LUTHER AND WESLEY ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE*

The role that Luther played, both directly and indirectly, in the evangelical conversion of John Wesley is well known. In the first place Peter Bohler focused his attention on the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith. In March 1738 Bohler convinced him that the doctrine accorded both with Scripture and experience. Wesley began immediately, though with some diffidence, to preach the doctrine, even though privately he confessed that he himself did not have the faith about which he preached. What he lacked, however, was given in his experience of May 24 that same year. It occurred, we are told, while Wesley was listening to an unnamed person reading from Luther's Preface to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. In spite of this fact, references to Luther in Wesley's works are not numerous and most of them are not of great significance.

It was not until June 15, 1741 that Wesley read for himself Luther's Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians. If, as the record suggests, his only knowledge of this massive work was what he gained on a day's coach journey from Nottingham to London, we may judge that even his knowledge of this was limited. What Wesley did read did not please him. His comments in his Journal are well known:

I was utterly ashamed. How have I esteemed this book, only because I heard it so commended by others; or, at best, because I had read some excellent sentences occasionally quoted from it! But what shall I say, now I judge for myself, now I see with my own eyes? Why, not only that the author makes nothing out, clears up not one considerable difficulty; that he is quite shallow in his remarks on many passages and muddy and confused almost, on all, and hence often dangerously wrong.1

What particularly distressed Wesley was the way in which Luther spoke of the law, coupling it with sin, death and hell, and the way in which he treated good works. Nevertheless, in a letter to Mrs. Hutton on August 22, 1744, Wesley confessed to loving Luther more than Calvin, though less than the Moravians, Mr. Law and Mr. Whitefield. In another place Wesley expresses his agreement with Luther on justification but his variance with him on the question of sanctification. "Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone", Wesley asks, "and who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conception of it?"2

Even on the doctrine of justification there was not complete agreement between Wesley and Luther, though the difference appears slight. For Luther justification meant basically God's judgment of acquittal pronounced over the sinner because of Christ. That is to say, because of Christ, because of his perfect obedience from the manger to the Cross, because he suffered as a sinner in our place, and because of his victory over the "tyrants"

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1 This paper was prepared for, and read at the 1987 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in Oxford, England.
in his death and resurrection, God forgives sin and no longer imputes it to the sinner. Instead, God imputes to the believer in a moment the full righteousness of Jesus Christ. This imputation could be described as effected through faith, but it is not because of faith, but because of Jesus Christ, or to put it in another way, because of God's grace. For grace meant for Luther fundamentally God's favour, or the goodwill he bears us, such that in Christ he seeks us out while we are yet sinners and lack any worthiness of our own. It is by his grace that God gives us his gifts: Christ and his immanent righteousness. For Luther, therefore, the righteousness of the justified was a complete and perfect righteousness though it was also alien righteousness.

For Wesley justification meant God's full and free forgiveness for the sake of the merits of Jesus Christ. The atonement was the ground of justification, and the grace, or the love, of God was the ground of the atonement. Wesley differed principally from Luther and Calvin in denying that justification involves the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Wesley regarded this as unscriptural and liable to abuse by obscuring the need for the believer to grow in personal righteousness. Wesley preferred to stick closely to the Pauline statement that faith “was imputed to him (Abraham) for righteousness” (Rom. 4:22). It is difficult to assess the significance of this difference since, like Luther, he still regarded the believer as fully righteous in God's sight.

As one would expect from Wesley's own observations on the subject, it was in the area of sanctification that their differences were greatest. Yet one has the feeling that Wesley's castigation of Luther on this matter would have been less harsh if he had understood him better.

For didactic and doctrinal purposes Luther isolated the question of justification from all consideration of good works, and therefore from all consideration of sanctification. Luther considered that justification must first be purely taught. In his particular situation that was where the priority lay. Luther agreed wholeheartedly that the faith that justifies (if we may speak this way) is not passive, but a mighty, living, active thing; nevertheless he saw that wanting to speak of good works at the same time one was speaking of justification ran the danger of smuggling in again in one form or another the notion of merit. At the same time, in life and experience there remained the closest possible connection between justification and what might be referred to as sanctification. So close is the connection that the two will never come cleanly apart in Luther's thought. There is nothing in Luther corresponding to the clear and sharp distinction to be found in Wesley.

For Luther justification was not merely a forensic declaration of righteousness. God's word of justification is an effective word. It makes a difference that a person has been declared righteous. In his work, Against Latomus, he explains that to impute sin means not merely that God holds the sinner guilty and under wrath, but that he allows sin to reign and exercise all its powers. On the other hand, when God does not impute sin it means not only that he considers a person righteous, but that he breaks the power of sin, so that although sin remains, it is broken and in subjection. Again for Luther justification and sanctification were bound up together in his understanding of the nature and efficacy of faith. It was by apprehending Christ and holding him present that faith
brought justification. But it was also Christ present through faith who mortified the flesh and thus enabled good works. Yet Luther always maintained that the removal of sin only begins in this life and that its eradication is never complete this side of death. As he put it in the Lectures On Romans,

This life is a life of cure from sin; it is not a life of sinlessness, as if the cure were finished and health had been recovered. The church is an inn and an infirmary for the sick and for convalescents. Heaven, however, is the palace where the whole and the righteous live.\(^4\)

The person of faith, therefore, is totally righteous through his faith in Christ, and at the same time a sinner, able to stand before God only because of the divine imputation of righteousness. The person of faith remains simul iustus et peccator.

To grasp the full nature of this simul concept it is necessary to look carefully at the way Luther uses the terms "flesh" and "spirit". He clearly regarded the right grasp of these terms as being of the greatest importance. Without the understanding of these terms he believed it impossible to understand correctly the thought of St. Paul.\(^5\) Whether he himself correctly understood St. Paul we can leave aside, but certainly Luther himself will hardly be understood unless we are aware of what these terms mean in his Christian anthropology.

By "flesh" Luther understands not just the physical aspect of a person but rather the whole person, body and soul. Insofar as a person is dominated by pride and concupiscence he or she is flesh. Flesh is the “old Adam” in us. Whatever is outside grace and does not come from faith is flesh. Likewise "spirit" does not refer to a particular part of a person but to the whole person as ruled by God. Whatever proceeds from faith and is born of grace is spirit, even if it be something quite physical, such as the disciples fishing in the lake. It follows that the faithless person is nothing but flesh, while the person of faith is both flesh and spirit. While Luther does speak of these as two parts of a person of faith, they are not parts in the sense that they co-exist in inverse proportion. They are each really total views of the person in somewhat the same sense as Christ is truly God and truly man. One cannot be transformed into the other there can be no harmony between them, nor any truce. Thus Luther says: "God has stirred up a conflict and fight in your body, for the Spirit struggles against the flesh, and the flesh against the Spirit."\(^6\) The Christian life is nothing but a constant battle between these two. The warfare does not cease in this life, but only in the life to come. To speak therefore of the Christian as simul iustus et peccator is to speak of a continuing state but not a static one.

Luther finds a scriptural basis for this view not only in Paul's use of the terms "flesh" and "spirit" but particularly in the two Pauline passages Romans 7:7-25 and Galatians 2:19-21 ("I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"). Whether Luther is correct in taking Romans 7:7-25 as a description of the regenerate state is a matter of contention. It is a notoriously difficult text to interpret. Most of the early Greek Fathers held that it described the unregenerate person. Augustine was the first notable commentator to refer it to the regenerate person and the majority of Latin exegetes followed him. Apart from Karl Barth few prominent modern scholars read
the passage in this way. Paul Althaus' judgment of Luther's exegesis is intriguing. He says: "it is exegetically impossible; it contradicts the thought of Paul, but it expresses the self-judgment of the Christian in a way that we must substantially accept." In other words, the justification of Luther's position is to be sought not in a proper interpretation of this passage of Scripture, but in experience.

It is because this spirit/flesh conflict model is at the very heart of Luther's understanding of the Christian life that his doctrine seemed so unsatisfactory to Wesley. Strictly speaking, on Luther's model one cannot speak of sanctification at all, (and indeed the word seldom occurs in Luther), because the flesh, the old Adam, cannot be sanctified. It can only be mortified. And that can be done not by some higher part of our nature, but only by Christ himself present in our hearts through faith. However, insofar as the flesh is mortified the will of God in the individual will come to expression in good works. Yet Luther was never happy about identifying the new being with the converted person. Whatever righteousness there is about us never changes into a part of our personality or ego. It exists only as the alien righteousness of Christ.

In keeping with this view of the Christian life, Luther has no room for any idea of effort or struggle. It is true that Luther's works contain many exhortations to strenuous effort. In his Commentary of 1535 on Paul's Letter to the Galatians he exhorts his readers to "take pains to be righteous outwardly as well, that is not to yield to our flesh, but to resist it through the Spirit." But this is not really typical of Luther and is always in tension with the strong element of passivity in his thought. More typically he envisages a natural unfolding of goodness in the person who is justified by faith. This is the implication of his constant return to the parable of the good tree bringing forth good fruit. The same idea is expressed in the earlier lectures on Galatians where he writes "Thus we cannot say that three and seven ought to be ten, but they are ten already, as Blessed Augustine says. Thus a vessel full of wine does not need filling for it is full. Thus the just man does not need to live well and do good, for he lives well and does good."

Luther found it increasingly difficult to speak of progress in the Christian life. The idea is present in his Lectures an Romans but in his later work on Galatians he recounts with approval how Staupitz used to say: "I have vowed unto God above a thousand times, that I would become a better man; but I never performed that which I vowed." Pinomaa correctly explains the reason for this difficulty. "It is difficult," he writes, “to speak of progress for there is no such thing as growth of the old man in holiness and perfection. The old man in us must be put to death daily and the new man arise."

Similarly Luther really has no place for a third use of the law though just occasionally he speaks as though he has. Thus, for example, he writes:

   The commandments are necessary not in order that we may be justified by doing the works they enjoin, but in order that as persons who are already righteous we may know how our spirit should crucify the flesh and direct us in the affairs of this life.

However generally Luther speaks only of two uses: the usus politicus and the usus theologicus, the former to restrain the wicked, and the latter to uncover sin and bring the
sinful person to awareness of his or, her predicament before God. The law has nothing to do with the Christian as such. "I have said several times before, and I repeat now - for this is a thing that cannot be emphasized enough - that the Christian who by faith takes hold of the benefits of Christ has no Law at all but is free from it."\(^\text{13}\) Luther insists that Christ is the end of the law, not in the sense that it no longer expresses God's will for people, for in that respect it remains unchanged, but in the sense that it no longer accuses believers or delivers them to despair and death. Nor is it really needed for Christian living because faith does not need to be commanded to do, nor instructed in doing, good works. Because of Christ dwelling within, the Christian does whatever the occasion calls for. Of course it must be borne in mind that in this life the Christian is not spirit alone, but spirit and flesh. Therefore "as long as we live in the flesh, that is not free of sin, so long the law keeps coming back and performing its function."\(^\text{14}\) That function is the *usus theologicus* however, not the third use of the law.

In the light of all this, it is not surprising that Wesley found Luther so unsatisfactory. His own understanding of the Christian life was totally different.

In the first place Wesley distinguished very clearly between justification and sanctification. Justification, he said, "is not the being made actually just and righteous. This is sanctification; which is indeed in some degree, the immediate fruit of justification, but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature. The one implies what God does for us through His Son; the other, what He works in us by His Spirit."\(^\text{15}\) For Wesley this is not just a didactic distinction; there is a clear distinction in reality, which has no parallel in Luther. Though distinguished, of course Wesley did not believe that they could be separated. People are justified before they are sanctified, but in the very moment they are justified sanctification begins.

As the use of the word, "begins" suggests, sanctification was in Wesley's view a process. At conversion the individual was thought of as commencing a process of growth, which should continue so long as the individual lived and remained a believer. Even entire sanctification did not, in Wesley's view, constitute a resting place. Even after that state had been attained there was still room for further development. One could say that Wesley's model of the Christian life was that of organic growth. In fact the metaphor of organic growth was prominent in his thought and writing. The newly converted are "babes in Christ" and must grow into mature personhood. In his sermon on "The New Birth" he draws the analogy between our natural birth and our growth, on the one hand, and our new birth and our sanctification on the other. The idea of renewal is also prominent. The believer is one who is being renewed into the lost image of God. The renewal is not accomplished all at once, though with justification a basic change has occurred: the believer is renewed "in the spirit of his mind" but not entirely renewed.\(^\text{16}\)

In spite of the fact that Wesley believed that no outward sin was compatible with justification, he did believe that sin remained even in believers. He left us a sermon on that topic and parts of it could fittingly have come from the pen of Luther himself:

> With this conviction of sin remaining in our hearts, there is joined a clear conviction of the sin remaining in our lives; still cleaving to all our words and action. In the best of
these we now discern a mixture of evil, either in the spirit, the matter, or the manner of
them; something that could not endure the righteous judgment of God, ... Where we least
suspect it, we find a taint of pride and self-will, of unbelief or idolatry; so that we are now
more ashamed of our best duties than formerly of our worst sins; and hence we cannot
but feel that these are so far from having anything meritorious in them, yea, so far from
being able to stand in the sight of divine justice, that for those also we should be guilty
before God, were it not for the blood of the covenant."

Whether or not Wesley would have been happy with Luther's description of the Christian
as simul iustus et peccator, in the light of this quotation it could be said that it also fits
Wesley's understanding of the Christian's status. However, there would be a subtle
difference in the way Wesley would have had to construe the simul concept. While for
Luther the Christian was equally totus iustus, totus peccator, for Wesley the person of
genuine faith could no longer be totus peccator but only partim peccator.

The process of growth goes on, to some extent quite apart from our efforts or our self-
conscious will, but Wesley clearly believed that Christians have a part to play in their
sanctification and the co-operation of their will is required. In this respect Wesley finds a
positive place for the third use of the law. It convinces the believer of sin remaining in
him or her; it teaches the believer to seek and obtain strength in Christ to do what his law
commands; and it confirms the believer's hope of whatever the law commands. That is
why Wesley saw the law as essentially good and reacted so sharply to Luther's linking it
with sin and death and the devil.

There is good New Testament backing for Wesley's progressive growth model. Here and
there, particularly in the Pauline corpus, there are texts that speak of progressive
development and make use of organic growth metaphors. Perhaps the most prominent of
these texts is Ephesians 4:11-16, where the author speaks of being no longer children
"tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine", but of growing up into
Christ, the head, and attaining mature personhood. Progressive transformation is also
suggested in Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Galatians 3:9-10, 2 Thessalonians 1:3.
Many other texts could be cited also, both in the non-Pauline letters and in the Gospels. It
could be argued, therefore, that Wesley has the surer biblical backing.

Are we then to judge between these two theologies of the Christian life on this basis and
reject Luther's in favour of Wesley's? There was a time when we would have had to say
that since they are different they cannot both be right; one at least must be wrong.
However, since Ian Ramsey gave us his valuable little book, Models and Mystery, we
have learnt to see that some theological formulations may be like models in science,
which stand alongside each other, each making its own essential disclosure of truth.

Luther's model does have some strengths and does preserve some valid Christian insights.
As we live the Christian life we do experience a certain conflict within ourselves, so that
sometimes we feel like a battleground in which good and evil are at war with each other.
More importantly it does full justice to the strong, and biblical conviction of the believer
that all that is good in him or her is of grace alone. It is this conviction that Harriet Auber
expressed when she wrote:
And every virtue we possess
And every victory won,
And every thought of Holiness
Are his alone.

Since it ascribes all to Christ, Luther's model leaves not the smallest room for human pride. Since it teaches us to look only to God and to rely on his grace, it is a liberating model. Expressing as it does the freedom of the Christian from the tyranny of the law and from wrath, it is a very joyful model. Perhaps it is because this model so permeates Luther's thinking and writing that he makes the more exciting reading.

The model also has its weaknesses. Historically it has proved to be vulnerable to antinomian and "cheap grace" misunderstandings. It is our Christian experience that moral exhortation has a place in the life of the believer and hence there must be a place for human intention and effort. Exhortation is to be found all through the epistles as well as in the gospels. Yet according to Luther's model, strictly speaking there is no room for this kind of exhortation, as there is no point in a third use of the law which applies to Christians as such.

Wesley's model also has its strengths and weaknesses. It gives glory to God in that it allows that God may truly transform a person's nature here and now as Luther's does not. It leaves room for exhortation and for the struggle, which we often know in ourselves, as we seek, with the grace of God, to achieve victory over the sin that remains in us. It is consistent with the fact that we do expect to see growth and progress in the lives of those who have been born anew. On the other hand it can easily give rise to an unfortunate introspection intent on measuring how far one has progressed in sanctification instead of fastening one's gaze on Christ and his grace. It has been open to misunderstanding in the direction of legalism.

The two models, therefore, may stand side by side, supplementing and correcting each other. Each represents something biblical and something valid in Christian experience. Yet it seems that neither singly nor together do they exhaust the biblical witness concerning the Christian life. It was while reading Wesley's sermon, On Sin in Believers, that I was alerted to this fact. There he takes the Corinthian Christians as an example, and answering the hypothetical objection "But sure, they had not a new heart and an old heart together", he says:

It is most sure they had; for, at that very time their hearts were truly, yet not entirely, renewed. Their carnal mind was nailed to the cross; yet it was not wholly destroyed.20

Then answering the objection that a person cannot be both a new creature and an old creature, he says:

Yes, he may: he may be partly renewed, which was the very case with those at Corinth. They were doubtless 'renewed in the spirit of their mind,' or they could not have been so much as 'babes in Christ'; yet they had not the whole mind that was in Christ, for they envied one another. 'But it is said expressly "Old things are passed away; all things are
become new". But we may not so interpret the Apostle's Words, as to make him contradict himself. And if we will make him consistent with himself, the plain meaning of the words is this: His old judgment concerning justification, holiness, happiness, indeed concerning the things of God in general, is now passed away; so are his old desires, designs, affections, tempers and conversation. All of these are undeniably become new, greatly changed from what they were; and yet, though they are new, they are not wholly new. Still he feels, to his sorrow and shame, remains of the old man, too manifest taints of his former tempers and affections though they cannot gain any advantage over him, as long as he watches unto prayer.

The fact that according to Wesley's view St. Paul's words are, at one point, something of an exaggeration, and over all somewhat contradictory, raises the question whether St Paul might have held a view of the Christian life with which his words were thoroughly consistent. This indeed seems to be the case. It is possible to find in Paul, alongside organic growth metaphors, another model of the Christian life. It might be called the eschatological model.

Though it is pervasive in Paul's letters, possibly the classic expression of this model is found in Romans 6: 1-11. This passage makes it clear that the whole being of the Christian is determined by the fact that he or she has been baptized into the death of Jesus Christ. The Christian has already died with Christ and the execution of God's judgment on sin has already occurred in Christ's baptism and death. Therefore, since the Christian has already been united with Christ in his death, he or she has the promise of being raised up with him in a new life. His or her present life is one of promise and hope. These things, though future, profoundly alter the nature and structure of life in the present, so that one may no longer "yield (one's) members to sin as instruments of wickedness." To do so does indeed remain an inexplicable possibility, in the face of which a person has to die daily, and be exhorted to set the mind on things that are above. But this remaining possibility of sin does not indicate the true nature of the person.

It is this model which underlies such phrases as "putting an Christ", and "being in Christ". The work of Christ is understood in terms of the creation of a new humanity, which the believer "puts on", as those who have been baptized put on a new robe. To be " in Christ" is to have one's being in this new humanity. At the same time, the full realization of this new humanity is yet to come. It is grasped now by faith. Besides faith, the characteristic attitude of the person who is "in Christ" is hope. "We have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead" (I Pet. 1:3). As the old corrupt person is determined cut of the past (Adam), the new person is determined out of the future (Christ as he shall appear: 1 John 3:2-3). At the same time, the future is already breaking into the present. The Spirit is already given as a sign of what the believer is destined to be. While the Spirit seals "for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30), he also imparts gifts that are empirically manifested in such things as glossolalia, prophecy and loving service of many kinds. The believer is also incorporated into the church. However, the reality of the believer's present life is never fully comprehended through these observable things. Just as the promise and the hope by which he or she lives are not seen, so the new reality of the Christian's life is not fully visible, but is "hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3).
According to this model, justification and sanctification are not separable, except for purposes of discussion. Both of them belong to the believer's eschatological determination. St. Paul says to the Corinthians, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). Believers are totally righteous, not just forensically, but fundamentally. They are to understand themselves as people who have a new nature by virtue of which they are already dead to sin and alive to God. Yet at the same time they have to acknowledge that sin remains as an unnatural contradiction of this new nature. To sin remains a possibility in the face of which they must be exhorted to be what they are already through the promise and the hope that have been given to them. Believers are, as Luther characterized them, *simul iustus et peccator* yet they are not permitted to regard themselves equally from either point of view. The priority is with the iustus.

Insofar as we may conceptually distinguish sanctification from justification, it is not an epiphenomenon of the conflict of flesh and spirit, as in Luther, nor progressive as in Wesley, but realizational. It does not have to be striven for as something, which is not yet, but realized (that is, made real) in the believer's life in the world. Indicative and imperative are bound together. "You are not children of darkness, but children of the light. Therefore walk in the light." "You are the light of the World. Therefore let your light shine." This is how Paul approaches the Corinthians. Astounded at their behaviour, he reminds them that that was indeed the way they lived before they received the gospel, "but," he says to them, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified." They had forgotten that, and so they were living as if the gospel were not true, and Christ had made no difference. What was lacking was not the new reality, but their faith in it, and hence their will to let the change be evident. And that is what he exhorts them to do. It was as if the paralysed man who heard Christ's command to arise and walk, simply continued to lie there, unwilling to believe that Christ's word had made any difference or unwilling to let the difference reshape his life.

This model provides us with a view of the Christian life that is helpful in a number of respects. For one thing, it saves the preaching of the Christian life from becoming bad news. It is not a matter of exhorting sinners to become holy, but of calling upon saints who have been sanctified in Jesus Christ, to remember and be what they are. At the same time, there is a place for exhortation, and the "cheap grace" misunderstanding of Luther's doctrine is foreclosed.

It is well known that later in his life Wesley became very uncertain about speaking of states in the Christian life, whether it be a justified or a sanctified state. We catch this uncertainty in the 1770 Minutes.²² His insistence that no outward sin is compatible with justification certainly undermines any notion of justification as a continuing state. Yet if justification is such an "on-again, off-again" thing it ceases to have any practical value. Yet one can appreciate Wesley's difficulty. How can one speak of justification as a continuing state in the presence of sin, especially if predestination and perseverance are abandoned? Perhaps Wesley would have been helped by a view of the Christian life which saw justification and sanctification as states not because they are predestined, but because they are pro-destined, determined not by God's eternal decree before all time, but
by God's promise to be fulfilled at the end of time. A person does not cease to stand under this promise and be shaped by it because in a particular moment the sin that remains exhibits itself in some outward action, though the person may need to be exhorted again to be what he or she is through that promise. On the other hand, the sanctified state, as Wesley earlier taught it, could safely be relinquished in favour of the conviction that in any particular moment or situation we can be and act as the saints whom God has made us by the hope we have through our baptism into Christ.

Again I emphasize that I am not suggesting the abandonment of either Luther's or Wesley's models, because they each provide us with valuable disclosures. I want to hang on to them both, together with this third model, appreciating the strengths and weaknesses in each of them and grateful for the fact that because of the application of model theory to theology we are not compelled to opt for one to the exclusion of the others.

4 W. Pauck, Luther: Lectures on Romans, Philadelphia, 1961, p.130
6 L.W. Vol. 27, p.65.
7 Quoted in H. O. Kadai, ed., Accents in Luther's Theology, St. Louis, 1967, p.121.
8 L.W., Vol. 27, p.72.
10 L.W. Vol. 27, p.73.
12 L.W. Vol. 27, p.232, italics added.
13 L.W. Vol. 26, p.445-446
17 Ibid. p.455.
18 Ibid. p.54.
21 Ibid. p.372.