NEW FOCUS

Attempting to Unite Hearts and Heads
(A brief look at the current Wesleymania in our Reformed Churches)

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Burning hearts set free

Most books on John and Charles Wesley refer to his religion of the heart. We thus find Leslie Church entitling his biography of John Wesley Knight of the Burning Heart and Arnold Dallimore presenting Charles Wesley under the title A Heart Set Free. Yet there was far more to John Wesley and the Arminian Methodist movement that he founded than 'utterances of the heart.' Both Augustus Toplady[1] and George Eayrs[2], to mention two theological opposites, stress that Wesley was a thinker and philosopher and due attention must be paid to John Wesley's head, a head which even his brother Charles often noticed, did not always go the way of his heart.

Wesley's liberty to contradict himself

This fact, i.e. the contrary utterances of Wesley's heart and head, has made it a nigh impossible task to evaluate Wesley's contribution to theology and church life adequately. It would be extremely difficult for any Wesleyan Methodist, be he ever so enthusiastic for his founder, to allege that in his head and heart utterances, Wesley showed any sign of consistency. Indeed, Wesley's critics made much of this fact and presented him regularly with long lists of expressions from his works concerning basic Christian doctrine that totally contradicted one another. They demonstrated from Wesley's published writings that he both affirmed and denied every evangelical doctrine. However, unlike West Germany's Chancellor Adenauer who, when criticised for contradicting himself, answered, "What have I to do with my gossip of yesterday?", Wesley always denied that he was self-contradictory and, often boasted that he could out-debate anyone and produce arguments to show that he was equally correct in all contrary cases. This left Augustus Toplady, Richard and Rowland Hill, James Hervey, William Romaine and John Berridge with the opinion that 'Pope John' believed that his statements were correct merely because he, himself, had uttered them, no matter how self-contradictory they might seem to others. Whether they were from the heart or the head, was irrelevant to him. Pope John had spoken and that was that!

The many Absaloms amongst Wesley's supposed sons and pupils

Wesley's exaggerated feeling of self-importance is easily recognised in his attitude to his contestants. Whatever their age, experience and convictions, he viewed them as his cheeky wayward offspring in the faith who ought to follow his paternal care or be punished. Thus, when Sir Richard Hill and his brother Rowland denounced Wesley's theology, he promised them a good thrashing. His possessiveness over his 'children' knew no bounds. When Toplady, Conyers, Hill, Hervey, Cudworth, Erskine or any other champion of the faith of this time, showed their Calvinist colours, Wesley would adopt Davidic airs and cry "Absalom, my son, my son", wailing that they had left his 'fatherly' care and become ne'er-do-wells. Furthermore, Wesley had a fixed idea that all true Christians, even the Calvinistic kind, must, at some time, even if it did not happen until they were on their death beds, confess him to be right and free-willism to be the doctrine of God. Thus, he was prepared to pick up, believe and pass on any kind of rumour or interpret any kind of supposed sign which suggested that a person, formerly in disagreement with him had 'turned' back to Wesleyan paths. This caused him much embarrassment which he bluffed out when it turned out that he had jumped to wrong conclusions. When Toplady was dying, Wesley proclaimed that he had repented of his former beliefs. When Toplady heard what nonsense Wesley was relating, he was too weak to support himself but had himself carried into his pulpit. From there he announce that Wesley's were evil and fictitious and he would not retract a word of his criticisms against Wesley's religion of man. Toplady died soon afterwards rejoicing in sovereign grace and the mercies of God. When Wesley heard this, he spread the evil rumour that Toplady had died in deep despair. Yet we now read time and time again in Reformed magazines and newspapers how wicked Toplady was to criticise that good man John Wesley who was within his authoritative rights to denounce such a whippersnapper as Augustus Montague Toplady! These same magazines told a very different story a generation ago when Toplady was recognised as the giant he truly was.

Similarly, when Hervey was on his deathbed, Wesley spoke very highly of him as his former student. Hervey died trusting in the efficacy of Christ's imputed righteousness, having no righteousness in himself. Wesley who had called imputed righteousness 'imputed nonsense' was furious when he heard this, taking Hervey's deathbed testimony as an insult to himself. He then spread the silly rumour that Hervey had died cursing him. The protest at this scandalous accusation was great amongst Hervey's friends. Soon Wesley saw how his fable was hardly flattering to himself and his cause. Instead of apologising for what was so obviously a lie, Wesley now announced in print that Hervey's defence of his theology against Wesley's criticism was a forgery and, in fact, Hervey had died in harmony with his former tutor. Thus John Wesley followed in the footsteps of John Goodwin, who had explained away the Calvinism of departed Episcopalian

Puritans such as John Davenant and James Usher with the same imaginative, criminal, Arminian fervour.

The theological fashion has obviously changed and Wesley's free-willism and sceptical view of salvation and the ascent of man after the fall has become fashionable again. Forgotten are the perverse, below-the-belt stories Wesley told to discredit the saints and the forgeries he penned to turn people against the truth. His lies are now accepted as valid and good. Modern man needs a guru to follow. Those gurus who boast of their own infallibility are followed by the gullible the most. Thus our former Reformed establishment kotows to the Arch-Arminian and such as we who believe in the doctrines of grace are denounced as infidels, 'Hypers' and 'Antinomians'.

Sound in poetry, erroneous in prose

There are many signs, however, that Wesley's heart was sounder in doctrine and Christian experience than his head. His philosophical works, especially those on free-will, chance, human reason, necessity and scepticism, as Toplady pointed out, deny all the basic doctrines of Christianity and make God a mere product of man's wishful thinking and can thus be considered atheistic, indeed, blasphemous. Many of Wesley's philosophical interpretations of doctrine, as Hervey showed at length in his Aspasio Vindicated, were the teaching of Trent. Yet, as Hervey also pointed out, Wesley's hymns, songs of Christian experience, were often of the finest Biblical, experimental truth, embodying all the doctrines of grace that Wesley denied in his prose works. Thus again, it is not sufficient to denounce Wesley, as did the Hills, on the basis that Wesley was wrong 'in his head', therefore he was completely wrong in his heart. We must establish whether Wesley was right in his heart and whether this ever reached his head. We must also consider whether Wesley's acute scepticism summed up in the expression 'a child of God today can be a child of the devil's tomorrow', put an end to Arminian Methodism as a movement with a sound Body of Divinity, and left them merely a social society, united by institutionalised Methodism and the highest possible regard for their human founder.

Calvinistic and Arminian bias makes an objective study of Wesley difficult

Such a study, however, is difficult indeed, because of the great divide in theological appreciation caused by those churches and believers who have taken a militant Calvinistic stance and those churches and individuals who have adopted militant Arminian tenets. The former tend to scorn any enquiry into the views of their arch-enemy. He was an Arminian – and that is enough! For instance, I have been branded as an Arminian by so-called 'hardshells' merely for attempting to evaluate John Wesley's theology.

"What have the pure in heart to do with lepers", they say. Thus most works on Wesley have come from either secular, Arminian or Roman Catholic pens and, unlike the very large number of Wesley's contemporaries, few moderns such as Arnold Dallimore have felt called to take issue against John Wesley. Also, in the hundreds of biographies published favouring Arminianism, the main events of history, both political and ecclesiastical and the testimony of Wesley's non-Methodist contemporaries are left aside. John Wesley is simply presented as the one and only great preacher, teacher and church organiser of the 18th century. Many, unfamiliar with the facts, thus conclude that Arminian Methodism must be seen not only as the epitome of the 18th century church but as the foundation, walls and roof of the true apostolic church and the measure of all things.

Methodist tolerance and the Ecumenical Movement

At present, this exclusiveness is proving an embarrassment to Methodists. Though some few bemoan the crumbling of standards in their ranks, most appear to welcome the development of a World Church based on a spirit of ecumenical compromise. Inclusiveness has now become the keyword. Indeed, the time is ripe to ask modern Methodists if they have turned their backs on Wesleyanism en bloc. They appear not only to have rejected the doctrines of the Reformers but also the moral teaching of their own founder. Methodists, especially in Britain, have become a dwindling group of churches who are seeking a new form of organisation and administration to preserve their numbers. Less thought, if any, is now given to doctrinal and moral integrity. Indeed, it is obvious that something is fundamentally wrong with Methodism's heart and head as reports come regularly from their ranks concerning their anti-family campaigns and support of ways of life utterly contrary to the revealed will of God and totally abhorrent to true Christians.

Sadly, this modern shift in Methodism reveals a very superficial display of tolerance. It is a one-way tolerance at best. It is not that Methodism is open to new ideas on all sides but that its basic Arminianism and the low view of God's nature and high view of man's agency in salvation revealed in it is being stretched out to include all the logical consequences of a fanatical belief in man's basic ability and duty to choose what is right. In pursuing all the more a doctrine of works, they are rejecting all the more the doctrines of grace. Thus, though I believe in many ways, John Wesley drew nearer the gospel truth than Andrew Fuller, it is far easier to witness to a Fullerite than it is to witness to a convinced Arminian. A Fullerite will not explode at the sound of words such as election, predestination and the preservation of the saints, though he must be coaxed into interpreting them in a Biblical and not a Latitudinarian, Grotian context. Yet years of dealing with Arminians has shown this author that the doctrines of grace serve as a fuse to the dynamite of the Arminian's wrath and one can speak with a Methodist about anything but the grace which saved him. This sad truth

was underlined at a Bible study in my own home in which a Methodist circuit preacher and army colonel took part. We had come to that great first chapter of Ephesians and had started reading from the first verse and had come to the words, "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." Without waiting for anybody's exegesis, the colonel, shut his Bible with a loud slap, stood up with it in his right hand as though he was about to throw it away and exclaimed in a loud, angry voice, "Were the Bible to teach predestination and election, I would throw my Bible into the next waste bin!" All attempts to continue the Bible study failed because the red-faced colonel just would not calm down. He was only soothed when my wife tactfully came in with an excellent meal she had prepared and the conversation developed upon other lines.

THE STEEP FALL OF THE REFORMED ESTABLISHMENT

Former Reformation leaders, who left the doctrines of grace they had paid lip-service to in the nineteen fifties to eighties, to bask in the easy-believism of Fullerism, are now tumbling head over heels into Wesleyanism. They have proved to be reeds shaken by the winds of change. Wherever we look on the conference agendas of our Reformed institutions and para-church organisations today, we find the earlier Reformers and Puritans banished. They are either replaced by zany-sounding themes such as 'Helping your children be dazzled by God', 'or by topics with a Wesleyan flair such as 'John Wesley: bane or blessing?', or, 'What can we learn from John Wesley?', In our Reformed magazines, we now have one article after another on Wesley showing often a bottomless bathos in theological thought. We learn from some what herbal remedies Wesley had for various physical complaints; how he always told people to abstain from all controversy in public; and how he had the right balance of law and grace. We are warned that it is folly to criticise such a good man. We are now told that Wesley was really a Calvinist at heart and Calvin a Wesleyan at heart so that Calvin's Calvinism and Wesley's Wesleyanism are merely the two complimentary sides to the banner of truth. George Orwell in his Animal Farm saw that the pigs were becoming so like men and the men so like pigs that every difference would disappear. This is the future path of the Brave New World along which our Reformed and Wesleyan leaders are taking us. When our hearts tell our heads that man has become as the gods, then what care we for the gospel of God's electing and atoning mercies and what fear have we for the agonies of hell! Calminianism has saved us! We pigmen have become god-men at last!

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1. The Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity Asserted. See also Toplady's other works against Wesley's Arminianism.

2. John Wesley: Christian Philosopher and Church Founder.

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