

**Progressively Justified:
Justifying Grace and Justifying Faith Prior to Justification**
By Scott Kisker

Introduction

Considerable scholarly disagreement concerning the development of Wesley's soteriology has been due to Wesley's own seemingly contradictory statements about the nature of justification, the new birth, "real" Christianity, and the relationships of these concepts to each other. The discussion is further complicated by Wesley's assessments of the eschatological states of those who have not had such spiritual experiences. This paper will argue that many of Wesley's inconsistencies disappear if one assumes that a "degree of justifying faith" or even "justifying faith" is not the same as being justified. Wesley's references to "degrees of justifying faith" instead refer to the process of growing in faith (confidence in the promise of forgiveness) that begins with the crisis of conviction and culminates in assurance and the new birth. A person may have justifying faith, which is identical to the "faith of a servant," without being justified. Such a person does not have assurance, a sense of God's pardon, but is not under the wrath of God. Ecclesiologically speaking, such people may be included in the means of grace of the church, included in the sacraments, and welcomed into the discipline of the Methodist society through its classes. They are not however Christians nor do they have "proper Christian faith."

The Standard Model

Wesley seems fairly consistent in his understanding of the way of salvation if one confines oneself to the Standard 44 Sermons. By grace¹ one who knows herself to be a sinner, who has the "faith of a servant"² is pardoned or justified by faith in the promise of forgiveness.³ This faith is a divine "evidence," whereby she is assured⁴ of present salvation "from sin and the consequences of sin."⁵ This is properly Christian faith which "purifyeth the heart."⁶ She is in that moment born again⁷ and having the witness of the

¹ *Works* 1:120 (Salvation by Faith, 1738, 1, I.4); *Works* 1:196 (Justification by Faith, 1746, IV.6); *Works* 1:202, 213 (Righteousness of Faith, 1746, 1;II.8).

² *Works* 1:225 (Way to the Kingdom, 1746, II.1); *Works* 1:278 (Witness of the Spirit I, 1746, II.4); *Works* 1:250 (Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption, 1746, 2.4).

³ *Works* 1:161-2 (Scriptural Christianity, 1744, I.1-2); *Works* 1:189,195 (Justification by Faith, 1746, II.5; IV.3); *Works* 1:208 (Righteousness of Faith, 1746, I.9); *Works* 1:230(Way to the Kingdom, 1746, II.9); *Works* 1:394 (Means of Grace, 1746, V.1); *Works* 1:405 (Circumcision of the Heart, 1733,I.7); *Works* 1:634-5 (Sermon on the Mount IX, 4-6); *Works* 2:41-2 (Law Established through Faith II, 1750, III.3); *Works* 2: 143-4 (Satan's Devices, 1750, I.8).

⁴ *Works* 1:146 (Awake Thou that Sleepest, 1742, I.11); *Works* 1:223 (Way to the Kingdom, 1746, I.10); *Works* 1:484-5 (Sermon on the Mount I, 1748, II.3-4).

⁵ *Works* 1:124 (Salvation by Faith, 1738, II.7).

⁶ *Works* 1:139 (The Almost Christian, 1742,II.6); *Works* 1:402-3 (Circumcision of the Heart, 1733,I.1).

⁷ *Works* 1:142-3 (Awake thou that Sleepest, 1742, I.2); *Works* 1:279 (Witness of the Spirit I, 1746, II.5); *Works* 431-2 (Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God, 1748,1-2); *Works* 2:187 (The New Birth, 1760, 1).

Spirit that she is a child of God, enabled to cry “Abba, Father.”⁸ She is freed from the guilt and power of sin,⁹ has the fruits of the Spirit,¹⁰ and begins to love God whom she now knows first loved her, and to love her neighbor.¹¹ She has begun to run the “race set before” her, begun to be sanctified, made holy, perfected in love.¹² This is the salvation for which Christ was manifest and only those who have been so justified and born again, have begun to be Christians in the proper sense of the word.¹³

Even after 1660, for example in “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765), Wesley continued to restate much of this *via salutis* using similar language. “Justification is another word for pardon.”¹⁴ Justification is by faith that “necessarily implies an assurance,”

(which is here only another word for evidence, it being hard to tell the difference between them) that Christ loved me, and gave Himself for me. For "he that believeth" with the true living faith "hath the witness in himself": "the Spirit witnesseth with his spirit that he is a child of God." "Because he is a son, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into his heart, crying, Abba, Father"; giving him an assurance that he is so, and a childlike confidence in Him. . . . It is by this faith we are saved, justified, and sanctified.¹⁵

Wesley also continued to maintain that justification and the new birth happen simultaneously. “At the same time that we are justified, yea, in that very moment, sanctification begins. In that instant we are born again, born from above, born of the Spirit: there is a real as well as a relative change.”¹⁶ Although Wesley did articulate in this sermon a clearer appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit prior to justification and new birth “from the first dawning of grace” as part of the overall process of salvation, than he seemed to in earlier sermons. Nonetheless, he was also clear that justification and the new birth is what “the Apostle is directly speaking of” in Ephesians 2:8 when he speaks of salvation.¹⁷

This connection between assurance, the new birth, and real Christian faith is stated even more firmly in Wesley’s 1788 sermon “Walking by Faith and not by Sight:”

⁸ *Works* 1:161 (Scriptural Christianity, 1744, I.1); *Works* 1:260,262 (Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption, 1746, III.1.6); *Works* 1:274, 276 (Witness of the Spirit I, 1746, I.7, I.12); *Works* 1:425 (Marks of the New Birth, 1748, III.1).

⁹ *Works* 1:419-20 (Marks of the New Birth, 1748, I.4); *Works* 1:559-60 (Sermon on the Mount V, III.9); *Works* 2:105-6 (Christian Perfection, 1741, II.1-2).

¹⁰ *Works* 1:273-4 (Witness of the Spirit I, 1746, I.6).

¹¹ *Works* 1:193 (Justification by Faith, 1746, III.6); *Works* 1:274-5 (Witness of the Spirit I, 1746, I.8).

¹² *Works* 1:187, 189-90 (Justification by Faith, 1746, II.1.5); *Works* 1:479 (Sermon on the Mount I, 1748, I.7); *Works* 1:239 (First Fruits of the Spirit, 1746, II.5); *Works* 2:198 (The New Birth, 1760, IV.3).

¹³ *Works* 1:154 (Awake Thou that Sleepest, 1742, III.6); *Works* 1:265-6 (Spirit of Bondage and Adoption, 1746, IV.3-4).

¹⁴ *Works* 2:157-8 (Scripture Way of Salvation, 1765, I.3).

¹⁵ *Works* 2:161-2 (Scripture Way of Salvation, 1765, II.3-4) Wesley’s wording is nearly identical that that in *Works* 19:136 (Journal, Jan. 25, 1740).

¹⁶ *Works* 2:158 (Scripture Way of Salvation, 1765, I.4).

¹⁷ *Works* 2:157-8 (Scripture Way of Salvation, 1765, I.3).

How short is this description of real Christians! And yet how exceeding full! It comprehends, it sums up, the whole experience of those that are truly such, from the time they are born of God till they remove into Abraham's bosom. For, who are the we that are here spoken of? All that are true Christian believers. I say Christian, not Jewish, believers. All that are not only servants, but children, of God. All that have "the Spirit of adoption, crying in their hearts, Abba, Father." All that have "the Spirit of God witnessing with their spirits, that they are the sons of God."¹⁸

Similar articulations of the way of salvation and the definition of real Christian faith are found in "God's Love to Fallen Man (1782),¹⁹ "On Charity" (1784),²⁰ "Working Out Our Own Salvation (1785),²¹ "Unity of the divine Being (1789),²² "On Living Without God" (1790),²³ "Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels (1790),"²⁴ and "On Faith" (1791).²⁵

Revision of the Standard Model

Despite the seeming consistency within the published sermons, numerous scholars have noted Wesley's deviations from this standard model particularly with regard to justification, the place of faith that implies assurance, and who Wesley considers a Christian. One of the main pieces of evidence for Wesley's soteriological shift is his evaluation of his own religious experience. In 1738, Wesley wrote that before his Aldersgate experience, "'alienated' as I am 'from the life of God,' I am Child of Wrath, an heir of hell."²⁶ Wesley later modified this statement in the 1774 edition of the *Journal* adding to it the footnote, "I believe not." Wesley also included footnotes earlier on the same page stating that he "had even then the faith of a servant though not the faith of a son."²⁷ Later in the same entry he defines the "faith of a son" in a footnote as "'a sure trust and confidence in God, that through the merits of Christ my sins are forgiven and I reconciled to the favour of God."²⁸

Scholars have also noted Wesley's attribution of "A degree of justifying faith" to the state prior to the new birth (and assurance). The language appears as early as 1740 in Wesley's controversy with the Moravians over who may receive the sacrament of communion.

I assert: (1) "that a man may have a *degree of justifying faith* before he is wholly freed from all doubt and fear, and before he has (in the proper sense) a new and

¹⁸ *Works* 4:49 (Walking by Faith and Not by Sight, 1788, 1).

¹⁹ *Works* 2:426-7 (God's Love to Fallen Man, 1782, I.2-3).

²⁰ *Works* 3:295 (On Charity, 1784, I.2).

²¹ *Works* 3:203-4 (Working Out Our Own Salvation, 1785, II.1).

²² *Works* 4:67 (Unity of the Divine Being, 1789, 17).

²³ *Works* 4:171-173 (On Living Without God, 1790, 8-11).

²⁴ *Works* 4:163-4 (Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels, 1790, I.1-3).

²⁵ *Works* 4:188 (On Faith, 1791, 1).

²⁶ *Works* 18:215. (*Journal*, Feb. 1, 1738, footnote j).

²⁷ *Works* 18:215. (*Journal*, Feb. 1, 1738, footnote i) It is important to note here that Wesley does not say he was then a "Christian."

²⁸ *Works* 18:215-216. (*Journal*, Feb. 1, 1738, footnote k)

clean heart”; (2) “That a man may use the ordinances of God, the Lord’s supper I particular, before he has such a faith as excludes all doubt and fear, and implies a new, a clean heart.”²⁹

Wesley referred to this faith, prior to assurance, again in “The Duty of Constant Communion” (1787). The only “preparation that is absolutely necessary” for communion, he wrote, “is contained in those words, ‘Repent you truly of your sins past; have faith in Christ our Saviour’ (*and observe, that the word is not here taken in its highest sense!*)” This lower faith implies only “believing that Christ died to save sinners.”³⁰ It is not a conviction or assurance that Christ died for me, but only that the doctrine is true.³¹

Edward Sugden noted in his edition of the Sermons that Wesley seemed to have contradicted his assertion in “The Almost Christian” that assurance is necessary to full Christianity. Sugden suggested that Wesley came to believe that while assurance is a gracious gift of God it is not essential to being a Christian.³² Both Albert Outler,³³ and Colin Williams³⁴ noted Wesley’s waffling on the same issue, and Theodore Jennings argued in 1988 that sometime in the 1740s Wesley came to hold that assurance is not necessary to justification.³⁵

In 1993, I published an article entitled “Justified but Unregenerate” in which, in continuity with Sugden, et al., I argued that there appears to be a state of justification without assurance. That “Wesley (in the 1774 footnote) . . . conceived himself as justified prior to Aldersgate, although he did not then have assurance.”³⁶ I also argued that Wesley maintained the pivotal role of the new birth in his soteriology and the essential nature assurance to new birth. Thus I posited that there was a state where one could be justified but not born again.

In 1994 Randy Maddox published *Responsible Grace* in which he stated similarly that

The mature Wesley rejected his immediate post-Aldersgate assumption of an absolute connection between being the recipient of God’s pardoning grace and having a clear assurance of that pardon. He allowed for a *broader variability in the manner that the Holy Spirit effects justification in individuals*. But this is not to say that he rejected the importance of assurance itself.³⁷

Maddox argued developmentally that Wesley first allowed for “degrees of justifying assurance short of full assurance.” Wesley then granted that there might be a few

²⁹ *Works* 18:220 (Journal, Preface, written Sept 29, 1740)

³⁰ *Works* 3:436 (The Duty of Constant Communion, 1787, II.14) emphasis mine

³¹ This is how Wesley records his own state in his conversation with Spangenberg. *Works* 18:146 (Journal, Feb 7, 1736)

³² Edward Sugden, ed. *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*: vol. 1 (London: Epworth Press, 1921) 61.

³³ Albert Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 59.

³⁴ Colin Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960) 112-114.

³⁵ Theodore Wesley Jennings Jr., “John Wesley Against Aldersgate,” *Quarterly Review* (Fall 1988) 3-22.

³⁶ Scott Kisker, “Justified but Unregenerate? The Relationship of Assurance to Justification and Regeneration in the thought of John Wesley” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 28 (Spring-Fall, 1993) 55.

³⁷ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994) 127.

“exceptional cases (due to bodily disorder or ignorance) where a person might have justifying faith while lacking conscious assurance.” Finally, with Wesley’s greater appreciation of the faith of a servant, he designated it as justifying faith. “With each of these concessions,” argued Maddox

It became more difficult to assert an exclusive twice-born model where all believers would be able to date their “conversion experience. This is not to say that Wesley rejected or came to impugn the twice-born model. It remained his favored model – as most expressive of the common Christian *privilege* of assurance, but he no longer considered it exclusively *normative*. Indeed the clarifying footnotes that he added in 1774 to his original account of Aldersgate suggest that Wesley had gravitated toward such a gradualist reading of his own spiritual journey. He now viewed the transitions in his spiritual life as more incremental in nature, and God’s justifying acceptance as present prior to Aldersgate (he was *already* a “servant of God”).³⁸

One problem with the assertion that “the Holy Spirit effects justification in individuals” without assurance is that it almost certainly undermines Wesley’s understanding of justification as the beginning of the restoration of the image of God -- particularly the moral image (that one becomes righteous through love, loving God and neighbor).³⁹ Such a transformation is only possible, Wesley asserted throughout his life, if a person knows she is loved, is in God’s favor. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19) is one of Wesley’s favorite prooftexts on this point, and such knowledge that one is loved and forgiven by God is the definition of assurance.⁴⁰ To assert that assurance is not necessary to being a Christian, implies a Christianity without the transformation of the affections by the love of God to love God and neighbor.

Another problem with both mine and Maddox’s readings is that, even after 1760, “Wesley repeatedly links justification with regeneration in his writings.”⁴¹ Justification and the new birth (the beginning of sanctification and “real Christianity”) happen simultaneously. This was one of the critiques leveled by Ken Collins in his 1997 *The Scripture Way of Salvation*.

The problem with Collin’s critique however is that he failed to deal adequately with Wesley’s identification of “degrees of justifying faith” or even simply “justifying faith” with the stage Wesley identifies as the faith of a servant.

Kisker confuses the degree of acceptance that pertains to those who have the faith of a servant with the reality of justification which is quite a different matter. . . .

³⁸ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 155.

³⁹ *Works* 2:410-11 (On the Fall of Man, 1782, II.8).

⁴⁰ *Works* 1:230-1 (The Way to the Kingdom, 1746, II.11-12); *Works* 1:274-5 (Witness of the Spirit I, 1746, I.8-9); *Works* 1:289-90 (Witness of the Spirit II, 1767, III.4-6); *Works* 1:481 (Sermon on the Mount I, 1748, I.11); *Works* 1:510 (Sermon on the Mount III, 1748, I.1); *Works* 1:578-9 (Sermon on the Mount VI, 1748, III.4); *Works* 2:144 (Satan’s Devices, 1750, I.8); *Works* 2:232 (Heaviness through Manifold Temptations, 1760, IV.4); *Works* 2:314-15 (Reformation of Manners, 1763, III.7-8); *Works* 2:427-8 (God’s Love to Fallen Man, 1782, I.4-5); *Works* 2:598 (Case of Reason Impartially Considered, 1781, II.8); *Works* 3:207-8 (Working Out Our Own Salvation, 1785, III.5); *Works* 3:336 (On Family Religion, 1783, I.2).

⁴¹ Ken Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997)104.

Wesley realized that those sinners were in process so to speak; that is, though not justified, they were responding – painfully no doubt – to *the convincing grace of God*.⁴²

According to Collins, the measure of grace one has prior to justification is “convincing grace.” Collins concludes his critique, “If sinners are “continually under conviction of sin as Kisker intimates, then it is clear that although they have a measure of grace (*convincing*) and a degree of acceptance (as they respond to the grace of God) they can hardly be deemed justified.”⁴³

An Alternative Reading

A common assumption in Maddox’s, my (in my previous article), and Collins’ work is that having justifying faith in response to justifying grace is the same things as being justified. In Maddox’s and in my previous article the assumption forces us to assume some sort of justification prior to the new birth. In Collins’ it forces him to assume prior to justification, people are responding to the convincing grace of God. What this paper argues is that, when Wesley referred to justifying grace, he was referring to grace in the process of justifying the penitent sinner until they are justified.

It is important to remember that grace, for Wesley, is one thing. Grace is the love of God, the activity of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴ However, God’s grace works differently in individuals depending on their spiritual condition. Those who are asleep need to be convinced. Those who are convinced need to be justified. Those who are justified need to be sanctified. Wesley’s descriptors for grace thus serve as diagnoses of the spiritual conditions of individuals and describe the way God is actively loving them. Wesley designates grace not by what it has accomplished, but by what it is working to accomplish. Grace is convincing, justifying, or sanctifying.

This is indeed what we see in Wesley’s references the work of grace in phases other than justification. Preventing/convincing grace begins from the first awareness of conscience and extends by degrees until one is convinced/thoroughly awakened/repentant. Sanctifying grace begins from the moment of the new birth and extends by degrees until one is sanctified/made perfect in love. If Wesley’s thinking with regard to justification is parallel to his thinking with regard to conviction and sanctification, then the work of justifying grace shifts from the moment of justification to the entire process from conviction to justification. Likewise, justifying faith (the response to justifying grace) grows by degrees from conviction until one is justified.

Preventing/Convincing grace works to convince (and there are degrees of conviction short of a “thorough awakening”⁴⁵). Justifying grace works to justify (and there are degrees of justifying faith short of justification and the faith of assurance that implies new birth). Sanctifying grace works to sanctify (and there are degrees of sanctification short of sanctification/perfection).⁴⁶

⁴² Collins, 105. emphasis mine.

⁴³ Collins, 105.

⁴⁴ *Works* 2:544 (Free Grace, 1739, 2).

⁴⁵ *Works* 1:380 (Means of Grace, 1746, I.6).

⁴⁶ *Works* 1:325-6 (On Sin in Believers, 1763, IV.1); Outler, *John Wesley*, 165-7 (*Minutes*, 1747, Q.5.).

<u>“Crisis” of the Believer</u>	<u>“Process” of Grace</u>	<u>Faith</u>	<u>Saved</u>
Asleep/Dead	\		
	Preventing/Convincing	heathen	bound
	/		
Conviction/Repentance	\		
	Justifying	servant	from wrath
	/		
Justification/New Birth	\		
	Sanctifying	child	from sin (guilt and power)
	/		
Sanctification/Perfection			

In this model, a person is simultaneously convinced and is the object of justifying grace. In the post-conviction pre-new birth stage, a person has “eyes a little opened.”⁴⁷ She is able to see “by degrees . . . (the veil being in part removed).”⁴⁸ This perception of God’s light is real justifying faith. It is “a divine ‘evidence and conviction of things not seen;’ . . . a divine evidence and conviction of God, and of the things of God.”⁴⁹ And this faith is “properly saving.” It “brings eternal salvation to all those that keep it to the end? It is such a divine conviction of God, and the things of God, as, even in its infant state, enables every one that possesses it to “fear God and work righteousness.”⁵⁰ Such justifying faith is giving God “our heart, in the lowest degree.”⁵¹

Practically speaking, those who have justifying faith may join a class and become members of the society. They are expected to make use of the means of grace, including the sacraments of the Church.⁵² For the person with justifying faith “the wrath of God’ no longer ‘abideth on him’” and “whosoever, in every nation, believes thus far . . . is ‘accepted of [God].’ That person actually is, at that very moment, in a state of acceptance,”⁵³ even though they do not perceive it. Wesley means by this is that God is pleased when people repent.

Penitents are not, however, “real Christians!” Such a person is “at present only a servant of God, not properly a son.” They are, in Wesley’s words, “Jewish believers”⁵⁴ or

⁴⁷ *Works* 2:246 (Self-denial, 1760, II.3).

⁴⁸ *Works* 1:255 (Spirit of Bondage and Adoption, 1746, II.1).

⁴⁹ *Works* 3:492 (On Faith, 1788, 1).

⁵⁰ *Works* 3:497 (On Faith, 1788, I.10). Here Wesley’s use of the term “eternal salvation” does not refer to his usual use of the term “salvation,” a present salvation from the guilt and power of sin, but rather to “the going to heaven, eternal happiness.” *Works* 2:156 (Scripture Way of Salvation, 1765, I.1).

⁵¹ *Works* 3:282-3 (An Israelite Indeed, 1785, I.1).

⁵² *Works* 19:32 (Journal, January 25, 1739). Wesley comments that the recipients of the sacrament of baptism had not even been “born again in a lower sense,” by which he means justified. See *Works* 2:106 (Christian Perfection, 1741, II.3).

⁵³ *Works* 3:497 (On Faith, 1788, I.10).

⁵⁴ *Works* 4:49 (Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith, 1788, 1-2).

proselytes “of the Temple.”⁵⁵ Christian faith, on the other hand, is that degree of justifying faith that works justification and implies assurance. It marks the boundary between justifying and sanctifying grace, linked by the new birth. This justification “is the taking away the *guilt* . . . of sin,”⁵⁶ which happens not simply when God looks favorably on the sinner, but when the sinner “conceives of the wrath of God being turned away.”⁵⁷ “Only these [believers] ‘hath [God] quickened,’ and made alive; given you new senses, -- spiritual senses, -- ‘senses exercised to discern spiritual good and evil.’”⁵⁸ Only in these does true Christian faith appear, faith that begins to transform the affections. This Christian faith perceives not only the righteousness of God, but also the love of God, and begins “working by love”⁵⁹ toward God and neighbor.

The process of justifying (of reconciling sinners to God) begins at the moment of conviction. A sinner has turned toward God. She believes the promise of judgment. A person who believes in the promise of judgment is not an enemy of God. But her faith must mature, by the grace of God, into trust (assurance) that she is truly loved. She must believe the promise of forgiveness. Only then can she truly love God and neighbor. Only thereafter, with the experience of the new birth as a child of God, can she begin to believe in the promise of holiness.

Rereading Inconsistent Statements on Justification

One of the advantages of this model is that many seemingly contradictory statements become less so if we assume that justifying faith is not justification, but rather the gradual response to justifying grace prior to justification. In terms of Wesley’s 1774 clarifications in his journal, what is surprising is not that they were added, but that they were not added earlier.

As mentioned, the move to a non-Moravian view of “degrees of justifying faith” prior to assurance and the new birth is present by 1740. The unassured are welcomed at the Lord’s Table (evidence of His favor). With the introduction of class meetings in the societies in 1742, Wesley’s appreciation of the spiritual state of repentant sinners, desiring to “flee the wrath to come” yet without assurance, is institutionalized. What is however significant about his 1774 clarifications is that Wesley, while he clarified that he was not under the wrath of God, did not claim he was a Christian, only that he had “the faith of a servant.”⁶⁰ He was still an almost Christian.

With this model, the clear statement in the 1744 *Minutes* connecting justification, assurance, and being a true Christian:

“That all true Christians have this faith, even such a faith as implies an assurance of God’s love, appears from Rom. 8:15, Eph. 4:23, II Cor. 13:5, Heb. 8:10, I Jn. 4:10 and 19. And that no man can be justified and not know it appears farther

⁵⁵ *Letters* (Telford) 5:16 (Letter to Charles, 27 June 1766).

⁵⁶ (The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God, 1748, I.6)

⁵⁷ *Works* 2:187 (S.45, The New Birth, 1760, 1).

⁵⁸ *Works* 4:49 (Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith, 1788, 1-2).

⁵⁹ *Works* 1:139 (The Almost Christian, 1741, II.6)

⁶⁰ *Works* 18:215. (Journal, Feb. 1, 1738, footnote i) It is important to note here that Wesley does not say he was then a “Christian.”

from the very nature of things – for faith after repentance is ease after pain, rest after toil, light after darkness – and from the immediate as well as distant fruits”⁶¹

is no longer in conflict with the 1745 statement on assurance.

“Q1. Is an assurance of God’s love absolutely necessary to our being in his favor, or may there possibly be some exempt cases? A. We dare not positively say there are not. Q2. Is such an assurance absolutely necessary to inward and outward holiness? A. To inward, we apprehend that it is: to outward we apprehend that it is not.”⁶²

If “being in [God’s] favor” and being “justified” (“a true Christian”) are not equivalent, the two are easily reconciled.

The model also sheds light on the *Minutes* of June, 1747. “Q.1. Is justifying faith a divine assurance that Christ loved me and gave himself for me? A. We believe it is.” In this question “justifying faith” is being used to refer to that highest degree of justifying faith that implies assurance and justification. That there are lesser degrees of justifying faith is clear from Question 10 which mentions a state where people are not completely “void of justifying faith,” not “under the wrath and under the curse of God,” yet without the faith of assurance. Such people, who have a degree of justifying faith, nonetheless, “if Christ is not revealed in their hearts, they are not yet Christian believers.” Thus Conference recognized there could be “such a person as J.A. or E.V.,” who while not properly Christian, is not void of justifying faith and not under the curse of God.⁶³ This is a person with justifying faith responding to justifying grace short of justification and the new birth.

Indeed, Wesley’s letter of July 31, 1747 to Charles, who was apparently also confused by the *Minutes*, makes sense as a clarification only when we assume the above parallel model of John’s thought.

By justifying faith I mean that faith which whosoever hath *is not under the wrath and curse of God*. By a *sense of pardon* I mean a distinct, explicit assurance that my sins are forgiven. I allow: (1) that there is such an explicit assurance: (2) that it is the common privilege of real Christians; (3) that it is the proper Christian faith, which purifieth the heart and overcometh the world. But I cannot allow that justifying faith is such an assurance, or necessarily connected therewith.⁶⁴

“Justifying faith” is that faith in the process of justifying. It is not the same as assurance, because it is prior to it. At the same time “justifying faith” is not “proper Christian faith.”

Several years later, Wesley revisited the same topic in a letter to Mr. Richard Thompson (1755). Again his views appear consistent if we assume justifying faith prior to justification, and Christian faith.

⁶¹ Outler, *John Wesley*, 137

⁶² Outler, *John Wesley*, 149

⁶³ Outler, *John Wesley*, 165-7.

⁶⁴ *Works* 26: 254-5 (Letter to Charles Wesley, July 31, 1747)

As to the nature of [assurance], I think a divine conviction of pardon is directly implied in the evidence, or conviction, of things unseen. But if not, it is no absurdity to suppose that, when God pardons a mourning broken-hearted sinner, His mercy obliges him to another act – to witness to his spirit, that he has pardoned him. . . . I agree with you, that a justifying faith cannot be conviction that I am justified; and that a man who is not assured that his sins are forgiven may yet have a kind or degree of faith, which distinguishes him, not only from the devil, but also from a heathen; and on which I may admit him to the Lord’s supper. But still I believe the proper Christian faith, which purified the heart, implies such a conviction.⁶⁵

Here assurance is implied in the definition of “proper Christian faith.” Yet there is “A kind or degree of faith” which “distinguishes a person “not only from the devil, but also from a heathen.”⁶⁶ If Wesley still holds his opinion of 1740, this degree of faith by which Wesley “may admit him to the Lord’s supper” is justifying faith. It is not however “proper Christian faith.”

Finally, only by assuming that one without assurance is not properly a Christian can we make sense of Wesley’s own struggles as he examined his spiritual state both in the early and later years. In 1739⁶⁷ and 1766,⁶⁸ it is precisely this lack of assurance, a lack of the love of God shed abroad in his heart that causes Wesley to conclude that he himself is not a Christian, not born again. In his letter to Charles on June 27, 1766, Wesley claims he lacks the evidence “of the eternal or invisible world.” He does not “believe in the Christian sense of the word.” Despite his experience at Aldersgate (and consistent with his musings following the experience) he claims he does not have assurance, he is only “one of the god-fearers.”

“[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.”⁶⁹

If we are to take Wesley at his word, it seems he was convinced that what he preached about justification and the new birth was biblical, and that it coincided with the experience of believers in his own day. He simply was not sure he had experienced it. One may question whether Wesley’s self-perception is accurate, but his comments are consistent with his theology of grace and of faith.⁷⁰ Those who have a degree of justifying faith are not objects of wrath, but, at the same time, they are not Christians. Wesley’s comment to Melville Horne in 1788 rings true. “We preach assurance as we

⁶⁵ *Works* 26:574-5 (Letter to Richard Tompson, July 25, 1755)

⁶⁶ This is the faith of a servant. *Works* 1:250 (Spirit of Bondage and Adoption, 1746, 2)

⁶⁷ *Works* 19:29-31 (Journal, Jan 4, 1739)

⁶⁸ *Letters* (Telford)5:16, (Letter to Charles, 27 June 1766).

⁶⁹ *Letters* (Telford)5:16, (Letter to Charles, 27 June 1766).

⁷⁰ In statements where Wesley does claim to be a Christian, it is also based on a sense of assurance, because he has “some measure of this faith, which bringeth salvation, or victory over sin, and which implies peace and trust in God through Christ.” *Works* 25:575-8 (Letter to Samuel Wesley, Jr., 30 Oct 1738).

always did, as a common privilege of real Christians; but we do not enforce it, under pain of damnation, denounced on all who enjoy it not.”⁷¹

Justification Worked by Preventing Grace?

The best argument against the above model is found in “The Witness of the Spirit II” (1767). While exhorting none to “rest in any supposed fruit of the Spirit without the witness,”⁷² Wesley stated that what sounds like it could be a description of a degree of justifying faith is worked by the “preventing grace” of God.⁷³

There may be foretastes of joy, of peace, of love, and those not delusive, but really from God, long before we have the witness in ourselves; before the Spirit of God witnesses with our spirits that we have "redemption in the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins." Yea, there may be a degree of long-suffering, of gentleness, of fidelity, meekness, temperance, (not a shadow thereof, but a real degree, by the *preventing* grace of God,)⁷⁴

This may indeed contradict the above model. However, what is odd about these “foretastes” and “degrees” is that they happen not only “before we have a testimony of our acceptance,” which one would expect if they are a degree of justifying faith, but also “before we *are* accepted in the Beloved,”⁷⁵ which would indicate they are prior to even a degree of justifying faith, prior to conviction.

Thus, Wesley may be referring here to those who

"receive the word with joy." And “because they have no deepness of earth,” no deep work in their heart [of conviction], therefore the seed “immediately springs up.” There is immediately a superficial change, which, together with that light joy, striking in with the pride of their unbroken heart, and with their inordinate self-love, easily persuades them they have already "tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come.”⁷⁶

Elsewhere Wesley talks about similar “drawings of the Father” which may occur before “conviction of sin; which in the nature of things, must precede that faith whereby we are justified.”⁷⁷

Whatever Wesley means, he is clear:

⁷¹ Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley* (New York: W.B. Gilley, 1820), 1:258.

⁷² *Works* 1:298 (Witness of the Spirit II, 1767, V.4) emphasis mine.

⁷³ Wesley may be using the word “preventing” to describe a general attribute of grace “coming before,” no matter how it is presently working in a particular person, as he does in “Circumcision of the Heart” *Works* 1:411 (Circumcision of the Heart, 1733, II.4). In this sense all grace is preventing grace: convincing grace comes before we are convinced, justifying grace comes before we are justified, and sanctifying grace comes before we are sanctified.

⁷⁴ *Works* 1:298 (Witness of the Spirit II, 1767, V.4).

⁷⁵ *Works* 1:298 (Witness of the Spirit II, 1767, V.4).

⁷⁶ *Works* 2:50 (The Nature Of Enthusiasm, 1750, 13)

⁷⁷ *Works* 2:230-1 (Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations, 1760, III.9).

It is by no means advisable to rest here; it is at the peril of our souls if we do. If we are wise, we shall be continually crying to God, until his Spirit cry in our heart, "Abba, Father!" This is the privilege of all the children of God, and without this we can never be assured that we are his children. Without this we cannot retain a steady peace, nor avoid perplexing doubts and fears. But when we have once received this Spirit of adoption, this "peace which passeth all understanding," . . . when this has brought forth its genuine fruit, all inward and outward holiness, it is undoubtedly the will of Him that calleth us, to give us always what he has once given; so that there is no need that we should ever more be deprived of either the testimony of God's Spirit, or the testimony of our own, the consciousness of our walking in all righteousness and true holiness.⁷⁸

Conclusions

The process and experience of justification (the doorway of Christianity) is, in Wesley' thinking, parallel to the processes and experiences of conviction or sanctification – processes that proceed by degrees but cross certain markers, when a person is said "be" what she has been becoming. Although theoretically all aspects of salvation can happen in an instant, a person is usually convinced after having been being convinced for some time, sanctified after having been being sanctified for some time. Just so, one is usually justified after having been being justified (by justifying faith) for some period of time.

If the above model of Wesley's thought is accurate, we should be careful not to overstate the development in Wesley's soteriology after 1740. Clearly, sometime after the break with the Moravians or the establishment of the class system, Wesley began to value the faith of a servant as evidence of justifying faith, the work of God's justifying (not convincing) grace. He came to doubt God's wrath toward those God was in the process of justifying. Such people were welcome at the Lord's Table. Their degree of faith qualified them for membership in the classes and societies. This is, in practice, consistent with what Wesley said in 1786 of those who fear God. They are not of the world. They are "the lowest character of those that 'are of God;'"⁷⁹ However, they are "not properly sons, but servants."⁸⁰

Wesley's concern for salvation from sin (guilt and power) on this side of the grave never changed, nor did his assertion of the centrality of love for this to be effected. In Christians this love must be "shed abroad in [their] hearts by the witness of the Holy Spirit." Assurance is essential to Christianity. One must be assured of God's love before one is able to love God and freely love neighbor. Only with God's assurance has one's faith crossed the threshold (into the house of religion) where one has become a Christian. Ecclesiologically, Christians (by Wesley's definition) are a relatively small subset of those who participate in the institutional church and receive its sacraments. They are a subset of those who call themselves Methodists. Indeed, Wesley may not have counted himself among them.

⁷⁸ *Works* 1:298 (Witness of the Spirit II, 1767, V.4).

⁷⁹ *Works* 3:118-9 (On Friendship with the World, 1786, 7).

⁸⁰ *Works* 3:118-9 (On Friendship with the World, 1786, 7).