³⁴ It is certainly true that Luther and Calvin, as well as those who came after them, were hesitant about sanctification. The reformation principles of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* were considered to be incompatible with human co-operation in salvation. Perhaps Wesley's most distinctive contribution lies in his conviction that sanctification does not contain an inherent contradiction of the doctrine of justification by faith.

I have already shown how Wesley taught that by faith a person is justified, and experiences a new birth. The new birth constitutes a new relationship with God, in which the Spirit animates a life of discipleship to God and neighbour. As has been stated above, Wesley understood the new birth to be a part of sanctification. Following Luther and Calvin, Wesley understood justification as the first step in the order of salvation, thus it precedes sanctification. In this, he differs from Anglicans like Jeremy Taylor who understood that some evidence of sanctification must precede

³³ Sermon 45, IV.2

³⁴ Sermon 107, "On God's vineyard", I.5

justification.³⁵ Wesley recognises that there may be some attitude or behaviour preceding justification that appears to be motivated by God's sanctifying presence. He insists that this is not a good work. Nothing that precedes justification can properly be understood as a good work.³⁶ Thus, he is careful to distinguish the repentance that precedes justification from that which follows.

Repentance indeed God had given him before [faith]. But that repentance was neither more nor less than a deep sense of the want of all good, and the presence of all evil. And whatever good he hath or doth from that hour when he first believes in God through Christ, faith does not *find* but *bring*. This is the fruit of faith. First the tree is good, and then the fruit is good also.³⁷

Wesley's notion of sanctification is sometimes described as "progressive sanctification," emphasising the growth in holiness that occurs subsequent to justification. The new birth is not the completion of God's action in our lives. The Spirit continues to animate us, leading us to live holy and perfect lives in conformity with God's will. The Law is transformed as well. No longer the oppressive means of condemnation, now the Law serves as a guide and support in living the truly Christian life.

'Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid! Yea, we establish the law.' What law do we establish by faith? Not the ritual law; not the ceremonial law of Moses. In no wise; but the great, unchangeable law of law, the holy love of God and of our neighbour.³⁸

The problem of the unrepentant sinner arises. What is to be said of the person who has been baptised and yet continues in sin? Has this person been born again? Wesley responds that such a person has not owned their baptism. He or she has denied their baptism by allowing the devil a place in their life.

For in your baptism you renounced the devil and all his works. Whenever therefore you give place to him again, whenever you do any of the works of the devil, then you deny your baptism.³⁹

Wesley is so concerned with the reality of the new birth that he insists that the justified are preserved from sinning. Consistent with his notion that all that precedes justification is wholly evil,

³⁵ cf. *Works of John Wesley*, 1: 187, note 38.

³⁶ Sermon 5, III.5

³⁷ Sermon 5, IV.2

³⁸ Sermon 5, IV.1

³⁹ Sermon 45, IV.4

and all that follows is animated by the Spirit of God, he insists that the person who is born of God:

who continually receives into his soul the breath of life from God, the gracious influence of his Spirit, and continually renders it back; one who thus believes and loves, who by faith perceives the continual acting of God upon his spirit, and by a kind of spiritual re-action [sic] returns the grace he receives in unceasing love, and praise, and prayer; not only 'doth not commit sin' while he thus 'keepeth himself,' but so long as this 'seed remaineth in him he cannot sin,' because he is born of God.⁴⁰

Sin is here understood as a voluntary "transgression of the law," or in other words, an outward and deliberate action that is known to violate God's will.⁴¹

I have now considered the broad outlines of Wesley's doctrines of justification, sanctification and the new birth. In the next part, I will consider the potential for Methodist adherence to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

II) ... in light of the Joint Declaration on Justification

As was stated above, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* was formally approved by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) on October 31, 1999 in Augsburg, Germany. The signing ceremony was planned for that date and place because of their historic significance. October 31 is the anniversary of Luther's posting of the *Ninety-five theses*, and each year that day has been observed in numerous Protestant traditions as Reformation Day. Augsburg is significant as the site where the *Lutheran Augsburg Confession* was issued. Thus on the 452nd anniversary of the *Ninety-five theses* it seemed appropriate to consign the mutual condemnations of the reformation era to historical memory.

The JDDJ declares that based on a consensus on the basic truths of justification, the condemnations expressed in the reformation era no longer apply to the contemporary Lutheran and Catholic churches.⁴² Further, the remaining differences of language, elaboration and emphasis are

⁴⁰ Sermon 19, II.1. The emphatic hyphen in "re-action" is Wesley's own usage. Albert Outler's editorial footnote in the *Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial edition) indicates that this is cited by the Oxford English Dictionary as a pioneer usage.

⁴¹ Sermon 19, II.2

⁴² JDDJ, § 41

not of a church-dividing character. The JDDJ consensus on justification is expressed in a brief summary statement.⁴³ This is preceded by five tightly worded paragraphs on the biblical message of justification.⁴⁴ In addition, the specific issues of concern in the original condemnations are addressed in a series of short sub-sections.⁴⁵ Each of these sub-sections contains a basic statement of consensus followed by a statement of Lutheran distinctive emphasis and another statement of Catholic distinctive emphasis. The summary statement at the end of the JDDJ confirms that “the Lutheran and Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths.”⁴⁶

Of the various papers presented at the Columbus consultation in November 2001, Wainwright’s is the most interesting for our purposes. He considers each of the seven sub-sections that reflect the Lutheran and Catholic distinctive emphases, and assesses them from a Methodist perspective. His paper is highly recommended as an indispensable tool for identifying Methodist evaluations of the JDDJ. For my purposes — to assess Wesley’s doctrine of justification, sanctification and the new birth in light of the JDDJ from a Catholic perspective — it seems appropriate to consider Wesley’s distinctive contributions and the particular issues that Methodists bring to the dialogue. However, before I move to consider these issues, a consideration of the basic consensus statement is essential.

A) The JDDJ consensus, briefly stated

The basic JDDJ consensus is quite brief. Even including all of the elaboration from Lutheran and Catholic perspectives, the total document is only forty-four short paragraphs. The consensus is built around the common conviction that it is Christ whose merit justifies humans. The post-reformation polemical stereotypes, which taught that Catholics believe in salvation by good works, and that

⁴³ cf. JDDJ, §§ 15-18

⁴⁴ cf. JDDJ, §§ 8-12

⁴⁵ cf. JDDJ, §§ 19-39

⁴⁶ JDDJ, § 40

Protestants believe in a sterile salvation that does not result in an interior conversion or good works, are rejected. The consensus includes the following affirmation in paragraph 15:

By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.⁴⁷

This is the core of the consensus. This is preceded by the clarification that "the foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ." Clearly, the concerns expressed by Wesley regarding justification would be perfectly in accordance with this consensus. The JDDJ continues in paragraph 16:

All people are called by God to salvation in Christ. Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God's gift through the Holy Spirit, who works through Word and Sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life.

The uniqueness of Christ's role in justification is shared by Wesley. The concern to affirm that it is through Christ alone that we are justified ensures that there is no confusion about the role of the church or the saints as mediators of salvation. It is faith in Christ that is saving faith. Nevertheless, as Wesley also affirms, in faith the Spirit leads one into a renewal of life — sanctification. Renewal occurs in the context of the community of believers and is characterised by attentiveness to the Word and Sacraments.⁴⁸

The remaining two paragraphs of the consensus touch on matters that are salutary but not necessarily problematic. The first relates to the common conviction that the doctrine of justification is found in the "New Testament witness to God's saving action in Christ." In particular it affirms that "because we are sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way."⁴⁹ This affirmation is shared equally by Lutherans, Catholics and Methodists, though some clarification of the language might be necessary in order for Methodists to adhere to this consensus statement. The JDDJ speaks

⁴⁷ JDDJ, § 15

⁴⁸ cf. Sermon 16, "The means of grace"

⁴⁹ JDDJ, § 17

of justification primarily, and thus it should be understood that the “new life” spoken of here is justification. Wesley’s notion of the new birth is compatible with this consensus, although the JDDJ does not speak explicitly of it. Sanctification follows justification, and is also recognised as due to the “forgiving and renewing mercy” of God.

The last paragraph of the basic consensus relates to the centrality of justification in the truths of faith.⁵⁰ This enshrines the conviction expressed by Luther that justification is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. Methodists should have no disagreement with this viewpoint. It is of course interesting to consider the implications for Catholicism if this view were equally to permeate Catholic theology. However, this is not the purview of this paper.

B) Methodist contributions to the JDDJ consensus

In 1997, the final draft of the JDDJ was sent to the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, and to the Vatican, for formal consideration. As a result of numerous questions, an *Annex* was developed that clarifies a few of the issues. Some of the papers prepared for the Columbus Consultation in November 2001 dealt with procedural issues in broadening the adherence to the JDDJ. It was proposed that a second annex to the JDDJ might be prepared that would reflect the particular concerns and explications of the WMC and WARC. There are problems with this approach; the most obvious being that it represents an asymmetrical adherence. The JDDJ reflects the distinctive emphases of the two original dialogue partners. However, these issues are not necessarily those of the more recent dialogue partners, the Methodist and Reformed churches. This should be kept in mind. As Methodist and Reformed churches consider whether to adhere in some fashion to the JDDJ, the four dialogue partners must consider whether there are additional issues that need explication in an annex to the original agreement. This is the task to which I turn next.

⁵⁰ cf. JDDJ, § 18

(i) The action of the Holy Spirit

One of the distinctive features of Wesley's soteriology is his emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that Luther or Calvin or other Protestant authors do not speak of the Holy Spirit in the context of soteriology. However, Protestant theology tends to be christocentric, particularly in Lutheran and Calvinist soteriology. Thus, Wesley's identification of the ongoing work of the Spirit in sanctifying the justified believer is a distinctive contribution to Protestantism. Consider, for example, this thoroughly trinitarian description of the new birth:

And now he may properly be said to live: God having quickened him by his Spirit [cf. I Pet. 3: 18], he is alive to God through Jesus Christ [Rom. 6: 11].⁵¹

A further example: "It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is 'created anew in Christ Jesus' [cf. Eph. 2: 10]."⁵² The doctrine of sanctification lends itself to this pneumatological emphasis, not only in Wesley's writings but in Catholic theology as well. The Spirit is understood as having a transformative effect in the life of the justified believer. As was mentioned above, Wesley speaks of what God does for us in justification and what the Spirit works in us in sanctification.⁵³

Wesley scholars have long recognised that Wesley's reading of Eastern church fathers such as Macarius the Egyptian and Ephraem the Syrian has influenced his understanding of sanctification. A number of recent journal articles have explored this theme,⁵⁴ and Albert Outler confirms the importance of Eastern thought in Wesley's formative years at Oxford.

Their concept of perfection as a process rather than a state gave Wesley a spiritual vision quite different than the static perfectionism envisaged in Roman spiritual theology of the period and the equally static quietism of those Protestants and Catholics whom he deplored as "the mystic writers."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Sermon 5, II.4

⁵² Sermon 5, II.5

⁵³ cf. Sermon 5, II.1

⁵⁴ cf. John G. Merritt, "'Dialogue' within a tradition: John Wesley and Gregory of Nyssa discuss Christian perfection," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 92-116; David C. Ford, "Saint Makarios of Egypt and John Wesley: Variations on the theme of sanctification," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 33, no. 3 (1988): 285-312; Michael J. Christensen, "Theosis and sanctification: John Wesley's reformulation of a patristic doctrine," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 71-94.

⁵⁵ Outler, 10

The trinitarian perspective of the eastern churches gave Wesley a sense of the progressive character of sanctification and a sense of the pneumatological context in which regeneration occurs. The Wesleyan and Holiness traditions have received this — at least in part — in their emphasis on the continuing works of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Modern Pentecostalism owes a considerable debt to Wesley in this regard.

As I mentioned above, Wesley understood salvation in a comprehensive sense as “the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory.”⁵⁶ It is this whole work of God — justification, new birth and sanctification — that is sometimes described as “whole sanctification” or Christian perfection. It is this to which I turn next.

(ii) The transformative character of justification

Two aspects of Wesley’s understanding of faith are relevant to my task here: assurance and conversion. Wesley defines justifying faith as an assurance that the love of God has reached me, forgiven me and delivered me. In contemporary Evangelicalism, assurance of salvation is sometimes understood as a conviction that God has already saved the person at the moment of justification. Thus, there is an emphasis on the moment of conversion. This is not Wesley’s sense of assurance or conversion. For Wesley, personal assurance of God’s loving forgiveness is the sign that our faith is authentic and that we have been justified.

Wesley’s own autobiographical account of the Aldersgate experience is sometimes described as his conversion experience. His ability to provide a date and place of the experience lends support to the notion that Wesley understood conversion as an event, a moment in time. However, the emphasis on the ongoing sanctification of the justified shows that Wesley understood conversion as a process. The theme of progressive sanctification, or perfection is found throughout Wesley’s theological writings. For example:

Christian perfection therefore does not imply ... an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus everyone that is perfect is holy, and everyone that is holy is, in the Scripture

⁵⁶ Sermon 43, I.1

sense, perfect. Yet we may, lastly, observe that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no 'perfection of degrees,' as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase. So that how much soever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to 'grow in grace,' and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.⁵⁷

An aspect of Wesley's emphasis on the work of the Spirit is found in the transformative character of justification. The justifying grace of God "sanctifies, as well as justifies, all them that believe in him."⁵⁸ This transformative character is found in the JDDJ as well, as Wainwright points out. He sees in the JDDJ paragraph 26 an echo of recent Finnish Luther research. Under the influence of their dialogue with the Finnish Orthodox churches, Lutheran theologians led by Tuomo Mannermaa have identified in Luther tendencies that are suspiciously similar to *theosis* or divinisation.

Mannermaa and his colleagues went behind the disputatious history of the Lutheran doctrine of justification and reread Luther's texts. There they found that for Luther faith is a real participation in Christ, that in faith a believer receives the righteousness of God in Christ, not only in a nominal and external way [forensic justification], but really and inwardly.⁵⁹

The Finnish interpretation of Luther does not have the same authoritative impact in Lutheranism that a new interpretation of Wesley might have in Methodism, since Luther's own writings are not doctrinal standards of Lutheranism. Nevertheless, the new interpretation has a potential for being extremely influential. It offers an opportunity to move beyond the problematic concept of forensic justification and to consider the transformative character of God's justifying grace. While the Finnish interpretation was developed with the Orthodox dialogue in mind, it is equally open to Wesley's emphasis on the new birth as a regeneration in the image of God. Mannermaa's emphasis on faith as a "real participation in Christ" lends itself to a rich reflection on *koinonia* (communion, fellowship or participation) in trinitarian terms. This then leads to reflection on the communal implications of justification, which may be where the justification dialogue is rewarded in Catholic theology. Lutherans and Catholics will find further consensus through this new reading of Luther.

⁵⁷ Sermon 40, "Christian perfection", I.9

⁵⁸ Sermon 20, "The Lord our righteousness", II.12

⁵⁹ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The new Finnish interpretation of Luther*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), viii.

Methodists as well will find in this a greater openness to the progressive work of sanctification, which has been problematic in much of Lutheran-Methodist dialogue.

III) Conclusion

In this essay, my task has been to assess John Wesley's doctrines of justification, the new birth and sanctification from a Catholic perspective, and in light of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. The JDDJ is a relatively new accomplishment for the ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, and its implications — both within the two partner churches and for other ecumenical partners — will not really be known for many years. The Columbus consultation in November 2001 was a first step towards expanding the consensus community.

The Columbus consultation represents a major new initiative. The Methodist and Lutheran churches have already entered into "pulpit and altar fellowship" in various places, and some preliminary dialogue has been ongoing with Roman Catholics for some time. However, the possibility of Methodists adhering to the JDDJ at the highest levels of authority within their communities, as the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches already do, presents a new and unexpected opportunity. In this essay, I believe that I have shown the basic outlines of Wesley's soteriology. In so far as Methodists adhere to Wesley's soteriology, I do not recognise any insurmountable obstacles to Methodist adherence, or to a positive Roman Catholic assessment of that adherence. I will leave it to Lutherans to comment upon a Lutheran assessment. An assessment of the Reformed doctrine of justification, which will be necessary before WARC could adhere to the JDDJ, is also beyond the purview of this paper.

The dialogue between Methodists and Catholics has not been the showpiece of the ecumenical movement. This is partly because, unlike the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, the relationship does not have the same form of theological condemnations to resolve. Methodists are perhaps not as numerous as Lutherans, and theological contact has been limited for various reasons. In addition, Methodism has been perceived as a mainly Anglo-American phenomenon. One of the objections made by Anglicans towards Methodists in Wesley's own lifetime, was that of enthusiasm.

Methodists were considered to be more concerned with the subjective than the objective. Every attempt by Wesley to change this assessment went unheeded. A similar opinion would be found amongst contemporary Roman Catholics towards certain Wesleyan churches. Some of Wesley's theological heirs have developed a reputation for anti-intellectualism. This presents a concern to Roman Catholics, and limits the level of interest in ecumenical dialogue or co-operation. As the dialogues with the earliest reformation churches are now beginning to bear fruit, the possibility of embarking on new ecumenical voyages is now possible.

There are some difficulties that will arise in the process of adherence to the JDDJ. I have already alluded to the concern about whether an additional *Annex* to the JDDJ is the most appropriate method of formalising the adherence. The other procedural problem will be similar to the problem faced by the Lutheran World Federation in 1997. The World Methodist Council does not have a doctrinal teaching authority that is binding upon its members. In addition, many churches that consider Wesley to be a doctrinal standard do not belong to the WMC. Adherence to a broader JDDJ consensus that does not represent the clear majority of Methodist churches could potentially be more problematic than no consensus at all. No doubt, Methodists will find a process that is consistent with their own polities that will allow them to proceed on this ecumenical voyage with Lutherans and Catholics.

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