

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE MIRACLE OF NEW BIRTH:
THE ECLIPSE OF THE RESURRECTION IN JOHN WESLEY
IN LIGHT OF HIS RESPONSE TO CONYERS MIDDLETON

QUALIFYING EXAM
IN
HISTORY OF DOCTRINE
FOR
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A survey of the works of John Wesley and the secondary literature concerning him reveals a paucity of references to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This lacuna does not imply that there is no resurrection in Wesley, but it does raise the question of its theological function in his thought. What is the role of the resurrection in John Wesley? How can we account for this role or lack thereof? The thesis of this paper is that Wesley's prioritization of inwardness served to eclipse the resurrection in his thought.

The point of entry toward substantiating such a claim is Wesley's lengthy open letter to Conyers Middleton on the subject of early Christian miracles. It is through his response to Middleton that we can see most clearly Wesley's prioritization of inwardness. After placing Wesley and Middleton in the appropriate historical context, I will identify the diverse strategies Wesley employs in his defense of miracles. The combination of these strategies is unstable. The consequence of this instability is the eclipse of the resurrection evident in a number of Wesley's sermons.

I. Wesley's Confessional Context

In order to understand Wesley better, he must be situated within his historical context. Wesley's broader historical setting supplied hidden assumptions that framed his thought in general. This background is especially important for understanding what is at stake in the miracles controversy surrounding Conyers Middleton.

However, arriving at an appropriate understanding of Wesley's historical context is not easy. The difficulty arises from the lack of scholarly consensus over how to best characterize the eighteenth century. Much of the secondary literature on Wesley relies on a particular narrative of post-Reformation England. However, more recent historical research into eighteenth English society has called into question this narrative. What are

these two competing narratives and how do they shape one's reading of Wesley in general and his debate with Middleton in particular?

The received wisdom is that English history prior to Wesley underwent a major period of upheaval described as the Enlightenment. This trans-European intellectual movement responded to the devastation of the Wars of Religion by offering a secular account of the state that would underwrite religious freedom. Traditional religion lost ground to its rationalist critics. The secularization and modernization of societies followed with mixed results.

Within this context, the figure of Wesley emerges as a specific type of response to the Enlightenment. Wesley was both an exponent of certain strands of Enlightenment thinking and a reactionary to it. On the one hand, Wesley's practical or "experimental" Christianity drew on the Lockean empiricist tradition to supply a new ground for Christian faith. On the other hand, Wesley's emphasis on emotional or "heart" religion was a reaction to the rationalism of the day. On both fronts, Wesley succeeded as a reviver of religion during the time of its demise. This two-pronged placement of Wesley within an Enlightenment context is embodied in the title of Henry Rack's classic text, *Reasonable Enthusiast*.¹

Wesley's response to Middleton can be read accordingly. On the one hand, Wesley defends early Christian accounts of miracles not only on the basis of historical evidence but also with reference to the personal transformation of the individuals involved. This practical emphasis performs an apologetic function by shifting the focus away from Enlightenment challenges concerning historical reliability. On the other hand,

¹ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd Ed (London: Epworth Press, 2002). Cf. also Richard Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984).

Wesley stridently defends the supernatural worldview attacked by the Enlightenment. From this reactionary position, Wesley remains an ardent traditionalist despite his “experimental” innovations.

But is this narrative the most accurate portrayal of Wesley’s historical context? Recent studies of England in the eighteenth century have shown that the impact of the Enlightenment on English culture has been overstated. This thesis has been strongly supported by the work of J. C. D. Clark.² According to Clark, a transition to a more secularized state and society did occur, but it took place much later in England’s history. The key period of transition was the early nineteenth century, during which reform movements successfully dismantled the confessional state, both legally and intellectually. Prior to this period one finds an “old order” in which royal, ecclesiastical and parliamentary factors were interwoven. English society from the Restoration (1660) through the Glorious Revolution (1688-89) to the Act of Reform (1832) exhibits great continuity in its confessional self-understanding.

What about the Enlightenment critiques of traditional religion? First of all, it must be noted that such critiques were often found at the extremes of public discourse and do not necessarily represent the bulk of English society. Defenders of the faith such as Bishop Butler had a wide appeal and were relatively successful at shoring up belief.³ Second, many intellectuals kept quiet their heterodox religious views, their most critical works often appearing posthumously. Finally, and most importantly, such criticism is

² Clark, J. C. D. *English Society 1660-1832: Religion, ideology and politics during the ancien regime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. The significance of Clark’s work for understanding Wesley’s historical context was first pointed out by William J. Abraham in “Saving Souls in the Twenty-First Century: A Missiological Midrash on John Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 38:1 (Spring 2003), pp. 10.

³ Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed*. London, 1736.

best interpreted not as a sign of secularization per se but as a phenomenon *within* the confessional state. The Deists, Arians and Socinians of this period understood themselves as dissenting heterodox theologies. As Clark puts it, “What was most in evidence in the last half century of England’s old order was not the rise of unbelief, but of Dissent.”⁴

How does such a revised understanding of English history shape one’s interpretation of Wesley? First of all, the apologetic reading of his “experimental” Christianity is tenuous at best. Wesley did not need to supply an alternative empirical ground for Christianity because the intellectual foundations had not been so shaken as to require such an apologetic move. Rather, Wesley’s focus on the practical outworking of Christian belief could take for granted widespread orthodox opinion. Wesley’s primary concern was not Enlightenment rationalism but the reduction of Christianity to confessional subscription and liturgical conformity. Wesley did not reject the state church, but thought it insufficient to save people’s souls. So, when read against the backdrop of a confessional state, Wesley’s whole project of renewal can be understood as building on the foundation of the old order.

Wesley, of course, pushed the boundaries of this old order. But even as his relations with church officials became strained, Wesley’s defense of the Anglican establishment persisted.⁵ Wesley’s intended loyalty to the Church of England is not disputed. The issue is how to understand this loyalty. Rather than being counted as an instance of traditionalism that conflicted with his nonconformist practices, Wesley’s defense of the state church and the confessional state was the assumption that illumines his nonconformity. He consistently protests that his nonconformist practices were

⁴ Clark, *English Society*, p. 30.

⁵ For instance, *The Works of John Wesley* (Thomas Jackson, ed; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), Vol. I, p. 224; Vol. II, pp. 4-6, 385; Vol. X, pp. 133-140, 501-506; Vol. XII, pp. 106, 146, 225-232.

pragmatic in character, only chosen out of necessity when no other options were available. This sort of argument reveals that he at least assumes the legitimacy of the state church and seeks to be tolerated within it.

Despite his intentions, Wesley was on a trajectory toward dissent. The eventual separation of the Methodists from the Church of England at the turn of the century was contemporaneous with the collapse of the old order. After 1832, the cost of nonconformity greatly decreased, so that in hindsight Wesley's defense of the Church of England seemed unnecessary and could be dismissed as his personal prejudice. But read in context, Wesley's self-understanding fits within the overarching confessional self-understanding of English society.

II. Conyers Middleton and the Miracles Controversy

Located within this context, Conyers Middleton's critique of miracles and John Wesley's response to it take on a different hue. To a large extent, Middleton embodies the spirit of the Enlightenment in his criticism of miracles. However, Middleton's *Free Inquiry* would be misunderstood if it were read as an attack on the church from without.⁶ Rather, Middleton takes his stand within the established church to defend it against error. The error that concerned him was superstition. He rightly discerned that church bodies appeal to accounts of miracles to support their claims. This was especially true of Roman Catholics, whom he perceived to be making inroads into English society.⁷ But the same could be said of the more "enthusiastic" dissenting groups, such as the "Methodist, Moravian, or French Prophet."⁸ Middleton aims to undercut the miraculous claims of

⁶ Conyers Middleton, *Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers Which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church* (Ludgate-Hill, 1749).

⁷ Middleton, *Free*, p. xli.

⁸ Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, p. 197.

such groups precisely in order to recommend a more Enlightened form of the Protestant establishment, as his regular references to “this Protestant country” reveal.⁹

In order to accomplish this aim, Middleton does not engage in an assault on miracles in general. Rather, he distinguishes between the false miracles of one period and the true miracles of another. He intends to create a “rule of discerning the true from the false; so as to give a reason for admitting the miracles of one age, and rejecting those of another.”¹⁰ He wishes to reserve miracles only to the time of Christ and his apostles. This periodization of history does not serve as an attack on Christian faith in general, but rather serves to support one Christian Church against another.

The establishment character of Middleton’s critique of miracles is brought into sharp relief when contrasted with David Hume’s.¹¹ Although Middleton and Hume can both be correctly categorized together as “Enlightenment” thinkers, such an appellation conceals more than it reveals. Middleton’s Enlightenment principles were used in service of the Protestant establishment, whereas Hume’s assault on the miraculous in general was a threat to Christian faith of any kind. When placed next to Hume’s, Middleton’s argument is a rather “traditional” defense of the establishment.¹²

Now it must be acknowledged that Middleton’s method of defending the establishment was itself controversial. The Church of England in the eighteenth century made claims to continuity with the early church. Middleton’s attack on the credibility and authority of the early church was perceived as an attack on the Church itself. However,

⁹ Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, p. xli. Cf. also, p. xxxviii-xxxix.

¹⁰ Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, p. xliv.

¹¹ David Hume, “Of Miracles” in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd Edition, edited by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998) 107-125.

¹² It is ironic that Middleton created a greater stir than Hume. This irony was not lost on Hume, cf. Robert M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981) 10-11.

the controversy that ensued was a conversation *within* the Protestant establishment about its proper basis. As Middleton puts it, “The design of the present treatise is to fix the religion of Protestants on its proper basis, that is, on the sacred Scriptures.”¹³

This “establishment” interpretation of Middleton’s *Free Inquiry* helps to illumine what was at stake for Wesley in the debate. Middleton’s work concerned Wesley greatly, as is shown by his acquisition of the book prior to its publication and his cancellation of a trip to the Netherlands in order to read and respond publicly to it.¹⁴ Wesley continued to refer to Middleton throughout the rest of his career.¹⁵ Although usually dismissive and contemptuous, these references reveal the seriousness with which Wesley took the issues raised by Middleton’s *Free Inquiry*. Why did Middleton concern him so much?

As indicated above, Middleton was critical of both Roman Catholic and nonconformist Protestant claims to authority on the basis of evidence of miraculous powers. Middleton explicitly included the Methodist movement among the targets of his two-pronged attack.¹⁶ Wesley thought it necessary to clear himself and his movement of the charge of enthusiastic superstition. As such, Wesley’s defense of post-biblical miracles is not so much a “traditional” apologetic of Christianity against Enlightenment criticism as it is a defense of his allegiance and loyalty to the Protestant establishment.

The association with Roman Catholics was especially damning in this regard. This was not the first time Methodism had been criticized as a Catholic defection. Not long before the release of Middleton’s *Free Inquiry*, the Bishop of Exeter George

¹³ Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, p. cxi.

¹⁴ These biographical details are supplied by Ted A. Campbell, “John Wesley and Conyers Middleton on Divine Intervention in History,” *Church History* 55:1 (Mar 1986), pp. 39.

¹⁵ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. II, p. 128; Vol. III, p. 441; Vol. VIII, pp. 264, 515-16; Vol. IX, pp. 7, 149, 193; Vol. XIII, pp. 298, 416. Cf. also Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd Ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) pp. 131, 145.

¹⁶ Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, p. 197.

Lavington published *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared*.¹⁷ So Wesley goes out of his way to display his anti-Papist credentials, repeatedly arguing against Middleton that one can assemble a successful polemic of Catholic claims without rejecting post-biblical miracles.¹⁸

Interpreted within the particular contours of this debate, Wesley's response to Conyers Middleton can be analyzed with reference to the various strategies he employs in defense of post-biblical miracles. A number of discreet lines of argument can be discerned in Wesley's response. These strategies are employed eclectically and not fully integrated. This eclectic combination is important, because it reveals tensions in Wesley's theology. These tensions peacefully coexisted within his confessional context but rose to the surface subsequent to its collapse. Highlighting these tensions within Wesley's response to Middleton will pave the way for tracing the same tension in Wesley's sermons.

III. Wesley's Strategies in Response to Middleton

Wesley dedicates the bulk of his "Letter to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton"¹⁹ to an investigation of the particular evidence discussed by Middleton himself. The body of the letter is thus fittingly structured according to the chapter divisions in Middleton's *Free Inquiry*. After an introduction concerning Middleton's overall argument (pp. 1-15), Wesley deals first with the ancient testimonies to miracles (pp. 16-24), second with the persons so endued with miraculous powers (pp. 24-29), third with the Fathers who recorded these testimonies (pp. 29-38), fourth with the different kinds of miraculous gifts

¹⁷ George Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (London, 1949).

¹⁸ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 2.

¹⁹ John Wesley, "A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton occasioned by his late 'Free Inquiry,'" in *Works*, Vol. X, p. 1-79.

(p. 38-59), and fifth with Middleton's replies to objections (pp. 59-66). Wesley concludes with a description of the true Christian, real Christianity, and its strongest evidence (pp. 67-79). Although the whole the letter is of interest, especially with regard to Wesley's use of the patristic sources,²⁰ the introduction and conclusion are the most relevant for discerning Wesley's strategies in defense of post-biblical miracles.

There are at least four distinct argumentative strategies employed by Wesley in his response to Middleton: the extending, the modifying, the characterizing, and the interiorizing. After describing each strategy in turn, it will be shown how the combination of these strategies evinces a tension in Wesley's account of the relation between past and present divine action.

The Extending Strategy

Wesley extends Middleton's argument to its logical conclusion in order to discredit it. Wesley thinks that the rejection of post-biblical miracles will necessarily lead to a rejection of the miracles of Christ and the apostles. This concern about the trajectory of Middleton's argument is indicated in the opening paragraph of Wesley's letter:

In your late "Inquiry," you endeavour [*sic*] to prove, First, that there were no miracles wrought in the primitive Church: Secondly, that all the primitive Fathers were fools or knaves, and most of them both one and the other. And it is easy to observe, the whole tenor of your argument tends to prove, Thirdly, that no miracles were wrought by Christ or his Apostles; and, fourthly, that these too were fools or knaves, or both.²¹

Wesley's extension of Middleton's argument is of course not intended as a wholesale rejection of the miraculous, but rather the identification of an undesirable logical consequence of Middleton's position.

²⁰ Ted A. Campbell's thorough study of Wesley's use of the Fathers includes considerable discussion of Wesley's letter to Middleton, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991).

²¹ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 1.

It should be noted that Wesley's initial statement of his extending strategy commits the logical fallacy of a slippery slope argument: if one rejects post-biblical miracles, then one will necessarily reject biblical miracles; therefore, one should accept (or at least be open to accepting) post-biblical miracles. However, it should also be noted that Middleton employs his own slippery slope argument, albeit in the other direction: if one permits any post-biblical miracles, then one must permit all miracles claimed by Catholics and enthusiasts; therefore, one should reject all post-biblical miracles. In both arguments, the undesirability of the logical conclusion is based on other grounds. These grounds are supplied by the confessional assumptions shared by both Wesley and Middleton. As Anglicans, both assume the truth of biblical miracles and the falsehood of Catholic ones.

However, Wesley's extending strategy is not always formulated as a slippery slope argument. For instance, he infers that Middleton's larger principle of probability undermines any and all certainty in historical knowledge. Wesley states, "If you defend, and can prove, as well as assert [this principle], then farewell the credit of all history, not only sacred but profane." If, on account of the probabilistic principle, "all the history of the Bible is utterly precarious and uncertain; then I may indeed presume, but cannot certainly know, that Jesus of Nazareth ever was born; much less that he healed the sick, and raised either Lazarus or himself from the dead."²²

In the process of extending Middleton's argument, Wesley accuses Middleton of being a closet Deist. Although Middleton's arguments against supernatural intervention often bear resemblance to Deism, his affirmation of biblical miracles makes the appellation of "Deist" problematic. But since Wesley regards the Deist position as the

²² Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 3.

logical implication of Middleton's stance, he concludes that Middleton is either contradictory or disingenuous. Wesley interprets Middleton's affirmation of biblical miracles as a "mere grimace."²³ He goes on to castigate Middleton: "You believe not one word of what you say. You cannot possibly, if you believe what you said before. For who can believe both the sides of a contradiction?"²⁴ Wesley concludes that Middleton speaks with two voices: one real, the other personated. "By what criterion," Wesley asks, "shall we distinguish between what is spoken in your real, and what in your personated, character?"²⁵ Wesley believes he is exposing the Deistic assumptions behind and trajectory of Middleton's position.

Although the extending strategy does not in itself support the reality of miracles, it does prejudice Wesley's audience against Middleton. Just as Middleton rendered the Methodists guilty by association with Catholics, Wesley renders Middleton guilty by association with Deists. The result is that Wesley creates a dilemma for his readers: they can either be "real Deists" or "real Christians."²⁶ Given the prejudices of his time in favor of miraculous intervention in the Bible, this is an effective strategy.

The Modifying Strategy

Wesley modifies Middleton's periodization of Christian history. Wesley does not object in principle to the notion of a cessation of miracles. For him, there was a real, though temporary, cessation in external miracles. The date of this cessation, however, is much later than Middleton claims. Although Middleton believes miracles ceased

²³ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 5.

²⁴ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 5.

²⁵ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 14.

²⁶ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 77.

immediately after the death of the apostles, Wesley dates the cessation of miracles to the legalization of Christianity at the time of Constantine.

Wesley's temporal modification of cessation is already signaled on the first page of his letter: "I shall ... contract the question itself to the three first centuries. For I have no more to do with the writers or miracles of the fourth, than with those of the fourteenth, century."²⁷ He cites approvingly "the generality of the Protestant Doctors" who "agreed to what period they should confine themselves; believing that miracles subsisted through the three first centuries, and ceased in the beginning of the fourth."²⁸ So Wesley and Middleton shared with much of the Protestant establishment a belief in the cessation of miracles. What differentiated them within this consensus was the timing.

As Wesley's extending strategy has shown, drawing an imaginary line between biblical and post-biblical history is ultimately arbitrary. But is not Wesley's dating of the cessation of miracles at the time of Constantine just as arbitrary as Middleton's? Not in his mind, for he does not merely assert such a date but also argues for it. He takes his cue from Middleton's principle that miracles cease once the necessitating occasions cease. The necessitating occasions of miraculous powers are missionary activity and the persecution of the church. Wesley points out that such occasions persisted until the fourth century:

With what shadow of reason can you maintain, that (if they ever subsisted at all) they [miracles] were finally withdrawn before Christianity was established by the civil power? Then indeed these ends did manifestly cease; persecution was at an end; and the inveterate prejudices which had so long obtained were in great measure rooted up; another plain reason why the powers which were to balance these should remain in the Church so long, and no longer.²⁹

²⁷ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 1.

²⁸ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 10.

²⁹ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 7.

Wesley reiterates this connection between cessation and establishment as a widely held position: “it is commonly believed, that they [miracles] continued till Christianity was the established religion.”³⁰ So, Wesley certainly had his reasons for dating the cessation of miracles when he did.

Wesley not only adjusted Middleton’s timeline of cessation but also rendered the cessation temporary. The cessation of miracles is not permanent. They may return. According to Wesley, they had returned among the revival movements of his day.³¹ He defends that “we do not pretend the revival of them [miracles].”³² So Wesley understood the cessation of miracles to be an intermission of sorts. The dual affirmation of the cessation of miracles on the one hand and the revival of miracles on the other serves to differentiate Methodists from Catholics, which is one of the driving concerns of Wesley’s response to Middleton.

Unlike his attempt to undermine Middleton’s argument by means of the extending strategy, Wesley’s modifying strategy merely adjusts the details of his account. These details are significant, but do not reveal any fundamental difference in their approach to the miraculous. Wesley is on board with Middleton’s anti-Catholic polemic; he just does not want that polemic turned against the early church or himself. As such, the modifying strategy is useful for positioning the Methodist movement vis-à-vis the established church.

³⁰ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 8.

³¹ Although Wesley does not explicitly draw the connection, it would seem that a revival of miracles would imply that their necessitating occasions of missionary activity and persecution have also returned. That Wesley saw England as a mission field is undisputed, but *in what sense* this was the case is still not entirely clear.

³² Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 27.

The Characterizing Strategy

Wesley defends the character of the Fathers against Middleton's criticism. Middleton spends much of his energy calling into question the trustworthiness of patristic sources that record miracle stories. Wesley was particularly offended by this "slander" against the primitive church. And so he responds in detail. He is careful to indicate that the major Catholic "abuses" were not introduced until the fourth century or later.³³ He also quarrels with Middleton over what counts as an abuse.³⁴ He dedicates a long portion of the body of his letter to the defense of the character of the Fathers.³⁵ Throughout the letter it is clear that Wesley was deeply concerned with the trustworthiness of the patristic period.

More was at stake for Wesley in defending the reputation of the Fathers than the defense of their miracles stories. Wesley, along with many of his contemporaries, wished to draw on the early church in support of his positions and practices. In fact, Wesley had just recently published a defense of Methodism replete with appeals to patristic precedent.³⁶ So he had every reason to defend the trustworthiness of the early church Fathers. By positively characterizing the Fathers, Wesley was not only defending the miracles they recorded but also defending the Fathers themselves.

When Wesley moves from extending and modifying Middleton's argument to his characterizing strategy, an important shift takes place. His attention moves away from the historical reality of miracles to the inner life and piety of the Fathers. Though historically verifiable accounts of miracles matter to him, the piety of the Fathers matters even more.

³³ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 9.

³⁴ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 10.

³⁵ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 29-38.

³⁶ John Wesley, "Plain Account of the People Called Methodists" (1748), in *Works*, Vol. VIII, pp. 248-268.

This is especially apparent in the conclusion of the letter, where Wesley praises the Fathers for their genuine Christianity. He openly acknowledges their fallibility:

“I allow that some of these had not strong natural sense, that few of them had much learning, and none of the assistances which our age enjoys in some respects above all that went before. Hence I doubt not but whoever will be at pains of reading over their writing for that poor end, will find many mistakes, many weak suppositions, and many ill-drawn conclusions.”³⁷

Yet, despite all this, Wesley believes they should be praised for their piety: “And yet I exceedingly reverence them, as well as their writings, and esteem them very highly in love. I reverence them, because they were [real] Christians ... And I reverence their writings, because they describe true, genuine Christianity, and direct us to the strongest evidence of the Christian doctrine.” Wesley, of course, does not deny the reality of the supernatural interventions they record. But he does prioritize their personal transformation as the real heart of the matter. This prioritizing of the “internal” over the “external” comes to the fore in Wesley’s last strategy in his response to Middleton.

The Interiorizing Strategy

Wesley interiorizes the miraculous and thereby places it out of the reach of Middleton’s criticism. In the conclusion of his letter, Wesley turns from a direct engagement with the particulars of Middleton’s argument to a general description of Christianity. His intent is to clarify what is being defended and how it should be defended: “We have been long disputing about Christians, about Christianity, and the evidence whereby it is supported. But what do these terms mean? Who is a Christian indeed? What is real, genuine Christianity? And what is the surest and most accessible evidence (if I may so speak) whereby I may know that it is of God?”³⁸ These questions

³⁷ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 79.

³⁸ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 67.

correspond to the three sections of Wesley's conclusion. First, he describes real Christians in terms of their relationship to God, relationship to others, and internal attitudes (pp. 67-72). Second, he speaks of real, genuine Christianity as "that system of doctrine which describes the character above recited, which promises, it shall be mine, (provided I will not rest till I attain,) and which tells me how I may attain it."³⁹ Third, he identifies "the strongest evidence of the truth of Christianity."⁴⁰ In this third and final section, Wesley strictly prioritizes the evidential force of the interior miracle of personal transformation over the external miracles of ecclesiastical history.

Wesley is clear from the beginning that he does not deny the reality or significance of traditional, external evidence: "I do not undervalue traditional evidence. Let it have its place and its due honour. It is highly serviceable in its kind, and in its degree."⁴¹ But he makes its inferiority clear: "And yet I cannot set it on a level with this [internal evidence]."⁴²

He substantiates this subordination of traditional to inward evidence by noting three contrasts. First, traditional evidence is "weakened by length of time," whereas "no length of time can possibly affect the strength of this internal evidence."⁴³ Second, "[t]raditional evidence is of an extremely complicated nature," whereas inward evidence is "plain and simple."⁴⁴ Third, the "traditional evidence of Christianity stands, as it were, a great way off; and therefore, although it speaks loud and clear, yet makes a less lively impression. Whereas the inward evidence is intimately present to all persons, at all times,

³⁹ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 72.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 75.

⁴¹ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 75.

⁴² Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 75.

⁴³ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 75.

⁴⁴ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 75-76.

and in all places.”⁴⁵ In view of the superiority of inward evidence, Wesley states that Christianity would still be secure even if external evidences were removed: “If, then, it were possible (which I conceive it is not) to shake the traditional evidence of Christianity, still he that has the internal evidence (and every true believer hath the witness or evidence in himself) would stand firm and unshaken.”⁴⁶

Wesley goes on to speculate that perhaps God may permit attacks on the external evidence of Christianity in order to push Christians toward internal evidence. This does not mean Christians should avoid defending external evidence, as Wesley has been doing throughout his letter. But even as they defend it, they should not “rest the whole strength of their cause thereon, but seek a deeper and firmer support for it.”⁴⁷ The critique of miracles, then, serves to separate the real Christians from nominal ones. Wesley even baits the critics to do their worst, knowing it will only serve the cause of real Christianity: “Go on, gentlemen, and prosper. Shame these nominal Christians out of that poor superstition which they call Christianity.”⁴⁸ So, Wesley’s final response to Middleton is that even if he succeeds in his critique of external miracles, the most important evidence remains out of reach: the miracle of the Christian life.

When combined with his previous strategies, Wesley’s interiorizing strategy creates tensions in his approach to the miraculous. He clearly affirms both biblical and post-biblical miracles. However, his extending strategy argued that a rejection of the post-biblical miracles leads necessarily to a rejection of biblical miracles. Would Wesley also prioritize inward evidence over biblical miracles? Would Wesley subordinate the

⁴⁵ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 76.

⁴⁶ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 76.

⁴⁸ Wesley, *Works*, Vol. X, p. 77.

resurrection of Lazarus or of Christ himself to the Christian's new birth? Would Wesley bait the Deist to go ahead and undermine the miracles of Christmas and Easter because the strongest evidence is one's new life in Christ? Wesley, of course, does not go here. In fact, given his confessional context, he did not need to make such a move because he could count on widespread belief in the core doctrines of Christianity. However, the combination of these strategies creates an unresolved tension with risky implications.

Although Wesley is right to avoid grounding Christian faith on the "external evidence" of ecclesiastical miracles, he is wrong to give primacy to the "internal evidence" of spiritual formation. If the category of external evidence is extended to include biblical miracles, then Wesley's rhetoric unintentionally creates a fissure between God's work for us there and then and God's work in us here and now. Wesley clearly affirms the reality of both and can assume the priority of the former over the later. Within his robustly confessional context, such a fissure is not so dangerous. In fact, it serves his revivalist aims by encouraging a robust Christian life beyond mere "right opinion." However, once Wesley's world collapses, this fissure cracks wide open. The tensions in Wesley's theology lend themselves all too easily to a reductionistic form of the interiorizing strategy, where the sole foundation for Christian faith is subjective religious experience.⁴⁹

To confirm that these tensions are not just a unique feature of Wesley's response to Middleton, I will next examine the role in Wesley's sermons of arguably the most important biblical miracle: the resurrection of Christ. As we shall see, the fissure

⁴⁹ Such an interiorizing reduction is evident in the line "You ask how I know he lives, / he lives within my heart" from the hymn "He Lives," written by Methodist song leader Homer A. Rodeheaver in 1933.

identified in Wesley's "Letter to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton" runs straight through the heart of Wesley's corpus.

IV. The Eclipse of the Resurrection in Wesley's Sermons

The resurrection of Christ does not play a major role in Wesley's account of the Christian life. Wesley affirms the resurrection of Christ and speaks of the future resurrection of Christians.⁵⁰ But talk of resurrection is not connected to the present tense. Although Wesley should not be expected to make every possible theological connection, this lacuna is particularly striking because the connection could have been made so easily. Some of the key biblical texts he employs in his sermons refer to the resurrection. This is especially the case for Romans 8, the *locus classicus* for Wesley's doctrine of assurance. Paul explicitly identifies the Spirit of adoption who testifies with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16) as the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:11). This sort of connection grounds God's work in us here and now on God's work for us there and then as it presses forward to God's last and final work. Wesley's theology of the Christian life lacks this important connection and would have benefited greatly from it.

In what follows, I will analyze a selection of Wesley's sermons to show how the resurrection of Christ is eclipsed by the new birth of the Christian. This eclipse is the

⁵⁰ Wesley had much to say about the future general resurrection and cosmic redemption, cf. "The General Deliverance" (Sermon 60, 1779), "The New Creation" (Sermon 64, 1785), and "On the Resurrection of the Dead" (Sermon 137, 1732). For an analysis of Sermon 137 in the context of Wesley's eschatology, see David Ingersoll Naglee, *From Everlasting to Everlasting: John Wesley on Eternity and Time*, Vol. 2 (New York: Peter Lang, 1991) pp. 561-570. For a passing reference to the relation between general resurrection and final justification, see Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) p. 194. For more on the cosmic breadth of Wesley's theology, see Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). This material is worth noting, because the problem is not that Wesley reduced redemption to personal transformation, but rather that he did not always adequately connect personal transformation with its eschatological dimensions in the resurrection of Christ.

result of Wesley's prioritization of inwardness. I am not arguing that this eclipse issues directly from Wesley's engagement with Middleton. The eclipse occurs in sermons that pre-date Wesley's foray into the miracles controversy. Rather, Wesley's response to Middleton makes his priorities explicit and so reveals the assumptions he brings to his reading of biblical texts.

In a 1746 sermon on Romans 8:15 entitled "The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption," Wesley develops his threefold typology of humanity: natural man, man under the law, and man under grace. Although he would later modify the notion of "natural man" in light of his developing position on prevenient grace, the basic movement from the faith of a servant under the law to the faith of a son under grace remained a constant feature of his *ordo salutis*. Wesley thoroughly summarizes this typology toward the end of the sermon:

To sum up all: The 'natural man' neither fears nor loves God; one 'under the law' fears, one 'under grace' loves him. The first has no light in the things of God, but walks in utter darkness. The second sees the painful light of hell; the third, the joyous light of heaven. He that sleeps in death has a false peace. He that is awakened has no peace at all. He that believes has true peace, the peace of God, filling and ruling his heart. The heathen, baptized or unbaptized, hath a fancied liberty, which is indeed licentiousness; the Jew (or one under the Jewish dispensation) is in heavy, grievous bondage; the Christian enjoys the true glorious liberty of the sons of God. An unawakened child of the devil sins willingly; one that is awakened sins unwillingly; a child of God 'sinneth not, but keeping himself, and the wicked one toucheth him not'. To conclude: the nature man neither conquers nor fights; the man under the law fights win sin, but cannot conquer; the man under grace fights and conquers, yea is 'more than conqueror, through him that loveth him'.⁵¹

Both the second and third types are broadly "Christian," but the point of the typology is to move from the second to the third. Wesley coordinates the faith of a servant with Romans 7 and the faith of a son with Romans 8. The Spirit of adoption

⁵¹ John Wesley, "The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) p. 142.

promised in Romans 8:15 speaks of a Christian life characterized by spiritual triumph. Unfortunately, Wesley makes no mention of the source of this grand spiritual power. He does not deny that it comes from the risen Christ, but he does not even gesture toward the explicit connection Paul makes in Romans 8 between Christ's resurrection in the past, general resurrection in the future, and spiritual transformation in the present. Wesley's prioritization of the "inward," so explicitly outlined in his response to Middleton, blinds him to the "external" basis for the inner life of the Christian in God's resurrection of Christ by the Spirit.

In the same year, Wesley wrote a sermon on the following verse (Romans 8:16) entitled, "The Witness of the Spirit, I."⁵² In this sermon, Wesley lays out his doctrine of assurance as a defense of the Methodist movement against the charge of enthusiasm. He identifies two extremes: those who imagine they are children of God while still living unholy lives, and those who think that the Spirit does not give any assurance at all. The former are the true enthusiasts.⁵³ Wesley tries to "steer a middle course" between these extremes by strictly distinguishing the testimony of our spirit and the testimony of God's Spirit and prioritizing the later over the former.⁵⁴

The testimony of our spirit is a natural and logical movement from the subjective to the objective. A clear conscience tested against the Scriptural marks of the Christian life can logically infer that one is in fact a child of God. This is Wesley's reception of the practical syllogism of his Puritan forebears. The testimony of God's Spirit is a

⁵² John Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," in *John Wesley's Sermons*, pp. 146-155.

⁵³ It is interesting to note that Wesley does not define enthusiasm according to certain nonconformist practices but in terms of an antinomian interpretation of the doctrine of assurance. Chang Hoon Park has successfully shown that nearly every position Wesley rejected, he accused of antinomianism, showing this to be his driving concern. See Chang Hoon Park, *The Theology of John Wesley as "Checks to Antinomianism"* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Drew University, 2002).

⁵⁴ Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," p. 146.

supernatural and intuitionist movement from the objective to the subjective. The testimony of God's Spirit is "an inward impression on the soul" that one is reconciled to God.⁵⁵ By means of God's work in us as a distinct agent we can be assured of our adoption in Christ. This divine work is the prior condition of human consciousness of salvation: "this 'testimony of the Spirit of God' must needs, in the very nature of things, be *antecedent* to the 'testimony of our own spirit.'"⁵⁶

Wesley is right to give priority to the testimony of God's Spirit. However, this does not adequately address the problem of subjectivism he is aiming to solve.⁵⁷ Though he clearly distinguishes God's Spirit from the human spirit, Wesley does not identify this Spirit with any "objective" reality in history. He could have followed Paul in linking the Spirit who indwells us as the same Spirit through whom God raised Jesus from the dead. On the basis of this past action of God, we now can call God "Father" as adopted children in Christ by the Spirit. Wesley does not make use of such a connection because he is so committed to the prioritization of the interior life of the Christian. Just as personal life change supplies the strongest evidence for Christianity in Wesley's response to Middleton, so personal life change functions as the more reasonable and objective testimony in Wesley's doctrine of assurance.⁵⁸

Wesley's eclipse of the resurrection is not limited to his exposition on Romans 8. A similar pattern emerges in his 1781 sermon, "The End of Christ's Coming."⁵⁹ In this sermon, Wesley surveys the whole history of redemption by means of a meditation on 1

⁵⁵ Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," p. 149

⁵⁶ Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," p. 149, emphasis added.

⁵⁷ Pace Heizenrater's introduction to this sermon, *John Wesley's Sermons*, p. 145.

⁵⁸ In 1767, John Wesley wrote a second sermon on Romans 8:16 concerning the doctrine of assurance: "The Witness of the Spirit, II," *John Wesley's Sermons*, pp. 394-403. In this sequel, Wesley reiterates and clarifies his position as well as responds to a number of objections. However, there remains no connection with or reference to the resurrection language of Romans 8.

⁵⁹ *John Wesley's Sermons*, pp. 442-450.

John 3:8: “For this purpose was the Son of God manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (AV). He first discusses the Fall and its consequences as “the works of the devil” (pp. 443-446). Second, he considers how “the Son of God was manifested” (pp. 446-448). Third, Wesley addresses “how he does this, in what manner, and by what steps he does actually destroy”⁶⁰ the works of the devil (pp. 448-450). What is interesting is how Wesley transitions from the second to the third sections.

In the second section, Wesley masterfully traces the work of the Son of God from before creation through the whole of his first advent. The penultimate manifestation of the Son is his crucifixion: “This was a more glorious manifestation of himself than any he had made before.”⁶¹ After elucidating the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, Wesley makes only a passing reference to Easter and Pentecost. “We need but just mention those farther manifestations—his resurrection from the dead, his ascension into heaven, into the glory which he had before the world began; and his pouring out the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost.”⁶² He then quickly speaks of the ultimate manifestation of the Son of God: “his inward manifestation of himself.”⁶³ Wesley identifies this as the crucial manifestation whereby the consequences of the Fall are reversed: “it is by thus manifesting himself in our hearts that he *effectually* ‘destroys the works of the devil’.”⁶⁴ He then goes on to discuss this process in the third section.

Unlike his sermons on Romans, the resurrection is at least mentioned in this sermon. However, the role of the resurrection as the basis of Christ’s presence to us remains eclipsed behind an unrelenting focus on inwardness. The resurrection of Christ

⁶⁰ Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” p. 448.

⁶¹ Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” p. 447.

⁶² Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” p. 447.

⁶³ Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” p.447.

⁶⁴ Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” p.448, emphasis added.

and the outpouring of his Spirit are not even treated as distinct manifestations of the Son, let alone as a transitional step toward the manifestation of the Son of God in us. Here as elsewhere, Wesley affirms the great miracle of Christ's resurrection but does not connect it substantively to the miracle of personal transformation.

The tragedy of this eclipse is not that it necessarily undermines Wesley's soteriology, but rather that Wesley overlooks a potential resource to more securely ground his theology of the Christian life. Wesley's affirmations of miracles in general and the resurrection in particular are clear. Even when he does not speak of them, he could take them for granted in his context. But Wesley does not make any significant connection between the resurrection of Christ and spiritual transformation. This eclipse is the unfortunate unintended consequence of the unbridled prioritization of internal evidence so clearly outlined in Wesley's response to Middleton.

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