

Wesley's Revision of the Shorter Catechism

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In 1642 the English Parliament convened the Westminster Assembly for the purpose of rebuilding the constitution and theology of the Church of England.

One hundred fifty-one theologians attended, including the most learned and erudite divines in England and Scotland—but the Episcopalian scholars, unhappy with the Presbyterian dominance, refused to participate. The Assembly met between July, 1643, and March, 1652, and three important theological documents were formulated. The first was "The Westminster Confession," the most comprehensive statement of 17th-century Calvinism published in English and based on the supralapsarian Irish Articles of Faith drawn up by Archbishop Ussher in 1615. The second Assembly document was "The Larger Catechism," a directory for the use of teachers, while the third document was "The Shorter Catechism," a brief handbook of indoctrination.

The writings of John Wesley show he was familiar with all three documents. In his "Predestination Calmly Considered," he quotes three times from "The Larger Catechism"¹ and he makes one reference to it in his "Thoughts upon Necessity."²

Wesley was far from being in full agreement with the expressly Calvinistic points of this Catechism, but in reply to Dr. Taylor of Norwich, he wrote: "To

it I never subscribed but I think it is in the main a very excellent composition which I shall therefore endeavor to defend, so far as I conceive it is grounded on clear scripture."³ And this Wesley does through the next 12 pages, defending, in general terms, the larger Catechism's doctrine of original sin against its denial by the Unitarian Taylor.

It was to the "Shorter Catechism" that John Wesley gave most attention. Hidden away at the end of volume 14 of his 30 volumes, "A Christian Library," is his revision of this Catechism.⁴ He made no additions to it, but he did make some important changes. When the original text of the Catechism is compared with Wesley's "Revision," the theological significance of the alterations is apparent.

Wesley began by removing altogether Questions 7 and 8: "What are the decrees of God?" and "How doth God execute His decrees?" Likewise the respective answers: "The decrees of God are His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass"; and, "God executeth His decrees in the works of creation and providence."⁵

There are no textual notes in Wesley's "Revision," but in other writings he expresses his understand-
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ing of the decrees of election and predestination. "I believe election commonly means one of two things. First, it means a divine appointment of some particular men to do some particular work in the world and this election I believe not only to be personal but absolute and unconditional. . . . Secondly, it means a divine appointment of some men to eternal happiness. But I believe this election to be conditional, as well as the reprobation opposite thereto. I believe the eternal decree concerning both is expressed in those words: 'He that believeth shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned.' And this decree God will not change and men cannot resist. According to this, all true believers are in scripture termed elect, as all who continue in unbelief are so long properly reprobates."⁶

The most surprising change Wesley makes in the Shorter Catechism is his complete removal of the article on adoption.

Wesley was unhappy with the Calvinistic use of the term "God's elect," and in Question 18 and its answer he substituted the word "mankind." "Who is the Redeemer of mankind?" "The only Redeemer of mankind is the Lord Jesus Christ."⁷ He also removed Question 20: "Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?" and its answer, that speaks of a covenant of grace given to those who are "elected to everlasting life."

Question 14 in the Shorter Catechism asks: "What is sin?" and answers: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." The Westminster divines based their answer on 1 John 3:4: *He hamartia estin he anomia*, interpreting "anomia" as both "want of conformity to" and "transgression of" the law of God.

Wesley significantly struck out the first clause and made the answer: "Sin is a transgression of the law of God."⁸ He would not generally use the Westminster formula though he would occasionally employ it with an explanation. "Every *anomia*, disconformity to, or deviation from, this law [the law of love in 1 Corinthians 13] is sin."⁹ John does not speak of "any" want of conformity to God's law but rather: "Sin is lawlessness." Wesley argues that John does not say: "All transgression of the law is sin. This I deny. Let him prove it that can."¹⁰

In relation to the unbeliever this distinction is unimportant, but for the believer there are disconformities to the law of God not imputed as sin. "Nothing is sin," Wesley argues, "strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God."¹¹ In any analysis of Wesley's doctrine of sin, the additional explanatory clause given in the Larger Catechism should be considered. "Any law of God

given as a rule to the reasonable creature." This addition makes sin both willful and conscious—the point Wesley argues for. Wesley, no less than the Reformers, is insistent on man's natural sinfulness. He uses the Larger Catechism to defend the doctrine of original sin and his accord with Reformed theologians at this point is seen in the fact that he transcribed, without change, many pages of Boston's "Fourfold State." He seems to imply the imputation of Adam's guilt, for he makes no changes in the Shorter Catechism's reply to the question: "Wherein consists the sinfulness of the estate whereinto man fell?" "The sinfulness of that estate . . . consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin."¹²

As we would expect, Wesley is opposed to the Calvinistic understanding of the calling of the elect, and he makes changes in Questions 30-32.¹³ Question 30 asks: "How doth the Spirit apply to us the redemption purchased by Christ?" and answers: "By working faith in us and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling." Wesley removes the phrase "in our effectual calling" and all of Question 31 and its answer: "What is effectual calling?" "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills, He doth persuade us and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ . . ." In Question 32, Wesley substitutes for the phrase, "they that are effectually called" the phrase "they that truly believe."¹⁴

The most surprising change Wesley makes in the Shorter Catechism is his complete removal of the article on adoption. He expunged Question 34: "What is adoption?" and its answer: "Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God."

There is nothing in this answer to which Wesley might have objected, as his own teaching on adoption shows, i.e. his sermon, "The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption"¹⁵ and his "Notes" on Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5. Why, then, did he expunge it? We cannot be certain, but a possible reason, admittedly a weak one, is that he wanted to set in bolder relief the preceding question, "What is Justification?" and the succeeding one, "What is Sanctification?"¹⁶

The latter question was of great importance to Wesley. The Shorter Catechism answered: "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness." Wesley struck out the words "more and more" to emphasize death to sin as realizable in this life and quoted Rom. 6:4 and 6 as proof texts.¹⁷ Wesley's interpretation of entire sanctification would not harmonize with the Calvinistic teaching on holiness attainable in the article of death—so plainly stated in the answer to Question 37. "What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?" "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory . . ." Wesley strongly denied that scripture taught anywhere a holiness achieved in or at death, and his revised answer

reads: "The souls of believers at their death pass into glory . . ."18

Wesley's insistence on a life of holiness made possible by the indwelling Spirit led him to expunge Question 82: "Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?" and its answer: "No man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed." The Scottish "Confession of Faith" adopted in 1560 avowed in Article 15: "The law of God we confess most just, most equal, most holy . . . but our nature is so corrupt . . . that we are never able to fulfill the works of the law in perfection."

John Knox, however, when incorporating this Confession in his "History of the Reformation in Scotland," included also the "Places" (i.e. articles of faith) of Patrick Hamilton, the first preacher of the Scottish Reformation. In "Certain Propositions proved by Scripture," Hamilton wrote: "He that hath faith keepeth all the commandments of God; ergo, he that hath faith keepeth all the commandments of God."¹⁹

Wesley's doctrine of justification by faith reaffirms the Protestant doctrine of Article 15 of the Scottish Confession; his doctrine of entire sanctification reaffirms the early Reformation teaching on holiness as stated by Patrick Hamilton.

What do we learn about John Wesley's theology from his "Revision"? The most significant thing is the small number of changes Wesley made: out of the 107 questions and answers of the Catechism, Wesley made important changes in only 10 of them. While this is not meant to imply that John Wesley

was Calvinistic (G. Croft Cell's abortive attempt showed the fallacy of such a contention),²⁰ it does show how large was his area of agreement with Reformed theology. The changes Wesley made are those expected. In dealing with the divine decrees, he removed the scholastic accretions that went beyond the teaching of scripture. Relative to sanctification and holy living, Wesley emphasized the Pauline doctrine that "love is the fulfilling of the law"—an emphasis that Patrick Hamilton and John Knox would have approved. And John Wesley did for the Westminster Shorter Catechism what its authors had not done—he added scriptural references for all the answers. In this, as in all things, Wesley sought to be *homo unius libri*.

1. *The Works of John Wesley* (Beacon Hill, Kansas City N.D.), 10: 904-59.
2. *Ibid.*, 10:459.
3. *Ibid.*, 10:261.
4. "A Christian Library consisting of Extracts from and Abridgements of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been Published in the English Tongue," by John Wesley (London: 1822), 14:387-414.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 390-91.
6. *Works*, p. 210.
7. "Christian Library," pp. 393-94.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 392.
9. *Works*, 5:152.
10. *Ibid.*, 6:417.
11. *Ibid.*, 12:394.
12. "Christian Library," p. 393.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 399.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 398.
15. *Works*, 5:98-111.
16. See J. A. Macdonald's *Wesley's Revision of the Shorter Catechism* (Edinburgh, 1906), pp. 51-60.
17. "Christian Library," p. 399.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 400.
19. See Macdonald, *Wesley's Revision . . .*, pp. 131-48.
20. G. C. Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York, 1935), pp. 242-72.

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Indeed, those who have not yet been "exodused" in this way continue to live under oppression in many kinds of *Egypt*s. The function of the exodus story for all people is specifically the function of gospel proclamation; the Good News in this case is that the God of the first exodus is also the God of countless exoduses in every generation.

Many excellent commentaries on Exodus are available. I have chosen some of those which I personally find helpful. No single commentary will suffice for exegetical study of a biblical book. Choose as many of the following as you can afford.

Commentaries

1. Brevard Childs. *The Book of Exodus*. OTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974. This is the single most comprehensive work on the market in English.
2. Martin Noth. *Exodus*. OTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962. This work is specifically

aimed at analyzing the text as a literary composite from several sources, written and oral.

3. R. E. Clements. *Exodus*. Cambridge Bible Commentary on the NEB. Brief but solid and helpful.

4. J. C. Rylaarsdam and J. E. Park. "Exodus" in *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1. The "Introduction" by Rylaarsdam is useful because it is succinct and accurate. The exegetical comments are often very general.

5. F. B. Huey, Jr. *Exodus*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977. This is generally a good series to own.

6. Keil & Delitzsch on *Exodus* are generally excellent on the Hebrew text; they are hard to use for anyone who does not handle the Hebrew alphabet and also quite out of date in areas of interest other than textual.

7. Umberto Cassuto. *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967. This volume is recommended because the spirit of the author, an observant Jew of the previous generation, should be captured by anyone who loves the Scriptures.

Special Studies

Here are several articles and other longer works on Exodus which deal with something less than the entire book. Most of these should be avail-

able in any good seminary or college library if you do not wish to order them personally.

1. Martin Buber. *Moses*. Harper Torchbooks, 1958.
2. *Review and Expositor* LXXIV, 4 (1977). "The Book of Exodus."
3. Moshe Greenberg. *Understanding Exodus*.
4. G. E. Wright, "Exodus, Book of," *IDB* 2:188-97.
5. R. E. Clements, "Exodus, Book of," *IDBSup* 310-12. This article is recommended for its updated bibliography.
6. Charles D. Isbell, "The Divine Name 'Eh-yah as a Symbol of Presence in Israelite Tradition," *Hebrew Annual Review* 2:101-18.
7. Charles D. Isbell, "Preaching the Old Testament," *Preacher's Magazine*, Dec.-Jan.-Feb., 1979-80, 36-40.

In the coming issues, I shall survey significant key words which function within the exodus narrative as conveyors of important theological insights.

*Author's own translation.