John Wesley, False Apostle of Free Will

Rev. Angus Stewart

BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE
John Wesley, A Biography
Stephen Tomkins
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, paperback, 208 pp.
ISBN 0-8028-2499-4

In 24 short chapters, Stephen Tomkins has given us an interesting and readable life of the heretic, John Wesley (1703-1791). This book is all the more valuable because it was written by one who is sympathetic to Wesley and his "gospel" of man's free will.

Wesley was a remarkable man by any standards, "a man of rare ability, passion and commitment and unique energy" (p. 199). In his 87 years, he rode over 250,000 miles to preach over 40,000 sermons (p. 199). He was a man of indomitable will, rising at 4 a.m. each morning and braving foul weather and hostile crowds. One reads of his escapes from angry mobs with wonder (pp. 110-120). Tomkins writes that in his last few years he was widely received with "veneration;" indeed he was "almost a national treasure" (p. 183). In 1790, there were 61,811 Methodists in the United States and 71,463 in the United Kingdom (p. 190). Today, there are some 33 million Methodists worldwide. Last year was the tercentenary of Wesley's birth and accolades poured in from all over the world, with some of the most effusive coming from purported Calvinists. Surely then John Wesley was a faithful servant of God, owned and honoured in the cause of Jesus Christ?

The Reformed believer is not dazzled by a man's popular acclaim. Instead, he "judgeth all things" in the light of "the mind of Christ" (I Cor. 2:15-16) revealed in sacred Scripture and summed in the Reformed confessions. We bear record of John Wesley that he had a zeal for God, but was it according to knowledge (Rom. 10:2)? We marvel at his endurance: riding from London to Bristol, Wales and Ireland in the west; and to Newcastle and Scotland in the north. But we also remember another who is even more assiduous, ever "going to and fro in the earth" (Job 1:7). Wesley studied extremely hard, even reading when on horseback. But the Scripture speaks of those who are "Ever learning,

and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (II Tim. 3:7). And did not our Lord call down "woe" upon the scribes and the Pharisees for travelling across "sea and land to make one proselyte" because they made him "twofold more the child of hell than" themselves (Matt. 23:15)? The question is this: What was the gospel that Wesley preached? Was it the true gospel (with some weaknesses, perhaps) or was it "another gospel" "which is not another" (Gal. 1:6-7)? Tomkins' book alone provides enough information to answer this question. Wesley even quotes Whitefield as saying that the two of them "preached two different gospels" (p. 94).

Wesley's gospel was the false gospel of salvation by the free will of the sinner. Free will, for all his talk of God's grace, was the deciding factor in salvation. In loving free will, Wesley hated predestination calling it "blasphemy." He declared, "It represents the most holy God as worse than the Devil, as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust" (p. 78).

However, the *Canons of Dordt* state that the "decree of election and reprobation" is "revealed in the Word of God" and "though men of perverse, impure and unstable minds wrest [it] to their own destruction, yet to holy and pious souls [it] affords unspeakable consolation" (I.6). Where does this leave Wesley? Not with the "holy and pious souls," but with the "men of perverse, impure and unstable minds" who "wrest" the truth of predestination "to their own destruction."

In its "Conclusion," the Synod of Dordt "warns calumniators to consider the terrible judgment of God which awaits them." Wesley certainly belongs in this category for he is guilty of the sins that the "Conclusion" proceeds to enumerate:

> bearing false witness against the confessions of so many Churches [including the church of England in which he lived and died] ... distressing the consciences of the weak; and ... labouring to render suspected the society of the truly faithful.

Remember that Wesley was not simply a church member but a church office bearer and that his church's creed (article 17 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*) taught election. Moreover, he was a founder of societies (and eventually a denomination) and he saw himself as a restorer of primitive Christianity! If church teachers shall receive a greater judgment (James 3:1), where will this leave Wesley? A false apostle of free will.

With his faith in free will, not only predestination but also the doctrines of total depravity, particular atonement, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints had to go (pp. 71, 96, 171), contrary to articles 9, 15 and 17 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. At the 1770 Methodist Conference, Wesley's doctrine of justification by free will led him to espouse an even more crude heresy: justification by works (pp. 171-173). Briefly, Wesley dropped the formula that the conference had approved but "almost immediately afterwards" he printed a defence of the original minutes (p. 173). Tomkins makes no reference to the controversial subject of Wesley's denial of the imputed righteousness of Christ in justification.

Wesley's corruption of the will of God in sovereign grace fits with his misunderstanding of the will of God in providence. Wesley believed in opening the Bible at random for guidance at critical junctures (pp. 54, 78), as did his brother, Charles (pp. 68-69). He also resorted to lots (pp. 54, 75, 78), dreams (p. 133) and intuitions (p. 71). This unscriptural understanding of divine guidance led him into further trouble.

Wesley and Whitefield had reached a truce on God's decree, agreeing to "let sleeping dogmas lie," as Tomkins puts it. But one day, Wesley "found himself *inwardly called* to speak out against predestination" (p. 71; italics mine). Tomkins continues, "After making the point at length, [Wesley] prayed aloud (again on divine impulse) that if he was right God would send a sign." People began to fall down and cry out (pp. 72-73). To Wesley, Almighty God was "stamping Divine approval" on his message (p. 73). "On one occasion," writes Tomkins, Wesley even ascribed his recovery from illness "as a reward [from God] for preaching against the Calvinists" (p. 98)!

While mysticism led him to *preach* against predestination, the casting of lots brought him to *publish* against it: "he resorted to pulling God's will out of a hat and was told 'Print and preach,' which he did" (p. 78). What are we to make of this? The Lord "put a lying spirit in the mouth" of John Wesley (I Kings 22:23) and He willed, in His sovereignty over the lot (Prov. 16:33), that Wesley's lies be printed for the deceiving of the reprobate (II Thess. 2:10-12) and the testing of the elect. Not content to attack the truth of predestination merely in his preaching and his books, Wesley also used "hymns," as did his brother, Charles (p. 93).

Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification by the free will of man fits with his teaching of justification by the free will of man, though not with articles 9 and 15 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. He was already teaching perfectionism in the

"Holy Club" at Oxford University in 1733 (p. 38). By 1739-1740, through a dispute with the Moravians, he reached the point were he would "castigate any who denied perfection as antinomians who were happy to accept their sinfulness" (p. 88). This was a doctrine in which Wesley "passionately believed" (p. 156). Tomkins sees perfectionism as a great "preoccupation" of Wesley's, "the very heart" of his "spirituality." "Faith, Wesley said, was the door of religion; holiness, 'religion itself'" (p. 197). Thus he "preached" entire sanctification and "fought for it at length" (p. 156).

Wesley's free will theology also carried over into his view of the church. Though an ordained minister in the Church of England, he organised a connexion of societies (along side the institute church) governed by his rules and regulations, i.e. his free will (e.g., pp. 166-167). Methodist lay men were being used of God (p. 81), Wesley thought, so in 1739 he "gave his permission" for them to continue preaching (p. 82), contrary to articles 23 and 36 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. When a Methodist lay preacher administered communion in 1755, Charles states, "John was not greatly troubled" (contra article 23 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*). Wesley "suggested that this was the logical conclusion of appointing lay people to preach: 'We have in effect ordained already'" (p. 150). This is the slippery slope of disobedience, for if an unordained person may preach (the greater thing; cf. I Cor. 1:17), how can he be stopped from administering the sacraments (the lesser thing)?

Women preaching followed in the 1760s (pp. 159-160) with Wesley giving them rules (p. 167). Sarah Crosby "travelled nearly 1,000 miles a year, speaking at over 200 public meetings and 600 class or band meetings" (p. 175). Mary Bosanquet, another woman preacher, "married Wesley's close friend and defender John Fletcher in 1781, and the couple operated virtually as joint ministers in his Madeley parish" (p. 190). As Tomkins says, Wesley "was a pragmatist;" this was "his deepest instinct" (p. 160). Remember too that when Wesley was a boy, his mother, Susanna, "led in prayer and discussion and read sermons" and missionary stories to 200 members—including men—of her husband Samuel's congregation in their crowded parsonage on Sunday afternoons when he was away at Convocation (p. 16).

Wesley and the Methodists also corrupted God's worship with their "testimonies" (p. 81) and hymn singing. The apostle of free will further attacked the Psalms by his "censored" version of them in the liturgy he drafted for the American Methodists. Tomkins writes, "He bowdlerized the Psalms, finding the honesty of biblical worship 'highly improper for the mouths of a Christian congre-

gation'" (p. 187). In other words, Wesley's free willism could not survive the naked truth of God's absolute sovereignty and the terrible imprecations upon the wicked set forth in the Psalms.

Both John and Charles wrote hymns, with the latter penning between 4,000 and 10,000 (p. 95). John published America's first hymn book in 1736 (p. 51). Tomkins writes,

> These hymns were of vital importance to Methodism. They were used to gather crowds for outdoor preaching, they were a popular part of the societies' worship, and they wrote Methodist teaching in the memory of the singers and in their hearts too ... *They were also weapons in the war over predestination and perfection*, and much of Charles's sectarian propaganda survives in hymns sung all over the world today (pp. 95-96; italics mine).

Tomkins adds, "John was not above stopping the congregation halfway through to ask them if they really meant what they were singing" (p. 96). What about that for a way of catching a congregation in an Arminian, perfectionist trap! Write "exuberant and emotional," anti-Calvinist hymns (p. 95); lead those assembled in the singing; then explain their meaning; and the people are snared. Ulster fundamentalist, Ian Paisley, once stated that he could derive all five points of Calvinism from the hymns of the Wesleys. John and Charles would turn in their graves!

Methodist revivalist meetings were attended with charismatic phenomena. There were people crying out (pp. 65, 71, 105, 108) or laughing (p. 157), with children often playing "prominent parts" (p. 175) in both the wailing (p. 155) and the laughing (p. 157). Some fell down prostrate (pp. 72, 79, 105, 156-157) and others had visions and revelations (p. 156).

Was this a rare thing? No, Tomkins writes, "this kind of thing happened almost daily" (p. 71).

But did this occur where Wesley himself was preaching? Yes, his preaching provoked the "charismatic phenomena" (p. 65), including the "wailing and convulsions" (p. 103). Thus his preaching was a "noisy event" (p. 72). Tomkins writes that "charismatic phenomena ... were to surround Wesley throughout his life" (p. 39).

But did not Wesley oppose these things? No. He was "impressed," "delighted" and "wholly positive" regarding the charismatic phenomena (pp. 73, 157) view-

ing the outbreaks "most favourably" (p. 105). Wesley "championed ... charismatic gifts" (p. 195) and "embraced" dreams and visions "unreservedly" (p. 65).

Of course! For not only other Methodists (pp. 60, 102, 123, 161), but also Wesley himself had dreams (p. 133). He also held to miraculous healing (pp. 162-163) and evidently believed that on one occasion he raised the dead or at least one "dangerously ill." Concerning the latter, Wesley issued the challenge: "I wait to hear who will either disprove this fact, or philosophically account for it" (p. 106).

Tomkins traces Wesley's belief in the paranormal back to his teenage days. While John was at Charterhouse School in London, his family thought that Epworth rectory, where they lived, was being visited by a poltergeist whom they named "Old Jeffery" (pp. 18-20). The ghost-stories were passed on to John who was "fascinated" (p. 19). Tomkins writes,

> John was utterly convinced. He evidently had an innate taste for the supernatural and Old Jeffery brought it to the surface. Intrigued by his family's accounts, he later collected and published them ... His letters home often repeated other ghost stories he had heard. When he next went home, he wrote an account of the haunting from Samuel's diary and the family's recollections ... In later years, he was to welcome the paranormal manifestations his preaching provoked in a way that upset even his closest colleagues (p. 20).

Other "bizarre religious phenomena of Methodism" include the man "who had the gift of preaching in his sleep."

> He would sing a hymn, recite a text and then preach a six-point sermon, sometimes breaking off to dispute with a clergyman who came to interrupt him (p. 144).

Then there was the Wesleyan lay preacher who spoke in tongues and the demon-possessed girl who recovered before Wesley was able to make it to her house (p. 144).

Tomkins sums up the role of charismatic phenomena in Methodism:

> The importance of Methodism's willingness to embrace the miraculous and charismatic has not always been recognised, but it

> was crucial. It was, though by no means uniformly, a religion of dreams and visions, healings, convulsions, ecstatic worship, exorcisms and messages and guidance from God. Such phenomena were exciting for participants and drew many spectators. They were also often decisive in Methodist conversions and played an ongoing part in their spiritual lives (p. 85).

Tomkins rightly sees Wesley and his Methodism as a forerunner of the Pentecostal movement (pp. 196, 198-199). This is where his free will gospel was to take many of his followers in years to come.

Moreover, the fusion of free will and emotionalism in modern Pentecostalism has much in common with Wesley who stressed "look[ing] within" and "feel[ing]" God's love (p. 66) and who "put such store on his feelings as proof of his soul's state" (p. 62). John Wesley's love of the medieval mystics and his indebtedness to the "emotional" Moravians (p. 46) comes in here too. They placed a lot of "emphasis on experience and feelings in the spiritual life." There is a lot to be said for Tomkins' reckoning: "Moravian spirituality ... [had] an incalculable impact on the shape of Methodism" (p. 46).

Tomkins concludes that Wesley "certainly" was a "web of contradictions" (p. 195) whose accounts of his life and work contain "a dizzying degree of spin" (p. 196). This applies to his religion, spirituality, churchmanship, politics and even his relationships with the opposite sex (pp. 195-197).

In 1751, Wesley wedded Molly Vazeille, but their marriage was "distant and unhappy" (p. 167). In a chapter dealing with the period 1759-1763, Tomkins states,

> Wesley's private life was far from perfect at this time. He saw little of his wife and received no letters from her. He gave her the benefit of his plain speaking, writing to her with a list of the faults he wanted her to mend and wishing her 'the blessing which you now want above any other—namely, unfeigned and deep repentance' (pp. 158-159).

Tomkins writes of Wesley's "romantic debacles" (p. 196) with women both before and after his marriage to Molly. His conclusion is that Wesley's

> personal relationships with women were, even according to admirers, an 'inexcusable weakness.' He was surely not—with all due respect to Molly Wesley—an adulterer [in the sense of actual sexual intercourse with other women] ... However, he suffered from a failure to discern between the romantic and pastoral, which blighted his romances and cast a shadow over his pastoring (p. 197).

Wesley plagiarised an anti-slavery work written by a Quaker and a book by Samuel Johnson in support of the British taxing of the American colonies (pp. 177-178). Augustus Toplady "publicly decried his disgraceful fraud" and "trumpeted Wesley's intellectual bankruptcy in *The Old Fox Tarr'd and Feather'd*" (p. 179). Tomkins writes,

> Wesley was a serial plagiarist and simply saw nothing wrong with regurgitating other people's work. As a writer, he inserted other people's writings into his own as happily and as unannounced as he inserted his own into other people's as an editor (p. 178).

Wesley also engaged in the same shameful practices in the field of theology. Tomkins writes,

> Protesting his hatred of controversy, Wesley entered the ring in March 1770 with an extraordinary blow, even for him: he condensed and distorted Toplady's 134-page book *Absolute Predestination* into a 12-page tract, ending with these words:
>
> > The sum of all is this: One in twenty (suppose) of mankind are elected; nineteen in twenty are reprobated. The elect shall be saved, do what they will; the reprobate will be damned, do what they can. Reader believe this or be damned. Witness my hand, A- T- (p. 170).

Tomkins states, "Now this fraud had proved [Wesley] a criminal worthy to be transported to America if not hanged" (p. 170). Wesley did not respond to Toplady, and this "was just as well, as it is hard to see what he could have said in his defence" (p. 171).

Tomkins quotes at length "a most extraordinary letter [from John Wesley] to Charles in 1766" in which "he bares his soul in the most bleak and moving way:"

> In one of my last [letters] I was saying that I do not feel the wrath of God abiding on me; nor can I believe it does. And yet (this is the mystery), *I do not love God.* I never did. Therefore *I never believed,* in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore *I am only an honest heathen* ... And yet, to be so employed of God! And so hedged in that I can neither get forward nor backward! Surely there was never such an instance before, from the beginning of the world! If I ever have had that faith, it would not be so strange. But *I never had any other evidence of the eternal or invisible world than I have now*; and that is none at all, unless such as faintly shines from reason's glimmering ray. *I have no direct witness* (I do not say, that I am a child of God, but) of anything invisible or eternal.
>
> And yet I dare not preach otherwise than I do, either concerning faith, or love, or justification, or perfection. And yet I find rather an increase than a decrease of zeal for the whole work of God and every part of it. I am borne along, I know not how, that I can't stand still. *I want all the world to come to what I do not know* (p. 168; italics mine).

What are we to make of this bizarre letter of confession? Here, the apostle of free will, now in his sixties, confesses that he does not love God, believe or have the direct witness of divine sonship or even of things invisible or eternal; and that *he never did.* "*I do not love God. I never did ... I want all the world to come to what I do not know*" (p. 168; italics mine). And can it be that Wesley never gained an interest in the Saviour's blood?

Wesley's heretical theology revealed itself very clearly in his (doctrinally significant) abridgement of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* for the American Methodists (1784). Tomkins notes,

> He left out 15 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles,* extensively abridging the remainder. The missing articles included 'Christ Alone Without

> Sin' [15], which denied perfection, 'Predestination and Election' [17], for obvious reasons, and most notably 'Works Before Justification' [13], which, with its overstatement [sic] of the contrast before and after justification, was maybe too much like hard-line evangelicalism for Wesley's mature tastes (p. 187).

A further comparison of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* with Wesley's *American Methodist Articles of Religion* (1784)—both found in Philip Schaff's *The Creeds of Christendom* (vol. 3)—reveals other striking omissions. Gone is the confession of the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Nicene Creed* and the *Athanasian Creed* (8), probably because of the "overconfident damnations" of the last (p. 187). More than half of the article on original sin (9) is removed, for it speaks of the inevitable conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. Article 18, "Of obtaining eternal salvation *only by the name of Christ*," is gone, as is the second half of article 19, "Of the church," which states that Rome has not only erred in ceremonies "but also in matters of faith." The articles on ordination (36) and against lay preaching and lay administering of the sacraments (23) were omitted for obvious reasons.

Key phrases are dropped, for example, the denial of "passions" to God (1) and the eternal generation of the Son, "begotten from everlasting of the Father" (2).

A defence could at least be made of some of the other omissions. Christ's descent into hell is not clearly explained in article 3. The homilies (35, 11), the Erastianism of articles 21 ("General councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of princes") and 37 (the monarch's "chief government" of "eccelesiastical or civil" affairs), and the English provenance of articles 35, 36 and 37, would hardly fit with the new American situation.

But the doctrinally significant omissions are a sure mark of the apostasy of John Wesley. His heresies finally resulted in his "gutting" the creed; such is often the case.

Tomkins writes that Wesley "was a founding father of evangelicalism, but for his last 20 years, he consistently retreated from its stark certainties" (p. 196). This is where Wesley's free will theology took him! Of course! Free will, itself, is the end of the certainties of the evangel, and Wesley's followers today are still retreating—ever more consistently—from the gospel!