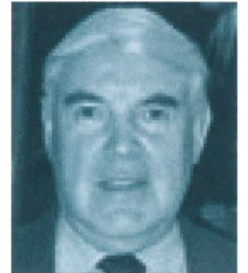


# KNOW YOUR DISEASE! KNOW YOUR CURE!: JOHN WESLEY'S DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN

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**IN THE JOURNAL OF THE REVD JOHN WESLEY (1703–91), FOUNDER AND LEADER OF THE METHODIST SOCIETIES, THERE IS AN UNEXPECTED AND INTERESTING HIATUS FOR THE EIGHT-WEEK PERIOD OF DECEMBER 1756 AND JANUARY 1757.** Since the beginning of his 'field preaching' in Bristol in April 1739, Wesley had been fully occupied with itinerant evangelism and almost every week found him travelling the roads of Britain and Ireland in his non-stop gospel ministry. Now, however, in late 1756, he took an unexpected break and used the time to write a theological treatise. Entitled *The Doctrine of Original Sin according to Scripture, Reason and Experience*, it ran to 522 octavo pages and was Wesley's single longest publication. It was intended as a page by page rebuttal of a book published 17 years earlier by Dr John Taylor of Norwich, *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin Proposed to Free and Candid Examination*. Wesley confessed that he had waited some time in the hope that others would reply to Taylor. When this did not happen, he took up his pen because he could no longer be silent. 'Necessity is laid upon me to provide those who desire to know the truth with some antidote against that deadly poison which has been diffusing itself for several years through our nation, our Church and even our Universities.'

John Wesley was deeply disturbed and concerned about the spread of Socinianism in England and its corollary denial of the doctrine of original sin. Named after the Italian rationalists, Lelio Sozzini (1525–62) and Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604), Socinianism advocated a reductionist Christology and an Enlightenment repudiation of the traditional doctrine of original sin. Wesley's concern was both doctrinal and practical; theologically he viewed Socinianism as destructive of the very foundations of the Christian doctrines of incarnation and redemption, and evangelistically he saw it as a very real threat to the proclamation of the gospel and the work of bringing men and women to Christ.

John Wesley's interest in the doctrine of human sinfulness had begun much earlier than his encounter with John Taylor's book in the 1750s. In 1725, as he prepared for ordination in the Church of England, he carefully examined the *Thirty-Nine Articles* so that he could swear his allegiance to them without quibble or reserve. In particular he had studied Article IX, entitled 'Of Original or Birth Sin,' and in subsequent years he would quote from it approvingly as an expression of Scripture doctrine: 'Original Sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of

Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil ... and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.'

Two weeks after his ordination in September 1725, Wesley preached his first sermon at Fleet Marston. The sermon was entitled 'Death and Deliverance,' based on the words of Job, 'There the wicked cease from troubling' (3.17). In the opening paragraph the 22 year old preacher reminded his listeners that the miseries of life hardly needed proof. 'The words of Job, "few and evil have been the days of the years of thy servant," may be justly applied to the whole race of mankind. Such is the inheritance which the sin of our first father has entailed on his whole posterity.'<sup>1</sup>

Five years later John Wesley preached two sermons in November 1730 that indicate his ongoing concern with universal sinfulness. The first, entitled, 'The Promise of Understanding', was preached in All Saints, Oxford, and the second, 'The Image of God', two weeks later in St Mary's, Oxford. The importance of this latter sermon is that it was his first 'university sermon'. The leader of the Oxford 'Methodists' took for his text the words of Genesis 1.27, 'God created man in his own image'. The sermon gives a vivid description of Adam before and after the 'Fall', and both sermons enlarge on man's sin and ignorance and spiritual declension. While neither sermon deals directly with the subject of Adam's sin corrupting the human race, the whole argument presupposes the Fall in a very orthodox way, as summarised in Article IX of the *Articles*.

Later, in 1730, in correspondence with his father Samuel Wesley, John Wesley wrote about his concerns over a recently published book dealing with original sin. In 1729 Archbishop William King published *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* and John reported to his father his deep dissatisfaction with King's doctrine. King argued that evil arises from matter as all creation must be inferior to the Creator. Wesley dismissed King's thesis as a revival of Stoic thinking and pointed out that King made no use of Genesis 3, nor did he account for fallen humanity, as in Article IX of the *Articles*. It is very clear that from 1725, the year of his ordination, John Wesley was deeply concerned about how the doctrine of original sin was being marginalised even by Anglican theologians. Well before his evangelical 'heart-warming' in May 1738, Wesley was already convinced of a doctrine of original sin as summarised in Article IX of the *Articles*. When he convened the first

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### NOTES

- 1 J Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (The Bi-Centennial Edition; 16 Vols. published so far; editor-in-chief, F Baker; Oxford/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975–2008), 4.206.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 8.277.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 3.520.
- 4 J Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (8 Vols; ed. J Telford; London: Epworth Press, 1931), 4.48.
- 5 Wesley, *Works*, 9.258.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 9.308.
- 7 Wesley, *Letters*, 4.67,68.
- 8 Wesley, *Works*, 6.63–5.

► Conference of 'Methodist' preachers in 1744, it was significant that they engaged in a discussion on the doctrine of original sin. The consensus arrived at in 1744 represented the understanding of human sinfulness that John Wesley firmly held and defended for the rest of his life: 'Question. In what sense is Adam's sin imputed to all mankind? Answer. In Adam all die; that is, (1) Our bodies then became mortal. (2) Our souls died; that is, were disunited from God. And hence, (3) We are all born with a sinful, devilish nature. By reason whereof, (4) We are children of wrath, liable to death eternal. (Romans 5.18; Eph. 2.3).'<sup>2</sup>

Ten years after John Wesley began his itinerant preaching ministry across the British Isles, he encountered Socinianism first-hand. In his *Journal* for Sunday, August 28, 1748, he recorded a preaching visit to Shackerley in Lancashire: 'Abundance of people were gathered before six, many of whom were disciples of Dr. Taylor's, laughing at original sin and, consequently, at the whole frame of scriptural Christianity. Oh, what a providence it is which has brought us here also among these silver-tongued Antichrists. Surely a few, at least, will recover out of the snare and know Jesus Christ as their wisdom and righteousness.'

Three years later he was back in Shackerley and recorded: 'Being now in the very midst of Mr Taylor's disciples, I enlarged much more than I am accustomed to do on the doctrine of original sin, and determined, if God should give me a few years life, publicly to answer his new gospel.'<sup>3</sup> Two more examples of Wesley's fear of the destructive influences of Dr John Taylor's doctrine can be cited. Preaching in Belfast on April 6 1769, Wesley related: 'I stood in the street and strongly declared, "All have sinned and are come short of the glory of God." But this many of them had no ears to hear, being faithful followers of Dr. Taylor.' But even more pointed was a paragraph in a letter from Wesley to Augustus Toplady in December 1758. 'I verily believe no single person since Mahomet has given such a wound to Christianity as Dr. Taylor. They are his books, chiefly that upon original sin, which have poisoned so many of the clergy and indeed the fountains themselves – the universities in England, Scotland, Holland and Germany.'<sup>4</sup>

Who was this John Taylor whose teaching John Wesley opposed so vehemently? Taylor (1694–1761) was born at Lancaster and spent the greater part of his life as a Nonconformist minister in Norwich where he built the famous Octagon Chapel in 1756. An ardent disciple of

the anti-Trinitarian Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), he steadily moved to a Socinian position and in 1740 he published *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin Proposed to Free and Candid Examination*. In 1757 he was appointed to teach theology at Warrington Academy, a stronghold of Socinianism and not far from Shackerley where Wesley had confronted Taylor's disciples in 1748. Taylor's book had been hugely influential and in 1758, Jonathan Edwards lamented the harm it had done in New England. It was this work from the pen of Taylor that Wesley set himself the task of answering in December 1756. His *Doctrine of Original Sin*, together with a later summary sermon, *Original Sin*, sets out his teaching.

Opening his treatise, Wesley quickly came to the point. He could no longer remain silent 'against that deadly poison which has been diffusing itself for several years through our nation, our Church and even our Universities.' He judged Taylor's book more dangerous than 'open Deism;' indeed it is 'old Deism in a new dress,' sapping the foundation of 'all revealed religion, whether Jewish or Christian.' Framing an overall view of human history from Genesis 3 to the present, he painted a stark and realistic picture of fallen man through the ages, dealing, in turn, with the Israelites, the Romans, the Heathen, the Mahometans and, finally, the whole Christian world, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. Everywhere and in every age Wesley found evidence of human pride, malice, envy, hatred, fear, lying, treachery and murder. 'Universal misery is at once a consequence and a proof of this universal corruption. Men are unhappy because they are unholy.'

How can we account for universal human wickedness? Wesley's answer was to quote from Genesis 3, 1 Corinthians 15.22, and Romans 5.12. 'In Adam all die', by the first man came both natural and spiritual death, by 'this one man sin entered into the world ... and death passed upon all men in that all have sinned.' John Taylor had argued that it was unjust of God to punish others because of Adam's sin. The only consequence of Adam's sin that affected the human race was physical death. Wesley replied that since Adam's posterity was punished with death therefore all men were justly punishable. By 'punishment' Wesley said he meant 'suffering consequent upon sin. All mankind suffer death consequent upon Adam's sin ... Adam sinned, his posterity suffer and that in consequence of his sin.' Along lines similar to the arguments for original sin found in the writings of Augustine, Luther and Calvin, Wesley saw Adam as the federal head of the race. In the

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'Fall' of Adam, all men and women are represented: 'In and through their first parents all Adam's posterity died in a spiritual sense and they remain wholly "dead in trespasses and Sins" till the second Adam makes them alive. By this one man sin entered into the world and passed upon all men. And through the infection which they derive from him, all men, are, and ever were, by nature entirely alienated from the life of God, without hope, without God in the world.'<sup>5</sup>

John Taylor asserted that it was inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture to say that because of Adam's sin all of us have been put in the hands of the devil. Surely God, in all his dispensations, has been working to deliver us from the devil? Wesley read Taylor's argument as a specimen of Enlightenment optimism about human nature that ignored the plain teaching of Scripture. 'What can be made clear from the Scriptures is this: That from Adam sin passed upon all men, that hereby all men, being by nature dead in sin, cannot of themselves resist the devil and that, consequently, all who will not accept help from God are taken captive by Satan at his will.'

John Wesley was convinced that Taylor's rejection of the doctrine of original sin held by the Christian Church from New Testament times resulted in his corollary rejection of the biblical doctrine of grace. Taylor described the new birth and regeneration as merely 'the gaining those habits of virtue which make us children of God'. Wesley expostulated that if that is what regeneration is, then Paul should not have written, 'You are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3.26), but 'You are all the children of God by gaining habits of virtue.' Wesley's doctrine of regeneration was built on the foundation of universal sin: he saw regeneration as a radical transformation of our fallenness by God's almighty grace: 'According to the whole tenor of Scripture the being born again does really signify the being inwardly changed by the almighty operation of the Spirit of God; changed from sin to holiness, renewed in the image of Him who created us. And why must we be so changed? Because without holiness no man shall see the Lord, and because without this change, all our endeavours after holiness are ineffectual.'<sup>6</sup>

Two years after his *Doctrine of Original Sin* was published, Wesley wrote a personal letter to Taylor. His style was polite and courteous but he pulled no punches when he described the chasm between their respective doctrines: 'It is Christianity or heathenism! for, take away the scriptural doctrine of Redemption or

Justification and, that of the New Birth, the beginning of sanctification, or (which amounts to the same) explain them as you do, suitable to your doctrine of Original Sin, and what is Christianity better than heathenism? wherein, save in rectifying some of our notions, has the religion of St. Paul any pre-eminence over that of Socrates or Epictetus? Either I or you mistake the whole of Christianity from the beginning to the end! Either my scheme or yours is as contrary to the scriptural as the Koran is. Is it mine, or yours? Yours has gone through all England and made numerous converts. I attack it from end to end. Let all England judge whether it can be defended or not!'<sup>7</sup>

In taking time to refute John Taylor's book, John Wesley was attempting to answer one of the most erudite and popular Socinian publications of the eighteenth century. His knowledge of Scripture and his ability with the biblical languages are well demonstrated in these pages, as is his close acquaintance with the classics, the Church Fathers and the English Puritans. But the real reason for Wesley's long reply to Taylor was his conviction that Taylor's denial of the doctrine of original sin threatened the whole gospel message. He warned against this danger in his 1759 sermon, *Original Sin*: 'All who deny this, call it original sin, or by any other title, are but Heathens still in the fundamental point which differences Heathenism from Christianity ... Is man by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Allow this and you are so far a Christian. Deny it and you are but a Heathen still ... O beware of all those teachers of lies who would palm this upon you for Christianity. Keep to the plain, old faith, "once delivered to the saints," and delivered by the Spirit of God to our hearts. Know your disease! Know your cure! You were born in sin: Therefore "ye must be born again," born of God.'<sup>8</sup> ■