

# The Arminian

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## INERRANCY and the WESLEYAN TRADITION *Jonathan A. Staniforth*

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Over the past few years, I have been spiritually troubled by an increasingly popular implication that *not* “all scripture is breathed by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). I have come to an understanding of the inerrancy of God’s Word, in all matters, as essential to the faith. Though there are those who do not see the point in explaining the original autograph manuscripts which we have not seen, yet out of reverence for the sovereign knowledge of the Author, I believe it is essential we defend them.

Though I consider its message of salvation and holiness as the purpose for which this book was “breathed by God,” I do not undermine its Author’s ability to communicate to mankind a message free from errors in history, geography, science, or any other subjects. There is no doubt that the Bible is a book of God’s redemptive plan. However, we cannot ignore the fact that this redemptive plan involves a history, a place in which it unfolds, and, often, sci-

ence plays a role. To bring in to question any of these “other topics” will undoubtedly affect the central message, as it is inextricably linked. It must all be a part of the affirmation, “*All scripture* is breathed by God.”

In simple terms, I will attempt to bring understanding to all that I have stated thus far. On the side of a packet of bottled water, I noted the slogan “pure, refreshing and invigorating.” There is no doubt that one who drinks bottled water does so that he may be refreshed. Furthermore, that person would expect the water to be pure. This is the purpose of bottled water.

However, here is a question many have not considered, “Is the bottle clean?” Let us consider the history, the geography and science of the bottle. Imagine if the manufacturers of bottled water added in small print under their slogan, this following remark:

We are not concerned with the scientific composition of the bottle itself. Furthermore, we are unsure of the historical facts regarding the handling of this bottle, and may have been misinformed as to its origin. Nevertheless, we ensure you its contents are pure.

Immediately, the consumer would suspect that the water is no longer pure, because the bottle was subject to contamination. Though he or she may have picked up the bottle only because they merely wished to be refreshed, an awareness of potential error in the science, history and geography of the bottle, has caused the very content to come under question.

As the pure bottled water is the source of refreshment to the consumer, the living water is the source of life to those who believe. Jesus the Word stated, “I

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have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10b). In a nutshell, this is the message of salvation and entire sanctification that has been held so dear by Wesleyans over the past two and a half centuries. However, this message has been encased in “time and space.” It was stated at a certain time in history and in a certain place. Furthermore, it establishes Jesus as the great Life Giver, the one who breathed life into man at the beginning of time (Gen 2:7; Col 1:16-17). This life that Jesus offers in John’s gospel is essentially spiritual, but in Genesis he was involved in the creation of physical life. Therefore, science is also involved.

If an absolute standard of inerrancy is not held, and only the message of salvation and holiness is consid-

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ered valid, then this will lead to a corruption of the message itself. As a contaminated bottle will serve to corrupt its contents, so will a contaminated history, geography or science

corrupt the message for the hearer of the Word. To question the historicity of a statement or the place in which a statement is made will only lead to the inevitable doubt of the validity of the statement itself. Which court would accept a statement as truth in which the witness is vulnerable to making errors in recollection of events and places? Would not the ruling be “insufficient evidence”? Yet the Bible is regarded by its Author as “sufficient” in all matters. “All scripture is breathed by God.”

This is the traditional belief of Wesleyans throughout the centuries. In a sermon entitled, “On Charity,” John Wesley states, “We know, ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ and is therefore true and right concerning all things.” It is quite clear that Wesley understood that “all scripture” meant “all things” in the Word. However, were these “things” so connected that an error in history, geography or science would affect the central message? When reviewing a tract entitled, “Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion,” by Soame Jenyns which undermined inerrancy, Wesley wrote in his *Journal* for 24 July 1776:

If he is a Christian, he betrays his own cause by averring that “All *Scripture* is not given by *inspi-*

*ration of God*, but the writers of it were *sometimes* left to themselves, and consequently made *some mistakes*.” Nay, if there be *any* mistakes in the Bible there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.

It is evident in this statement that Wesley believed that the admittance of “any mistakes” would affect the very “truth” that God wishes to reveal. Therefore, I am sure that John Wesley would ascribe to my analogy of bottled water.

Secondly, we must review those prominent theologians in a movement to trace the consistency of its doctrine. Adam Clarke concurred with Wesley’s view on inerrancy. He stated: “Men may err, but the Scriptures cannot; for it is the *Word of God* himself, who can neither mistake, deceive, nor be deceived.”

Richard Watson, the first systematic theologian of Methodism, stated that the authority of scripture “secures the Scriptures from all error both as to the subjects spoken and the manner of expressing them.”

However, the great debate of inerrancy never began to take its toll until the last century. It began in the early 1900s and culminated in the 1970s when “historical skeptics” attacked the Word of God as unreliable in matters of science and history. As a response, some Wesleyans have fled from the bastion of inerrancy in all matters, to the wilderness of what they would call “soteriological inerrancy.” This is to say that they have created a doctrine contrary to the truths held by the fathers of the Wesleyan movement.

However, just what is this new view on inerrancy? Rob L. Staples, a proponent of soteriological inerrancy, wrote, “For Wesleyanism, the basic theological question is: ‘What must I do to be saved?’” Therefore, he surmises, that “Wesleyans” need only be concerned about inerrancy as regards the message of salvation. Staples even goes so far as to quote John Wesley for support: “I want to know one thing, the way to heaven — how to land safe on that happy shore.”

Although Staples’ motives may be pure, there are two areas of immediate concern. First, the door has been left open for error in “other things” in scripture that Wesley himself considered inextricably linked to the message itself. Though the “way to heaven” is

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the pure water of the Word, one cannot avoid the fact that this message is linked with the bottle of “time and space.” To do so, would be to commit an intellectual suicide. Secondly, it is a sweeping statement of little historical merit to use the term “Wesleyans.” As we have seen, both the founder and its early theologians would disagree that this movement would support such a theological stance.

Furthermore, Dr. Staples stated, “We in the Wesleyan tradition have avoided the divisiveness some denominations have suffered whenever the “inerrancy” issue has reared its ugly head” [*Words of Faith*, p. 21].

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“inerrancy” issue has reared its ugly head” [*Words of Faith*, p. 21].

Once again, there is a contradiction here. “Soteriological inerrancy” is a divisive theology that has crept into Wesleyan denomina-

tions. H. Ray Dunning, wrote concerning the Nazarene statement of faith concerning “The Holy Scriptures,”

While some Nazarenes interpret this to imply full authority in the broadest sense...other Nazarene sources allow a more restricted interpretation, defining it as extending to the whole canon; in terms of the content of scripture, to the soteriological aspects of the Bible, that is, it holds that the way of salvation set forth in Scripture is completely reliable and dependable [*Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, p. 72].

In other words, we have those that hold to the Wesleyan belief that “all scripture is breathed by God” and those that would settle for less: pure water in a potentially dirty bottle.

This leaves only one question to be asked: If doubt as to the total inerrancy of God’s Word does not have its roots in the Wesleyan tradition, from where did this understanding originate? I believe we find this theology in the Garden of Eden. It is the original temptation. Eve had wandered too close to “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” For her waywardness, she would suffer temptation at the hands of the serpent. Instead of the inspired Word, she now will be tempted to settle for something less – the inspired snake of the evil one. He states his doctrine of

doubt, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” (Gen 3:1).

Notice, the serpent does not make a direct statement, such as “God did not say . . . .” He simply implies that it may not be true when he questions the validity of God’s statement. This is what I call “the power of suggestion.”

If the evangelist of soteriological inerrancy proclaims that only the message need be true, has he not wandered too closely to the tree? He may argue at this point that the question of the serpent need not be historical or that the creation account is allegorical. However, if he listens carefully to his “own understanding” he will find that he has not trusted God’s Word, but echoed the voice of the evil one (see Prov 3:5-8). After all, to deny the validity of history is to bring into question the message. In other words, if there was neither “time” nor “space” when God spoke those words, then the next question to ask is: “Did he really speak them?”

In the garden, the Word of God was doubted and the rest is history. Adam and Eve were cast into a wilderness because they bought into the lie. They had traded the pure waters of Eden, for the murky waters of the wilderness. If we begin to doubt the pure water of the Word and all that is inextricably linked, we will end up drinking the contaminated waters in the wilderness of doubt. One doctrine after another will fall. Furthermore, we will put ourselves in a very dangerous position before the Author and Judge, Jesus Christ. A. W. Tozer proclaimed:

Let a man question the inspiration of the Scriptures and a curious, even monstrous, inversion takes place: thereafter he judges the Word instead of letting the Word judge him; he determines what the Word should teach instead of permitting it to determine what he should believe; he edits, amends, strikes out, adds at his pleasure; but always he sits above the Word and makes it amenable to him instead of kneeling before God and becoming amenable to the Word.

Once any detail in the Word is doubted, then the doubter has permitted himself to judge that which will judge him. He begins to pick and choose what is true and what is false. He has attempted to set his throne higher than the Almighty: The One who has promised, “till heaven and earth pass away, one jot

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(the smallest letters in the Hebrew alphabet) or one tittle (accents and diacritical points) will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Luke 4:36). It is then that the door is opened and in creeps heresy.

At the outset of his book, *The Story of God*, Michael Lodahl, professor of theology at Point Loma Nazarene University, writes:

In many ways, it’s the same way anyone’s story gets told – except that this is a very old story, told over a considerable length of time with many tellers, twists, and complications, and with a rather unobtrusive main *Character (God) who seems not to be overly concerned that we get the Story “just right” in every detail* [p. 16].

Notice in the last sentence the word “seems” is used. The use of this verb does not create a direct statement. If he had used the verb “is” and the statement was straightforward in nature – “God is not concerned that we get the Story right,” then there would probably be an outcry. But here we have the power of suggestion: “God *seems* not to be overly concerned that we get the Story “just right.” And, as I have already stated, suggestion is more enticing. In other words, he gives you enough to begin to doubt. The door of doubt is open and now we as readers are invited to become the judge of the Word. You pick and choose what “details” are right.

As we are led into the wilderness of this book, the water itself begins to become contaminated; not just the “Story,” but the message itself. In his search for an answer to God’s judgment of water at the time of Noah, we are given a heretical “implication” by Lodahl: “There is an unavoidable implication in the story of the Flood, however, that it is that *God was learning through experience* about human beings of His own making.”

After this remark, Lodahl attempts to soften the blow: “This does not square with traditional notions of divine omniscience, but this need not be overly bothersome” [p. 97]. For those who still drink of the water of the Word from the Garden of Sound Doctrine, it must be bothersome! After all, Lodahl has just attempted to diminish the omniscient God of scripture. Instead of a God who is all-knowing, Lodahl has given us the option of another god, in our image, who is “learning through experiences” – a humanistic god. That is a breach of the sovereignty of the Almighty! Furthermore, it is evidence that when one begins to doubt total inerrancy and sits in judgment, the message becomes contaminated. I will stand with the disciples who stated to my God: “Now we are sure that *You know all things, and have no need that anyone should question You*” (John 16:30).

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## AN UNSHAKABLE KINGDOM

Vic Reasoner

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We must have a voice in the marketplace of ideas or else risk being irrelevant. According to 1 Chronicles 12:32, the children of Issachar had an understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. Before we can do the right thing, we must understand what is happening around us. Hebrews 12:26-28 give us the proper world view.

In this chapter the writer is comparing the first Pentecost with the second Pentecost. The children of Israel celebrated Passover as they were delivered from Egyptian bondage. Fifty days later they were given the law at Mt. Sinai and for them Pentecost was one of three major feasts they continued to celebrate.

At Mt. Sinai they witnessed thunder, lightning, heavy clouds, darkness. At the trumpet blast they as-

sembled at the foot of the mountain which was covered with smoke. The mountain shook violently as God spoke, giving them his law. However, this shock and awe did not transform them, because forty days later Moses found them worshiping a golden calf. We must have his law written on our hearts. Jeremiah 31:31 promised that God would make a new covenant and write his law on our hearts.

That new covenant came into effect fifty days after the death of Christ, which was on Passover. Once more God shook not only the earth but also the heavens. This does not indicate a literal earthquake, but a shake up in the spiritual realm. Haggai promised, “In a little while [about five hundred years] I will once more shake the heaven and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of

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all nations will come [the Messiah] and I will fill this house [the second temple] with glory (Haggai 2:6). As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ physically entered that rebuilt temple.

When the kingdom of God was established at Pentecost, Peter described the results of the effusion of the Holy Spirit as blood and fire and billows of smoke. The kingdom began with the blood of Christ, the fire of God, and the smoke of the Holy Spirit. We no longer

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## *The kingdom of man is being shaken down and an unshakable kingdom is being built up.*

born again since Pentecost and all who will be saved until the second advent of Christ are added to this same Church, the heavenly city, Mt. Zion, which incorporates all the redeemed on earth and in heaven.

Between Christ's first advent and his second advent, two things are happening. The kingdom of man is being shaken down and an unshakable kingdom is being built up. Everything that is temporary will be reduced to rubble. The participle "shaken," which occurs twice in verse 27 is a present participle. Wesley's comment was that this universal shaking began at the first coming of Christ and will be consummated at his second coming. Whatever can be shaken and leveled will be.

Sinful man is in rebellion against the sovereignty of God. Our culture is a reflection of this rebellion. Man is still trying to attain the satanic promise, "You will be like God." From the building of the Tower of Babel to the present day, there has been one attempt after another to build the city of man.

But every attempt is nothing more than a house of cards. God tolerates this rebellion for only so long, then he shakes it down. Everything that is not built upon the rock Christ Jesus will be shaken and destroyed. Our God is also a consuming fire. He will burn up everything the shaking brings down.

This, then, is the key to understand current events. There is a whole lot of shaking going on! Why are we witnessing such a great economic collapse? Why are we being judged economically? Just as the ten

plagues of Egypt were an attack on Egyptian deities, so this economic shakeup focuses on the Almighty dollar. We are reaping what we have sown. Every time man tries to establish his own kingdom, God sends an earthquake. Across the span of history is the rubble of human empires. The city of man has no future. We are at the end of an age.

John Maynard Keynes wrote the most influential economic book of the twentieth century in 1936. He advocated state intervention in the free market through deficit spending in order to stimulate the economy. This is salvation through inflation. Keynesian theory advocates spending ourselves out of debt. The more credit is extended, the more prosperity results.

By 1971 Nixon declared, "We are all Keynesians now." But our house of cards is collapsing and the recourse is more state intervention. The result will be the loss of a free market. The *Newsweek* cover story for February 16, 2009, proclaimed, "We are all socialists now."

Will America survive this economic judgment? Not if we continue in our defiance of God's law. But even if America falls, this does not necessarily mean the end of the world. Such analysis often leads to date-setting. When Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple, his disciples immediately associated that with his advent and the end of the world. I am not predicting the end of the world, but I am warning that we may be facing the end of our world.

We must avoid two extremes. One view does not make any connection between our economic collapse and eschatology. The other extreme connects them in such a way that we try to project the timing of Christ's return.

Our message to this generation is that we have broken covenant with God. Deuteronomy 28:15-68 warns that if we break covenant with God, the consequences will get progressively worse. Deuteronomy 28:22 forecasts seven levels of judgment with the last being total destruction. It is a mistake to set a date for the final judgment. But it is also a mistake to think things will get better without repentance and renewal of our covenant. Our emphasis should be on ethics and not speculation. We will continue to see a progressive judgment in which the screws get turned tighter and tighter. Peter said that God first visits his

plagues of Egypt were an attack on Egyptian deities, so this economic shakeup focuses on the Almighty dollar. We are reaping what we have sown. Every time man tries to establish his own kingdom, God sends an earthquake. Across the span of history is the rubble of human empires. The city of man has no future. We are at the end of an age.

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Church in both justice and mercy. But his judgments grow more and more severe until the ungodly are left with no hope of escape.

Any judgment of God is an eschatological event because its goal is to bring an end to our sin. In Scripture “the day of the Lord” does not always refer to the same event. “The day of the Lord” refers to any time when the Lord intervenes in the world to judge sin and establish his sovereign rule. There will be one final day of the Lord, a day which God has appointed to judge the world (Acts 17:31), but until that final day there will be many days of the Lord. God will continue to shake this world until every stronghold comes down, until every argument has been demolished, every high thing that exalts itself

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***We have present help, not simply the promise of future hope.***

against the knowledge of God, and every thought is taken captive and brought under the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

Yes, I am aware that David Wilkerson has been warning about a thousand fires coming to New York City not far off in the future. “It will engulf the whole megaplex, including areas of New Jersey and Connecticut. Major cities all across America will experience riots and blazing fires—such as we saw in Watts, Los Angeles, years ago. There will be riots and fires in cities worldwide. There will be looting — including Times Square, New York City. What we are experiencing now is not a recession, not even a depression. We are under God’s wrath.”

I agree that we are under God’s judgment. But some of the prophecies Wilkerson predicted would come “very soon” in *The Vision*, which was published in 1974, have not yet happened (see Deut 18:22). And I am concerned that this “message” contains little emphasis on hope. The righteous are only advised to lay in store a thirty-day supply of non-perishable food, toiletries and other essentials, if possible. Quite possibly Wilkerson’s message is more a reflection of the implication of his prophetic view than a word from the Lord.

But things are not hopeless. There is another dynamic at work. God is not only tearing something down, he is building something up. We are receiving a kingdom. Just as the shaking is present tense, so is

this receiving. Dispensationalism teaches that the kingdom was postponed at Christ’s first advent, yet our text says we are presently receiving it.

This kingdom began long ago with Christ’s first advent, but the end has not yet been finally realized. But God is building a kingdom. It started as small as a mustard seed, and it works as quietly as yeast, but it is built on Christ, and it *cannot be shaken*. E. Stanley Jones wrote in *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*, “Not only will it not be shaken, it cannot be shaken, for it is ultimate reality.”

If God is our refuge and strength, we have present help not simply the promise of future help. And if he is in our midst, we shall not be moved. The earth giving way, mountains falling, floods, and earthquakes are all ultimate expressions of crisis which are referenced in Psalm 46. Yet we are to be confident and not give in to fear. If God dwells among his people, the city of God will not fall — even if the city of man does collapse. Just at the break of dawn, God will help us. He will make wars cease. He will thwart the weapons of mass destruction. It is his agenda which prevails and he declares it — “I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.” Therefore, the people of God are to be still. Our peace and confidence are based on the sovereignty of God. The darkest hour of the night is just before the dawn of the morning. When things appear to be the blackest, the Lord will come to our aid. “Nevertheless the foundation of God stands firm, having this seal, The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim 2:19).

A. T. Robertson remarked that the kingdom of God is not shaken, fearful as some saints are about it. Many people live in fear, but God did not give his children the spirit of bondage and fear (Rom 8:15). Nor should the man of God engage in fear-mongering. Instead, we must call the people of God to work. “Therefore [in light of the resurrection], my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

On an old English church was found this inscription, “In the year of 1653, when all things sacred in the Kingdom were either profaned or demolished, this church was built to do the best of things in the worst

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of time.” And yet John Wesley would be born in 1703 and the great Methodism revival would sweep all of England. Richard Watson wrote that amid the scoffing of an infidel nation and the roaring of its senseless mobs, when there were but few signs of life amid the general death, the Wesleys sang,

Jesus, the Conqueror, reigns,  
In glorious strength arrayed,  
His kingdom over all maintains,  
And bids the earth be glad.

In 1804 Methodist evangelist Lorenzo Dow was disappointed with his revival services in Lynchburg, Virginia. He wrote, “I spoke in the open air in what I conceived to be the seat of Satan’s kingdom . . . Lynchburg was a deadly place for the worship of God.” Two hundred years later Lynchburg is home to the largest evangelical university in the world.

In Scripture, the day of the Lord is not only divine intervention in judgment, but also in revival. Isaiah 2 describes the day of the Lord. Everything proud and lofty will be brought low, but the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains and the nations shall flow to it. John Wesley did not postpone this vision to a future dispensation, for he wrote that what Christ instituted will

continue to the end of the world. Nor is this prophecy to be understood literally of a physical temple. Rather, it depicts the Church of God. His Church is marching on. In *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Wesley explained the Methodist revival by saying “the day of the Lord is come. He is again visiting and redeeming his people.”

Jesus promised that we would have tribulation in this world. But he also exhorted us to be confident and courageous because he had overcome the world (John 16:33). We are to be people who have an irrepressible hope. Death has already been conquered. We have an unstoppable king and we are part of his unshakable kingdom.

A year ago the conventional wisdom was that stock in General Motors was a secure investment. The truth is that God is building his kingdom and it will stand even if the United States does not. Martin Luther had it right

Let goods and kindred go  
This mortal life also  
The body they may kill  
God’s truth abideth still  
His kingdom is forever.

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## WESLEYAN FOUNDERS and SCRIPTURE

Daryl McCarthy

Among contemporary Wesleyan scholars it is popular to claim that biblical inerrancy is incompatible with Wesleyan-Arminian theology, that inerrancy is a Calvinistic doctrine and does not fit with Wesleyan-Arminian doctrine.

Larry Shelton in a *Wesleyan Theological Journal* article entitled, “John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective” sets forth the typical argument of Wesleyans who deny that a high view of Scripture is consistent with Wesleyanism. Shelton advises that Wesley’s

statements about Scripture must be interpreted from within the context of eighteenth-century thought, and efforts to super-impose on various proof-texts the framework of twentieth-century fundamentalist epistemology must not be considered legitimate explanations of his positions on

the Bible....Although he [Wesley] sometimes speaks in ways which may resemble Fundamentalism, his total context of thought is broader and more inclusive.... Furthermore, the canons of biblical authority and interpretation of a rationalistic Fundamentalism had their roots in post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism, which Wesley does not seem to have known, and nineteenth century Princeton theology, which Wesley did not survive to encounter.

Shelton goes on to assert that “it is anachronistic historically to project a nineteenth-century epistemology upon an eighteenth-century evangelist whose hermeneutics were strongly influenced by Patristic and Reformation sources.” He closes his reinterpretation of Wesley’s position of Scripture by declaring, “it is crucial that we employ methods of historical study which allow previous historical eras to speak

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without having twentieth-century presuppositions read back into them.”

Thus have Shelton and other modern Wesleyan scholars sought to redefine the numerous clear and unequivocal statements by Wesley and the other early leaders of the Wesleyan movement affirming the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. This makes Shelton’s solemn warnings about misinterpreting Wesley through a twentieth-century epistemology all the more preposterous. He practices exactly what he warns others against. He rereads Wesley’s affirmations of inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture through his own modern epistemology and lower view of Scripture.

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### **Wesley was one with the Reformers in his substitution of an infallible Book for an infallible Church.**

As Wesleyanism along with the larger Church struggles to define doctrine in this post-modern era, it is important to understand the commitment of historic Wesleyanism to biblical inerrancy as well as to other core doctrines of evangelicalism. An examination of the foundational writings of early Wesleyans demonstrates that in spite of the denial of biblical inerrancy on the part of many modern Wesleyan scholars, there was consistent unwavering affirmation of inerrancy and a high view of Scripture among these founders of the Wesleyan movement. John and Charles Wesley both stoutly defended a high view of Scripture. Richard Watson, the first systematic theologian of Wesleyanism, Adam Clarke, the renowned Wesleyan commentator, and all the other leading scholars of early Wesleyanism affirmed biblical inerrancy. This two-part article will document the positions of John Wesley, Richard Watson and Adam Clarke.

#### ***John Wesley on the Inspiration of Scripture***

The founder of Methodism was, by his own admission, *homo unius libri*, a man of one book. The well-known passage in which Wesley makes this declaration provides a poignant window into the heart and mind of this great man who had the highest regard for Scripture and who earnestly sought to hear God speak through his inspired Word.

I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from

God, and returning to God: Just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, — the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: — “Lord, is it not thy word, ‘If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God?’ Thou ‘givest liberally, and upbraidest not.’ Thou hast said; ‘If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.’ I am willing to do, let me know, thy will.” I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.

At the beginning of a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 he declared that since we know God is the source of all Scripture, we know the Word therefore to be “true and right concerning all things.” Wesley frequently affirmed his belief that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” and that “We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice.” He referred to Scripture as the “oracles of God.” He frequently appealed to 2 Timothy 3:16 which affirms God’s authorship and inspiration of scripture. In commenting on 1 Corinthians 2:13, he points out that Scripture consists of “*words taught by the Holy Spirit*—Such are all the words of Scripture. How high a regard ought we then to retain for them!” In commenting on Galatians 3:8, he declares, “So great is the excellency and fullness of the Scriptures, that all the things which can ever be controverted, are therein both foreseen and determined.”



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In his sermon on “Christian Perfection” he notes that many people object to using the words “perfect” and “perfection.” But Wesley protests,

But are they not found in the oracles of God? If so, by what authority can any Messenger of God lay them aside, even though all men should be offended?... Whatsoever God hath spoken, that will we speak, whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear. . . . We may not, therefore, lay these expressions aside, seeing they are the words of God and not of man. But we may and ought to explain the meaning of them; that those who are sincere of heart may not err to the right hand or left, from the mark of the prize of their high calling.

Wesley set forth a brief and simple apologetic for the divine inspiration of the Bible. He proposed that there are but five possible sources of the Scriptures: “good men or angels, bad men or devils, or...God.” He then systematically eliminated all the other choices except God. His conclusion is that “the Bible

must be given by divine inspiration.” To be sure, men were involved in the transmission of God’s Word. Wesley refers to the writers of the Bible as “men di-

vinely inspired.” But still God is the Source and the ultimate Author of the Book. It was he who moved upon the “holy men of God” (2 Pet 1:21). He even spoke of these writers of prophecy as being “purely passive” as they were “carried” by the Spirit, as expressed in 2 Peter 1:19. He believed that some portions of scripture were “dictated” by the Spirit.

In his sermon on “The Means of Grace,” Wesley asserts that Scripture is “the great means God has ordained for conveying his manifold grace to man” and reasoned directly from the scriptural declaration that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” to believe “consequently, all Scripture is infallibly true.” It is clear as Frank Baker has said, “Wesley was one with the Reformers in the tendency to substitute an infallible Book for an infallible Church.”

Wesley stoutly affirmed his belief in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures in a series of letters to a “John Smith.”

I am as fully assured today as I am of the shining of the sun that the Scriptures are of God. I cannot possibly deny or doubt it now; yet I may doubt of it to-morrow; as I have heretofore a thousand times, and that after the fullest assurance preceding. Now, if this be “a demonstration that my former assurance was a mere fancy,” then farewell to all revelation at once.

Wesley comments on this same matter again in a later letter to Mr. Smith. “The facts, whether asserted or denied, are still invariable...I am fully convinced to-day that the Scriptures are of God as that the sun shines. And this conviction (as every good gift) cometh from the Father of lights. Yet I may doubt of it to-morrow. I may throw away the good gift of God.”

In a letter to the editor of *Lloyd’s Evening Post* Wesley protested concerning remarks which had been made on a new edition of the Koran. He rejected objections which had been made to the Mosaic creation account and to God’s preference of the Jews. He responded to the suggestion that the devil could have invented the sacrificial system, to the argument that prophecy negates free will, and to the claim that “only the words of Christ Himself are the *pure, original* Scriptures.” He went on to proclaim, “I cannot but repeat the observation, wherein experience confirms me more and more, that they who disbelieve the Bible will believe anything. They may believe Voltaire! They may believe the Shastah! They may believe a man can put himself into a quart bottle.”

### ***John Wesley on the Inerrancy of Scripture***

Not only did Wesley consistently affirm the plenary inspiration of Scripture, but his own clear statements confirm his belief in the full verbal inspiration and trustworthiness or inerrancy of Scriptures. In 1776 Wesley commented in his *Journal* on Jenyn’s tract *Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion* by saying though it was an admirable piece, it was hard to tell whether Mr. Jenyn was a Christian, a deist, or an atheist. “If he is a Christian, he betrays his own cause by averring that “all Scripture is not given by inspiration of God, but the writers of it were sometimes left to themselves, and consequently made some mistakes.” Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.”

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***If there be any mistakes in the Bible ... it did not come from the God of truth.***

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Thus, Wesley in unequivocal terms denies any other position concerning Holy Scripture but that of inerrancy. In all his writings Wesley never once gave the slightest indication of a dichotomy between the inerrancy of scripture on “spiritual matters of faith and practice” and the errancy of historical and other “non-spiritual” matters. Rather, in the Preface to his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* Wesley sets forth his unequivocal understanding of Scripture as the inspired Word of God.

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was in the time of *Moses*, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other prophets. Afterward, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelists wrote.—This is what we now style the *Holy Scripture*: this is that *word of God which remaineth for ever*: of which, though *heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away*. The Scripture therefore of the *Old and New Testament*, is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.

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### **Wesley affirms that the Bible is inerrant in what it affirms as factual.**

An exact knowledge of the truth was accompanied in the inspired writers with an exactly regular series of arguments, a precise expression of their meaning, and a genuine vigour of suitable affections....

In the language of the sacred writings, we may observe the utmost depth, together with the utmost ease. All the elegancies of human compositures sink into nothing before: God speaks not as man, but as God. His thoughts are very deep: and thence his words are of inexhaustible virtue. And the language of his messengers also is exact in the highest degree: for the words which were given them accurately answered the impression made upon their minds: and hence *Luther* says, “Divinity is nothing but the grammar of the language of the Holy Ghost.” To un-

derstand this thoroughly, we should observe the *emphasis* which lies on every word; the holy *affections* expressed thereby, and the *tempers* shown by every writer.

Thus, Wesley provides a classic description of the evangelical doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration—an inspiration by God which covers every word and thought and yet allows for the individual styles of the inspired writers. Wesley’s declaration that there is “no defect, no excess” in Scripture, that “an exact knowledge of the truth was accompanied in the inspired writers with . . . a precise expression of their meaning” and that “the language of his [God’s] messengers also is exact in the highest degree” can hardly be reinterpreted to mean anything less than an undiluted affirmation of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible.

However Wesley’s view is by no means a naive, noncritical position, blind to difficulties. In his remarks on Matthew 1:1 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, concerning possible problems in the genealogy of Jesus, Wesley affirms that the genealogies are inerrant in all they affirm, in spite of potential problems in the records.

If there were any difficulties in this genealogy, or that given by St. Luke, which could not easily be removed, they would rather affect the Jewish tables than the credit of the evangelists; for they act only as historians, setting down these genealogies as they stood in those public and allowed records. Therefore they were to take them as they found them. Nor was it needful they should correct the mistakes, if there were any. For these accounts sufficiently answer the end for which they are recited. They unquestionably prove the grand point in view, that Jesus was of the family from which the promised Seed was to come. And they had more weight with the Jews for this purpose than if alterations had been made by inspiration itself. For such alterations would have occasioned endless disputes between them and the disciples of our Lord.

Wesley was simply affirming what most modern adherents of inerrancy would say, viz., that the Bible is inerrant in what it affirms as factual, to the degree of precision intended. Paul Feinberg asserts that “Inerrancy does not demand the infallibility or inerrancy of the noninspired sources used by biblical writers.” Feinberg also uses the phrase “true in everything

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they affirm” in referring to Scripture. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in Article XIII also denies that inerrancy is negated “by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.”

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### *All Scripture is infallibly true.*

It should be noted that Wesley did not say there were definitely mistakes in the genealogy. Rather, he merely recognized the possibility of mistakes—not on the part of the inspired authors, but in the Jewish records. He did not feel that his critical knowledge at that time warranted a definite statement either way concerning genealogical problems. Wesley affirmed that Matthew and Luke were inspired as they reported the traditional genealogical tables of the Jews which may have been in error. Thus, Wesley, while recognizing problems and gaps in our understanding, affirmed the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. As he stated, “‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ consequently, all Scripture is infallibly true.”

Wesley biographer A. Skevington Wood points out that

it is not to be assumed that he was altogether unconscious of the issues later raised in more acute form by the development of Higher Criticism. . . . An omnivorous reader like Wesley could hardly have been unaware of these preliminary rumblings. The storm was not to break until the next century, but the Bible was already under attack. Wesley’s convictions were not held in an atmosphere of undisturbed calm. His belief in the reliability of Scripture was tested by the rationalistic climate of his age.

On August 8, 1773, Wesley writes in his journal that he had reviewed a volume of theological *Dissertations* challenging the doctrine of eternal punishment. His response gives evidence of both his orthodoxy and his awareness of the critics of Scripture.

It would be excusable, if these menders of the Bible would offer their hypotheses modestly. But one cannot excuse them when they not only ob-

trude their novel scheme with the utmost confidence, but even ridicule that scriptural one which always was, and is now, held by men of the greatest learning and piety in the world. Hereby they promote the cause of infidelity more effectually than either Hume or Voltaire.

### *John Wesley’s Use of Scripture*

Wesley’s use and view of the Bible in his ministry illustrate and support his high view of Scripture. He constantly referred to and exhorted his people to be “Bible-Christians.” Deriders of the Holy Club called them “Bible-bigots” and “Bible-moths” who “fed upon the Bible, as moths do upon cloth.” In fact he went so far as to repeatedly warn against using frivolous modern terms, but rather to use Bible terminology so far as is possible. He called himself a “bigot” to the Bible and Bible language. He was fond of referring to himself similarly in connection with the Bible. “My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small.”

Wood said, “To borrow another arresting phrase from [P. T.] Forsyth, the effective preacher ‘must speak from within the silent sanctuary of Scripture.’ That was always Wesley’s way. Those who heard him sensed immediately that here was a man who had been with God and who now came to them with His message. Only preaching of that supernatural caliber could have produced the results which Wesley saw.”

He preached that “all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in searching the Scriptures.” Thus hearing, reading, and meditating upon the Scriptures serve as a means of grace. Yet he condemned in strong terms the fanaticism that led some to claim that Christians should read *only* the Bible. He declared that anyone who does that, must, to be consistent, do away with all sermons as well.

The preaching of Christian perfection raised disputes with other schools of theology. Inevitably the charge arose that Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification was unscriptural. In his reply to such accusations he indicated his solid position that the Bible is to be our sole rule of faith and practice. “I therein build on no authority, ancient or modern, but the Scripture. If this supports any doctrine, it will stand; if not, the sooner it falls the better. Neither the doctrine in question nor any other is anything to me, unless it be the

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doctrine of Christ and His Apostles...I search for truth, plain Bible truth.”

In another letter the founder of Methodism affirmed that “The Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice; and they are clear in all necessary points.” He especially emphasized the supremacy of the Scriptures in response to the mystics who promulgated the doctrine that the private guidance of the Spirit was more important than the rule of the Bible. He was concerned that his followers not be taken up with fanatical legalism but rather instructed them to “enjoin nothing that the Bible does not clearly enjoin. Forbid nothing that it does not clearly forbid.”

Wesley’s approach to interpreting Scripture was direct and uncomplicated. “The general rule of interpreting Scripture is this: the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it be not contrary to some other texts: but in that case the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly.” He quoted Clement of Alexandria to support his assertion that “the Scripture is the best expounder of itself.” He freely admitted that not all Christians agree on the interpretation of many passages, but pointed out that this is certainly not proof that they are not true Christians. Tongue-in-cheek, he asserts that it is a proof only that we should “no more expect living men to be infallible, than to be omniscient.”

One of the strongest indications of the value Wesley placed on the Bible comes in the training and demands he made on the Methodist preachers. The founder of Methodism declared that one cannot be a “good Divine” without being a “good textuary.” A minister of the Word ought to “know the literal meaning of every word, verse, and chapter.” He also demanded that his preachers have knowledge of the original languages of the Bible.

It is evident that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and the fountainhead of the movement which bears his name held a high view of Scripture. Wood asserts that “What Spurgeon once said of Bunyan is equally true of Wesley: his very blood is bibline.” While recognizing that our understanding of it is fallible and our interpretations may differ, he held unequivocally that the Bible comes to us by the inspiration of God and is consequently infallible and inerrant. This doctrinal position was demonstrated in practical terms in his many sermons, letters, and exhortations.

*Dr. McCarthy is president, International Institute for Christian Studies. These articles are edited from his paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, November 2001.*

—Continued in the next issue

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## The Acts of the Spirit, Part 4: The Evangelization of the Samaritans

Joseph D. McPherson

Most interesting is St. Luke’s account in Acts 8 of the evangelization of a people known as Samaritans. They were a mixture of Jewish and Gentile extraction. Their religion was likewise a mixture or mongrel kind of faith and worship. For these reasons, we understand that the Jews despised them even more than they despised the Gentiles.

Under the impact of persecution that followed the martyrdom of Stephen the disciples were scattered abroad “throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” Up to this time Christian believers had been concentrated in Jerusalem. This scattering of the disciples was in accord with the command of Christ: “When they persecute you in

this city, flee to another” (Matt 10:23). A literal obedience to this command resulted in a rapid spreading of the Gospel. It was in a city of Samaria that Philip proclaimed Christ with boldness. He like Stephen was one of the seven lay officers or deacons chosen to supervise the temporal affairs of the church. This man, who was first a deacon, later became an effective evangelist.

We are informed in verses 6-8 that “multitudes [of the Samaritans] gave heed with one accord unto those things that were spoken by Philip, when they heard, and saw the signs which he did. For from many of those that had unclean spirits, they came out, crying with a loud voice: and many that were

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*palsied, and that were lame, were healed. And there was much joy in the city.*” Their joy was the result of hearing the good news of the Gospel and witnessing various miracles of healing.

This story, however, is far from over at this point. What follows is an account of two leading apostles being sent to follow up the ministry of Philip. *“Now when the apostles which were in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none*

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## **Receiving the Holy Spirit was the culmination of their conversion.**

*of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.”* These

words reflect a sense of urgency among the leading apostles at Jerusalem. It was without delay that Peter and John were sent to Samaria.

There have been different explanations offered for the meaning of this passage. For instance, there are those who wish to believe that all these Samaritans were recipients of a measure of the Spirit common to regenerated believers and that Peter and John were sent to be instruments of God’s dispensing miraculous gifts upon a few consecrated leaders. The context, however, does not show this to be the Apostles’ intention and purpose. The concern of the leaders in Jerusalem was that the Holy Spirit *“as yet was fallen upon none of them.”*

Others see Peter and John as human instruments by which the Samaritans were entirely sanctified through their receiving the Holy Ghost on this occasion. Some are even of the persuasion that the Holy Spirit is received only in the work of entire sanctification. These views reflect an exceedingly low and unscriptural standard of regeneration.

We believe that a third view will appear more reasonable and far more scriptural. To assist us, however, in our understanding of this unusual occurrence let us first consider other New Testament sites wherein the Holy Ghost was given to newborn converts.

We know that the Corinthian believers were not only babes in Christ but carnal and yet the Apostle Paul

assures them in 1 Corinthians 3:16, that *“the Spirit of God dwelleth in you.”* Again in 6:19 he writes: *“your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you.”* In the same letter wherein he prays that the Thessalonian believers might be sanctified *“wholly,”* he testifies that they had become *“followers of ... the Lord, having received the word ... with joy of the Holy Ghost”* (1 Thess 1:6). Again, he testifies to the fact that the Galatian believers had previously *“begun in the Spirit”* (Gal 3:3). We therefore have scriptural assurance that justified and regenerated believers are in possession of the Holy Ghost even before they are entirely sanctified. Jesus promised His disciples in Acts 1:5 that they would *“be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.”* *“And so are all true believers, to the end of the world,”* wrote Mr. Wesley.

In one of his letters to Joseph Benson, Mr. Wesley gave a lengthy description of what it is to be entirely sanctified. He then ended with the following statement: *“If they like to call this ‘receiving the Holy Ghost,’ they may; only the phrase, in that sense, is not scriptural, and not quite proper; for they all ‘received the Holy Ghost’ when they were justified. God then ‘sent forth the Spirit of his son into their hearts, crying, Abba, Father.’ O Joseph, keep close to the Bible, both as to sentiment and expression!”*

We find St. Paul assuring the Corinthian babes in Christ that *“by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body ... and have been all made to drink into one Spirit”* (1Cor 12:13). This single verse makes it clear that by the baptism of the Holy Spirit we all enter the body of Christ, becoming new Christian converts and members of His Church. With a believer’s continued obedience of faith and a walking in the light, this same Holy Spirit is sure to bring that soul to full cleansing and a state of perfection so often mentioned in the New Testament. *“Being confident of this very thing,”* writes Paul to the Philippians, *“that he which hath begun a good work in you will perfect it.”* When Christ justifies believers, he has also begun the work of sanctification and is sure to carry on this work unto perfection in hearts who are faithful to the grace continually given them.

Dr. Robert Lyon makes the following observations:

It is said ... that they [the Samaritans] believed Philip’s message (v. 12). They had received the

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word (v. 14) and had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (v. 16). This account sounds as if they were truly converted. But questions arise. Everything that is said about the Samaritans is also said of Simon Magus who certainly had problems. If they were Christians, so was he at this point. Further, the reference in verse 16 to the fact that the Holy Spirit has not yet fallen upon them sounds as though this is abnormal and a surprise. Something was not quite right .... I suggest, then, that the sending of Peter and John was to provide some sort of corrective. One thing, however, is quite certain, viz., that when Peter and John laid their hands upon them and they "received" the Holy Spirit, it was their first experience of the Spirit and cannot be counted as a second experience. In the schema of the book (see 1:8) it is the incorporation of the Samaritans into the body. It was, so to speak, the culmination of their conversion.

Yes, the receiving of the Holy Spirit was, as Dr. Lyon concludes, "the culmination of their conversion." It is scripturally impossible for any to be evangelically regenerated without receiving the Holy Spirit. An early church Father by the name of Origen infers that until the arrival of Peter and John on the scene the initial salvation process of the Samaritans was "not complete." Another church Father by the name of Cyprian assures us that "Peter and John supplied ... what [the Samaritans] lacked" toward their salvation. One will search in vain to find early church Fathers and later reformers teaching that Peter and John were instruments by whom the Samaritans received the experience of entire sanctification.

Saving faith according to Mr. Wesley "is a gift of God. No man is able to work it in himself. It is a work of omnipotence. It requires no less power thus to quicken a dead soul, than to raise a body that lies in the grave. It is a new creation and none can create a soul anew, but He who at first created the heavens and the earth."

James Dunn believes that there are a number of reasons for concluding that the faith and commitment of the Samaritans under Philip's preaching were defective. After a thorough exegesis and study of this passage in the Greek New Testament, Dunn concludes in a convincing manner that the faith of the Samaritans was more of a mental assent to the truth preached by Philip and was lacking in full commitment. A New Testament scholar by the name of William H. Baker informs us that "New Testament use of the word *believe* can have a range of meaning, from mental assent to certain facts (John 2:23; James 2:19) to justifying commitment (Rom 10:9-10)." The Samaritans seem to have believed the man Philip but lacked a vital faith in Christ Jesus which alone brings the kingdom of heaven to the human heart with regenerating power. These Samaritans might be considered Christians in an outward form only, but not in the New Testament sense of the word. Such could be

said of many in today's congregations. They may have been baptized. They may have appeared at our altars. Better yet they may have given full mental assent to the doctrines of the Gospel and even rejoiced in the truth without ever experiencing the inward reception of the Holy Spirit.

We have already noticed that when the apostles in Jerusalem learned that the Holy Spirit was not yet fallen upon the Samaritans through Philip's ministry, they dispatched Peter and John immediately to the scene. Their praying and laying hands on the Samaritans resulted in their receiving or being baptized with the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, we know that the Corinthians were not yet entirely sanctified when Paul wrote to them his two letters. Yet we also know that he had previously lived and ministered in Corinth for a period of eighteen months. Can it be thought possible that during that eighteen months of ministry he would have failed to lay hands on the Corinthians that they might receive or be baptized in the Holy Ghost? Doubtless this was the way by which they came to have the Spirit of God dwelling within them (1Cor 3:16; 6:19).

"The mistake of many commentators," writes Dunn, "is to assume that because the conditions of Acts 2:38 had apparently been fulfilled, therefore, [the Samaritans] were Christians and in possession of the Spirit. The New Testament way is rather to say: Because the Spirit has not been given, therefore the conditions have not been met. This," continues Dunn, "is why Luke puts so much emphasis on the Samaritans' final reception of the Spirit, for it is God's giving of the Spirit which makes [one] a Christian, and, in the last analysis, nothing else."

St. Paul assures the Romans that "*if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his*" (Rom 8:9). Dr. Lyon assures us that "From Pentecost on, all believers receive at conversion the Holy Spirit as promised .... No biblical basis exists," says he, "for a distinction between receiving the Spirit and being baptized in ... the Spirit." Furthermore, he concludes that, "The dynamic of conversion to Jesus Christ is such that perfection in love [or entire sanctification] is the mandatory follow-up."

It is not sufficiently realized that in New Testament times the possession of the Spirit was the hallmark of the Christian. The apostles did not conclude, as many would today, that merely being baptized or merely going forward to the altar is proof of having received the Spirit. The fact that these Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Spirit under Philip's ministry is a critical factor in this narrative. Luke's aim is to highlight the difference between true and false Christianity. He, like the apostle Paul, emphasized the great difference between the Christian and non-Christian. Only the Christian is in possession of the Holy Spirit.

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## REVIEWS

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### **Anthony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 222 pages. ISBN: 978-0-06-133529-7**

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Robert Newton Flew was a Methodist minister and Cambridge scholar. From 1927-1937 he served as chair of New Testament Language and Literature at the Westcott House at Cambridge. He was awarded the Doctor of Divinity degree from Oxford in 1930. His work, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology: An Historical Study of the Christian Ideal for the Present Life* was published in 1934 and became regarded as the standard work on the subject. In his "Preface," Newton paid tribute to his father, a Wesleyan Methodist minister whose life-work was to influence souls. Newton Flew was elected the conference president of Methodism in 1946.

His only son, Anthony Garrard Newton Flew, was born in 1923 and attended Kingswood School, which had been founded by John Wesley. And yet by the age of fifteen, Anthony had concluded that there was no God. His heart had never been strangely warmed. While he had learned critical investigation from his father, that same critical investigation led Anthony to reject his father's faith—partially because of the problem of evil. While Anthony never discussed his doubts with his father, by the time he was nearly twenty-three, the word had gotten back to his parents that he was an atheist. For nearly seventy years he pursued the philosophy of atheism, denying both the existence of God and the existence of an afterlife.

By the time his father died in 1962, Anthony was the leading champion of atheism, having published over thirty philosophical works. Anthony also participated in the Socrates Club, chaired by C. S. Lewis. His first paper defending atheism was presented at the Socrates Club. However, at 84, Anthony said no one is as surprised as he is that his denial of the Divine has turned to discovery. Yet Anthony contends that this does not really amount to a paradigm shift since his paradigm remains, along with Socrates, "We must follow the argument wherever it leads."

Anthony wrestled with such questions as: How did the laws of nature come to be? How did life originate from nonlife? How did the universe come into existence? Since the early 1980s, Flew began to reconsider the evidence. He came to believe that he had arrived at his conclusion regarding the nonexistence of God much too quickly, much too easily, and for the wrong reasons. It seemed to him that those who advocated the cosmological argument were providing scientific proof that the universe had a beginning. An infinite regress does not explain causa-

tion. The almost unbelievable complexity of DNA points to the fact that the universe is intricately purpose driven. Faced with the arguments of Intelligent Design, Flew has a new answer to the question "Who wrote the laws of nature?" He has concluded that there is a Divine lawmaker.

Varghese, who coauthored this book, is not impressed with the "new atheism." He references three of the "four horsemen," Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, describing them as sounding like fundamentalist preachers. Their books are fiery and there is no room for ambiguity. It's black and white. Either you are with them all the way or you are with the enemy. Ironically, Dawkins claims that Flew has committed "apostasy." Varghese replied, "It has perhaps never occurred to Dawkins that philosophers, whether great or less well known, young or old, change their minds based on the evidence."

Yet Varghese says the new atheists refuse to engage the real issues involved in the question of God's existence and seem unaware of new arguments generated within philosophical theism. Varghese concluded that something always existed. Take your pick: God or universe.

Flew claims that his pilgrimage has been of reason and not of faith. He has not yet made contact with the Divine Mind, but he concludes with the statement, "Someday I might hear a Voice that says, 'Can you hear me now?'"

Does this mean that Flew has been seeking God simply through his own rational process? The biblical doctrine of prevenient grace teaches that God makes the first move. While Flew claims that he has not yet heard from God, perhaps he has a preconceived notion of the voice of God. It is the Spirit of Truth which guides us into all truth (John 16:13). Flew now believes that the Christian religion is the one religion that most clearly deserves to be honored and respected, whether or not its claim to be a divine revelation is true. In an appendix, Flew dialogues on this possibility with N. T. Wright, claiming Wright presents by far the best case for accepting Christian belief that he has ever seen.

Flew believes that his father would be hugely delighted with his present view on the existence of a God. I pray that, in God's grace, Anthony will come to know the God of his father. Although he is now old, apparently he has not been able to remain in a state of departure from his training as a child.

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### **Joseph D. McPherson, *"Our People Die Well:" Glorious Accounts of Early Methodists at Death's Door* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2008), 392 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4343-2981-3**

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As a reader of early Methodist literature I have often reflected that everyone ought to know the quality of people Wesley and

his followers truly were. In their living, suffering and dying they were exceptional people. At times in my reading I have

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distinctly been drawn by the Spirit to a place of prayer with the plea that God would make me like one of them. Over the years, as a pastor I have told my congregation that I wanted to die well. Joe McPherson now makes it possible for a pastor or anyone else to illustrate the point.

This book is a compilation of ninety-eight early Methodist testimonies as they faced the valley of the shadow of death. It also has a section contrasting the deaths of some notable unbelievers from the same period of time such as the French atheist, Voltaire. McPherson arranges them chronologically beginning with the death of Samuel Wesley, the father of John and Charles Wesley, and concludes with that of Adam Clarke. Some are short while others consist of several pages. But all of them breathe a faith in God and his Word that pulls on the human spirit as one reads its pages. The title is taken from an observation made by a physician to Charles Wesley who had watched a number of the Methodists die triumphantly. His words were these, "Most people die for fear of dying; but, I never met with people such as yours. They are none of them afraid of death, but are calm, and patient, and resigned to the last." This led John Wesley to state, "Our people die well."

McPherson is a lifelong student of the early Methodist and his notes and comments joined to several of the testimonies are pertinent and soul-searching. He is the son of well-known author Anna Talbott McPherson. He has been a regular contributor to *The Arminian Magazine*. I deeply appreciated his thoughts concerning assurance, patience with seekers and quotes from John Wesley's sermons that apply to the story at hand. His observations demonstrate his knowledge of Methodist doctrine.

Religion, if it is meant to be anything, it should be practical. Wesley used the word "experimental." That means it should come to the aid of humanity at every stress point in life. A per-

son should be able to happily prove the sufficiency of his beliefs. If my religion cannot help me live life dealing with the obstinate, the rude, the unkind among people; if it cannot teach and make me a spouse who loves my wife like she should be loved, equip me to work in all of life's unexpected changes and face the end with a great deal of assurance confident of God and his promise, then give me another religion. All my life I have sought for such a religion and blessed be God that I discovered the early Methodists. They have answered my questions helping me to clarify the Scriptures. I have felt more of the convicting and comforting power of the Holy Spirit while perusing their lives than any other book outside the Bible itself. I have read their dying words and felt "O God, let my end be like theirs."

It seems to me a religion that has fit a person to face the last enemy with peace and hope and allows one to admonish all around him in his dying hour of the trustworthiness of the Gospel is one we need to learn, advocate and possess. After all we too will die some day. The question this book forces one to ask is, "how?"

I highly recommend this book to all who know they will die and are seeking to do it well. McPherson is to be commended for his work. We are indebted to him for resurrecting the stories of those who are dead yet speak. Take the time to read this one for yourself.

You may order this book directly from Joseph McPherson for \$17.99, plus \$2.58 postage/handling.

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