Joy of Heaven to Earth Come Down:
Perfection and Millennium in the Eschatology of John Wesley

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Abstract

John Wesley was not a systematic theologian and therefore never expounded a systemized eschatology. Nevertheless, his soteriology and eschatology were inseparably linked. His belief in the possibility of entire sanctification in the present life of the believer meant that Christians could be perfected in love on earth as preparation for their eternal presence with God. Therefore, end-time events were already occurring now. Additionally, Wesley was an optimist of grace. He envisaged an extensive conversion of mankind throughout the world before Jesus’ second advent, through the preaching of the Gospel. This led naturally to his belief in a future millennium, for it was during this period that this spiritual utopia would take place.

However, Wesley adopted much of the strange millennial eschatology of the German Lutheran Johann Albrecht Bengel, who believed in a double millennium. Furthermore, Wesley seldom wrote overtly about the millennia, especially the second 1000 year period. Thus as an 18th century evangelist, Wesley should not be so readily labelled using the familiar post-19th century millennial language which exists today, as previous scholarship has so often done. It is the conviction of this thesis that Wesley can only be described with any safety as a ‘millenarian’ in the broadest definition of that word.
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I also wish to acknowledge with gratitude my circle of family and Christian friends who have prayed for me during the preparation of this thesis. Special thanks go to my wife Michelle who has been a great support to me in many ways over these last two years. To her, I dedicate this thesis.
The author holds an undergraduate honours degree in History from the University of St Andrews (1994), and a postgraduate Masters degree in Palaeography and Archive Administration from the University of Liverpool (1997). The author also obtained a postgraduate MTh in Biblical Studies from The Queen’s University, Belfast in 2007 (Belfast Bible College).

Additionally, the author worked in a research environment as an archivist at the National Archives of Scotland in Edinburgh between 1997 and 2005 and as archivist/curator at Fife Mining Museum between 2007 and 2009, which the present writer set up and managed for a local mining charity.
Preface

This thesis examines the eschatology of John Wesley, focusing on both his ‘realized’ understanding that the end times have, in part, already arrived with the first advent of Christ and on his interpretation of the millennium. This latter area has traditionally received only limited treatment, despite being an area of fervent debate in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most scholarship on Wesley’s eschatology has tended to home in on his soteriology because “situated on the cusp of time and eternity, entire sanctification prepares believers for service not only in this world, but also for the world to come.” Yet speculation over the millennium generally has intensified since the awakening of the 18th century and, especially, from the mid-19th century with J. N Darby’s dispensational reading of Scripture and the later emergence of the Scofield Reference Bible. This has brought a renewed interest in millennialism and, within Methodism, on Wesley’s understanding of Revelation 20 in particular. But despite this, when compared to other areas of his theology, his views on a 1000 year reign of Christ have continued to receive only passing attention.

The primary purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to revisit these two areas of inquiry. Because scholars have tended to impose both formalized post-19th century models and eschatological language on an 18th century evangelist, as well as bring their own

1 Randy L. Maddox: Responsible Grace – John Wesley’s Practical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 230-1
4 Of course, some millennial theories have existed since the early church period; yet not all. Dispensationalism is a relatively modern scheme and postmillennialism was hardly systemized before Daniel Whitby. Moreover, the terminology used to describe the eschatological models of today, were unknown in Wesley’s time. Even the word ‘eschatology’ was first only used in 1844. See Appendix A
predisposed millennial persuasions to Wesley, this thesis will attempt a fresh and independent look at his millennial eschatology. Additionally, whilst Wesley’s soteriology has received copious attention, it is inextricably linked with his eschatology and its relation to his millennial theology requires fuller consideration. As such, other areas of Wesley’s eschatology in the present are not the remit of this thesis.\(^5\) His doctrine of Christian Perfection will be the primary focus.

This thesis is broken down into these two parts, the millennium and Wesley’s eschatological hope in the present. Chapter one examines the split verdict of historical scholarship on Wesley’s millennialism, with chapter two investigating the millennial beliefs of the Lutheran Johann Albrecht Bengel,\(^6\) upon whom Wesley so heavily relied. Chapter three focuses on the millennium in Wesley’s own writings, especially his sermons. In part two, chapter four examines the early influences on Wesley which convinced him that true Christianity was seated in the heart. His pursuit of scriptural holiness from 1725 was the basis for his doctrine of entire sanctification which is examined in chapter five. The final chapter focuses on Wesley’s synergistic understanding of soteriology.

\(^5\) Such as Holy Communion
\(^6\) Appendix B elaborates on the eschatological calculations of Bengel, so providing important background to aid understanding of his millennial theory
In 1953, C.H. Dodd’s book entitled ‘The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel’ revolutionized Christian understanding of eschatology. Dodd emphasized New Testament passages, especially in John’s Gospel, which suggested that the kingdom of God was already a present reality in the ministry of Jesus. Dodd developed the idea of ‘realized’ eschatology which was later developed into an ‘already-not yet’ tension by later scholars. This tension discerned the work of the kingdom in two-stages, inauguration and consummation. Eternal life is not just a future reality but also a present one to be experienced from conversion. In Jesus Christ, the *eschaton* has already arrived. Certainly this was John Wesley’s understanding of the significance of the incarnation. So in some ways Wesley was a forerunner of Dodd. Yet clear differences remain between Wesley’s eschatology and that of Dodd’s, even when the latter modified his position later in his career having admitted that he “passed over too lightly” the future nature of the consummation.

Wesley developed his eschatological assumptions based on a literal hermeneutic which would have been anathema to Dodd. Nor would Wesley, unlike Dodd, see the ‘Day of the Lord’ as being fulfilled in the first advent. Here Wesley was a futurist. Other differences such as the resurrection body were a departure between the two. But a major discrepancy was that Wesley saw the *eschaton* as having entered time and space history. For Dodd, Jesus’ coming was timeless and the relationship believers now have with Him cannot be

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7 See Appendix A
experienced in history. Wesley saw a future coming; for Dodd this had moved from the future to the here and now. So fundamental differences existed between the two and this should be borne in mind when examining Wesley’s ‘realized’ eschatology.

Some have posited that, rather than ‘realized’ eschatology, a better description for Wesley should be ‘anticipated,’ because eschatology and soteriology are so closely linked. Salvation is neither fully attained nor subjective. Rather, it is the impartation of righteousness in Christ which is the believer’s and which brings their participation in God’s kingdom. Others have suggested that “we can and should develop a processive eschatology” when interpreting Wesley’s optimism of grace – the work of God in the here and now is merely a down payment for the greater work still to come. Wesley believed in gradations and believers ‘going on’ in the Lord. Salvation is never static; it continually advances and there is no upper limit, whether the work is gradual or instantaneous. Indeed, the process continues throughout eternity.

Yet whichever term we use, there is no doubt as to the present tense nature of Wesley’s eschatology, along with his undoubted belief in a future utopian state. The present glory available to the believer is a foretaste of the glory yet to come. Wesley’s understanding of this life was heavily influenced by the Johannine literature, and particular attention is given to this reliance in this thesis.

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9 Marino, 222-4
Another area of debate has been Wesley’s millennialism. However, the debate has tended to be coloured by the predisposed persuasion of the scholars in question; those who themselves are premillennial, make Wesley a premillennialist. Likewise, those of a postmillennial bent have read this into Wesley. Others have tried to bolster their own claims by bringing Wesley’s Methodist colleagues into the equation, in particular his brother Charles. If it can be proven that Charles and other early Methodists were premillennialists, then presumably this would add weight to the hypothesis that John was. But postmillennial opponents dispute these conclusions in order to move John back towards their own postmillennial camp.

But, apart from the obvious danger of describing an 18th century evangelist using 19th century millennial language, the question of the millennial persuasion of Charles Wesley, Thomas Coke and John Fletcher is, quite frankly, of limited value for an investigation into John Wesley’s own millennial thought. Eschatology is a secondary issue within the church, and even within denominations. As there were, and are, both Calvinist and Arminian Methodists, so there can potentially be major variations on eschatological issues within Methodism. Even if it can be proven that his brother was a premillennialist, this need not necessarily make John one, nor mean he would have been overly persuaded by this scheme. Wesley believed in a literal millennium because he read it in Scripture; its nature and chronology was not systemised in the writing he left behind. It cannot be proven that the millennial views of other early Methodists overly impinged on Wesley’s and so his eschatology should be examined in its own right.

A further factor is the influence of Johann Albrecht Bengel. Because Wesley relied so heavily on the Lutheran, attention has naturally fallen on his eschatological calculations. But some scholars seem to have read Bengel either only superficially or have simply adopted the second-hand assumptions which previous writers made about Bengel and his chronology pertaining to the millennium. This is especially true of the importance he placed on the year 1836, when Bengel predicted the millennial age would commence. Such surface reading has led many to the wrong assumption that Bengel predicted the return of Christ at that time, leading many to label him a premillennialist. Furthermore, Bengel, and so Wesley, posited two millennia. This makes it difficult to place either in neat, modern day millennial categories. An examination of Bengel’s millennialism is given in this thesis, with a fuller account of his eschatological calculations and how he came to fix on the year 1836 being outlined in Appendix B.

There have already been some theses written on the eschatology of John Wesley. In 1960, J. Cyril Downes produced a wide-ranging work on the eschatological doctrines of both John and Charles Wesley.14 Yet, despite its title, the work primarily centred on John. This thesis was very general and included every aspect of eschatology from the present to the end. It was interested in doctrines and included topics such as Holy Communion, heaven, hell, angels, the resurrection and the final consummation. The millennium too is mentioned but no topic is treated in great depth.

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14 Downes: see n4
In 1994, Bruce Marino produced a work which focused on how eschatology was incorporated into the world-view of John Wesley. He argued that, although never fully articulated, Wesley did have a detailed system of personal and general eschatology similar to many of his contemporaries. The thesis delved into issues of theodicy and philosophy as being part of an eschatology which was fully integrated into Wesley’s theology at large. The driver behind this was Wesley’s deep desire for the assurance of salvation with which his eschatology was intertwined. Marino’s work went into areas that this present thesis does not, namely the supernatural, death, the intermediate state and the new heavens and earth. Nevertheless, aspects of Wesley’s of present tense eschatology, the millennium and Wesley’s use of Bengel have provided useful background to this present work.

In 1999, Ronald Creasman’s thesis sought to examine eschatology in the Wesleyan tradition. One chapter pertained to John Wesley and focused on eschatology as the motive for personal and social action and looked at areas such as metaphysics and how Wesley saw death, hell and heaven as an impetus for holy living during the Methodist revival. The brief sections on synergism, and in particular Wesley’s understanding of Christian holiness, are areas relevant to this present thesis; but the millennial issue was not part of Creasman’s work.

Another PhD thesis was produced in Australia in 2008 by Tik-Wah Wong. This work examined Wesley’s belief that a relationship with God is both the fundamental and end

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15 Marino: see n2
purpose of eschatology. Moreover, ‘eschatological living’ receives both the present kingdom of grace and the end-time kingdom of glory as its eschatological-teleological vision which guides and moulds the believer’s journey through this kingdom into next. This eschatological living starts with justification and then sanctification until believers are perfected in love, through continued faith and repentance with God’s imparted righteousness resulting in sin in the Christian being expunged and the image of God in them restored. That thesis covered some of the same material in Part 2 of this present work, but did not concern itself with the issue of the millennium. Other areas are covered in Wong’s broader work which find no place at all here. These include primeval creation and the Fall, the new creation, prayer, fasting, the structure of early Methodism, love feasts, hymns, ecclesiological issues, and the author’s contextualisation of Wesley’s eschatological living in a modern Malaysian milieu. Other areas receive only limited mention here, namely eschatology and the environment and Christian stewardship.

In short, the above dissertations cover some of the material encompassed in this thesis. But the focus of this present work is not to examine all aspects of future eschatology, nor other areas of Wesley’s realized eschatology, such as the Lord’s Supper which Wesley undoubtedly believed was a means of grace for the believer and which confirmed their pardon from sin and enabled them to be free from it. The bread and wine strengthened both body and soul, leading the Christian on to perfection. Instead, this thesis is more narrowly focused on the connection between Christian perfection and eschatology and Wesley’s far from clear millennial theology.

18 Steven T. Hoskins: “Eucharist and Eschatology in the Writings of the Wesleys” in WTJ (29: 1 and 2, Spring – Fall 1994), 64-80
Part One – The Millennium

Chapter 1 – John Wesley’s Millennial Views in Scholarship

Since the mid-19th century, scholars have attempted to label John Wesley either a premillennialist or a postmillennialist. However, some more recent scholars have suggested that Wesley could be claimed with equal validity by those in either camp. For Clarence Bence, Wesley followed the historical premillennial view, but by this he means the ‘historicism’ of Wesley’s own day – namely that Revelation describes past events in the history of the Church – rather than a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth after His second coming. But one can be a historicist and yet be a postmillennialist. Bence warned of the difficulty of being dogmatic about Wesley’s views since he inherited Johann Albrecht Bengel’s odd double-millennia model. Moreover, he wisely cautioned against the all too familiar occurrence of both pre and postmillennialists claiming Wesley as their own based on dubious proof-texts.19

Others too have described Wesley’s reliance on Bengel without seeming to commit him to either model. John Deschner described the fact that “Satan is bound for the millennium”20 before his utter destruction. But where he placed Wesley’s millennium in relation to Christ’s return was not explicitly stated. Bruce Marino hinted that Wesley, following Bengel, was postmillennial in the fact that Christ would return after the millennia, but yet “there seems to be a premillennial formation co-existing with the more unusual scheme of Bengel.”21 He based this on Wesley’s supposed affirmation of the chiliast Thomas Hartley, Wesley’s

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19 Bence, 45-6
20 John Deschner: Wesley’s Christology – An Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1988), 124
21 Marino, 92
comment on Justin Martyr’s premillennialism, as well as influence from his own father Samuel and others.

Kenneth Brown did not admit to any firm view either, simply stating that “the answer lies with the interpreter.”²² Arthur Skevington Wood believed that, being primarily an evangelist, Wesley “confined himself to the bold outlines of prophecy, rather than wrestling with the details of debatable interpretation.”²³ Frederick E. Maser wrote ‘The Unknown Wesley’ in 1978 for ‘The Drew Gateway.’ He admitted the difficulty in placing Wesley in either category and claimed that Wesley, certainly later in life, was “tired of the whole subject and was content simply to save souls.”²⁴ J. Cyril Downes can stand accused of the same negativity when he said that Wesley “was not sufficiently interested”²⁵ in the millennium. But Wesley could never be accused of being disinterested in any part of Scripture. Downes did not overtly place Wesley in either millennial camp. But he did state that Wesley believed “in the certainty of Christ’s reign.”²⁶ But Downes failed to define clearly what form this ‘reign’ would take.

However, most scholars have not engaged in such fence-sitting, preferring to place Wesley in their own millennial camp through predisposed bias, forcing the ‘evidence’ to fit Wesley. The premillennialists stand most guilty of this charge. This chapter will attempt a re-cap and

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²² Kenneth O. Brown: “John Wesley – Post or Premillennialist?” in Methodist History (The United Methodist Church: General Commission on Archives and History, 28: 1, October 1989), 41
²³ Arthur Skevington Wood: The Burning Heart: John Wesley, Evangelist (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1978), 275
²⁴ Brown, 40 n31, 32
²⁵ Downes, 169
²⁶ Downes, 165
an evaluation of how Wesley’s writings, which at best only ever provided circumstantial evidence, have been interpreted in historical scholarship.

*The Premillennial view*

Daniel T. Taylor was an Adventist minister, author and hymn writer and was one of the earliest writers to claim that Wesley was a premillennialist, like Charles Wesley, the Baptists, the Westminster divines and the majority of the early creed-makers of the present evangelical denominations. Yet most of Taylor’s citations from Wesley’s exegesis of Revelation were general in nature, not specifically requiring a premillennial interpretation. Quoting Wesley on the sounding of the seventh trumpet of Rev 11:15, it was the greatest and most joyous event; indeed the dominion of Christ had now come and in an entirely new way. But all Wesley was saying here was that Christ would come at the end of the world. This is certainly not exclusive to premillennialism.

Taylor then made the claim that Wesley “looked for the millennium in 1836.” This comment is blatantly false and confuses Wesley with Bengel. Wesley shied away from such date-setting. Taylor turned his readers’ attention to Wesley’s “excellent Sermon on the New Earth.” Yet Wesley had no sermon by that title. One can only assume the reference is to Wesley’s sermon entitled ‘The New Creation.’ Moreover, if this is the sermon Taylor meant, he did not analyze it or even comment on it in any way and so failed to demonstrate how

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28 Taylor, 245-7
29 Reasoner, 247-8
30 Taylor, 247
31 Taylor, 248
this sermon made Wesley a premillennialist. In fact, this sermon does not concern itself with the millennium at all. Taylor’s closing remarks on Wesley have him dying three years before he actually did and also quote the opening lines of three hymns which are not explicitly premillennial.

Wesley’s Victorian biography by Luke Tyerman first appeared in 1870, and in it Tyerman provided a full account of Wesley’s reaction to Thomas Hartley’s work ‘Paradise Restored: A Testimony to the Doctrine of the Blessed Millennium’ which was published in 1764. Yet he took five pages to promote his own views whilst only providing five lines of text on Wesley’s reaction to Hartley. Tyerman firstly elaborated on Hartley’s classic premillennial position.32 Tyerman’s purpose in outlining Hartley’s basic eschatological views in his “learned and able book” was to let the reader know that “in substance, they were held by Wesley.”33 He substantiated this claim with Wesley’s famous dialogue with Hartley, dated 27 March 1764. Denouncing Hartley’s defence of the ‘mystic writers,’ which were found in an appendix to ‘Paradise Restored’ Wesley, nevertheless, sided with Hartley’s belief in a millennium. “I cannot but thank you for strong and seasonable confirmation of that comfortable doctrine; of which I cannot entertain the least doubt as long as I believe the Bible.”34 However, this quote does not necessarily mean that Wesley believed the millennium to be earthly through a physical reign of Christ. It simply demonstrates Wesley’s profound belief that there would be a millennium.

33 Tyerman, 2: 523
Tyerman then cited parental influence: “Wesley, like his father before him, was a millenarian, a believer in the second advent of Christ, to reign on earth, visibly and gloriously, for a thousand years.” Yet Wesley himself claimed no such thing. He would certainly have been aware of the amillennialism of the Anglican Reformers who did not believe in a literal millennial reign of Christ on earth. The saints were reigning now in heaven and the ‘millennium’ on earth was the present Church age between the two comings of Christ. But although Wesley was a committed millenarian, this did not mean that he was a premillennialist, seeking a literal reign of Christ on earth after His return. Tyerman also used Wesley’s correspondence with Conyers Middleton and his apparent agreement with Middleton’s evidence on the premillennial stance of Justin Martyr. But this letter defended only a millennium not a visible reign of Christ on earth. Finally, Tyerman cited Wesley’s article ‘The Renovation of all Things.’ There Wesley wrote in part: “Between the present pollution, corruption and degradation of the earth...and that of total, universal restoration of all things, in purely angelical, celestial, ethereal state...and that in this middle period, between these two extremes...the earth will be restored to its paradisiacal state...renewed in its primitive lustre and beauty.” But this ‘paradisiacal state’ need not be a millennium ushered in by an actual return and reign of Christ. Wesley could equally be referring to a golden age of Gospel acceptance prior to the return of Christ. Nevertheless, Tyerman’s arguments on this issue would go on to have an influential affect on later writers.

35 By this he means a premillennialist. Samuel’s alleged influence over John on this issue is more fully critiqued below.
36 Tyerman, 2: 523
37 Collins: Theology, 316
38 Tyerman, 2: 524; Wesley’s correspondence with Middleton and his article in the Arminian Magazine in 1784 will be discussed in chapter three.
39 Marino, 91
40 It would be remiss, however, to omit Tyerman’s citing of Wesley’s Notes on Revelation 20 and some of his sermons which “scarcely harmonize the millenarian theory.” And Tyerman himself left the matter open to the researcher’s own interpretation. Tyerman, 2: 525
Nathaniel West, a Presbyterian pastor from Ohio “set the pace for premillennialists over the next fifty years.” He addressed the first prophecy conference in New York in 1878 on the ‘History of the Premillennial Doctrine.’ However, his thesis rested largely on Tyerman’s analysis of Wesley’s dialogue with Thomas Hartley. He found favour with other Methodists such as Professor Henry Lummis, who would argue against the Methodist and postmillennialist Daniel Steele over the issue. He was also eager to emphasise that Daniel Whitby’s ‘new hypothesis,’ namely his formal systemization of postmillennialism, had already been rejected by the likes of Knox and Calvin prior to the 18th century.

West’s classic premillennial work was first published in 1894. West highlighted Wesley’s dialogue with Middleton and his apparent agreement with Middleton’s evidence on the chiliasm of Justin Martyr. West then turned to Hartley’s book, and Wesley’s alleged premillennial approval of it, by reciting much of Luke Tyerman’s argument. In referring to Wesley’s use of Bengel, West wrote that Wesley avoided Bengel’s mistake of a “double millennium, a mistake due to a supposed necessity for the definite article in Revelation 20: 2, 4, 6.” But Wesley did not avoid Bengel’s double millennium model and never even attempted to.

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41 Brown, 34
42 Brown, 34-5
43 Nathaniel West: Premillennial Essays of the Prophetic Conference; Second Coming of Christ with an Appendix of Critical Testimonies (Chicago: Fleming. H. Revell, 1879; revised edition Memphis: General Books, 2010), 204-6
44 Nathaniel West: John Wesley and Pre-millennialism (New York: John de Witt, 1894), 7-19
45 West: Wesley and Pre-millennialism, 22-3
West conceded that Wesley’s interpretation of Matthew 13: 33 was postmillennial, yet claimed that Wesley did not foresee “a universal conversion of the world before the Lord comes.” Maybe Wesley did not envisage universal conversion, but West was hardly correct to account for Wesley’s belief in a “general and gradual spread of the Gospel” as being only a passing phase, “when a revival fifty years long was so mighty, and the Whitby theory was in vogue.” West also read a premillennialism into Wesley’s sermon ‘The General Spread of the Gospel.’ Wesley did speak there of the end-time conversion of the Jews but West interpreted this prophecy as being literally fulfilled “in connection with the Lord’s coming.” But nowhere did Wesley explicitly link Israel’s deliverance there with a premillennial return of Christ.

In his interpretation of ‘The General Deliverance,’ West quoted Wesley that the creation will “groan in pain until the Lord comes.” But Wesley did not say this. Wesley believed that the creation in its present state would be delivered by an act of God and here spoke only of a future state, not the Lord’s return. Wesley’s eschatological sermon ‘The Great Assize’ had only one passing reference to a thousand year period in it. West claimed this was because Wesley here was merging all end-time events into one: “two Ends in one End, two Resurrections in one Resurrection – two Judgments in one universal and simultaneous Judgment of all mankind...he blends all the Scripture texts concerning the End of our

47 West: *Wesley and Pre-millennialism*, 23
48 West: *Wesley and Pre-millennialism*, 23-4
50 West: *Wesley and Pre-millennialism*, 24
51 Notes, 120-2: Matt 25: 31-46; Skevington Wood, 275
52 West: *Wesley and Pre-millennialism*, 24; Cf. BE2, 442 where Wesley said “until now” quoting Rom 8: 22
53 BE2, 447
present age, and of the Millennial Age, in one scene.” But Wesley clearly linked judgment with the return of Christ and was not merging this with any millennial age, even implicitly.

Finally, West also argued that Wesley placed the millennium after the return of Christ in Revelation 19:11 and quoted Wesley’s comments on this text. Yet Wesley said nothing there about the return of Christ. In this respect, it is fair to suggest that “West has simply imposed his interpretation on Wesley and then claimed Wesley to be what he [West] was.” In fact, in concluding that “Wesley believed in no millennium before the Lord comes visibly and personally...to destroy the Antichrist,” West seemed clearer on Wesley’s view than Wesley himself was.

The Methodist evangelist Leander Munhall stated his premillennial case for John Wesley in the late 1880s. He was one of the few Methodists who became involved in the prophecy conference movement. Indeed, not only did he cite Wesley as a premillennialist, he added Charles, and other Methodists to the list. He even referred to Charles as the “Millennial Poet” (as had Nathaniel West) making much of Charles’ “premillennial” hymn ‘Lo! He Comes, with Clouds Descending.’ But the context of this hymn is the judgment, not the millennium. Munhall tended to base his argument for John Wesley’s premillennialism exclusively on his ‘NT Notes.’ Sweeping comments abounded: “John Wesley held to the imminency of our Lord’s return,” and Jesus need not delay His coming and that, in fact, the

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54 West: Wesley and Pre-millennialism, 24-5
55 West: Wesley and Pre-millennialism, 30-1
56 Notes, 1034
57 Reasoner, 249
58 West: Wesley and Pre-millennialism, 30
60 Munhall, 19
world should expect Him at any time. Munhall used Wesley’s exegesis on Revelation to add weight to his argument. Here Wesley said that the time of the eschatological end-time events were near and that the millennium itself was approaching. But, as shall be argued, these end-time speculations of Wesley were dated from the middle period of his ministry and appear inconsistent with his later assertions that a golden age of Gospel acceptance would occur before the Lord’s return. Additionally, the question as to whether Wesley in the 1760s meant by ‘the Lord’s return’ an actual physical and visual return is open to debate.

Many years later, Munhall presented a paper at the Prophetic Bible Conference held at Moody Bible Institute in February 1914. It was entitled ‘The Second Coming of Our Lord in Relation to Evangelism’ in which he borrowed extensively from Nathaniel West. He claimed that of Charles Wesley’s 7,000 or so hymns, over 5,000 were premillennial. At the back of this book was an abridged article taken from ‘The Christian Worker’s’ magazine dated December, 1913. In it, over 450 ‘witnesses’ to Christ’s premillennial coming were listed. Of the thirteen Methodists both John and Charles Wesley were named.

The Methodist lay evangelist William Blackstone first published his book ‘Jesus is Coming’ in 1878 which soon “brought Blackstone to national prominence.” On the inside cover he also quoted Charles Wesley’s hymn ‘Lo! He Comes, with Clouds Descending,’ a second advent hymn proclaiming that “God appears on earth to reign,” which he believed to have

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61 Munhall, 19-20  
62 Brown, 37  
63 Brown, 37  
64 Brown, 37
clear premillennial undertones. Blackstone only named Charles as premillennial in this publication. In his other book dated 1904 entitled ‘The Millennium,’ Blackstone again only cited Charles Wesley as being premillennial. Later editions of ‘Jesus Is Coming’ contained a ‘Foreword to Fellow Ministers,’ penned in January 1917. There Blackstone’s stated desire was that they would “someday rejoice together with Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, Knox and the Wesley’s signing Charles’ beautiful hymns as a welcome to our descending Lord.”

Reuben Torrey, the president of the Moody Bible Institute, towed the premillennial line, citing a long list of premillennialists, including both Wesley brothers but without any explanation for their inclusion. Similarly, J. Wilbur Chapman provided no sources or reason for his description of John Wesley as a premillennialist, in his address on ‘The Lord’s Return’ to a premillennial prophecy conference in Philadelphia in May 1918. The Free Methodist Jessie Silver offered more proof that Wesley was a premillennialist. Broadly taking West’s line and disagreeing with postmillennialist Charles Munger, he unpicked the New Testament texts from Wesley’s ‘Notes’ which Munger claimed were postmillennial, including Revelation 20. For Silver, Bengel was “an ardent premillenarian” yet Wesley was happy to use him “as an exegetical guide.” Even Wesley’s “general teaching is premillennial.” Silver acknowledged Bengel’s dual millennia scheme, envisaging a golden church age on earth and

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65 William E. Blackstone: Jesus is Coming – God’s Hope for a Restless World (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989. Tyerman also quotes this hymn. Tyerman, 2: 525
66 Blackstone, 43
67 Cited in Brown, 37 n19
68 Blackstone, 10
69 Reuben A. Torrey: The Return of the Lord Jesus; the Key to the Scripture, and the Solution of all our Political and Social Problems; or, the Golden Age that is Soon Coming to the Earth (Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1913), 148.
72 Silver, 150
then a reign of the saints with Christ, but did not demonstrate how this proved Bengel’s, and therefore Wesley’s, premillennialism; only to say that Wesley’s ‘Notes’ were “abridged too much to clearly elucidate Bengel.” He also believed that Wesley’s first resurrection was premillennial. But the first resurrection for Bengel and Wesley was *between* the millennia and so it was only ‘premillennial’ *vis-à-vis* the second millennium; but it came after the first.

Silver then moved on to Wesley’s sermons. He took a paragraph from ‘On Former Times’ which seemed to suggest that Wesley believed that the world would get no better until Christ returns. But he robbed Wesley off context; Wesley here was refuting the opinion of Bishop Newton who believed that the conversion of Constantine and the benefits which the Church enjoyed as a result, were symbolised in Revelation by the New Jerusalem descending from heaven. Silver also quoted Wesley as saying, “the days which Adam and Eve spent in Paradise were far better than any which have been spent by their descendents, or ever will be, till Christ returns to reign upon earth.” Indeed, in the same sermon Wesley argued strongly that “Christianity and heathenism...will hardly ever be divided till Christ comes to reign upon earth.” However, Silver was blinded by his own premillennial bias. Nowhere, did Wesley mention that this reign of Christ upon earth in power would be actual and physical, as premillennialists believed. It could easily refer to a postmillennial reign of Christ on earth through His Church. In fact, Wesley did not mention a millennium there at all. In fact, Wesley’s language was so vague that it is more likely that he was talking about Christ’s rule in the New Creation at the end of all things. Silver’s theology of hopelessness, which

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73 Silver, 150
74 Silver, 152; c.f. BE3, 449-50
75 BE3, 443
76 BE3, 450
“despairs of other agencies and appeals to the sheer force of omnipotence” when “the Almighty acts irresistibly” was “the exact opposite of Mr Wesley’s opinion.” For were God to act in such a way, Wesley believed, then “man would be man no longer...he would no longer be a moral agent...capable of virtue or vice.”

Silver made similar premillennial judgments about Wesley’s sermon ‘The Mystery of Iniquity.’ Certainly Wesley had written that “the whole world never did, nor can at this day, show a Christian country or city.” Yet he also believed that God would change this state of play by allowing a healing of the nations, a general reformation and a time when “righteousness shall be as universal as unrighteousness is now.” And no millennium is mentioned here. Silver also attempted to compare Wesley with other ‘premillennialists’ within the Methodist movement, Wesley’s own family, the Moravians and cited Walter Churchey’s remarks at Wesley’s tomb. But the opinions of others, even if represented accurately, do not prove Wesley’s premillennialism. Finally, Silver copied others in highlighting the premillennial writings which Wesley had apparently endorsed, such as his letter to Middleton and his approval of Bengel and Hartley.

In 1901, the author, hymn-writer and holiness evangelist L. L. Pickett published ‘The Blessed Hope of His Glorious Appearing’ in which he made “the standard argument that Wesley was a premillennialist,” having initially argued for postmillennialism in an earlier work. His

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77 Harris Franklin Rall: Modern Pre-millennialism and the Christian Hope (New York: Abingdon Press, 1920), 247-8. Rall’s postmillennialism is discussed below
78 BE2, 466
79 BE2, 466, 470
80 Silver, 153-161
81 Brown, 36
82 Reasoner, 249 n44
importance is less about the strength of his argument, but more in the fact that he was an early holiness leader who was also a premillennialist. Over twenty years later, he joined forces with another Methodist author and evangelist, Andrew Johnson. Together they criticized all opposing views, concluding that whilst the “Methodist postmillennialists fight hard for Wesley...he was more premillennial than postmillennial in his view.” Yet there was little original in their brief defence of this statement. They attacked Harris Franklin Rall’s postmillennial label for Wesley and simply regurgitated Tyerman’s arguments.

Others guilty of the same course of action included C. F. Wimberly who, in 1944, published an article in the ‘Christian Witness’ entitled, ‘John Wesley – Premillennialist.’ He offered nothing original. His argument consisted of ‘seven proofs’ to substantiate his claim but these included the same old ‘evidence,’ including Wesley’s dialogue with Hartley and Middleton, a quote from Samuel Wesley and the comments of premillennialists who had claimed Wesley in the past, such as Tyerman. LeRoy Froom, a Seventh-Day Adventist, wrote that Wesley “followed Bengel’s curious and complicated chronology.” He went on to say that “throughout the early part of his career [Wesley] was a premillennialist in the sense that he looked upon the new earth state as the millennium.” But was Froom then implying that the later Wesley was not premillennial? Froom then quoted a hymn by Charles Wesley to support his case. It was hymn 22 found in the 1748 edition of ‘Hymns for Our Lord’s Resurrection.’ Certainly the line ‘thy great millennial reign begin’ following on from a description of the whole creation being at rest and paradise restored could be read as

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83 Andrew Johnson and L. L. Pickett: *Post-Millennialism and the Higher Critics* (Chicago: Glad Tidings, 1923), 259
84 Johnson and Pickett, 259
85 Brown, 39 n29
87 Froom, 2: 694
But Charles’ views need not have been identical to John’s and even though Froom was correct to point out John’s shared input into the theology of the Methodist hymnal, this argument assumed that both brothers had a fully formed, consistent and identical millennial doctrine. This could certainly be debated. Furthermore, the hymn in question could also envisage an earthly utopia created by postmillennial conditions. Indeed, it is hard not to agree on this occasion with the somewhat cynical view that “it has been common for premillennialists to claim everyone who was not amillennial.” Froom concluded his brief synopsis with the common error that Wesley’s first millennium would start in 1836. But this was a date set by Bengel, which Wesley did not affirm.

Even the modern branch of premillennialism, namely dispensationalism, has claimed Wesley as its own. ‘The Pre-trib Research Center’ published a book in 1995 defending their eschatology and in it stated that Wesley held to an imminent rapture. Their evidence for this was Wesley’s sermon ‘The Righteousness of Faith’. Premillennialists have tended to concentrate on a specific line in this sermon, “perhaps he will appear as the day-spring from on high, before the morning light. O do not set him a time. Expect him every hour. Now, he is nigh! Even at the door!” But the context of earlier sentences is Wesley urging those who wished reconciliation with God and a forgiveness of sins not to think they must do something first; only believe. He is not preaching passivity or some form of quietism, but active obedience. The context is a warning not to do other things before coming to Christ but to come to Him first in repentance. Wesley does talk of waiting for the Lord’s appearing in the previous sentences but one wonders if this refers to the second coming at all. He

88 Froom, 2: 694
89 Reasoner, 246
90 Reasoner, 249 n46
91 BE1, 216
always preached that Jesus Christ, through the Spirit, could be expected at any time, bringing both salvation and assurance. Nothing in the context of the full sermon hints at the second advent. Rather Wesley alludes to Luke 1: 78, a part of Zacharias’ prophecy, which talks of light being given to those in death and darkness through God’s mercy. And God has done this through a visitation of the ‘Dayspring’ on high, namely Christ. Perhaps then “the dawn of the light of the Gospel to those who are in the darkness of sin”\(^2\) is in view. Certainly, Wesley uses the phrase ‘Day-spring from on high’ elsewhere to refer, not to the second coming of Christ, but to the presence of Christ or the light of the Gospel.\(^3\) One line taken out of context is shaky ground for premillennialists to base an argument upon. In fact, when some of his own prophesised an imminent end to the world, as George Bell predicted for 28 February 1763, Wesley met the claims with utter disdain.

More recently, Kenneth Newport has placed 18\(^{th}\) century Methodism generally in the historicist camp which supported “a premillennial eschatological expectation.”\(^4\) Newport concentrated mostly on Charles Wesley but his work also included John and others. His treatment of John is brief and does little to convince that there was overt premillennial thought in Wesley. Newport seemed satisfied by Tyerman’s analysis of Wesley as one who expected a visual, physical and personal reign of Jesus Christ upon the earth to usher in a millennium, with Wesley’s dialogue with Thomas Hartley providing a convincing basis for Tyerman’s view.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Reasoner, 250
\(^3\) Reasoner, 250 n47
\(^4\) Newport, 91
\(^5\) Newport, 93
He then attributed to George Lavington, the Bishop of Exeter, a criticism of the young Wesley, likening him to the French Prophets who spoke often and unequivocally about the imminence of Jesus Christ’s second coming. He quoted Wesley, “Behold the Lord is come; he is again visiting and redeeming his people – at this very hour the Lord is rolling away our reproach.” But this does not mention a physical return of Christ to usher in the millennium. Similarly, whilst Lavington did record one of the French Prophets as speaking of the coming of Christ being at hand and Wesley being concerned that the French Prophets would draw away his supporters, the lady quoted spoke of Christ’s coming in the context of the “spreading of the Gospel over all the Earth.” One can have an expectation of Christ’s coming and yet interpret Revelation 20 in ways other than premillennial; and a positive, postmillennial expectation, whereby God works through His Church to propagate the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, is more in view here than a pessimistic, apocalyptic intervention by Christ to set up his premillennial reign on earth. Lavington did not quote Wesley here as proposing such an eschatological event.

Newport cited Bengel’s prediction that the millennium would occur in 1836. But how this made either Bengel or Wesley a premillennialist, as Newport seems to suggest, is not clear. If the millennia occurred in 1836 and if the Lord did not return until after the millennia (as both Wesley and Bengel believed) then this surely links them closer with postmillennialism; millennia first, then Christ’s coming, not the other way round. Newport did stress that Wesley was reticent to adopt all of Bengel’s calculations and that Wesley’s eschatological

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97 Lavington, 3. 1. 22, 1: 125
expectation was “chronologically indeterminate.” But the general thrust of Newport’s hypothesis is to suggest premillennialism as being rife within early Methodism. If indeed that is Newport’s intention for Wesley, one wonders whether Bengel’s and Wesley’s historicist reading of Revelation is being confused with premillennialism.

The Postmillennial view

In 1899 an article by Charles Munger, a Methodist minister from Maine, entitled ‘Was Wesley a Premillennialist?’ was included as an appendix to Daniel Steele’s ‘A Substitute for Holiness.’ Munger decried Tyerman’s claims about Wesley’s millennial views and questioned whether the six biographers of Wesley before Tyerman could all be wrong – for Tyerman “makes no claim to the discovery of any new facts touching this matter.” He then countered Tyerman’s ‘evidence’ of Wesley’s premillennialism in a letter in which Wesley appealed to Justin Martyr and the later Fathers. For Munger this letter said nothing about the second coming or any subsequent visible reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years. Munger then listed in two columns the views of modern premillennialism on one side with Wesley’s eschatological understanding on the other. His data for the former came from the reports of the 1878 and 1886 Prophetic Conferences “which may be taken as the best accredited representation of premillennial thought in Europe and America.” His conclusion was that Wesley’s eschatology was antagonistic toward modern premillennialism. In ending his article, Munger provided brief views of the primitive church

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98 Newport, 94
99 Before this it had appeared as an article in ‘Zion’s Herald’ and then as a pamphlet
101 Munger, 275
which premillennialists claimed as consistent with their own understanding of Revelation 20. But Munger was unconvinced and concluded that “of the historians who lived in either of the first five hundred years, not one has yet been found who even intimates that premillennialism was ever the faith of the primitive church.”

Daniel Steele himself echoed Munger’s understanding of Wesley. He listed several difficulties with a literal thousand year reign on earth based on Revelation 20 and cited Bengel and Wesley in asserting that there were two distinct millennia. And “both of these periods are before the second coming of Christ. Thus Bengel and Wesley, instead of being premillenarians, were, in fact, what most modern Methodists are, postmillenarians.” For Steele, the reigning of Christ which the raised martyrs are to enjoy being part of was described by Wesley, Bengel and others as not being on earth but in heaven.

The Methodist Episcopal minister George Eckman was the former editor of the ‘New York Christian Advocate.’ He asserted that Wesley had been “proudly but incorrectly claimed by the group of millenarians who say the world and the church are on the downward track,” a clear attack on premillennialism. He largely based his argument on Wesley’s sermon ‘On Former Times’ and adamantly stated that Wesley “plainly indicates that though he may have expected our Lord’s return before the climax of Christian conquest, he could not be regarded as at all in favour of the doleful program which extremists have mapped out for the time immediately preceding our Lord’s second advent.”

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102 Munger, 281
103 Steele, 240-1
104 George P. Eckman: *When Christ Comes Again* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1917), 197
105 Eckman, 197-8
characterised by both evangelism and unity between all strands of the Church resulted in Eckman condemning the view that “the former days...were better than these!”\textsuperscript{106}

The Methodist theologian Harris Franklin Rall, who was also Professor of Systematic Theology at Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois gave a “masterful treatment of the Christian hope from a postmillennial view”\textsuperscript{107} in his 1920 publication. For Rall, premillennialism was individualistic and pessimistic, stunted social reform, denied the possibility of the Christian state and saw only destruction for the Church, rather than it being God’s chosen agent for Christianizing the world. In the appendix of this book he asked the question, ‘Was John Wesley a Premillennialist?’\textsuperscript{108} Rall disputed the list of Methodist premillennialists cited at the 1914 Prophecy Conference, claiming this list was made to look “as extensive as possible.”\textsuperscript{109} Many were dead or little known with only eight being Methodists. Indeed, “the list does not contain a single Methodist Bishop, general officer, or district superintendent, or a teacher from any Methodist college or seminary.”\textsuperscript{110}

Rall based his arguments on Wesley’s sermon corpus as well as his ‘Notes’ on Revelation 20 and his “curious theory” on the millennium. Rall appealed to the ‘Notes’ because many premillennialists seemed to cite Wesley’s exegesis of Revelation 20 as being premillennial which, according to Rall, it was “certainly not.” Indeed, Wesley’s adoption of Bengel’s two millennia “is probably shared by no one to-day.”\textsuperscript{111} Rall also took the view that the two

\textsuperscript{106} Eckman, 199 n29
\textsuperscript{107} Brown, 38
\textsuperscript{108} Rall, 245-253
\textsuperscript{109} Rall, 245
\textsuperscript{110} Rall, 245; but Rall excluded a Free Methodist Bishop, a German Methodist editor and also a German Methodist professor. See Brown, 38
\textsuperscript{111} Rall, 249
millennia described by Bengel, which were to occur prior to the new creation, never implied a “rule of Christ on earth” and indeed Jesus’ second coming would take place only “at the last day.”

But it was Wesley’s sermons which took up most of Rall’s attention. Wesley, despite being interested in the same issues about which premillennialists were concerned, namely “the bringing in of the kingdom of God upon earth,” was in fact “at every point opposed to...chiliasm.” Rall named the sermons which clearly demonstrated a latter-day glory emphasis in Wesley’s preaching, such as ‘The General Spread of the Gospel’ and ‘On Former Times’ amongst others. Interestingly though, he also named ‘The Great Assize’ in his list of sermons which described “hastening to renew the whole race of mankind in righteousness and holiness.” But this sermon is a better example of judgment and the present earth’s destruction ushering in the new creation, not widespread spiritual renewal in a millennium. But for Rall, Wesley’s later sermons proved his postmillennialism. He made similar arguments in the ‘Methodist Review’ dated March 1920 in an article entitled ‘Methodism and Premillennialism’ where his conclusions were more or less the same.

Interestingly, Rall also brought in the Calvinist-Arminian debate to beef up his defence. Whilst Augustine and Calvin were avowedly opposed to premillennialism and Calvinism “does not imply premillennialism,” nevertheless “premillennialism does involve Calvinism, and that of an extreme type.” Premillennialism, said Rall, did not primarily deal with

112 Rall, 250
113 Rall, 246
114 Rall, 246
115 Brown, 38 n23
116 Rall, 250
individual salvation and shared with Calvinism the same essential features as applied to world history – God’s sovereignty would result in Him acting solely in end-time affairs with man being denied any moral freedom and being merely passive. The result was a rigid, predetermined scheme of God “just as in old Jewish apocalypticism” being imposed on the world with a total “disregard of moral and rational considerations.”¹¹⁷ This would mean a victory for Satan in the present so “the world is not to be saved in this dispensation.”¹¹⁸ This predetermination violently opposed Wesley’s belief in God’s sovereignty through reciprocal love and moral freedom, whereby redemption would be brought about by man’s co-operation with God.¹¹⁹

In 1930 Professor John Faulkner of Drew University’s book devoted a whole chapter to Wesley, entitled ‘Was Wesley a Premillennialist?’ He tackled some of Wesley’s eschatological sermons and his ‘NT Notes’ as well as the Wesleyan corpus of hymns. Faulkner denied that ‘The Great Assize’ had anything to do with another reign of Christ but pertained to His return “to wind up all events.”¹²⁰ Nor did ‘The Great Deliverance’ suggest any millennial scheme, pre or post. And the gloomy picture painted by Wesley in ‘The Mystery of Iniquity’ did not envisage a premillennial reign to solve man’s black moral condition. Indeed, the second coming was not central in this sermon. Furthermore, ‘The End of Christ’s Coming’ referred entirely to Christ’s first coming.

The classic expression of postmillennialism for Faulkner was ‘The General Spread of the Gospel,’ which foresaw the expansion of Christianity, not through a “premillennial...coup

¹¹⁷ Rall, 251  
¹¹⁸ Rall, 251  
¹¹⁹ Rall, 252-3  
d’etat from heaven...but [from] the natural influence of real Christianity as shown in the lives of love and devotion on heathen and near-heathen...no Second Coming to inaugurate a millennium is postulated.”

Additionally, ‘The New Creation’ did not refer to the second coming but to the consummation of all things. Finally, the lack of reference to the parousia in ‘The Signs of the Times’ merely confirmed “how little Wesley’s consciousness was premillennial.”

Turning to Wesley’s ‘NT Notes,’ Faulkner took scores of New Testament passages which refer to the second coming. Wesley tended to speak in a general way or connected the second coming with the end-time judgment and the Last Day, “which is the ordinary (postmillennial) view, as expressed in the Apostles Creed.”

Turning to the “famous premillenarian stronghold” of Rev 20: 1-10, Faulkner re-affirmed Wesley’s belief in the double millennia. The millennium would be ushered in by no “spectacular inauguration as by a personal visible coming, but by an ‘easy’ transition...Wesley seems to have here the postmillennial theory.” Since Christ would only return after the millennia to usher in the New Jerusalem, Faulkner could see no “special divergence” between Wesley’s ‘Notes’ and sermons on the chronology of Christ’s second coming.

Faulkner followed the typical postmillennial interpretation (against Tyerman) of Wesley’s ‘agreement’ with Hartley over the doctrine of the millennium generally, not Hartley’s premillennial description of it. Faulkner also questioned Tyerman on his inference that

121 Faulkner, 171
122 Faulkner, 173
123 Faulkner, 175
124 Faulkner, 176
125 Faulkner, 177
126 Faulkner, 179
Wesley agreed with the chiliasm of Justin Martyr. Wesley “does not deny or affirm Justin’s views.” Wesley was only claiming the doctrine of the millennium generally to be biblical. Faulkner then claimed an anonymous article in Wesley’s Arminian Magazine of 1784 and his comments during a sermon preached in Bradford in 1788 to be at best ambiguous. Indeed, the former could be taken equally as postmillennial and a later clarification to Hopper of the latter comment by Wesley explicitly states that he left all speculation to Bengel and he himself would not venture an opinion on millennial chronology. Faulkner took up the argument that some of Charles’ hymn corpus was premillennial, but concluded that they merely demonstrate “that the Wesleys took the New Testament seriously.” Indeed, the hymns could be equally sung by those of a postmillennial persuasion. This applies even to the hymn cited most of all as premillennial: ‘Lo! He comes with clouds descending.’ Faulkner reasoned that this hymn was found in his 1905 ‘Methodist Hymnal’ and “you may be sure there were no premillennialists on the committee which compiled that book.”

Others have taken Wesley’s spirit of optimism over the future, despite his acknowledgement that much sin remained in the world. James McEldowney wrote that Wesley “saw the hand of God working for the ultimate salvation of vast numbers of people. He believed that God was at work in his own day bringing about a new concern for the kingdom of God.” Colin Williams believed that Wesley “stressed realized eschatology more than any other leading western theologian.” Williams did not explicitly mention the millennium in his final chapter which dealt with Wesley’s eschatology. However, the whole

127 Faulkner, 180
128 Faulkner, 180-1
129 Faulkner, 181
130 Faulkner, 182
131 Unpublished 1943 PhD thesis quoted by Reasoner, 251 n57
132 Colin Williams: John Wesley’s Theology Today (New York, Abingdon Press, 1960), 194
tenet of the discussion – transformation; religion spreading - seems to suggest that he placed Wesley in the postmillennial camp. Williams did point out Wesley’s caution, because of man’s inherent sinfulness, in pushing the ‘this-worldly’ transformation notion too far. Triumphs could only ever be temporary this side of eternity: “The forces of evil are still at loose so that victory can easily be followed by defeat.”

Nevertheless, Williams acknowledged Wesley’s general optimism about what God could do. Roger Hahn continued the theme in claiming that Wesley “set in motion the forces that would move in the direction of postmillennialism.”

Jerry Mercer wrote that “it can hardly be doubted that Wesley’s adopted view is what would today be termed ‘postmillennial.’” He cited Wesley’s reliance on Bengel and further claimed that, “it is important for Wesley’s eschatology that the millennium precedes the second coming of Christ” because “the Church in the world does not look for death” but prepares the way for Christ’s coming. James DeJong believed that “the awakenings were the occasion of the widespread acceptance of simple chiliasm,” by which he means postmillennialism as it came to be known. The negative apocalyptic and cosmic despair which had characterised Calvinistic eschatology was becoming passé in New England, with Jonathan Edwards being a classic example of positive postmillennialism there. Wesley and Whitefield also supported “the idea of a spiritual millennium” although “it did not assume

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133 Williams, 196
134 Unpublished 1992 paper quoted by Reasoner, 251 n60
135 Jerry L. Mercer: “The Destiny of Man in John Wesley’s Eschatology” in *WTJ* (2: 1, Spring 1967), 60
136 Mercer, 60
137 James A. DeJong: *As the Waters Cover the Sea – Millennial Expectations in the Rise of Anglo-American Missions, 1640–1810* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1970), 120
the importance for them that it did for Edwards.”\textsuperscript{138} He cited Bengel as the leading proponent of postmillennialism amongst German preachers and theologians.

W. Ralph Thompson’s two volume work on Wesleyan Theology included a section on the millennium. He looked at the three major interpretations of Revelation 20 and pointed out that postmillennialism came to prominence in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century under Daniel Whitby, with Jonathan Edwards, a short while later, being a protagonist for this school of thought in the colonies. Wesley continued the trend in a more muted sense in 18\textsuperscript{th} century Britain. “While John Wesley...did not emphasize postmillennialism, his writings reveal that he tended to think in keeping with that frame of reference.”\textsuperscript{139} The reasons were the drastic improvements he witnessed in society, as well as the obvious fruits which the Methodists of his time were bearing. Wesley believed in a transformed universe, with God working through man. There was little room for apocalyptic pessimism and passivism.

Donald Dayton too believed that, whilst Wesley did not consciously adopt any millennial scheme, “the basic thrust of Wesley’s thought was probably better captured by the less apocalyptic and more postmillennial schemes of thought.”\textsuperscript{140} But he also admitted that because Wesley’s eschatology was so “oriented to soteriology...his followers could combine a basically Wesleyan scheme of salvation with a variety of eschatologies without an obvious sense of betrayal.”\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{138} DeJong, 120
\textsuperscript{140} Donald W. Dayton: Theological Roots of Pentecostalism (New Jersey and London: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 153
\textsuperscript{141} Dayton, 153
William Greathouse opened his debate with Wesley commending Hartley and Tyerman’s belief that this made Wesley a premillennialist. Wesley’s reliance on Bengel was “further evidence of his presumed premillennialism”\(^{142}\) because Bengel believed that the return of Christ would occur in 1836 and then the millennia would begin. But, of course, Bengel believed no such thing. Yet Greathouse pointed out that the hypothesis of Wesley as a premillennialist had been strenuously debated. Because of Wesley’s ‘NT Notes,’ the sermon evidence, some letters and journals and the fact that Wesley’s published works contained no sermons on the \textit{parousia}, reputable scholars argued for the opposite conclusion. Greathouse himself acknowledged that Wesley “had anything but ‘a premillennial mind.’”\(^{143}\) Yet the dual millennium and his reliance on Bengel, left the debate unresolved. In this he sided with Clarence Bence in suggesting that any comprehension of Wesley’s eschatology must be seen in the light of his soteriology as these “are two parts of one system of understanding.”\(^{144}\)

Arthur Wainwright believed Wesley was fortunate not to commend all of Bengel’s calculations, given the fact that 1836 would pass by without the fall of the Papacy which Bengel had predicted. Wainwright called Bengel’s millennial eschatology “an unusual variation of postmillennialism.”\(^{145}\) For Wesley, a thousand years of spiritual prosperity and church growth “was congenial to his evangelistic and perfectionistic concerns.”\(^{146}\) Others too have linked Wesley’s eschatology with his soteriology and come to a postmillennial

\(^{142}\) William M. Greathouse: “John Wesley’s View of the Last Things” in H. Ray Dunning (ed.): \textit{The Second Coming – A Wesleyan Approach to the Last Things} (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1995), 139
\(^{143}\) Greathouse, 140
\(^{144}\) Greathouse, 142
\(^{145}\) Arthur Wainwright: \textit{Mysterious Apocalypse – Interpreting the Book of Revelation} (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 79
\(^{146}\) Wainwright, 79
conclusion. Kenneth Collins believed that in linking “the great evangelical revival with the approaching (first) millennial reign, especially in some late sermons, Wesley maintained not only that this reign would be progressive, even incremental, but also that it would occur before the second coming of Christ.”\textsuperscript{147} Here Collins was persuaded by the argument of Randy Maddox. Maddox was convinced that Bengel was a postmillennialist, although Wesley’s adoption of him was not without reservation. And despite the alleged influence of Thomas Hartley and John Fletcher, Maddox was of the view that the later Wesley had settled for “strong postmillennial expressions.”\textsuperscript{148}

Vic Reasoner of ‘Fundamental Wesleyan Publishers’ attempted to place early Methodism in the postmillennial camp, as Kenneth Newport had tried to place it in the premillennial camp. He started off by talking of the inwardness of Wesley’s eschatology, whereby God rules in the heart. Wesley’s eschatology “is based more upon God’s redemptive activity than apocalyptic language.”\textsuperscript{149} This then “anticipates the eschatological victory of Christ in the world.”\textsuperscript{150} The kingdom of God involved both personal pietism and the transformation of society corporately, both now and in the future.

Reasoner acknowledged Wesley’s use of Bengel, who was claimed to combine both pre and postmillennialism. How Bengel was placed in the former category, Reasoner did not make clear.\textsuperscript{151} He then focused on previous scholars who have placed Wesley in either millennial

\textsuperscript{147} Collins: Theology, 316
\textsuperscript{148} Maddox: Responsible Grace, 239
\textsuperscript{149} Reasoner, 242
\textsuperscript{150} Reasoner, 243
\textsuperscript{151} In private correspondence he stated that, because Christ returned in some way in 1836, this is “in a sense premillennial.” 4 Nov, 2009. Yet this ‘coming’ is still a departure from the normative premillennial expectation of a physical and visual reign of Christ on earth.
camp, giving more favourable recommendations to those who made Wesley a postmillennialist.\textsuperscript{152} Reasoner himself found this “more consistent with Wesleyan-Arminian doctrine than any other.”\textsuperscript{153}

Whilst past scholars have stressed the importance of Bengel to Wesley, this has often involved tarring Bengel with whichever pre or post millennial brush the scholars themselves used, to suit their own ends. Additionally, it is obvious that many of these scholars either never read or properly understood Bengel, particularly in relation to the nature of the eschatological event he claimed would occur in 1836. The next chapter, therefore, hopes to do Bengel, and so Wesley, justice by spending time on the eschatological chronology of the Lutheran.

\textsuperscript{152} Reasoner’s personal postmillennial views are expressed elsewhere in Vic Reasoner: \textit{A Fundamental Wesleyan Commentary on Revelation} (Evansville: Fundamental Wesleyan Publishers, 2005), 503-518

\textsuperscript{153} Reasoner, 239
Chapter 2 – The Eschatological Calculations of Johann Albrecht Bengel

Johann Albrecht Bengel was born on 24 June, 1687 in Winnenden, a small town in Württemberg in Germany. He was the fourth child of Albrecht Bengel, the deacon and second pastor at Winnenden, and Barbara Sophie Schmidlin, the daughter of a prelate and Consistory member in Württemberg.\textsuperscript{154} Bengel was one of the shining lights of German Lutheranism and was one of its finest Biblical scholars. He is best known as a New Testament academic. After completing his theological education in Tubingen in 1706, he became a curate at the City Church there and then in Stuttgart. Most of his academic life, however, was spent as a professor at Denkendorf, between 1713 and 1741. He only left there to become a prelate of the church and died on 2 November, 1752.\textsuperscript{155}

This chapter will provide a resumé of the literature produced by Bengel. A problem encountered with any in-depth study of Bengel’s works is the fact that many are rare and some were published in Latin and German only. Thus availability and language issues preclude detailed investigation. Then, without passing judgment on Bengel’s methods or chronological accuracy, this chapter will examine how he dated the world from creation to his own time and slightly beyond. However, Bengel’s chronological calculations were complex and so only a basic chronology is given in this thesis. The final part of this chapter will then investigate Bengel’s historicist approach to the book of Revelation, whereby events in human history could be appended to the various images in the Apocalypse, before looking at the time and nature of the millennium in his eschatological thought. The

\textsuperscript{154} Hermann Ehmer: “Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752)” in Carter Lindberg (ed.): \textit{The Pietist Theologians} (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 224

\textsuperscript{155} Andrew Helmbold: “J. A. Bengel – Full of Light” in \textit{Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society} (6. 3, 1963), 73
significance of all this is vital in understanding John Wesley’s treatment of both Revelation and the 20th chapter in particular. This is because Wesley plagiarised much of Bengel’s interpretation of the Apocalypse, even if he shied away from many of Bengel’s chronological predictions. So an investigation into Bengel’s chronology and millennial eschatology is important in order to understand how he came to the conclusions and predictions he did and also in aiding comprehension of Wesley’s millennial thought.

\[ \text{Bengel’s Writings} \]

Bengel’s writings were numerous, including his editions of the works of others. His original publications numbered about thirty.\(^{156}\) These were driven by a desire to make all the time-periods in Scripture consistent with each other. An early example of this was Bengel’s attempt to make consistent the chronology of the four Gospel accounts in his 1736 publication *Harmony of the Gospels*. He first dabbled with the topic of prophecy through his *Tracts on the Apocalypse*, which were included in various theological journals in Germany in the 1730s. This then became more formalised through the publication in 1740 of his *Ekklarte Offenbarung* or ‘Exposition of the Revelation of St John’. His desire for chronological exactness was the dominant feature of *Ordo Temporum* – the Order of Time - published in Stuttgart in 1741. The object of Bengel’s *Ordo Temporum*\(^{157}\) was set out in its laborious title: “to exhibit the whole line of chronology which pervades the historical and prophetic books of the Old and New Testament, from its commencement to its termination;

\(^{156}\) Andrew R. Fausset: “Sketch of the Life and Writings of J. A. Bengel” in Johann Albrecht Bengel: *Gnomon of the New Testament* (5 volumes; trans. Andrew R Fausset; Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1866), 5: xiii

\(^{157}\) Jo. Alberti Bengelii *Ordo Temporum, a principio per periodos aeconomiae divinae historicas atque propheticas ad finem usque ita deductus, ut tota series et quarumvis partium analogia sempiterna virtutis ac sapientiae cultoribus ex Scriptura V. et N. T. tanquam uno revera documento proponatur*
and thus to cumulate proof that the Scriptures form one beautifully connected and credible whole."\textsuperscript{158} Here, exegesis and textual criticism were fused in order to calculate the times and seasons of the Bible’s last book.

Chronological accuracy was also the mainstay of two more of Bengel’s works: his 1745 publication \textit{Cyclus} and his ‘Age of the World,’ written a year later. The former was an attempt to cohere apocalyptic periods with the findings of astronomers of his own time. The latter work in its content repeated much of \textit{Ordo Temporum} “rather copiously”\textsuperscript{159} but some of its content was original and it was more than a translation of \textit{Ordo Temporum}. Nor was ‘Age of the World’ simply addressing refutations of \textit{Ordo Temporum}. Mostly, it was a fresh attempt at constructing a chronology of time in a clearer way. An effort to tackle the complexity of Revelation came in 1747, when Bengel produced ‘Sixty Practical Addresses on the Apocalypse.’\textsuperscript{160} The second coming of Christ was “Revelation’s grand object.”\textsuperscript{161}

However, Bengel’s most famous works were his ‘Greek New Testament’ and his \textit{Gnomon} of the New Testament. Here we are faced with another intense interest of Bengel’s, out with prophetic and chronological enquiries. He had a huge concern for Biblical authenticity and in prioritising some of the various extant New Testament manuscripts over others. Often the Christian had to content himself with a deep-rooted belief that God would never have allowed a corruption of the sacred text. Bengel wanted to assure the believer that he not

\textsuperscript{158} John C. F. Burk: \textit{A Memoir of the Life and Writings of John Albert Bengel} (trans. Robert Francis Walker; Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1837), 267
\textsuperscript{159} Burk, 354
\textsuperscript{160} Fausset, 5: xix
\textsuperscript{161} Fausset, 5: xx
only could believe this was the case, but see it also. In 1725, Bengel published a tract entitled *Prodromus Novi Testamenti Graeci recte cauteque adornandi*, which was annexed to some of his other works, promising a critical edition of the Greek New Testament. In it, he also promised to publish a commentary on the entire New Testament under the title *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* or ‘Exegetical Annotations on the New Testament,’ published in 1742. The more humble meaning of *Gnomon* is ‘pointer’ or ‘indicator.’ It was on this most famous work that Wesley based his ‘Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.’

However, before producing his *Gnomon*, Bengel was determined to establish the authentic text of the New Testament. Indeed, Bengel’s scholarly concern for the manuscript of the New Testament bordered on obsession. Concerned about the accuracy of many editions of the New Testament being used, he was convinced that “a new critical principle ought to underlie any further research in the field.” He would collect over twenty manuscripts and printed editions of the New Testament from libraries all over Europe and divided manuscripts into families and subfamilies. In his *Prodromus*, Bengel outlined the principles on which his intended edition was to be based. He insisted that his published text would not make use of the various readings which had not already been printed in some preceding edition of the Greek text. For Bengel, any reading not found in previous printed editions were of only minor importance, leading him to deduce “proclivi lectioni praestat ardua” or “the difficult is preferable to the easy reading.” The reason was simple – transcribers or interpolators would tend to substitute the easier reading for the more complex one, rather than vice versa. However, he deviated from this rule in the case of Revelation due to what

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162 Fausset, 5: xiv
163 Jaroslav Pelikan: “In Memoriam: Joh. Albrecht Bengel June 24, 1687 to November 2, 1752” in Concordia Theological Monthly, (23. 11, November 1952), 788
164 Fausset, 5: xiv-xv
he saw as the corrupt state of the text. There he felt himself at liberty to introduce certain readings on manuscript authority and these shall be discussed briefly below.

The result, nine years later, was his 1734 publication Novum Testamentum Græcum. This was produced in two forms; one larger quarto edition and a smaller octavo edition. Later in the same year came his Apparatus Criticus, which was contained in his larger edition, giving instruction as to the principles of criticism as well as an account of every reading he adopted. Since the smaller edition of the Greek New Testament, did not contain his Apparatus, he gave a brief account in the preface of the principles of his research. At the end, he taught how the Scriptures could be searched to the greatest profit: “Te totum applica ad Textum: rem totam applica ad te.” Translated, this means “Keep [or apply] yourself wholly to the text; and apply the whole substance of it to yourself [or to your own edification].”

In his Novum Testamentum Græcum, Bengel used the Apparatus to champion his predecessors in the field of textual criticism and outlined the problems one faced in this field. The longest section of his Novum Testamentum Græcum was a verse by verse examination of the most significant manuscript evidence and patristic citations. He often added an appendix, providing a brief explanation of why he had chosen a particular variant reading for any given verse. This second section also tackled the especially peculiar and complex textual issues surrounding the Apocalypse. The third section documented his conviction first voiced in the Prodromus that the faults in previous editions originated in the principles they used in weighing up the manuscript evidence. Bengel would write a Defensio

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165 Fausset, 5: xiv
166 Fausset, 5: xv; Cf. Burk, 236
Novum Testamentum Græcum in 1737, further explaining and validating his methods against a backdrop of opposition, informing them that his mode of criticism was old and in fact not original to him. Bengel’s deep-rooted desire was to continue in this tradition and never waver from collating the most accurate manuscript evidence.

A result of Bengel’s chronological speculations was not merely to account accurately for the dates of Scripture which had passed. It also led Bengel to predict when events would unfold in the future. But did the Gospels themselves not caution against date-setting? For Bengel, these admonitions were only pertinent to their immediate historical context. Moreover, had Noah not been forewarned of the very year when the flood would come and did Abraham not know in advance of the four hundred year wanderings in a strange land? Anyway, for Bengel, when the Lord gave John the Apocalypse on Patmos – and Bengel believed that this took place decades after the Gospels were written – this not only made date setting possible, but in fact provided “a divine mandate so to do.”

Bengel’s Chronology

Ordo Temporum consisted of a table of the whole chronological line from Adam to the end of the world. In this work, Bengel attempted to collate all the numerical figures of Scripture. Bengel took the notifications of time as they were scattered throughout both testaments and determined to demonstrate how they were all connected to one another “as unbroken

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167 Pelikan, 789
168 Matthew 24: 36; Mark 13: 32 and Acts 1: 6-7
169 Marino, 62-3
links of one common chronology.\textsuperscript{170} The beginning of time corresponded to the autumn season. Adam’s period of innocence was but for a very short time; the Jewish Day of Atonement – the tenth day of the seventh month – was the anniversary of the Fall.

Bengel’s calculations led him to deduce that from the Creation and the Fall to the naming of Adam’s family in Genesis 5, through to the deluge and the procreation from the descendents of Noah in Genesis 10, there were 1,656 years. Leading up to the birth of Abraham, another 290 years elapsed and then from his birth to the birth of his son Isaac lapsed another 100 years. The time up to the birth of Jacob saw another 60 years pass and then another 90 up to the birth of Joseph. By the time Joseph died another 110 years had elapsed, with another 140 years to the departure of the Israelites out of Egypt. So far, the world was 2,446 years old. Bengel then took the 487 years of the exodus until the completion of the building work on the temple in the eleventh year of Solomon’s reign, and now factored that in.\textsuperscript{171} These 487 years were accounted for, thus: after the exile, came 40 years of sojourning in the wilderness; followed by another 5 for the conquest of Canaan. The period of the Judges and Samuel, up to the reign of Saul, accounted for another 391 years. David’s reign was for 40 years and the final 11 years of the 487 was Solomon’s reign up to the completion of the temple. The world was now 2,933 years old.\textsuperscript{172}

However, for Bengel there were problems with this calculation. The book of Judges seemed to provide 79 more years than Bengel’s calculations had taken into account.\textsuperscript{173} Secondly, issues arose over Saul’s reign of 40 years. Bengel seemed to omit this reign in the above 391

\textsuperscript{170} Burk, 268
\textsuperscript{171} 1 Kings 6: 1
\textsuperscript{172} Burk, 268-70
\textsuperscript{173} Judges 3: 8, 14; 4: 3; 6: 1; 12: 7; 15: 20; 16: 31
year period of the Judges and Samuel. This period had only taken Bengel up to the reign of Saul, rather than included it. The Apostle Paul records that Saul reigned for 40 years.\textsuperscript{174} Bengel suggested that the above 79 years could be included in the period of the Judges cited above “since whoever had been divinely called to act as a judge, upon only a single occasion, bore, we may say, the style and title of a judge for the rest of his life; or, in the language of the Bible, was said to have judged Israel so many years; though he never afterwards acted as chief, either in a civil or a military capacity.”\textsuperscript{175} But for Bengel there was confusion as to whether Paul meant Saul’s reign was four years, rather than forty.\textsuperscript{176} Certainly the forty years cited by Paul is an item of information not found in the Old Testament. But Josephus believed this figure to be accurate: “Now Saul, when he had reigned eighteen years while Samuel was alive, and after his death two [and twenty], ended his life in this manner.”\textsuperscript{177} Admittedly, elsewhere Josephus ascribed Saul as retaining the government for 20 years.\textsuperscript{178} Yet if Paul did indeed ascribe forty years to Saul’s reign, “then he might mean, not his personal reign, but the whole time of Samuel the prophet, to the beginning of the reign of David.”\textsuperscript{179} So the issue regarding the 79 years did not seem have much bearing on any of Bengel’s calculations if they were simply to be included in the 391 total years of the Judges and Samuel; nor it seems did the length of Saul’s reign, if it was to be incorporated likewise. And this appears to have been Bengel’s conclusion.

\textsuperscript{174} Acts 13: 21
\textsuperscript{175} Burk, 270
\textsuperscript{176} Burk, 270
\textsuperscript{177} Josephus: The Works of Josephus – Complete and Unabridged (trans. by William Whiston; 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), Book 6, chapter 14. 9
\textsuperscript{178} Josephus: Book 10, chapter 8. 4
\textsuperscript{179} Burk, 270
One other problem was to surface though, because Acts 13: 20\textsuperscript{180} was brought into harmony with the above chronology. There, 450 years was mentioned as the time of the Judges until Samuel the prophet. But based on the authority of several manuscripts, Bengel took this period of years not to refer to the time-frame of the Judges but rather to Abraham’s seed being a stranger in a strange land (Gen 15: 13) to the actual partition of Canaan. He then concluded that thirty additional years needed to be added to the 2,933 provided above, if this 450 years expired at the 11\textsuperscript{th} year of Solomon’s reign, when the temple was completed. This was because Solomon reigned 40 years; hence the need to add the previous short-fall of thirty years.\textsuperscript{181} In short, Bengel’s chronological schema from creation to the end of Solomon’s reign brought the age of the earth to 2,963 years, rather than the 2,933 years previously stated. This seems to be the understanding behind Burk’s confusing abridgement of Bengel’s *Ordo Temporum* thus far.\textsuperscript{182} Bengel delved into these sterile chronological debates, but in doing so at least demonstrated fully his desire to remain utterly committed to the epochs and dates of Scripture.

After these minor problems were resolved, Bengel continued with his chronological calculations. According to the accumulated chronology of Kings and Chronicles, the reigns of the kings of Judah, up to the eleventh year of Zedekiah when he was taken to Babylon, amounted to some 393 years. Bengel however was a stickler for chronological tidiness – he now insisted on reducing the reigns of the kings of Israel in order that they would be in harmony with the length of the Judah reigns. In modern parlance, some ‘cooking of the books’ seems to have taken place in order to end up at the required destination of 393

\textsuperscript{180} Cf. Acts 7: 6
\textsuperscript{181} 1 Kings 11: 42; 2 Chronicles 9: 30
\textsuperscript{182} Burk, 270-1
years. The reigns of Israel he calculated to be 98 years from the revolt of the ten northern tribes to the Assyrian invasion. Because the corresponding period of the reigns of Judah for this period was only 95 years, Bengel shortened the Israel reigns by three years under the premise that these reigns “were not always entire ones.”\(^{183}\) After the exile of the northern kingdom, the kings of Israel reigned 143 years, but Bengel had to bring this figure up to the 165 years covering the corresponding reigns of the kings of Judah. These 22 years were ‘made up’ by 12 years of Jeroboam’s reign which were not accounted for and an interregnum of around 9-10 years. Thus both the kings of Israel and Judah reigned for 95 years then 165 years, totalling some 260 years. Additionally, Judah outlived Israel by 133 years, giving the required total of 393 years. When this was added to the 2,963 years already calculated, the total age of the earth from creation to Nebuchadnezzar’s sacking of Jerusalem was 3,356 years.

Thereafter, calculations became more straightforward when Bengel used secular dating to fill in any gaps left by the Old Testament record.\(^{184}\) Thus it was reckoned that from the exile in the eighteenth or nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign\(^{185}\) to the “vulgar Christian era”\(^{186}\) some 587 years would pass. Bengel made provision for these 587 years, thus: Nebuchadnezzar reigned for another 25 years after the raping of Jerusalem and other reigns up to and including the edict of Cyrus accounted for a further 26 years. The temple took 15 years to build, Ezra and Nehemiah’s arrival in Judah totalled 76 years and another 113 years passed to Alexander the Great. Another 164 years passed until the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes; then 128 years elapsed to the reign of Herod. Bengel calculated from

\(^{183}\) Burk, 271
\(^{184}\) Burk, 271-2
\(^{185}\) There is a slight discrepancy between 2 Kings 25: 8 and Jeremiah 52: 29
\(^{186}\) Burk, 272
there another 37 years to the birth of Christ in 3 BCE, probably on 25 December.\textsuperscript{187} Then there was a final 3 years which commenced the “vulgar era.” Added to the previous total of 3,356 years, Bengel calculated that the age of the world from Adam to the beginning of the Christian epoch was 3,943 years, providing a full demonstration of the chronology of the Old Testament.

In dating the age of the world from the time of Christ to the present, Bengel was precise on how much time remained before Jesus’ return. The birth of Christ was already established as occurring after 3,940 years of world history, with the “vulgar Christian era”\textsuperscript{188} of Dionysius Exiguus beginning after 3,943 years.\textsuperscript{189} But the New Testament era would be much shorter. On that basis, there could be no more than 3,940 years of future history left. Thus the world would never extend beyond 7,880 years from beginning to end. Some 5,680 years had already come and gone, by way of a simple arithmetical addition of the 3,940 which had already passed from Adam to Christ, and the 1,740 years from Christ up to the time of writing \textit{Ordo Temporum}. This left only 2,200 years of world history remaining, including the two millennia. Thus only 200 years were left before the prophecy of Revelation 20 would start to be fulfilled. All this led Bengel to believe that “the events which are to precede what is foretold in that chapter must be very near at hand.”\textsuperscript{190}

However, 7,880 years was the \textit{maximum} duration of world history. For Bengel, the reality was less because the Biblical use of the number seven provided a key to the exact duration

\begin{footnotes}
\item[187] Marino, 62
\item[188] Burk, 272
\item[189] Gnomon, 5: 372
\item[190] Burk, 278
\end{footnotes}
Thus “both Scripture and...its traditional interpretation [foretold] the span of history as limited to slightly over 7,777 years,” leaving only 3,837 years to pass after the birth of Christ.” Therefore only 97 years, not 200, remained between the date of Bengel’s calculations in *Ordo Temporum* and the beginning of the first millennium in 1836. At that time, the age of the world would be nearing 5,778 years old. Satan was then to be bound for one thousand years in Rev 20: 2-3. When this expired, the world would be just under 6,778 years old with the date being 2836CE. Another thousand years was then to follow, during which Satan would be loosed for “a little time,” before the “end of the world and judgment.” So the date when history would give way to eternity was reckoned at 3836CE.

*Revelation and the Millennium*

It was on Advent Sunday in 1724 that the key to the book of Revelation was disclosed to Bengel. If the key to its understanding had been revealed to him, the language of the text would be an issue for a scholar intent on defending Biblical accuracy. The allegedly poorer standard of Greek in Revelation has long puzzled scholars, leading many to suggest that either John of Patmos deliberately used solecisms to highlight Old Testament allusions or to conclude that his Greek was simply less proficient when he wrote Revelation, hinting at an early date for that document. The former argument suggests that these deliberate solecisms

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192 Actually 7777 7/9 years
193 Marino, 63
194 Burk, 294
195 Burk, 294
196 Bengel did not specifically mention the dates 2836 or 3836, but this is the logical conclusion of adding two successive 1000 year periods to 1836
197 Ehmer, 231 n28
appear when John alludes to the Old Testament and carries over the exact grammatical forms from either the Hebrew or the LXX. The alternative view posits that John wrote the Apocalypse much earlier than his Gospel when his Greek was less adept. Revelation then was written in an idiolect which departed from established norms and in places is nothing more than the vulgar Greek of the 1st century. For John it was simply a second language. There appears to be some evidence for this assertion also.

Whatever the causes or reasons for Revelation’s seemingly sub-standard Greek, Bengel felt himself at liberty to introduce and evaluate various readings of it from the available manuscript evidence. In compiling his Novum Testamentum Græcum, in the lower margin of the page Bengel inserted and graded, by means of the first five letters of the Greek alphabet, the relative importance of a selection of various readings. Bengel placed the letter α in the margin to indicate the reading which, in his opinion, was the true one, although he did not venture to place it in the text. β indicated a reading which was better than that in the text; γ signified one of equal importance to the text. Those marked with δ were inferior to the textual reading and those marked ε, Bengel marked “Rec. Text has it without authority.”

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198 These tend to be disagreements in case, number, gender or person. However, they can also be peculiar variations in style, such as resumptive pronouns, resolution of a participle into a finite verb in a following clause, the mixing of verb tenses for no obvious reason and other stylistic expressions that seem to express Hebraisms or Aramaisms. Greg K. Beale: The Book of Revelation - The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 101-102
199 Here, of course, authorship questions are brought into the debate
201 Stephen S. Smalley: “John’s Revelation and John’s Community” in Bulletin of the John Rylands Library (69, 1986-87), 563
202 Entry entitled “Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752)” in Encyclopaedia Britannica (VO3, 1911), 737
203 Gnomon, 5: 366
Before delving into the chronology of Revelation it is worth explaining some of Bengel’s
ground rules in order to make this endeavour more comprehensible. Common or natural
time for Bengel did not equate to prophetic time. The former was a literal amount of years.
The latter, however, had to be calculated (Rev 13: 18) and this was vital in terms of working
out the world’s remaining duration. These were in the seven denominations of hour, day,
month, year, season (kairos), time (chronos) and age (aion). In order to obtain the correct
interpretation for any time-frame cited, it was vital for Bengel to distinguish between
common time on the one hand and prophetic or mystical time on the other.

An example of this was the number of the beast arising out of the earth (Rev 13: 18) being
666 and the number of the beast rising out of the sea (Rev 13: 5) being 42 months. Since the
text instructed the reader to calculate, this had to mean that there were two numbers
enabling calculation to be possible. The former for Bengel was a literal time of years,

It may be proper to enquire, what noun, understood in a grammatical sense, can
belong to the numeral expression 666. The answer is, that it must, according to the
context, be a noun denoting computation of time. Moreover, the neutral form of this
numeral as found in the best Greek MSS., and its masculine form, as found in the
Latin Vulgate, direct us to the word ‘years,’ as the understood noun for it to agree
with. Thus the numeral expression 666, denotes 666 years; and these, as the text
implies, arithmos gar anthropon esti, are common years; while the forty and two
months denote likewise 666 years. 204

Thus 42 months were prophetic in nature; the 666 being literal years. The conclusion was 42
prophetic months was the equivalent to the 666 years, making one prophetic day equivalent
to about half of one common year. 205

204 Burk, 288
205 Exposition, III.LII, 214
How did one though discern which time-frames are to be taken as ‘common’ and which are to be taken as ‘prophetic’ or mystical? To answer this, is to acknowledge the importance of Revelation’s 3rd woe for Bengel. The visions of the seven seals in Revelation referred to the years 97-98CE, with the seven trumpets pertaining to the second through to the tenth centuries. The 3rd woe of Revelation 12: 12, covered the period 947-1836CE. This is the ‘short time’ cited in the text. A fuller of explanation of how Bengel arrives at these dates will be given below. At this juncture, it is sufficient to say that, for Bengel, those time periods which elapsed before the 3rd woe, or the number of the Beast, were mystical; those which finish the mystery of God afterwards were to be taken literally. So the 3rd woe itself formed a connecting link between these two interpretations of numbers. Burk claimed these were half visible (presumably 666) and half secret (42 months). And for Bengel, these 666 years lasted from 1143 to 1809.

Bengel managed ingeniously to fit this chronology into the book of Revelation. From the start of the Christian era, another 96 years were added up to the writing of the Apocalypse. By 98 the seven seals were opened, followed by the seven trumpets. Each trumpet marked the end of its century, so the first trumpet was the end of the first century; the second trumpet the end of the second century, etc. After the fifth trumpet, came the 1st woe in chapter 9. This came between 510 and 589CE. Up to 634CE was the interval between the first and second woes. Then the 2nd woe took the year up to 840.

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206 Burk, 292
207 Burk, 288
208 Gnomon, 5: 373
In the year 800 the non-chronos extended to 1836 and was described by Bengel as the period of many kings. This included an interval after the 2nd woe, leading up to chapter 11 of Revelation and the year 947CE. Part of this period started in 864 and extended to 1521. This was the 1,260 days of the woman “after she had brought forth the man-child” in Rev 12: 6. The 3rd woe, described as a ‘short time’ in Rev 12: 12, commenced in 947 and lasted until 1836. Part of this was from 1058 until 1836 and the ‘time, times and half a time.’ During this era there was a war with the saints in 1209 at the end of the chronus (Rev 13: 7); the everlasting Gospel was preached by the angel in 1614.

The end of the 42 months of the beast would come in 1810, “upon the completion of which, and the pouring out of the seven vials, he is not, and Babylon sits as a Queen” (Rev 15-17). By 1832, the beast would be out of the bottomless pit, as described in chapters 17-18. He would take his throne upon the seven mountains between 1831 and 1836. Halfway through this period, in 1833, “the ten kings lay Babylon (Rome) waste; in an agreement with the Beast.” There would then be a last raging of Antichrist for the three and a half common years between 1832 until 1836 when the non-chronos of many kings ends. God’s words would then be fulfilled, followed by a repentance of those left in the great city. Satan would be bound for a thousand years and the beast destroyed (Rev 19-20). Afterwards,

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209 Bengel took the Greek words kairos and chronos – both translated as ‘time’ – as keys to inferring the chronology of Revelation. Kairos would tend to mean a definite time-frame whereas a chronos was a more abstract notion of time generally. For Bengel, every period of time cited in Revelation had to be calculable. So, for example, the ‘time and times and a half time’ of Revelation 12: 14 was cited as a kairos, whilst a chronos fitted better with Revelation 6: 11 and the cry of the saints when the fifth seal is opened, i.e. ‘a little while longer.’ A chronos for Bengel, even if abstract, was a whole time or period. So when Revelation 10: 6 talks of a ‘time’ or a ‘delay no longer,’ this in fact was a non-chronos, meaning vernacularly “not quite a chronos.” The chronos then is longer than the non-chronos as Revelation 6: 11 makes clear. A little time longer can always be completed. Marino, 66
210 Gnomon, 5: 373
211 Gnomon, 5: 373
212 Burk, 293
Satan will be loosed for a little *chronus* and a second thousand years then commences with the saints reigning in heaven. Then the little *chronus* expires and all things are made new chapters 21-22.

It is here that Bengel’s historicist approach to Revelation was clearly seen. Each chapter of the Apocalypse marked an earthly event of importance. It was appropriate to “distinguish the centuries from the time of John in Patmos to our own age.” The centuries correlated with the seven trumpets. If the first century ended with John on Patmos, the second century marked the destruction of Judaism (Rev 8: 7). The third saw inroads being made by the Barbarians (Rev 8: 8) and the fourth brought Arianism (Rev 8: 10). Rome was overthrown in the following century (Rev 8: 12) and with the next came “the Jewish Synagogue tormented” (Rev 9: 1 and the fifth trumpet). The seventh century brought the Saracens (Rev 9: 13) and the seventh trumpet of Revelation 10: 15 ushered in the iconoclastic age. Then came the age of Photius I, the Patriarch of Constantinople, in the ninth century. The Child of the nations was born in 12: 5, before the disastrous age of the third woe in 12: 12 in the tenth century. This ushered in the age of Hildebrand, Pope Gregory VII, and the rising up of the beast from the sea in the eleventh century (Rev 13: 1). Power was then given to the beast in the twelfth century (Rev 13: 5) during the persecution of the Waldensians.

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213 *Gnomon*, 5: 374
214 *Gnomon*, 5: 373
215 *Gnomon*, 5: 374; presumably this is a reference to Christianity gaining a foothold in the Roman world and the Temple Mount becoming a desolate rubble heap. In 534CE, over the site of Solomon’s elaborate palace, the Emperor Justinian built mighty substructures as foundations for the New Church of St. Mary
The following century, Bengel described as the ‘Scholastic Age’ which he appended to Rev 13: 7, describing it as a “war with the saints.”216 The fourteenth to sixteenth centuries were not given Scripture references by Bengel, but the fourteenth century brought Wycliffe in the middle of the 3rd woe. The fifteenth century was the age of the Synods and saw the beast in the height of his strength. With the sixteenth century came the Reformation. Here the woman in the wilderness was better nourished; presumably Bengel was going back chronologically to Rev 12: 14. The everlasting Gospel was the feature of the seventeenth century and this occurred in Rev 14: 6, continuing until Christ came back after the second millennium.217 Bengel’s historical linking of centuries to events in Revelation stopped here until the activity of the nineteenth century would draw the world towards the millennium of 1836, starting with the worship of the beast and his image in Rev 14: 9.

It is important to state that Bengel did not believe that Christ would return in 1836. Many scholars seem to suggest this.218 Even the Lutheran scholar Jaroslav Pelikan believed Bengel predicted Jesus’ return that year.219 Yet he also quoted Bengel as saying that this event would be the interitus bestiae which is not the same thing at all; rather it is an eschatological event in the cosmos which ushers in the millennia, namely the binding of Satan. Pelikan then claimed that Bengel predicted the end of the world in 1836.220 Again, Bengel said no such thing. This is important, because the misunderstanding that Bengel believed Christ’s return as occurring in 1836 has led many later scholars to believe he, and so John Wesley, was a premillennialist. But for Bengel, Christ would return at the end of the two millennia,
not before them. For Rev 19: 11, a verse which many think describes the return of Christ, Bengel stated that, rather than speaking of the return of Jesus in glory, the resurrection of the dead and judgment, Christ’s one coming in glory will happen “at the last day: of which, however, [this verse] is an illustrious and remarkable prelude in the destruction of the beast.” This is consistent with Bengel’s view that the chapters of Revelation were in chronological order. So Christ could never come back in chapter 19, before the events of chapter 20. Additionally, the Lutheran was convinced that there would be two millennia and it is important to be clear on Jesus’ return in relation to these two periods. It is also important to deduce the nature of these two millennia.

It should be stated that Bengel did not claim his idea of a double millennium to be original to him. He identified previous authorities who interpreted Revelation 20 this way, as well as yet more others who believed in two millennia but believed the second one to be the eternal state. But Bengel’s originality was his belief that the first millennium would begin in 1836, sometime shortly after the events of Revelation 19: 11-21 which would take place on 18 June of that year. At the start of Revelation 20 the beast would be bound and thrown into the bottomless pit, or in Bengel’s contemporary parlance, in that year the Papacy would be overthrown. “Satan...will be disempowered from seducing the nations” and the beginning of this first millennium would be a prelude to Christ’s return. A golden age on earth would follow for a thousand years for the Church, during which Babylon will be destroyed and the beast and the false prophet will be cast into the lake of fire. The woman

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221 Gnomon, 5: 363
222 Some have seen Bengel as combining premillennialism with postmillennialism; although his pupils later rejected the latter, adopting a premillennial approach. Reasoner, 245
223 Gnomon, 5: 369
224 Burk, 294
225 Burk, 308
would no longer be in the wilderness, “but the whole earth lying open before her, the gospel will demonstrate itself in its full power.”

However, on Satan’s release the saints would reign in heaven while on earth the Church would be persecuted. After Satan’s release he would attack the earth “through the instrumentality of Gog and Magog.” But Satan would then be finally defeated and cast into the lake of fire. This second thousand year period sounds almost amillennial in nature because it is located in heaven: “The martyrs live and reign, not on earth, but with Christ: then the coming of Christ in glory at length takes place at the last day: then, next there is a new heaven, the new earth and the New Jerusalem.”

Bengel distinguished between separate one thousand year periods because he believed that this was consistent with Revelation 20. Verses 2, 3 and 7 speak of the first millennium on earth, whilst verses 4, 5 and 6 point to the heavenly second millennium. Moreover, at the end of the first millennium, and before the second millennium starts, comes the resurrection of the saints (Rev 20: 5); everybody else – good and bad – is resurrected at the general or second resurrection at the end of the second millennium. So the millennia run consecutively, rather than overlap in some way, “therefore the beginning and end of the former [millennium] is before the beginning and end of the second.”

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226 Burk, 308
227 Burk, 309
228 Gnomon, 5: 367
229 Exposition, 15.XX.2, 343
230 Marino, 84
231 Gnomon, 5: 370
232 Gnomon, 5: 368
Furthermore, having two distinct millennial periods offered Bengel the great advantage over the problems of having one period with the various interpretations of what would happen during it, namely a golden age of better times on the one hand and a period of perversity and turmoil on the other. So the first millennium promises the “most flourishing times of the Church” as first foreseen in Rev 10: 7. Then after the first resurrection, those risen will reign with Christ in heaven during the second millennium whilst, on earth, men will live for themselves as in the days of Noah and as the Lord predicted in Matthew 24: 37. Bengel also cited the Lord who asked in Luke 18: 8 whether the Son of Man would really find faith on the earth when He returned. The millennium during which Satan would be bound therefore, was for the Lutheran very different in context to the one in which the saints would reign.

This is crucial in terms of not only understanding Bengel’s millennial theology, but also in assessing John Wesley’s. Indeed, as we have seen, many scholars have labelled Wesley a pre or postmillennialist without having properly understood the nature and locale of Bengel’s millennia, which of course Wesley would go on to inherit. And it is to Wesley’s millennialism where this thesis now turns.

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233 _Gnomon_, 5: 369
234 _Gnomon_, 5: 369
235 _Gnomon_, 5: 369
That Wesley relied heavily upon the work of Bengel, in terms of his eschatological calculations, can hardly be denied. In compiling his *NT Notes*, Wesley added little original material of his own to the German’s. Certainly there are anomalies and minor discrepancies but broadly Wesley adopted, understood and incorporated Bengel’s entire system into his own without much concern.\(^\text{236}\) Indeed, Wesley’s reliance on Bengel for his entire *NT Notes* was stated unashamedly in his preface:

I once designed to write down barely what occurred to my own mind, consulting none but the inspired writers. But no sooner was I acquainted with that great light of the Christian world (lately gone to his reward) Bengelius, than I entirely changed my design, being thoroughly convinced it might be of more service to the cause of religion, were I barely to translate his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, than to write many volumes upon it.\(^\text{237}\)

Wesley’s *Notes* then were part translation, part abridgement of Bengel’s *Gnomon*, with some omissions only of parts which were purely critical. Wesley’s reliance on Bengel was particularly evident when it came to Revelation. Wesley paid homage to Bengel’s “*Ekklarte Offenbarung* [where] far more”\(^\text{238}\) was taken than from the *Gnomon*. He did not though defend every part of this work. It should be said that Wesley did use his sources, Bengel included, “with such independence that the result is a reflection of his own beliefs.”\(^\text{239}\) Indeed, “the selection and reformulation of his material is decisively confirmed by the confrontation of the *Notes* with sermons,” so the *Notes* therefore are “a reliable source for

\(^{236}\) Slight variations in Wesley’s *Notes* on the book of Revelation can most likely be accounted for by typographical errors during Wesley’s writing his of his *Notes* or during the publication process. Marino, 69-70

\(^{237}\) *Notes*, 7: Preface

\(^{238}\) *Notes*, 932: Introduction to Revelation

\(^{239}\) Harald Lindström: *Wesley and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 17
his theological thinking.” Yet, the similarity between Wesley’s treatment of the Apocalypse and that of Bengel’s is so striking that “Wesley must have been convinced to a singular degree by Bengel’s reasoning, adopting it as his own, virtually without change.”

However, the purpose of eschatological enquiry for Wesley differed from that of Bengel. Wesley’s eschatological enquiry was soteriological; for Bengel it was “located primarily within the text of Scripture itself, which he interpreted according to his symbolic-prophetic method of exposition. For Bengel, the prophetic aspect was the dominant and unifying theme for interpreting Scripture as a whole.”

**Wesley’s Use of Bengel**

Like Bengel and others, Wesley adopted a historicist reading of the Apocalypse. The seals, bowls and trumpets, for example, unfolded successive historical events in general chronological order. Thus the Gothic invasions of the Christianized Roman Empire, the rise of Islam, the reign of Charlemagne, the corruption of the Papacy and the resultant Protestant Reformation were seen as extremely significant. Yet the millennial 1836 date was the one speculation of Bengel which Wesley shied away from. Indeed, in a letter to Christopher Hopper in 1788, Wesley showed his traditional reserve about this date and eschatological ‘enthusiasm’ generally.

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240 Marino, 101 n271
241 Marino, 101
242 J. Steven O’Malley: “Pietist Influences in the Eschatological Thought of John Wesley and Jorgen Moltmann” in *WTJ* (29. 1 and 2, Spring-Fall 1994), 133
243 The Augustinian historicist approach was popular among Lutheran and Reformed theologians from the sixteenth century onwards. Peter Toon: *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel – Puritan Eschatology 1600 to 1660* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1970), 6
244 For example, the sixth vial being poured out referred to ‘the Mahometans’ according to Wesley’s interpretation of Rev 16: 10. *Notes*, 1021
My dear brother, I said nothing, less or more, in Bradford church, concerning the end of the world, neither concerning my own opinion, but what follows: that Bengelius had given it as his opinion, not that the world would end then, but that the millennial reign of Christ would begin in the year 1836. I have no opinion at all upon the head: I can determine nothing at all about it. These calculations are far above, out of my sight. I have only one thing to do, to save my soul, and those that hear me.

Wesley, of course, had enthusiasts within his own ranks. George Bell was amongst five or six misguided foretellers, who predicted the end of the world on 28 February, 1763. Wesley “immediately withstood them...both in public and in private.” Wesley used the false prophecy to his own end – urging the congregation at Wapping to “seek the Lord while He might be found.” And recalling the day itself, despite the rumours of impending doom and earthquakes, he recorded that “I went to bed at my usual time, and was fast asleep about ten o’clock.” Bell had a following, including Thomas Maxfield, and held his own meetings where Wesley had tried to reason with him, both in regards to the prophecy and to Bell’s perfectionist views, which he took the extreme. He believed that Adamic pre-Fall purity was possible. But it was the false prophecy which was the last straw. Wesley held firm that this prophecy did not come from God and disowned Bell as a Methodist. This is the probable background to Wesley’s caution over Bengel’s date-setting.

So Wesley exercised caution over Bengel’s millennial predictions. But if Wesley was cautious about date-setting, that there would be a millennium he had no doubts about. And like

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246 John Wesley: A Plain Account of Christian Perfection (Annotated edition by Mark K. Olson; Fenwick: Alethea In Heart, 2005), 22. 1
247 Olson, 152 n1
Bengel, he believed that there would be two of them and also two resurrections, firstly of believers and then a general resurrection. In his Notes on Rev 20: 4-6, Wesley did not question the idea of two resurrections, but this is probably because he took them as given. Certainly he believed the second millennium reached “to the general resurrection.” The first resurrection consisted of the “saints already raised” after having already been martyred for their witness. This would occur between the millennia. The second, general, resurrection was to take place at the end of the second and consisted of all remaining men, good and evil “to be reunited to their bodies.” This general resurrection was mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: 23 as occurring ‘afterward’ and this was, for Wesley, “the whole harvest” when both those in Christ and “at the same time the wicked shall rise also.”

After the second resurrection of the dead, Christ would return and those still alive would meet him in the air and their natural bodies would be transformed into new resurrection bodies. In this, Wesley simply followed Bengel’s interpretation of Matt 24; 1 Cor 15: 51-58, 1 Thess 4: 13-18, 2 Thess 2: 1-12 and Rev 20: 12. At the end of Wesley’s Notes on Revelation he appended a table of events which provided “a short view of the whole contents of this book,” including Bengel’s 1836 date which Wesley was so reticent to support. Again, this appendix mirrored Bengel. Christ was born after 3,940 years of world history, the Common Era started three years later and Revelation was penned in 96CE. As

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250 Notes, 1039
251 Notes, 1038
252 Notes, 1041
253 Notes, 635
254 Marino, 85; Cf. Gnomon, 1: 416-437; 3: 338-342; 4: 201-204; 217-232; 5: 374. In the latter verse Bengel records “surprise” that infants stand before the judgement seat of Christ
255 Notes, 1051
time built up to the millennia, the period of Antichrist was to be 1810-1836, coming to a head from 1832 when he was to be released from the bottomless pit.

In Rev 10: 7 ‘the mystery of God shall be fulfilled.’ This is the destruction of the beast and the removal of the dragon and these would occur when the seventh trumpet sounds. But this could not happen until the 3rd woe had passed and the vials had been poured out. “To the seventh trumpet belongs all that occurs from Revelation 11: 15 to 22: 5. And the third woe, which takes places under the same, properly stands Revelation 12: 1; 13: 1-18.”²⁵⁶ This fulfilment of God as prophesied in Rev 10: 7 then becomes reality during this first millennial period. And Wesley placed this millennium fully after the dragon is bound and thrown into the bottomless pit in Rev 20: 2, according to his Notes on that verse. He did so for five reasons. Firstly, he believed that Revelation represented “one continued chain of events”²⁵⁷ and, secondly, that after the woman brings forth the Child in Rev 12, the dragon would then be cast out of heaven down to earth. Next, this was connected with the 3rd woe, when the dragon, with and through the beast, “rages horribly.”²⁵⁸ At the end of the 3rd woe the beast and the false prophet were to be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 19: 20). It is at this time that the devil would be bound and shut up into the bottomless pit. This period would bring a “new, full and lasting immunity from all outward and inward evils, the authors of which are now removed, and an affluence of all blessings.”²⁵⁹ For Wesley, this is yet to occur in the Church and could only therefore be a future event. Fourthly, Satan is to be released after the thousand years from the abyss. He will then deceive the nations, gather Gog and Magog for battle, surround the camp of the saints, be destroyed and then be thrown into

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²⁵⁶ Notes, 986: Rev 10: 7
²⁵⁷ Notes, 1037
²⁵⁸ Notes, 1037
²⁵⁹ Notes, 1037
the lake of fire and brimstone, joining the beast and the false prophet. Wesley believed these to be successive events. This would take world history up to Rev 20: 10. Finally the events following, namely from Rev 20: 11 until 22: 5, “manifestly follows the things related in the nineteenth chapter.” Thus the times of the beast would have already occurred.

Like Bengel, Wesley would justify his two millennial belief. It resolved the many quandaries posed by only having one 1000-year period and left “room enough for the fulfilling of all the prophecies, and those which before seemed to clash are reconciled; particularly those which speak, on the one hand, of a most flourishing state of the Church as yet to come; and on the other, of the fatal security of men in the last days of the world.” Moreover, the change over from these two distinct millennial periods would not be known to men on earth because both Satan’s containment and then short release “are transacted in the invisible world.”

Again, in similar fashion to Bengel, Wesley’s millennia were “two distinct, contiguous, chronologically sequential, and literal periods of one thousand common years each.” This two period hypothesis was again based on them being mentioned three times each between verses 2-7 of Rev 20. In his Notes on verse 4, Wesley believed the first thousand years were cited in verses 2, 3 and 7 and it was during this period that Satan would be bound in the bottomless pit. The references in verses 4-6 then were to the second millennial period when the saints would reign in heaven: “The former end before the end of the world;

260 Notes, 1037
261 Notes, 1039: Rev 20: 5
262 Notes, 1039: Rev 20: 5
263 Marino, 88
the latter reach to the general resurrection.\textsuperscript{264} The second millennium itself would take place between verses 7 and 11, after the first resurrection has taken place when the martyred saints have been re-united with their bodies to reign with Christ. The period of the second millennium would, presumably, equate to Bengel’s dating of 2836CE and 3836CE but, like the German himself, Wesley never cited these dates specifically. If the first millennial period was to be defined by bliss on earth, the second would be bliss in heaven with events on earth being horrific, characterised by a thousand year period when “men on earth will be careless and secure.”\textsuperscript{265} Then would come the judgment, the day of the Lord, the general resurrection, the second death and the destruction of death and Hades in Rev 20: 11-15.

So where did Christ’s return fit into Wesley’s understanding of the millennia? Given that Rev 19 and 20 were sequential in Wesley’s economy, he could not believe that Christ’s second coming occurred before the millennia; nor that Jesus would be physically present on earth during the first utopian thousand year period. Certainly Wesley never stated any of this. Indeed the start of each millennia, for Wesley, would not be known to men. Any personal reign of Christ most certainly would be. Moreover, Bengel’s exegesis of Rev 19: 11 saw, not Christ’s second coming as most do today, but some kind of eschatological prelude to the \textit{parousia}. Wesley held to Bengel’s view, describing the event of that verse and those following, as “the magnificent expedition of Christ and His attendants against His great adversary.”\textsuperscript{266} This would start the eschatological ball rolling towards Bengel’s key year of 1836 and the binding of the dragon, when something of the Christ spirit would break through to commence the final destruction of evil. Wesley believed that he was indeed

\begin{footnotes}
\item[264] Notes, 1039: Rev 20: 4
\item[265] Notes, 1039: Rev 20: 4
\item[266] Notes, 1034
\end{footnotes}
living on the threshold of the first millennium. Whilst Wesley never put his weight firmly behind Bengel’s 1836 date, in writing his Notes in the middle of the eighteenth century, he seems to be in line with Bengel’s chronological approximations. Consistent with his historicist understanding of Revelation, he believed that chapters 10-14 contained “things which are now fulfilling” with chapters 15-19 to “be fulfilled shortly.” Rev 20-22 would then contain “things at a greater distance.”

Indeed, when Satan had been cast out of heaven and displayed great wrath towards the earth, he did so because of ‘the little time’ he knew he had left (Rev 12: 12). Echoing Bengel, Wesley translated all this into world events. According to Wesley, ‘the little time’ was “probably four-fifths of a chronos, or somewhat above 888 years. This time of the third woe may reach from 947 to the year 1836.” However, by the time of Rev 12: 14, the woman is harboured and kept safe in the wilderness for ‘a time and times and half a time.’ For Wesley, this period covered some of the same chronological ground as the 1,260 days of Rev 12: 6 and the beginning of ‘the little time’ of verse 12. The 1,260 days ran up to 1524, with the three and a half times running from 1058 to 1836, similar but not exactly the same as ‘the little time.’ Once the earth soaked up the flood which had spewed from the dragon’s mouth in Rev 12: 16, an even more accurate dating could be established. Of the three and half times, the first ‘time’ was from 1058 to 1280 during the reign of the Turks. The next ‘two times’ continued from 1280 up to 1725 when “the Turkish power flowed far and wide; but still from time to time the princes of the earth helped the woman, that she

267 Notes, 954: Introduction to Rev 4
268 Notes, 997: Rev 12: 12
269 Notes, 999
was not carried away by it."\textsuperscript{270} Thus, the ‘half time’ was between 1725 and 1836 as the
Turkish grip on power began to fade. Wesley then, saw himself as living in a period
approaching the onset of the (first) millennium. Indeed, those who believed it to be close
"will appear to have spoken the truth."\textsuperscript{271}

\textit{The Millennium: Imminent and Literal}

For Wesley, the nature of the millennium was characterised by both being imminent and
literal. But it was not only eschatological calculations which persuaded Wesley that the first
millennium was close. So did “the empirical evidence of the Methodist Revival” in
England.\textsuperscript{272} Wesley’s optimism about the expansion of the kingdom and his resistance to
deterministic Calvinism, seen as the foundation for much negative premillennial thought,
was the reason why he remained convinced that a thousand year period of grace was
imminent:

From a deep sense of the amazing work which God has of late years wrought in
England, I preached in the evening on those words ‘He hath not dealt so with any
nation.’ No, not even Scotland or New England. In both these God has indeed made
bare His arm, yet not in so astonishing a manner as among us. This must appear to
all who impartially consider: (1) the numbers of persons on whom God has wrought;
(2) the swiftness of His work, both convinced and truly converted in a few days; (3)
the depth of it in most of these, changing the heart as well as the whole
conversation; (4) the clearness of it, enabling them boldly to say, ‘Thou hast loved
me, thou has given thyself for me’; (5) the continuance of it...for near eighteen years
together, without any observable intermission.\textsuperscript{273}

\textsuperscript{270} Notes, 1000: Rev 12: 16
\textsuperscript{271} Notes, 1037: Rev 20: 2
\textsuperscript{272} Marino, 93
\textsuperscript{273} BE21 (CD), Mon 16 June, 1755
Wesley’s optimism of grace envisaged a widespread preaching of the Gospel and an extensive conviction of sin amongst mankind. Wesley’s metaphysics assumed that the supernatural world impinged on the present earthly experience in many ways, from angelic and demonic activity, to Divine intervention and even correspondence with the spirits of the dead. Another manifestation was through the activity of the Holy Spirit. God was working to restore His image in the life of believers in the present age; not simply postponing this activity until the next. Believers were not only collaborating with the Divine for the restoration of their own lives; society was also the focus of this renewal. And the Church was charged with this work. It was “a body of men compacted together in order, first, to save each his own soul, then to assist each other in working out their salvation, and afterwards as far as in them lies, to save all men from present and future misery, to overturn the kingdom of Satan, and set up the kingdom of Christ.” The Church’s redemptive enterprise was aimed then, not just at individuals but towards society as a whole.

But Wesley was convinced of the millennium not merely by Bengel’s eschatological chronology or simply by the spiritual revival which he was witnessing, as important as both of these factors were. Wesley’s assurance that there would be a millennium must also be seen in the wider context of how he interpreted Scripture generally. As an evangelist, he tended not to interpret texts critically, but purely as one yearning for a soul’s salvation. Additionally, a literal interpretation of Scripture, which provided the believer with the most direct meaning of the text, was Wesley’s favoured approach to biblical exegesis. The

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274 Creasman, 77
275 BE2, 302
276 Scott J. Jones: *Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood, Books, 1995), 191
“plain, indisputable” meaning of Scripture was important for Wesley as opposed to altering the text whereby the plain truth and promises are lost; with the result that the text was robbed of all its effectiveness. One was only guilty of “mending” the text when its literal interpretation violated the true meaning, such as contradicting another verse or going against the grain of Scripture generally. In this case, interpretation must be according to faith, when Scripture will interpret Scripture. With this approach in mind, if the New Testament said there was a millennium, then for Wesley there would literally be a millennium; or in this case two. This is because in Rev 20: 2 and 4, the beginning of each millennial period is introduced as “a thousand years...in other places, the thousand (verses 3, 5, 7), that is, the thousand mentioned before.” Moreover, if Wesley read of a literal millennium in Revelation 20, he also found the belief in an actual thousand years as consistent with Church tradition from the Apostles to Justin, Papias and Irenaeus, through to the second and third centuries. But there is no doubt, it was from Bengel that Wesley received his “distinctive understanding” of the millennium in the sense that he held to two successive thousand year periods where “the beginning and end of the former is before the beginning and end of the latter.”

And Wesley had consistently claimed this literal millennial belief throughout his ministry. He had already linked the millennium with the inheritance of the meek in his 1748 second

277 BE1, 427
278 BE1, 420-1
279 Jones, 193-4
280 Jones, 194
281 Notes, 1039: Rev 20: 4
282 Marino, 87-88 and nos. 208-210
283 Marino, 88
284 Notes, 1039: Rev 20: 4
discourse on the Sermon on the Mount, but here he was only quoting part of Rev 20. By 1763, however, he held firmly to “the bare text of the Revelation from the time I first read [it]...as to the general doctrine of the millennium. But of the particulars I am willingly ignorant since they are not revealed.” So Wesley here affirmed that he believed in a millennium, although at this point he did not speculate on its character. Wesley’s misinterpreted dialogue with Thomas Hartley from around this time can also be seen in this context. He agreed with Hartley on the existence of a millennium without working through its chronological setting in relation to Christ’s return. He also admonished those who rejected the belief. One of these was Charles Perronet whose comments are interesting because they could be used to argue for a premillennial position in Wesley. Wesley describes them in correspondence to Samuel Furly in the early 1760s:

Charles Perronet, the author of that remark on 2 Peter 3: 13, does not believe that Christ will reign at all upon earth, nor any millennium till we come to heaven. The argument by which he endeavours to prove that St. Peter there speaks only to what will precede the Day of Judgment is this: ‘If these expressions, a new heaven and a new earth, refer only to this world when they occur in Isaiah, then they refer to nothing more when they are used by St Peter.’

But since Wesley never understood Christ’s reign to be earthly, it can only be deduced here that he was criticising Perronet’s denial of a millennium, not a physical reign of Christ on earth. Wesley is not defending a premillennial position here; simply a millennial one. And towards the end of his life, he would reiterate his belief in a millennium. He wrote to Walter Churchey on 26 June 1788 that, “Bengelius, who thought not that the world would end, but

that the Millennium would begin about the year 1836. Not that I affirmed this myself, nor

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285 BE1, 494-5
286 Letter to Samuel Furly, 10 March, 1763. Jackson: Works (CD)
288 Downes, 164 n2
ever did. I do not determine any of these things: they are too high for me. I only desire to
creep on in the vale of holy love.” As in his letter to Hopper of the same year, Wesley
shunned date-setting, but not the belief in a millennium.

There were certainly some premillennial influences in Wesley’s life, most notably his father
Samuel. Samuel had written of the millennium on 17 October, 1691 in an edition of the
Athenian Gazette,

> We believe, as all Christians of the purest ages did, that the saints shall reign with
Christ on earth a thousand years; that this reign shall be immediately before the
general resurrection, and after the calling of the Jews, the fullness of the Gentiles,
and the destruction of Antichrist, whom our Saviour shall destroy by the brightness
of His coming, and appearance in heaven; that at the beginning of this thousand
years shall be the first resurrection, wherein martyrs and holy men shall rise and
reign here in spiritual delights in the New Jerusalem, in a new heaven and new earth,
foretold by the holy prophets.  

Whilst this is premillennial, there seems to be some confusion about the new heavens and
earth. Everyone agrees they come at the end of the millennium or church age; yet Samuel
Wesley here seems to suggest that they are the millennium. But even taking this
misunderstanding aside, Samuel’s doctrine clearly believes in a personal return and reign of
Christ on earth for 1000 years before the general resurrection. Samuel went on to write in
the Gazette of the nature of the bodies in heaven and hell and their eternal consciousness
but this further prose did not even mention the millennium. Yet none of this establishes a
clear influence on John Wesley. All that can be said, at best, is that Samuel’s belief in a literal

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289 Jackson: *Works* (CD), 12: No. 496
290 Marino, 105
291 Marino, 105 n293
millennium may have influenced Wesley from his youth at Epworth. But this does not mean that Samuel’s more specific pre-millennialism necessarily did.

One argument for Wesley’s supposed premillennialism was his response to Conyers Middleton’s *Free Inquiry*, where he seemed to defend the premillennialism of Justin Martyr. But Wesley is merely defending Justin’s belief in a millennium as non-heretical, based on Rev 20: 4-5 and not specifically endorsing his premillennialism. Wesley is simply holding to a belief in a millennium as being handed down from the prophets and Apostles to the Church Fathers: “Now, to say they believed this is neither more nor less than to say, they believed the Bible.” Wesley thus defended millennial eschatology, as well as the reputation of Justin Martyr from Middleton’s attack, not specifically premillennialism.

But it is unsatisfactory to attempt to make millennial judgments on Wesley based on snippets of biographical material or small amounts of sporadic correspondence on the millennium which remain open to interpretation. His millennial theology can only be better comprehended by taking his published eschatological sermons and deducing from them how Wesley saw the end-times unfolding. After all these “were his theology [and so] Wesley’s eschatology must be based primarily upon his sermons.”

*The Millennium in Wesley’s sermons*

Most of Wesley’s later sermons clearly expected a lengthy period of spiritual utopia on earth before Christ’s return, although this was not formally called a ‘millennium.’

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292 Jackson: *Works*, 10: 30-1
293 Reasoner: 247 n32
Interestingly, however, even some of Wesley’s early sermons hinted at this ‘latter day’ manifestation of the Spirit working through the Church.\textsuperscript{294} \textit{Scriptural Christianity}, published in 1744, took Acts 4: 31 and linked the great Pentecostal work of the Spirit in the days of the Apostles with an end time spiritual prosperity. “But shall we not see greater things than these? Yea, greater than have been yet from the beginning of the world? Can Satan cause the truth of God to fail? Or his promises to be of none effect? If not, the time will come when Christianity will prevail over all, and cover the earth. Let us stand a little, and survey...this strange sight, a \textit{Christian world}.”\textsuperscript{295}

In his sixth discourse of his \textit{Sermon on the Mount} series, dated 1748, Wesley continued this theme: “all kingdoms shall bow before him, when...the church of Christ, ‘shall be established in the top of the mountains.’” This shall be a time when “the kingdom of grace, may come quickly, and swallow up all the kingdoms of the earth; that all mankind receiving him for their king, truly believing in his name, filled with righteousness and peace and joy, with holiness and happiness.” Moreover, this state on earth would continue “till they are removed hence into his heavenly kingdom, there to reign with him forever and ever.”\textsuperscript{296}

Again, quite early on in his sermon ministry then, Wesley made postmillennial statements. Before the consummation where the saints reign in heaven, there would be a period of spiritual growth on earth. He continued, “For this also we pray in those words, ‘Thy kingdom come.’ We pray for the coming of this everlasting kingdom, the kingdom of glory in heaven,
which is the continuation and perfection of the kingdom of grace on earth." This period of grace on earth will be characterised by “the whole race of mankind do[ing] the will of their Father which is heaven” and is the reason for the prayer “the will of God may be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The result would be that “all mankind may do the whole will of God in all things.” This envisages a period of obedience to God, throughout humanity, on earth. Certainly Wesley has amillennial themes in this sermon – he does describe events in heaven. Moreover, he describes eschatological activity now, not simply at the consummation. Nevertheless, Wesley expected God’s glory to be manifested on earth before the end. Interestingly, in Section III: 8 of this sermon Wesley spoke of the kingdom of Christ as coming when “a particular person ‘repents and believes the Gospel’.” This sounds like a spiritual second coming. Indeed, in his ‘Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament’ of 1765-6, Wesley, under Isaiah 60:18, wrote that the promised peace so described would find fulfilment “in the thousand years wherein Christ shall reign upon earth.” However, he did not say here that Christ's reign would be physical, although it would equally be fair to read that suggestion into this quote. Indeed, in his OT Notes for Isaiah 24:23 Wesley wrote that Christ “shall come in the flesh, and set up his kingdom first in Jerusalem, and afterward in all other nations.” This does sound distinctly premillennial, but it remains inconsistent with Wesley’s millennial views elsewhere and could be read equally as the consummated new earth.

297 BE1, 582
298 BE1, 584
299 BE1, 581
300 Wesley was probably influenced by Hartley here in a rare addition to his sources
301 Maddox, Responsible Grace, 238 n45
302 Reasoner, 298 n16
His sermon *The Great Assize*, published in 1758, linked judgment with the return of Christ; but nowhere in it did Wesley outline chronological distinctions between the two resurrections. Rather, “he confined himself to the bold outlines of prophecy, rather than wrestling with the details of debatable interpretation.” This sermon had only a passing millennial reference in it. There, Wesley suggested that a possible thousand year return of Christ may not be long enough to complete the universal judgment; indeed “several thousand years” may be required. But in the same sermon he hinted at an imminent Second Coming without mentioning either a thousand year period of prosperity or personal reign of Christ. So in the late 1750s, “the basic amillennial assumptions of his training were still intact.” This sermon focused mainly on the new creation and its language was certainly more apocalyptic than Wesley’s normal eschatological focus upon God’s redemptive activity. And it did expect a final judgment and a more imminent expectancy of the end than many amillennialists would envisage.

Wesley did seem to deny in other places the thought of such an earthly kingdom before the consummation in sermons which lean towards amillennialism. In *The Way to the Kingdom*, published in 1746, Wesley preached on repentance to be assured of eternal life in heaven; nowhere really expressing a wide-spread acceptance of the Gospel on earth. However, this inward work in the heart still assured that “everlasting life is won, glory on earth is begun.” In *The Good Steward*, published in 1768, he wrote “Our day, the day of man, is

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303 BE1, 354-375
304 Reasoner, 247 n33
305 BE1, 360
306 BE1, 374
307 Maddox: *Responsible Grace*, 238
308 Certainly the judgement was “at hand” and would occur in “a little while,” BE1, 356
309 BE1, 217-232
310 BE1, 224 n48
over; ‘the day of salvation’ is ended. Nothing now remains but the day of the Lord, ushering in wide, unchangeable eternity.”

Again, this does not seem to foresee a utopian millennial reign of Christ’s Church on earth.

But as we have seen, it is not wholly accurate to force a dichotomy between an early amillennial Wesley and a later postmillennial one; even some of his early sermons do envisage, albeit more obscurely, an expectation of God working through His Church in a powerful way on earth before Christ’s second advent. And this expectation would be expressed more overtly later on in Wesley’s life. Certainly other sermons published in the middle and towards the end of his ministry at the height of the Methodist Revival spoke more deeply and blatantly of ‘latter day glory’ on earth. The Reformation of Manners, for example, published in 1763, was an appeal by Wesley to make “an open stand against all ungodliness and unrighteousness which overspread our land as a flood.” Moreover, to prevent the continuance of such vice and blasphemy “is one of the noblest designs it can possibly enter into the heart of one man to conceive.” This design would not only bring glory to God it would bring peace and respite for the soul and is possible “even in this present world...nor is it to individuals only...but to the whole community whereof we are members. For is it not a sure observation, ‘righteousness exalteth a nation’?” Indeed, if sin were restrained then “there can be no doubt but God will give national prosperity, in accomplishment of his faithful word, ‘Them that honour me, I will honour.’” For Wesley, this would be a work of God which would be affected within every part of society. Here

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311 BE2, 289
312 BE2, 308
313 BE2, 309
314 BE2, 309
315 BE2, 309
Wesley saw outward and inward reform within the hearts of men as having “derived upon our whole nation”\textsuperscript{316} and he never stopped believing that.

So far, working more or less chronologically, Wesley’s eschatological sermons have exhibited mild postmillennial tendencies, with evidence of some inherited amillennialism in them. Little justification can be made for any of these sermons being premillennial, although some of Wesley’s comments have hinted at this but these comments can be interpreted in different ways. However, Wesley’s later sermons seem to contain a fuller postmillennial emphases, namely a period of spiritual blessing where God would work on earth through His Church; although, of course, the word ‘millennium’ was not mentioned specifically.\textsuperscript{317}

The classic sermon expressing this was The General Spread of the Gospel, published in 1783, using Isaiah 11: 9 as its proof text and thus setting the scene for the advancement of the knowledge of God. Wesley believed that the Methodist Revival would not die; in fact what was happening in Britain and in the colonies was “only the beginning of a far greater work – the dawn of the ‘latter day glory.’”\textsuperscript{318} Indeed, God would “carry on his work in the same manner as he has begun.”\textsuperscript{319} This period would advance gradually as people of all classes, “in every nation under heaven,”\textsuperscript{320} would be converted to Christ and enter into the kingdom of God in what he called “the grand Pentecost.”\textsuperscript{321} Pure behaviour, conversation and spiritual unity shall result because a stumbling-block, namely nominal Christians, will be

\textsuperscript{316} BE2, 312
\textsuperscript{317} Other late sermons emphasized animal resurrection and new heavens and new earth, rather than ‘latter day glory’ before Christ’s return, e.g. The General Deliverance, published in 1781 and The New Creation of 1785; BE2, 436-450, 500-510
\textsuperscript{318} BE2, 493
\textsuperscript{319} BE2, 492
\textsuperscript{320} BE2, 493
\textsuperscript{321} BE2, 494
removed when “pure and undefiled religion, of experimental knowledge and love of God, of inward and outward holiness, will afterwards spread” in their hearts. Thus even Mahometans will look at their lives and be convicted by their words.

After the fullness of the Gentiles, ‘all Israel will be saved’ and be brought into their own land. Then “all these glorious promises made to the Christian church, which will not then be confined to this or that nation, but will include all the inhabitants of the earth” will be accomplished. And Wesley was convinced of this despite the present state of the world because “it will not always be thus: these things are only permitted for a season by the Great Governor of the world, that he may draw immense, eternal good out of this temporary evil.” Indeed, “all unprejudiced persons may see with their eyes that he is already renewing the face of the earth. And we have strong reason to hope that the work he hath begun he will carry on unto the day of his Lord Jesus.” So Wesley believed in a golden age on earth, as free from evil as it could be, by God working through His Church, before Christ returned, as also expressed by the parable of the Mustard Seed.

Other late sermons too show Wesley turning towards a ‘latter day glory’ emphasis, for example, his 1787 sermon The Signs of the Times. After briefly looking at the signs demonstrated by Christ’s coming, Wesley asked, “What are ‘the times’ which we have reason to believe are now at hand?” The answer is clear: “the time of ‘the latter-day glory’; meaning the time wherein God would gloriously display his power and love in fulfilment of his gracious promise that ‘the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth, as the waters

322 BE2, 493
323 BE2, 498
324 BE2, 499
325 Notes, 71: Matt 13: 31-2

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And Wesley was clear that these days were upon the world now, even though some sinful men could not discern it:

At this day the gospel leaven – faith working by love, inward and outward holiness, or...’righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost’ – hath so spread in various parts of Europe, particularly in England, Scotland, Ireland, in the islands, in the north and south, from Georgia to New England and Newfoundland, that sinners have been truly converted to God, thoroughly changed both in heart and in life; not by tens, or by hundreds only, but by thousands, yea, by myriads! The fact cannot be denied: we can point out the persons, with their names and places of abode.

This belief then became more of a reality for Wesley as his ministry approached its end.

“How swift, as well as how deep, and how extensive a work has been wrought in the present age!”

Another example of this strong postmillennial undercurrent came in another sermon of the same year, Of Former Times. Again, this sermon showed Wesley to be “a ‘theologian of culture,’ concerned with various correlations between the Christian world view and emergent current issues.” After contesting the assertion that previous generations of human history were somehow better than Wesley’s present time, he argued that to affirm that past days were better than these “is not only contrary to truth, but is an instance of black ingratitude to God, and a previous affront to his blessed Spirit. For whoever makes a fair and candid inquiry will easily perceive that true religion has in no wise decreased, but greatly increased, in the present century.” He cited a lack of persecution, religious
tolerance amongst Christians and a general benevolence of rulers towards their subjects as evidence.

In fact, Wesley believed that God in His wisdom and providence had used the “great infidelity, the Deism which has overspread all Europe”\(^331\) to force nominal Christians into accepting real Christianity, which Wesley described as “the love of God and man, filling the heart and governing the life.”\(^332\) In this way, a previous “total disregard for all religion pave[d] the way for the revival of the only religion which was worthy of God!”\(^333\) In places like North America, “the total indifference of the government there whether there be any religion or none leaves room for the propagation of true scriptural religion without the least let or hindrance.”\(^334\) The result was an increase in compassion and benevolence by humanity to humanity and an upsurge of hospitals and charities in places like London as a result. Therefore, “no ‘former time’ since the apostles left the earth has been ‘better than the present’...wherein he [God] is hastening to renew the whole race of mankind in righteousness and true holiness.”\(^335\) Thus, Wesley clearly not only foresaw the imminent arrival of time where God would usher in an exceptional period of grace through His Church on earth, he believed this golden age was already dawning.

Wesley believed that Methodism was the ‘great work’ through which Christianity in general would spread, and indeed had been spreading, “by degrees farther and farther, till the

\(^{331}\) BE3, 451-2
\(^{332}\) BE3, 448
\(^{333}\) BE3, 452
\(^{334}\) BE3, 452
\(^{335}\) BE3, 453
whole is leavened...for half a century.” All this was part of the transition towards the
beginning of the millennium:

And is it not probable, I say, that he [God] will carry it on in the same manner as he
has begun? At the first breaking out of his work in this or that place there may be a
shower, a torrent of grace; and so at some other particular seasons which ‘the
Father has reserved in his own power.’ But in general it seems the kingdom of God
will not ‘come with observation,’ but will silently increase wherever it is set up, and
spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one
kingdom to another. May it thus not spread, first through the remaining provinces,
then through the isles of North America? And at the same time from England to
Holland, where there is already a blessed work in Utrecht, Harlem, and many other
cities? Probably it will spread from these to the Protestants in France, to those in
Germany, and those in Switzerland. Then to Sweden, Denmark, Russia and all the
other Protestant nations in Europe.337

Certainly Wesley saw Methodism as a world-wide evangelical enterprise. And events in
Europe were pointing towards its progress. At the time of the French Revolution, right at the
end of his life, he wrote a letter to Thomas Morrell, who had given Wesley an update on
Gospel progress in America. “One would hope the time is approaching when the earth shall
be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. Indeed, the amazing revolutions which
have [been in] Europe seem to be the forerunners of the same grand event.”338 In another
correspondence of the same year to William Black, Wesley was pleased that God “is doing
great things in many parts of Europe such as have not been seen for many generations; and
the children of God expect to see greater things than these. I do not know that England was
ever before in so quiet a state as it is now. It is our part to wait the openings of Divine
Providence, and follow the headings of it.”339

336 BE2, 530
337 BE2, 493
338 4 Feb, 1790; Marino, 94 n243
339 4 Mar, 1790; Marino, 94 n244
Yet Bengel had not shared his enthusiasm, much to Wesley’s disappointment.\(^{340}\) Even before the great ‘postmillennial’ sermons of the 1780s, Wesley had spoken of a present revival in his 1777 sermon, *On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel*, in which he criticised Bengel’s hesitation on the issue.

For Bengelius, being asked why he placed the grand revival of religion so late as the year 1836, replied: ‘I acknowledge all the prophecies would incline me to place it a century sooner. But an insurmountable difficulty lies in the way: I cannot reconcile this to matter of fact. For I do not know of any remarkable work of God which has been wrought upon the earth between the years 1730 and 1740.’ This is really surprising. It is strange that sensible men should know so little of what is done at so small a distance. How could so great a man be ignorant of what was transacted no farther off than England? Especially considering the accounts then published in Germany, some of which were tolerably impartial; nay, considering the particular account which I had sent as early as the year 1742 to one well known through all the empire, Pastor (afterwards Superintendent) Steinmetz.\(^{341}\)

Wesley’s correspondence with the Lutheran pastor Steinmetz has not survived,\(^{342}\) but the above quote not only shows that Wesley believed that a powerful work of God was happening already, even disagreeing with Bengel whom he admired greatly, but that this work of grace had been in effect for about two generations.

Wesley could not be accused of date-setting, nor did he ever claim to be an expert on prophecy.\(^{343}\) His reluctance to accept Bengel’s date of 1836 and his own dealings with George Bell demonstrate this. Nor did he believe that all prophecy had now been fulfilled\(^{344}\) and shied away from speculation over the millennium, “neither will I enter any dispute

\(^{340}\) Nor did Dr Edmund Gibson, the late Bishop of London

\(^{341}\) BE3, 579-80

\(^{342}\) Outler: BE3, 580 n4

\(^{343}\) *Notes*, 627: 1 Cor 13: 12

\(^{344}\) Marino, 97
about it [Christian Perfection], nay more than about the millennium.” Admittedly, this quote is early and is dated 30 Dec, 1745. Wesley, it could be argued, based on the development of his belief in a golden age in his later sermons, may not have come away with such a comment about the millennium later in life. Likewise, in his 1754 *NT Notes*, he said that “the danger does not lie in maintaining that the thousand years are yet to come, but in interpreting them, whether past or to come, in a gross and carnal sense.” Wesley’s main concern was always to “believe and confess Him in all!”

For Wesley, the time of the end was a mystery, a “strange scene” and that “still our knowledge of the great truth which is delivered to us in these words is exceedingly short and imperfect.” Intriguingly, just shortly after his *Notes* were published, Wesley published a tract about the possible destruction of the earth through the impact of a comet in 1758, where he did not hint that Edmond Halley’s suggestion was theologically impossible. However, this dates from the middle of his ministry. Admittedly, he would also concede as late as 1784 that Christianity had not spread as much in the world as sin and that this remained something “mysterious in the divine dispensation.” Nevertheless, despite all this, the later Wesley was generally convinced that a work of God had been evident, was evident and would continue to be so in these ‘latter days.’

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346 *Notes*, 1037: Rev 20: 2
347 *Notes*, 1037: Rev 20: 2
348 Marino, 97
349 BE2, 501
350 Maddox: *Responsible Grace*, 237-8 n38
351 BE2, 581
Part Two – Eschatological Hope in the Present

Chapter 4 – ‘Inward and Outward Holiness’

John Wesley believed in the possibility of perfection in love in the present life of the Christian. Chapter five will examine exactly what perfection did and not did mean for Wesley, his heavy reliance on the Johannine literature as its scriptural basis and its eschatological dimension. This chapter will provide background on how the doctrine evolved in Wesley’s theology from 1725 up to Aldersgate in 1738. The influence of three authors on Wesley’s spiritual development at this time was particularly lasting.

Wesley would claim that by 1730 he was *homo unius libri*, comparatively studying no other book than the Bible as he sought “all inward and outward holiness, and I groaned to love God with all my heart and to serve him with all my strength.”  

However, his claims for reading solely Scripture from 1730 need to be qualified, because Wesley’s reading continued to be wide and influential. What Wesley seems to suggest in 1738, four months prior to Aldersgate, is not that he read only the Bible, but that his wider reading was treated with caution and often selectively edited, using the material for teaching and self-edification only in a way that promoted holiness as he understood it. Taking Ephesians 4: 14, he wrote a memorandum as he approached the English coast on returning from Georgia, saying “for many years I have been tossed about by various winds of doctrine...[in part] by making antiquity a co-ordinate (rather than subordinate) rule with Scripture.”  

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352 BE21, 510
353 Donald A. Bullen: *A Man of One Book?: John Wesley’s Interpretation and Use of the Bible* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, Milton Keynes, 2007), 72
354 BE21, 212-3
Wesley broadly broke his reading pattern into six headings, namely Scripture, the Papists, the Lutherans and Calvinists, the English Divines, the Essentialist Nonjurors and the Mystics. A Calvinist who clearly influenced Wesley and George Whitefield was Henry Scougal whose key work was entitled *Life of God in the Soul of Man*. There were also the writings of the Nonjuror Robert Nelson. Catholic works to have impressed Wesley and which helped him form his particular model of ‘perfection’ included Lorenzo Scupoli’s *Spiritual Combat*. Those who could be described as ‘mystics’ and who struck Wesley by their sense of perfect communion with God included Madame Guyon, Fénelon and another Quietist, Madame Bourignon. Others included the French philanthropist Gaston Jean Baptiste De Renty, influenced by Thomas à Kempis. Wesley would take the broad headings above and outline the pros and cons of all these groups of writers. Although by early 1738 he was still a man confused by the issue of faith and works, Wesley’s comment regarding the Bible as being his sole authority from about 1730 remains valid. He may have read voraciously, but he exercised discernment and would increasingly test everything against Scripture.

*Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor and William Law*

It is fair to say though that the works of Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor and William Law had the most staying power for Wesley. The year 1725 seems to have been a watershed in his life, marked as it was by an increased spiritual desire for intimacy with God. Still only 22 years of age, he sought parental advice regarding ordination. But it was a ‘religious friend,’

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355 Rack, 101
356 BE21, 212-3
357 Rack, 97
possibly Varanese (Sally) Kirkham, who introduced Wesley to the works of Thomas à Kempis and Bishop Jeremy Taylor. Later, from around 1730, Wesley came across William Law. This triumvirate would be “jointly responsible for what happened to Wesley in 1725 and the years immediately following.” Reflecting later in life he said that he was “exceedingly affected” by Taylor’s *Holy Living and Dying* and that reading it he “resolved to dedicate all of [his] life to God.” This would include his thought life, as well as his words and actions. Reading à Kempis opened up to him “the nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart.” And William Law “convinced [him], more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian.” These three men never left John Wesley. He would say later in life that “Thomas à Kempis was next to the Bible.” In Taylor he would find a practical manual for holy living and William Law was clear about what this holy living meant:

Devotion signifies a life given, or devoted to, God. The devout, therefore, are those who live no longer to their own will or the way and spirit of the world, but live to the sole will of God, consider God in everything, and serve God in everything. They are devout who make all the parts of their common life parts of piety by doing everything in the name of God, and under such rules as are conformable to His glory. If we are devout, we will readily acknowledge that God alone is to be the rule and measure of our prayers, that in them we are to look wholly unto Him and act wholly for Him, and that we are only to pray in such a manner and for such things and such ends as are suitable to His glory.

In 1733 Wesley published his sermon ‘The Circumcision of the Heart’. In it perfectionist language was already evident. He defined the title of the sermon as,

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358 Although there is a possibility that this friend was Robin Griffiths. Rack, 73
359 Bullen, 76 n73
360 *John Wesley: A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), s2
361 *Plain Account*, s3
362 *Plain Account*, s4
364 William Law: *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (Florida: Bridge-Logos, 2008), 5
that habitual disposition of the soul which in the Sacred Writings is termed ‘holiness,’ and which directly implies the being cleansed from sin, ‘from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit,’ and by consequence the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus, the being so ‘renewed in the image of our mind’ as to be ‘perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect.’”

Yet even with humility, faith, hope and charity, even with the cleansing of inbred pollution, “yet lackest thou one thing...add love, and thou hast the ‘circumcision of the heart.’ ‘Love is the fulfilling of the law, ‘the end of the commandment’...it is not only the great command, but it is all the commandments in one.”

In his Plain Account, Wesley reflected on this sermon amidst the attacks against perfectionism in the 1760s and claimed that he had not altered his opinion greatly on this issue since 1725.367

But Wesley would not always agree with Thomas à Kempis and Jeremy Taylor.368 He had spoken of the severities of à Kempis to his parents and Susannah had called à Kempis “an honest [but] weak man that had more zeal than knowledge, by condemning all mirth or pleasure as sinful or useless, in opposition to so many direct and plain texts of Scripture.”369 There seemed to be a need to be miserable for à Kempis.370 He would write, “woe to those who do not know their own misery, and a greater woe to those who love this miserable and corruptible life...so long as we carry about us this frail body of ours, we can never be without sin or live without weariness and pain.”371 Now Wesley would have no issue with man’s innate sinfulness, nor with the futility of a life without Christ; but to use the language of defeat for those in Christ, with no seeming dominion over sin in this life, coupled with the acceptance of a morose demeanour as a constant companion in this Christian life was, for

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365 BE1, 402-3
366 BE1, 407
367 Plain Account, Preface, xv; s6
368 Rack, 73-4
369 BE25, 166
370 BE25, 162-3
371 Thomas à Kempis: The Imitation of Christ (Florida: Bridge-Logos, 1999), Chapter 22 Consideration of Human Misery, 65
Wesley, nothing but sheer negativity. Wesley insisted that holiness ought to mean happiness and his mother concurred cautioning him that, despite the intentions of à Kempis being “holy, just and good,” there was a danger that a morose nature would “impair the tenderness of your conscience, obscure your sense of God, or take off your relish of spiritual things.” Wesley’s father Samuel added similar cautionary counsel when his son first read à Kempis but likewise esteemed him also. Yet despite Wesley’s later calling à Kempis “too strict” he would also credit à Kempis with showing him that “true religion was seated in the heart of God’s law [and] extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions.” In his abridgement of A Christian’s Pattern by à Kempis, Wesley described that work as being one to which little could be added,

It is scarce possible, without injury to the sense, to add or diminish anything. The whole treatise is a complete and finished work, comprehending all that relates to Christian Perfection, all the principles of that internal worship with which alone we worship God ‘in spirit and in truth.’ A serious mind will never be sated with it, though it were read a thousand times over; for those general principles are as fruitful seeds of meditation, and the stores they contain can never be exhausted.

Wesley also shared with his mother some of her scepticism of Taylor. His ‘religious friend’ had advised that no-one too young should read Taylor and certainly Wesley found the Bishop’s “recipes for humility excessive and perverse in their deliberate seeking for humiliation.” Taylor’s almost legalistic rule-keeping troubled Wesley and he had heard how another had felt almost excluded “from being in [a way] of salvation” if they dared not

372 BE25, 164
373 BE25, 166
374 BE25, 171
375 BE18, 243
376 Jackson: Works, 14: 202
377 Rack, 74
live up to Taylor’s regulations, “some of which are altogether impracticable.”

Wesley also had queries about Taylor’s lack of clarity about sins forgiven. This lack of assurance could, for Wesley, only make “all men miserable.” His mother agreed and saw a balance between pride on the one side and abject self-loathing on the other. Any unworthiness comes from a sense of God’s glory. As a result, “we should not court to be little esteemed.” However, Susannah also admitted in 1725 that she herself had not read Taylor in “above twenty years; but I think ‘tis generally well esteemed.” Yet it is true to say that Taylor’s attitude of misery in this life was clear:

As our life is very short, so it is very miserable; and therefore it is well that it is short. God, in pity to mankind, lest his burden should be insupportable, and his nature an intolerable load, hath reduced our state of misery to an abbreviature; and the greater our misery is, the less while it is like to last; the sorrows of a man’s spirit being like ponderous weights, which, by the greatness of their burden, make a swifter motion, and descend into the grave to rest and ease our wearied limbs; for then only we shall sleep quietly when those fetters are knocked off, which not only bound our souls in prison, but also ate the flesh, till the very bones opened the secret garments of their cartilages, discovering their nakedness and sorrow.

Still, Wesley did draw from Taylor the notion of keeping a devotional diary and the need for discipline. In the preface to his Journal (published in May 1740), and in the light of having read ‘Rules for Holy Living and Holy Dying’ many years earlier, Wesley wrote, “I began to take a more exact account than I had done before of the manner wherein I spent my time, writing down how I had employed every hour.” Wesley himself would then draw up his

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378 BE25, 168
379 BE25, 170
380 Rack, 74 n47
381 BE25, 172
383 BE18, 121
own ‘Rules and Resolutions’ which had its background in the influence of Jeremy Taylor.\textsuperscript{384} Wesley started keeping a diary during Lent at Oxford in 1725, not simply to protect memory but also to ‘redeem the time.’ Of course, Wesley also wanted to measure spiritual growth and this arduous and timely “process of introspection gave both the impulse toward improvement and the means to measure one’s movement toward perfection.”\textsuperscript{385} Wesley drew up three sets of ‘Rules and Resolutions’ – A General Rule in All Actions of Life; General Rules of Employing Time\textsuperscript{386} and General Rules as to Intention. These regulations were a ‘collection’ of some of Taylor’s paragraphs and his indebtedness to Taylor’s training in the school of method would be life-long.\textsuperscript{387} Even as late as 1790, Taylor was described as “that great and good man” with his ‘Rules of Holy Living and Dying’ being an “excellent book.”\textsuperscript{388}

As for the writings of Law, his influence came during Wesley’s Oxford years. By the late 1720s Law was “a man dominated by a consuming passion for the ethical implications of his religion.”\textsuperscript{389} Wesley had read both his works ‘A Serious Call’ and ‘Christian Perfection’ and would read from the latter to his newly formed religious societies in Savannah and Frederica in the later 1730s.\textsuperscript{390} Furthermore, in ‘The Circumcision of the Heart,’ Wesley started off by commending the “excellent man” who warned of the pitfalls of preaching true Christianity, being esteemed by one’s hearers.\textsuperscript{391} And there also “aroused [in Wesley] the doctrine of

\textsuperscript{384} Rack, 82
\textsuperscript{385} Heitzenrater, BE18, 303
\textsuperscript{386} As late as 1782, Wesley recalled Taylor’s Holy Living and Dying with regard to time-keeping. BE3, 324 and n2
\textsuperscript{387} Nehemiah Curnock (Ed.): The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley (8 volumes; London: Epworth Press, 1938), 1: 47-51
\textsuperscript{388} BE4, 120-1
\textsuperscript{389} Bullen, 74 and n65
\textsuperscript{390} Rack, 119-20
\textsuperscript{391} BE1, 401
Christian Perfection which was to become one of their [Methodism’s] major emphases.”\(^{392}\)

Wesley would agree with Law that perfection was simply, “a full Representation of that Height of Holiness and purity... [and] those holy Tempers which are the perfect Measure and Standard of Christian piety.”\(^{393}\) Wesley would tenaciously hold onto this belief for the rest of his life.

It was primarily Law who introduced the mystics to Wesley. If Wesley was later to express concerns about the mystics regarding their seeming lack of emphasis on good works through faith, Wesley would retain affection for the works of Law which he tested in the light of Scripture and the evidence he saw of his writings being lived out in the lives of others. His later disagreements with Law were never about pressing on towards perfect love. It was the means by which this victory was won that was the debate. Wesley saw in Law the importance of holy living; but he did not see in him how this life of purity was to be achieved.\(^{394}\) Law’s High Church way of perfection could only, for Wesley, drive men to despair. Ascetic practice and discipline in themselves would not bring about the ideal: perfect realization of the mind and life of Christ in the life of the believer. In fact, such discipline would only bring a more acute awareness that, in fact, there was a chasm between the reality and the ideal.\(^{395}\)

Law had introduced Wesley to the *Theologica Germanica*, a 14\(^{th}\) century work, which proposed a whole uniting of God and man through following a path of perfection, as

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\(^{394}\) Bullen, 75

\(^{395}\) Rack, 103-4
exemplified by the life of Christ. This would involve renouncing sin and self, culminating in
God’s will replacing human will. Wesley would write in 1740, “It is ‘asserted that Mr Law’s
system was the creed of the Methodists.’ But it is not proved. I had eight years at Oxford
before I read any of Mr Law’s writings; and when I did, I was so far from making them my
creed, that I had objections to almost every page.” This may be Wesley being
unnecessarily disparaging towards Law in the light of the controversy over justification by
faith about two years earlier, described below. It is clear that Wesley retained much of what
he had learned from Law, despite their fractious relationship which would continue until
Law’s death in 1761. Wesley would continue to accuse Law of being unscriptural in his
attempts to blend philosophy into his writing. However, on 24 May, 1738, the day of
Aldersgate, Wesley reflected on what he had learnt from Law’s writings years earlier.
Reading them he discovered,

> the exceeding height and breadth and depth of the law of God. The light flowed in so
mightyly upon my soul that everything appeared in a new view. I cried to God for
help and resolved not to prolong the time of obeying him as I had never done
before. And by my continued endeavour to keep his whole law, inward and outward,
to the utmost of my power, I was persuaded that I should be accepted of him, and
that I was even then in a state of salvation.

Law, along with Taylor and à Kempis kindled a flame in the hearts of the four Oxford Holy
Club members. However, their influence may well have encouraged “undue and
unwarranted emphasis upon man’s duty and obligation.” Additionally, some Holy Club
members would later castigate Law for making the blood of Christ in terms of salvific

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396 Jackson: Works, 8: 366
397 Law was heavily influenced by Jakob Böehme, the German mystic, and this was particularly reflected in
Law’s The Spirit of Prayer (1749-50) and The Spirit of Love (1752-54)
398 BE18, 244
399 Bullen, 76 n74
400 Charles R. Wilson: “The Relevance of John Wesley’s Distinctive Correlation of Love and Law” in WTJ (12.1,
Spring 1977), 55
importance almost merely on a par with moral character and metaphysical mysteries. Yet Law was still a forerunner to – if not a major player in – the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. So much so in fact, that Charles Wesley would call Law “our John the Baptist” and John Wesley would publish extracts from Law’s ‘A Serious Call’ in 1744. It was Law who influenced Wesley and not vice versa.

Much pain would have been avoided had Law led Wesley to realise that it was only on Christ’s atonement that he should rest for salvation. However, Wesley’s attitude to Law mellowed over time and Law would still be in the forefront of Wesley’s preaching as late as 1790. When speaking of single-minded simplicity of intention and purity of affections as fundamental to the life of the Christian, he alluded to “that strong and elegant writer, Mr Law, [who] earnestly presses in his Serious Call to a Devout Life – a treatise which will hardly be excelled, if it be equalled, in the English tongue, either for beauty of expression, or for justness and depth of thought.”

In many ways, it was during 1725 that Wesley’s yearning for practical piety began. It was then that his spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage commenced, allowing one to conclude that 1725 was of as equal importance to Wesley as 1738 and Aldersgate was. An entry in Wesley’s Journal of 1765 looked back forty years with reflection upon his doctrine of Christian perfection and how it came about, through the writings of these men,
But how came this opinion into my mind? I will tell you with all simplicity. In 1725, I met with Bishop Taylor’s *Rule of Holy Living and Dying*. I was struck particularly with the chapter upon intention, and felt a fixed intention to give myself to God. In this I was much confirmed soon after by the *Christian Pattern* [à Kempis], and longed to ‘give God all my heart.’ This is just what I mean by perfection now. I sought after it that hour. In 1727, I read Mr Law’s *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* and more explicitly resolved to be ‘all devoted to God in body, soul and spirit.’

Indeed, “Wesley’s search during this period for a meaningful understanding of the demands of Christian living eventually led him to tie together the perfectionism of the pietists, the moralism of the puritans, and the devotionalism of the mystics in a pragmatic approach that he felt could operate within the structure and doctrine of the Church of England.”

*Aldersgate*

John Wesley’s stated intention for going to Georgia was to save his own soul. In a letter to the Reverend John Burton on 10 October 1735, he wrote, “Can’t you save your own soul in England as well as in Georgia? I answer, no, neither can I hope to attain the same degree of holiness here which I may there; neither if I stay here knowing this, can I reasonably hope to attain any degree of holiness at all.” Wesley’s determination for salvation and holiness is central. His farcical dalliance with Sophy Hopkey and the resultant Grand Jury indictment when he was in Georgia may have moulded the character of the young Wesley, but these remain secondary here. Rather, it was a crucial conversation with the Moravians aboard the

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405 It is likely that the reading of William Law probably came later in truth and Wesley’s memory is inaccurate. He probably read Law’s *A Serious Call* towards the end of 1730 and *Christian Perfection* after meeting Law for the first time in 1732. See Frank Baker: “John Wesley’s Introduction to William Law” in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* (37: 3, October 1969), 78-82
406 BE21, 510
407 Richard P. Heitzenrater: *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 31
408 BE25, 441
Simmonds and the subsequent time spent with them in Georgia which were fundamental to Wesley’s state of mind and events leading up to the ‘heart-warming’ of Aldersgate in 1738. Fearing death during a particular stormy night on the voyage, Wesley was impressed by the calmness of his Moravian co-passengers. Even the women and children seemed at peace and were “not afraid to die.” After landing, he would meet with August Spangenberg, who proceeded to ask Wesley some searching questions about his spiritual condition.410

“Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God? Do you know Jesus Christ?” Wesley acknowledged that Jesus was the Saviour of the world but could only answer, when prompted for a personal response, that “I hope he has died to save me.” Wesley would later affirm the witness of the Spirit more positively, “but I fear they were vain words.”411 Often though a conversation can leave its recipients with different recollections, for Spangenberg’s own account of the dialogue left him in little doubt about Wesley’s salvation, “I observe that grace really dwells and reigns in him.”412 Whatever the truth of Wesley’s condition, he was led to mingle with the Moravians and sympathetically listen to their teaching. Additionally, he would commence correspondence with Count Zinzendorf, the Moravian leader, when Spangenberg told Wesley of the Count’s testimony, and his being full of the love of God.

What is crucial here is not so much recalling the correspondence between Wesley and the Moravians, but that Wesley was engaged in spiritual searching. It would be another Moravian, Peter Böhler, who would play a vital role in the next stage of Wesley’s spiritual development. Böhler was a convert of Zinzendorf whom Wesley was to meet in early

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409 BE18, 143
410 Rack, 115
411 BE18, 146
412 Rack, 115
February 1738 in London, after his return from Savannah. He “emphasized that true faith in Christ has two inevitable results: holiness and happiness.” They would become friends, despite Böhler’s insistence that Wesley did not fully know Jesus Christ. And it was through this relationship with Böhler that Wesley would grapple with the issue of justification by faith – its nature and fruits, it preceding sanctification and its instantaneousness. And it would be on this issue that Wesley became entangled in a series of heated exchanges with William Law over justification by faith in 1738.

For Wesley, Law laid too heavy an emphasis on human obligation. This, coupled with Wesley’s Holy Club understanding that sanctification preceded justification left Wesley “under this heavy yoke [in which he] might have groaned till death.” Law subordinated justification to sanctification in such a way that “the idea of Atonement is modified in Law...by the notion of man’s own mortification.” Man must practice self-denial if he is to benefit from the Atonement. So not only must Christ suffer for favour to be restored, but for Law we must also suffer “and sacrifice of ourselves fit to be received by God.” So initial justification of man on the basis of the cross was conditional upon human effort; full justification came only through merit and one’s imitation of Christ.

It would be Böhler who would lead Wesley to ‘discover’ the truly Pauline understanding of justification by faith as preceding sanctification. Law, for his part, claimed that he had

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413 Wilson: WTJ (12.1, Spring 1977), 55
414 Although Wesley remained unconvinced by this latter issue until Aldersgate. See Jackson: Works, 8: 366-7
415 Rack, 142
416 Telford, 104
417 Lindström, 57
418 Lindström, 57 n2
419 Williams, 78
introduced Wesley to the *Theologica Germanica* and that if this could not led Wesley to Christ, nothing would. He also apportioned much of the blame on to Wesley himself for he had also read and translated à Kempis, another piece of work that should have sufficiently assuaged Wesley’s concerns. Nor was Law Wesley’s spiritual advisor; “Who made me your teacher? You sought my acquaintance, you came to me as you pleased.” Yet Law was being disingenuous for he had not lead Wesley to faith – he described the deeper life, he had not explained it. This was the key factor. Law had never helped Wesley grasp the truth of salvation by faith alone. That credit goes to Peter Böhler. The consequence of this was that Wesley would reject Law’s seeming acceptance that somehow men are saved through their merit merging with Christ’s as their Example. For Wesley, Christ was an Example only *after* justification.  

We see a glimpse, therefore, into Wesley’s “constant sorrow and heaviness” in the days leading up to Aldersgate. He had had several conversations with Böhler since returning from America, the culmination of which resulted in Wesley asking after the nature of faith. Clinging to the fact that he had not sinned in the manner of some, he received the response that he remained in sin simply because he did not believe in Christ as his Saviour. Faith was still theoretical, not personal. On top of this, Charles Wesley had started to experience a change and, having left Georgia earlier than John, had been busy travelling and preaching. Talk of the ‘new birth’ peppered his diary entries during the second half of 1737. George Whitefield had similarly experienced this ‘new birth’ in 1735 and even William Law had used such language. It was Whitefield and Böhler who deepened Charles’ understanding of

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420 BE25, 549  
421 Williams, 81  
422 BE25, 551  
423 Rack, 140-1
instant conversion and the dichotomy between the ‘old man’ and the ‘new man.’\textsuperscript{424} And so Charles himself would have his own ‘Aldersgate’ in May 1738.\textsuperscript{425} Hitherto more sceptical than John regarding the truth of justification by faith, Charles experienced it first.

John Wesley would still be three days away from a similar experience. On 24 May, he read at 5am the promises given to believers of being partakers of the divine nature. In the afternoon he was asked to go to St Paul’s, where he listened of God’s mercy and redemption from Psalm 130.\textsuperscript{426} Conscious of his own sin and for personal evidence of faith he wrote an angst-ridden letter to the Rev John Gambold describing his bereft condition.\textsuperscript{427} Then in the evening he went to a society meeting which met weekly in Nettleton Court, Aldersgate Street, where Whitefield had preached the previous year.

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.\textsuperscript{428}

Prayers for those in a similar situation followed — even for those who had previously conspired against him. Wesley also openly testified to what had happened to those at the meeting, despite feeling an attack “from the enemy” over the lack of joy in his heart. Yet he felt the victory, peace and assurance of faith for the first time; the joy would come later, its being often withheld from those who had mourned deeply over their sin. “God sometimes

\textsuperscript{424} Rack, 140-1
\textsuperscript{426} BE18, 242-9
\textsuperscript{427} BE25, 550-1
\textsuperscript{428} BE18, 249-50
giveth, sometimes withholdeth them ["transports of joy"], according to the counsels of his own will.⁴²⁹

The nature and significance of Aldersgate – was it actually Wesley’s ‘conversion’ or not? - has long been disputed. Some have argued that 24 May should be seen in a Lutheran pietist context; Wesley’s self-critical analysis of the event is itself evidence of the importance he apportioned to the event. Böhler’s teaching on justification and the transition from salvation by works to faith are all signs that it was 1738, not 1725, which was the vital soteriological development in Wesley’s life.⁴³⁰ Aldersgate was a subjective experience whereby Wesley was “converted from a pre-Christian moralist into a true Christian believer.”⁴³¹ Therefore, this view sees 1738 as being a more decisive and defined theological change.

Others see things from a High Church context and have claimed that while 1738 was an important moment for Wesley, it was simply the key event in a long faith journey which had started at Epworth; 1725 being another. His personality and character did not overtly change in the light of Aldersgate. Only the truth for which he was searching – and preaching – was confirmed. Aldersgate then was not the beginning of Wesley’s new, converted life but rather a significant stage along the road of his spiritual journey. In essence, it was an assurance that he was justified, forgiven and a child of God.⁴³² The year 1738 then was not a watershed, but the building upon the foundations of a Wesley who had been seeking inward

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⁴²⁹ BE18, 250
⁴³⁰ Rack, 145-9
⁴³² Heitzenrater: “Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity” in Maddox: Aldersgate, 51
piety from 1725. This latter view gives more credence to 1725 than the former view because the ascetic methods and piety Wesley pursued – with a view to personalized sanctification – grew out of his time at Oxford and his reading of à Kempis, Taylor and Law.

But to call either 1725 or 1738 evangelical ‘conversions’ would be to over-simplify things. What we can say however is that those who tenaciously hold on to 1738 as Wesley’s evangelical conversion and forgiveness of sin, are clearly wrong to say that “by no stretch of the imagination was Wesley converted prior to Aldersgate.” The issue is not so clear-cut. This is because Wesley’s journal evidence is ambiguous. At times prior to 1738 he claimed to be a Christian and post-1738 he had sometimes claimed he was not! Even after Aldersgate he denied that he had the Fruit of the Spirit (love, peace and joy), nor indeed that he even loved “the Father or the Son.” Moreover, the significance of 1738 for Wesley himself seems to dwindle as the years pass on. If it were a watershed, why does Wesley not recall it as such in his own life or as an example to others? Nor does Aldersgate even receive a mention in A Plain Account. References to 1738 seem to concentrate on a “shift in his theology and preaching” rather than an evangelical ‘conversion.’

Yet, conversely, Aldersgate was vital because assurance and the perceptible inspiration of the Spirit held such a central place in Wesley’s ministry. Another factor is one of theological development. These can take years to formulate and are often moulded by many things – such as teaching, Bible study, personal experience, reflection and even spiritual inspiration.

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433 Rack, 146-7
434 Kenneth J. Collins: “Twentieth-Century Interpretations of John Wesley’s Aldersgate Experience: Coherence or Confusion?” in WTJ (24, 1989), 27
435 Heitzenrater: “Great Expectations,” in Maddox: Aldersgate, 49
436 BE19, 30
437 Heitzenrater: “Great Expectations,” in Maddox: Aldersgate, 50
But Aldersgate took place in the relative youth of Wesley’s Christian experience. So his later reflections on the event would naturally be more rounded, looking back as they did from a more mature perspective.\footnote{438 Heitzenrater: “Great Expectations,” in Maddox: Aldersgate, 50-1}

We must bear all this in mind when approaching Wesley’s journal entries. Taken on their own the early entries shortly after the ‘heart-warming’ seem to confirm that the event was what would today be called an evangelical conversion. Four days after Aldersgate he told people that “five days before he was not a Christian”\footnote{439 BE18, 252} and even eight months after that, on 4 January 1739, he wrote “I was not a Christian a year ago.”\footnote{440 BE19, 29} Similarly, in a letter to his brother Samuel in the late autumn of 1738, Wesley wrote, “By a Christian I mean one who so believes in Christ as that sin hath no dominion over him, and in this obvious sense of the word I was not a Christian till May 24 last past.”\footnote{441 BE25, 575}

However, by 1740 a subtle change is taking place in the journal record. Aldersgate is mentioned in passing in a journal entry dated 22 June. Wesley wrote that “about two years ago it pleased God to show us the old way of salvation by faith only.”\footnote{442 BE19, 153} So, “from 24 May 1738, ‘wherever I desired to preach, salvation by faith was my only theme’ (i.e., such a love of God and man as produces all inward and outward holiness, and springs from a conviction wrought in us by the Holy Ghost of the pardoning love of God).”\footnote{443 BE26, 183} So Wesley started to reflect on Aldersgate in the 1740s, in a less clear cut manner than he had done in 1738-9, as his understanding of the doctrine of salvation by faith alone developed.
Then there are entries just prior to Aldersgate which Wesley re-visited about 40 years later. Before that event, Wesley was convinced that he never was, nor ever had been a Christian. Yet in 1774-75, Wesley re-visited these journal extracts. For example, to the entry ending January 1738, Wesley had added several footnotes which cast doubt on his derogatory spiritual state prior to Aldersgate, believing that he was, even then, in a state of salvation. He thought his foundations of faith had been built on sand. Wesley later questioned this. In 1738 he had described himself as in a “vile, abject state of bondage to sin.” This was subsequently described as “state” in which he was fighting spiritual warfare. Moreover, Wesley once more returned to 1725 and his reading of a Kempis which “set him earnest upon a new life.” Once more, this year and the period 1729-32 (when he read Law) seem to be for Wesley as significant as 1738. So, the more mature and reflective Wesley of 1774-75 saw the years prior to Aldersgate in a more positive light, than the Wesley of 1740 seemed to.

Some scholars like Kenneth Collins dismiss Wesley’s pre-Aldersgate description of his own faith as the “faith of a servant...not a son” (added in 1774) as being pre-Christian faith. Others, perhaps more convincingly, would see this pre-1738 servant status as not “prevenient to the Christian life [but] in fact, the first stage of it.” Whether Collins’ view is accepted or not, other passages in Wesley’s journals do seem to give precedence to

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444 BE18, 208-216
445 BE18, 246-7
446 Thomas P. Haverly: “Conversion Narratives: Wesley’s Aldersgate Narrative and the Portrait of Peter in the Gospel of Mark” in WTJ (24, 1989), 54; BE18, 245 and footnotes c and d
447 BE18, 247 n62
448 BE18, 244 and n40
449 BE18, 215 footnote i
451 David L. Cubie: “Placing Aldersgate in John Wesley’s Order of Salvation” in WTJ (24, 1989), 47
Aldersgate as his moment of conversion. Before Aldersgate he had written to a friend saying, “Let no one deceive us by vain words, as if we had already attained this faith!” In 1774, he had added the words, “i.e., the proper Christian faith.” This seems to give centrality to Aldersgate. Wesley also responded to Peter Böhler’s description of faith in a journal entry dated 24 May, 1738. Faith, he said, had to be felt; such was the forgiveness of sin. Yet he felt nothing at that time and concluded that any faith he claimed to have had, had simply been self-delusion. In 1775 he reconfirmed that there was no Christian faith without feeling such forgiveness. Aldersgate then, in some instances, seems to have been an acknowledged turning-point for Wesley; but in modern parlance, to call it a ‘conversion’ would be excessive in light of the other journal evidence.

Aldersgate did not seem to fulfil for Wesley what he had been led to believe a ‘conversion’ should be by people such as Peter Böhler, who insisted on instantaneous faith. Wesley saw the New Testament evidence for instantaneous conversions but wondered if God had only acted this way during the days of the Apostles. So Böhler brought in witnesses who all testified to Wesley that they had received forgiveness and peace in a moment of time. Wesley was now convinced but even more anxious about his salvation as a result. Moreover, his own church background and upbringing had always differentiated between justification and sanctification and Aldersgate had not given him the full assurance or complete deliverance from sin he craved. Having gone to Germany after Aldersgate the German Moravians seemed to confirm “both these matters in contradistinction to the

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452 BE18, 242 footnote b
453 BE18, 248
teaching of Peter Böhler.”\textsuperscript{455} Böhler (and Spangenberg) insisted that while the sinner receives the ‘new man’ at justification, “having complete power and victory over all sin...[and] the witness of the Spirit to this complete deliverance,”\textsuperscript{456} yet the sinful nature will always remain and co-exist within. It is incurable and remains until death. Böhler continued that “sin will and must always remain in the soul. The old man will remain till death.”\textsuperscript{457} Zinzendorf would also toe the Moravian line when he said that Christian perfection was solely imputed. Furthermore, there could never be growth in holiness and love because when one is justified, he is likewise also as holy as he can ever hope to be in this life.\textsuperscript{458}

Yet there were also differences between the German and English Moravians. Count Zinzendorf said that assurance of having justified faith could take years to occur; Böhler said that one could not have justifying faith without knowing it.\textsuperscript{459} Additionally, whilst both Germans and English Moravians knew that the justified had peace with God, the Germans did not believe that this was always accompanied by deep-felt, abiding joy. Wesley’s feeling immediately after the ‘heart-warming’ was more consistent with this experience.\textsuperscript{460} Some ‘enthusiasts’ also seemed to suggest “forgiveness and salvation without the ordained means of grace provided through the Church.”\textsuperscript{461} This offended Wesley, as did some of the Moravians’ deductions from the doctrine of justification by faith that the law became of no effect; and this from those who had led him to that very great Pauline doctrine itself! Wesley was too rooted in High Church praxis to be married to the interpretation of

\textsuperscript{455} McGonigle, 110
\textsuperscript{456} McGonigle, 109
\textsuperscript{457} BE19, 195
\textsuperscript{458} McGonigle, 148
\textsuperscript{459} McGonigle, 108-9
\textsuperscript{460} McGonigle, 109
\textsuperscript{461} Wilson: \textit{WTJ} (12.1, Spring 1977), 56 n11
justification espoused by continental Protestantism. Anyway, by 1740 the formal break with the Moravians had taken place.

What is more important is that Aldersgate occurred when Wesley was still in a Moravian mind-set. It caused problems for Wesley because struggles over assurance and forgiveness of sin remained. This is the reason why Wesley would champion degrees of faith and the possibility of experiencing more than one ‘conversion’ moment. Later in life, Wesley’s reflections on Aldersgate would continue in this vein. In 1765 he recorded in his sermon ‘The Lord Our Righteousness’ that this doctrine of justification by faith “I have constantly believed and taught for near eight and twenty years. This I published to all the world in the year 1738.” In 1772, Wesley re-affirmed that he had preached this doctrine for “four-and-thirty years.” By the end of that decade, Wesley once more claimed to have preached consistently every Christian doctrine for forty years. And by the end of his life, in one of his final sermons entitled ‘The Wedding Garment’ published in 1790, Wesley reflected, “only about fifty years ago I had a clearer view than before of justification by faith.”

Wesley’s comments about Aldersgate at the time are understandable but can be explained by the profound experience of the event itself. Only later in life did he begin to apportion to it its proper place in his spiritual life. Just because Wesley claimed, soon after the intensity of Aldersgate, not to have been a Christian before it, this does not mean he was not one.

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462 Wilson: WTJ (12.1, Spring 1977), p56
463 Haverly: WTJ (24, 1989), 56 n16
464 Haverly: WTJ (24, 1989), 68
465 BE1, 456
466 Jackson: Works, 10: 388
467 BE23, 105
468 BE4, 147
One can claim an event to be life-changing at any given time, only to come to a more balanced view later. Wesley was not lying about his pre-1738 condition because this is how he understood it in the immediate light of the Aldersgate event. But nor can these comments be taken in isolation. The ‘heart-warming’ had an overpowering impact on Wesley; this should not be denied. Yet later in life he was able to put it into perspective and understand it more fully. It is clear that the older and wiser Wesley reflected upon Aldersgate as experiencing justification by faith alone and trusting God for it.

Similarly, respect must be made to those entries where, after Aldersgate, Wesley does not speak in ‘conversion’ language. This has led some scholars to place Wesley’s real conversion at the spring of 1739. Böhler had told Wesley to preach faith until he had it; but it was preaching in the style of Jonathan Edwards469 – fuelled by Whitefield’s call to open air preaching - that proved to Wesley that not only would his recipients find faith, but so would he. Moreover, he would keep it. And with this new found faith, Wesley entered into his new profession as a revivalist.470 Certainly one sees Wesley starting to back away from the “mystical excess of the Moravians”471 during this year. But it is hard to think of Wesley only as a true Christian in 1739, despite his own anxious comments to the contrary; or to believe he was not a Christian before Aldersgate.

If one defines a conversion as “God’s own act in which a man is turned away from his former self, made to pass from darkness into light, delivered from the power of Satan unto God,

469 BE19, 16 n50; Wesley read and distributed Edward’s tract A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God, in the Conversion of many hundred Souls in Northampton. Wesley abridged this in 1744
471 Wilson: WTJ (12.1, Spring 1977), 56
made over in mind and spirit"\textsuperscript{472} in which the experience then conforms to the theory – then Aldersgate is an already converted Wesley finally understanding that conversion. Aldersgate was assurance of forgiveness, freedom from the control of sin, full reliance on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the realization of the possibility of ‘instantaneousness’ in the workings of grace and a true Pauline understanding of the \textit{ordo salutis}.\textsuperscript{473}

If the reading of à Kempis convinced Wesley that the mind of Christ had to be appropriated, Taylor that intentions had to be pure and Law the necessity of “a proper inclination of the soul,”\textsuperscript{474} then Aldersgate brought for Wesley that deep spiritual assurance which he so craved. Both 1725 and 1738 then, as well as the years during, are of major soteriological importance for Wesley. “Without 1725, Wesley’s theology would have lacked the larger picture of our renewal in God’s image. Without 1738, this vision would never have caught fire in the hearts and lives of the multitudes. Wesley would forever have remained on the treadmill of works; trying to do what God alone can do – change the human heart!”\textsuperscript{475} Perhaps 1725 was the beginning of a serious commitment to faith; with 1738 its consummation.

In the end, of more importance are the spiritual changes which took place in Wesley’s life and thought from 1725 to 1738. No longer was holiness merely to be outward, but inward also, i.e. seated in the heart. One is struck by Wesley’s early perfectionist views in the light

\textsuperscript{472} Cubie: \textit{WTJ} (24, 1989), 32 n7; quoting William R. Cannon
\textsuperscript{473} Olson, 37-8
\textsuperscript{474} Heitzenrater: \textit{Great Expectations}, in Maddox: \textit{Aldersgate}, 55. If dates are seen as significant in Wesley’s spiritual life then the reading Law in from c.1730-32 were also crucial
\textsuperscript{475} Olson, 39
of the crucial influence the writings of à Kempis, Taylor and Law would have on him, as well as the important evangelical experience of Aldersgate. He spoke of these men leading him to his goal of ‘inward religion,’ namely perfection as wholeness, a life fully dedicated to God and how one’s outward religion must conform to and be an expression of true inward piety. True perfection for Wesley was to be characterised by “entire humility, absolute self-renunciation, unreserved resignation, and spiritual union with God, with the last quality spoken as the ‘highest degree’ of perfection.” Appendix B describes more fully and deeply the mature Wesley’s thesis on entire sanctification, namely A Plain Account. Wesley’s doctrine deepens as that prose progresses, but even this early period of 1725-38 can be seen as seminal. For Wesley, there must be brokenness before blessing. So the idea and ideal of holiness and perfection were formed in the mind of Wesley from 1725, even if his personal trust in Christ for his own salvation was not fully realized until Aldersgate. And this work of Divine grace in the heart was the basis on which Wesley constructed his doctrine of Christian perfection. Indeed, it is to his understanding of entire sanctification where this thesis will now turn.

476 Plain Account, s2-5
477 Olson, 25
Chapter 5 – Christian Perfection

For John Wesley, the power given to Christians enables them “not to commit sin – a crucial idea in the holy-living tradition.”478 Wesley had, theologically, been moving in this direction since his 1733 university sermon, The Circumcision of the Heart. This was followed by a number of other homilies before reaching “its climatic statement, up to that date”479 in his 1750 sermon entitled Christian Perfection.480 Wesley developed this further in his treatise A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, first published in the 1760s.481

Of course, the very phrase ‘not to commit sin’ was bound to face controversy and backlash from opponents and confusion amidst the ranks of the faithful. Wesley’s understanding of what was possible for the believer in this life was certainly a departure from the Lutheran view as outlined by Philip Melanchthon, the primary author of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology which followed it.482 For the Lutheran, simul justus et peccator had sin being present in the life of the believer, despite justification, where the fomes peccati were covered by the imputed righteousness of Christ. The old sinful nature always remained but, paradoxically, the alien righteousness of Christ ‘swallowed up’ the sin of the believer. The new nature was renewed daily and both natures existed in tension. Christians were both as sinful and as holy as they were at any previous time. Justification was never ‘perfected’ until the resurrection, so was both an event and a process. John Calvin followed Melanchthon more than Luther in that he adopted the former’s separation of justification from

478 Outler, BE1, 314
479 Outler, BE1, 314
480 Other sermons on holiness were The Witness of the Spirit, parts I and II (BE1, 267-298), The Means of Grace (BE1, 367-397) and The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God (BE1, 431-443)
481 See Appendix B
482 Toon, 55
regeneration (as did Wesley after 1738); justification merely being a forensic declaration of righteousness. Forgiveness of sin and the work of the spirit were thus distinct.\textsuperscript{483} Calvin believed in ‘mortification’ (casting off the old man) and ‘vivification’ (putting on the new man), whereby a Christian’s experience was a progressive sanctification. The believer had a constant struggle with sin – outlined in Romans 7 – so ‘perfection’ was not for this life. However, the power of the Spirit in Calvin was far more robust than in Luther. But ultimately it was Christ that was the perfection and sanctification, as much as the righteousness. Believers were ontologically related to Him. But there should always be increments of some visible growth in sanctification, if limited and unconsummated, in the believer this side of the \textit{eschaton}. So there was openness to sanctifying possibilities through the Spirit. By holding to these limitations and possibilities, Calvin believed he was doing justice to Scripture.\textsuperscript{484}

\textit{Sin and the believer}

On the other side, some in Wesley’s own ranks had taken ‘those born of God do not commit sin’ to the opposite extreme, advocating a sinless, even a guiltless perfection, whereby the power not to sin eradicated all remains of it.\textsuperscript{485} Wesley’s response was to find a ‘third way.’ He would differentiate between “sin properly so called” – a violation of a known law of God - and involuntary transgressions.\textsuperscript{486} The former were culpable if they remained unrepented.

\textsuperscript{483} Toon, 63
\textsuperscript{485} Outler: \textit{BE1}, 314 cites Thomas Maxfield, William Cudworth and James Relly as examples
\textsuperscript{486} \textit{Plain Account}, s19
The latter were likewise, but additionally culpable if the sin was not discarded when discerned.\textsuperscript{487} Both types of sin required the atoning blood.

Needless to say, all of this had echoes of Catholic moral theory whereby sin was seen as either ‘mortal’ or ‘venial.’ Yet even within Lutheranism (\textit{Formula of Concord}) and Anglicanism, similar definitions existed. The Welsh clergyman, Richard Lucas, in 1685 had established the same language which Wesley was to use in describing ‘mortal’ sin as deliberately breaking a known law of God.\textsuperscript{488} Others too had described voluntary and involuntary sins in a similar way.\textsuperscript{489}

However, this tension between a Christian being able to ‘not commit sin’ and sin remaining – if not reigning – in the believer was one which was uneasy and which would continue to dog Wesley. Yet he would nevertheless be able to hold firmly to both \textit{sola fide} – the doctrine of justification alone - and his doctrine of Christian perfection. His primary concern was always to “face the dreadful realities of sin while never yielding to any defeatist notion that God’s grace is intrinsically impotent to save souls ‘to the utmost’ in this life.”\textsuperscript{490}

However, the distortions of his doctrine needed to be addressed. And it was against this background that Wesley published his 1763 sermon \textit{On Sin in Believers} and its 1767 sequel \textit{The Repentance of Believers}. In both, Wesley needed to counter claims that there was no sin in those justified.

\textsuperscript{487} Outler: BE1, 315
\textsuperscript{488} Richard Lucas: \textit{Religious Perfection or A Third Part of the Enquiry After Happiness} (London: 5\textsuperscript{th} edition, 1735), 330-1
\textsuperscript{489} Outler: BE1, 315
\textsuperscript{490} Outler: BE1, 315
Wesley’s definition of sin was not without its difficulties. Often it was not easy to know when a sin had been committed and there could be degrees of yielding to sin in the unbeliever. However full, wilful sin could not occur “while faith and love are in the heart.”

Certainly a believer could lose faith and thus wilfully sin, but this type of sin – which for Wesley was sin in its proper sense – could not be committed by a believer constantly walking in the light. A believer can only be convicted of inbred sin by “the ministrations of the Holy Spirit who applies the moral law in its height and depth to the heart of the believer.” The moral law with respect to evangelical and legal repentance is one of accusation, displaying a contrast between sinful humanity and God. Yet the conviction required for legal and evangelical repentance brought about by the moral law is due to the growth in grace that has occurred in the interim. The moral law keeps the believer close to Christ so His blood may cleanse every moment. Thus, “the guilt of sin is addressed in justification, its power in regeneration and its being in entire sanctification.”

The Holy Spirit and the moral law are fundamental to each area.

Wesley held that inbred sin was expelled from the heart if and when the believer was entirely sanctified. But the principle of sin still remains in the regenerate, namely those not entirely sanctified; the power of sin may be broken, it may not reign, yet sin will always manifest itself and the believer will then become aware once more of their own iniquity. Wesley would differentiate between guilt of sin, its power and its being. True believers

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491 Leo G. Cox: “John Wesley’s Concept of Sin” in Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society (5.1, 1962), 21
493 Collins: Scripture Way, 159
enjoy freedom from guilt and in them the power of sin is broken. But the ‘being’ of sin remains. Flesh may have no dominion, but it remains and contends with the Spirit.494

The sin Wesley refers to here is inward or inbred sin, *phronema sarkos*, namely the inner bent or tendency. This would correspond to his thesis of involuntary transgressions. “By ‘sin’ I here understand inward sin: any sinful temper, passion or affection; such as pride, self-will, love of the world, in any kind or degree; such as lust, anger, peevishness; any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ.”495 Indeed, if Wesley was at one with the Reformers on original sin, he did not depart from Luther and Calvin greatly on the carnal heart of the believer either.496 There is a difference here between the above ‘inward sin’ and ‘inward sins.’ The latter remained voluntary and deliberate choices.

So against the charge that Wesley denied sin in the believer, he countered “I cannot believe it,”497 citing Paul’s strong affirmations that there are two contrary principles in the heart of the Christian which constantly strive against each other. And this came after a lengthy refutation against those who did deny sin in the believer.498 Wesley also alluded to the letters of Revelation to deny the claim and so assertions that “there is no sin in a believer, no carnal mind, no bent to backsliding, is thus contrary to the Word of God [and]...the experience of His children.”499 So whilst Wesley would claim that Christ would not reign or dwell where sin is allowed, He can exist in the same heart as long as that heart is “fighting against all sin; although it be ‘not’ yet ‘purified according to the purification of the

494 BE1, 329
495 BE1, 320
496 Cox, in *BETS* (5.1, 1962), 22
497 BE1, 321
498 BE1, 325-334
499 BE1, 323
sanctuary. Wesley would agree with the Reformers that human nature had to be fully cleansed in order to be fit for Heaven. For them this would occur at death or just before. However, Wesley was at odds with them by insisting that these spiritual changes could occur much earlier in life.

Of course, the way out of this impasse was repentance. This opened the way to being sanctified entirely and being saved to the “uttermost.” Repentance after justification resembles the inward change from sin to holiness. And it was necessary so the believer could depart from pride, self-will, the love of the world, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life, jealousy, anger, revenge, bitterness, uncharitable conversation, covetousness, outward sins of omission and an inward coolness towards God and our fellow man. Indeed, sin “cleaves to our words and actions” so that knowledge of the danger of these vices which lurk in the heart of those justified is their repentance. A conviction of their guilt, albeit knowing that condemnation is not theirs, and an utter helplessness before God, knowing that they have an inability in and of themselves to either perform good or deliver themselves from the guilt, brings about the required repentance. This is the lot of all justified: inward and outward sin cannot be driven out by self-effort, even through watching and praying.

Wesley was clear that even after justification, our hearts are not wholly cleansed unless the Lord “speak the second time” to our hearts. Unless His calling to be clean comes, only then will the leprosy of inbred sin be rooted out. Yet this state could not occur without a
second change – either instantaneous or gradual – and Wesley knew that this was not the experience of all. This work is up to God and some “must be content...to remain full of sin till death.” \[506\] Here Wesley was able to remain faithful to *simul justus et peccator* i.e. the condition of those believers who had not received this “special dispensation of grace.” \[507\] Wesley would not go to the lengths of saying that Christian Perfection was limited to only some believers – he would maintain that it was available to all - but he also knew that the standards were so high as to be difficult to maintain.

However, God is not only able to perform this act of grace, He is also willing to. Moreover, He is able to do it “today.” \[508\] The believer needs this assurance through faith. Indeed, going from faith to faith, knowing the Lord intercedes for them brings to the believer the knowledge that Christ’s power is with them every moment, enabling them both to be cleansed from indwelling sin and to “perfectly love Him, and worthily magnify His holy name.” \[509\] Repentance thus convinces of sin and seeks the only help it ever can. Faith brings to us all the help of heaven and earth. “Repentance says, ‘without him I can do nothing.’” faith says, ‘I can do all things through Christ strengthening me.’” \[510\] Thus whole sanctification does not come through justification. It starts with a realisation of one’s own guilt after justification through repentance and faith. And the work is all Christ’s. So, while Wesley would have no truck with those who denied inbred sin simply through being justified, neither did he accept the defeatist notion of some who merely accepted inbred sin as inevitable this side of eternity.

\[506\] BE1, 346  
\[507\] Outler: BE1, 346 n81  
\[508\] BE1, 348  
\[509\] BE1, 349  
\[510\] BE1, 350
Once made ‘perfect’ Christians were delivered from indwelling sin. The term itself was not one Wesley was particularly fond of. His favoured terms for entire sanctification were things like ‘perfect love’ or ‘love expelling sin.’ Additionally, comment needs to be made on what Christian Perfection actually was and was not. Christians are not perfect in knowledge, either regarding the present world, God or the Holy Scriptures. Neither are they free from error or infirmities, including bodily ailments and moral imperfections, such as a lack of intelligence, a poor memory or an excessive imagination. Nor are Christians perfect in that they are never free from temptation. For Wesley, all these things were involuntary transgressions which he was reticent to call ‘sin.’ “Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God. Therefore every voluntary breach of the law of love is sin; and nothing else, if we speak properly.” Indeed, “There may be ten thousand wandering thoughts and forgetful intervals without any breach of love, though not without transgressing the Adamic law.” He continued:

To explain myself a little farther on this head: 1. Not only sin, properly so called, (that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law,) but sin, improperly so called, (that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown,) needs the atoning blood. 2. I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality. 3. Therefore sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself. 4. I believe a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. 5. Such

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512 BE2, 100-5
513 Letter to Mrs Bennis, Yarm, 16 June 1772. Jackson: *Works* (CD)
514 Wesley to Bennis. Jackson: *Works* (CD)
transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not, for the reasons above-mentioned.\textsuperscript{515}

Wesley’s opponents saw salvation from all sin as impossible – how could one have no sin when still in a sinful body? Wesley stressed that what is impossible with men is not so with God. Furthermore, he held his definition of sin to be scriptural. Errors in judgment, fear, unreasonable love or aversion, foolish hope, etc., i.e. involuntary transgressions, were not contrary to perfect love.\textsuperscript{516} Objectors to Wesley’s idea of involuntary transgressions still saw them as sin, quoting the Apostle John, “all sin is a transgression of the law” (1 John 3: 4). Wesley accepted this but countered that the Apostle did not say ‘all transgression of the law is sin.’ “This I deny: let him prove it that can.”\textsuperscript{517} All sin was a transgression of the law, but not all transgressions were sins.

Wesley also rejected “the idea of static perfection that would not admit of a continual increase and advance as one improves the rich grace of God.”\textsuperscript{518} Perfection was never static; Wesley’s references to ‘perfection’ instead assumed the Eastern or Greek conception of \textit{teleiotes} (perfecting perfection), rather than the Western Latin translation of \textit{perfectio} (perfected perfection).\textsuperscript{519} This was “a never ending aspiration for all of love’s fullness,”\textsuperscript{520} typical of that concept found in the writings of the pre-Augustine, Eastern Fathers.\textsuperscript{521} Despite the need for growth and development, Christian perfection was also an “actualization of grace; a realization of holiness that is both preceded and followed by

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[515]{\textit{Plain Account}, s19}
\footnotetext[516]{BE3, 79}
\footnotetext[517]{BE3, 79}
\footnotetext[518]{Collins: \textit{Scripture Way}, p173}
\footnotetext[519]{Thomas C. Oden: \textit{John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity – A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 320; Outler, BE2, 98; Wong, 102}
\footnotetext[520]{Outler: BE2, 98}
\footnotetext[521]{Oden, 320}
\end{footnotes}
Wesley saw an instantaneous event as being “infinitely desirable, were it in the will of God” but also admitted that “in some this change was not instantaneous” at least in terms of their perception and being able to define the moment when they became wholly delivered from sin.

Indeed, there were stages in the Christian experience (1 John 2: 12-14). Only those who are ‘fathers’ in Christ are “properly Christians.” By this he meant that only these mature Christians were ‘perfect.’ They are those who are “strong in the Lord...are free from evil thoughts and tempers.” Those “born again in the lowest sense,” whom Wesley would liken to the ‘children’ and ‘young men’ of that passage are only ‘perfect’ in the sense that they no longer sin outwardly. Yet “even babes in Christ, are so far perfect as not to commit sin.” They have this capability if they keep walking with God “which he is able to do, by the grace of God.” But when Satan is active and when the young Christian’s steadfastness is shaken, then “he may commit sin even as another man.” Sin for Wesley could be either outward sin, namely actions, or inward sins, namely evil thoughts.

Believers are to walk as Jesus walked (1 John 2: 6) “having their hearts full of Him.” They are to be pure, as He is pure (1 John 3: 3). Wesley would have no truck with those who believed all this too high to attain in the course of the Christian life, or those who believed

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522 Collins: Scripture Way, 174
523 BE2, 168
524 Plain Account, s26
525 BE2, 105
526 BE2, 117
527 BE2, 106
528 Plain Account, s12
529 BE1, 438
530 BE1, 438
531 Collins: Scripture Way, 175
532 Notes, 906
that deliverance from sin was only for life after death. As Jesus is, “so are we in this world.” Anything else is a blatant contradiction of the Apostle John. Those born of God do not sin. Wesley would not accept Old Testament sin, even among the saints of that dispensation, as detrimental to his views. In light of Christ’s coming, Christ’s own assertion that John the Baptist was greater than all who had gone before him and in light of the kingdom of God now having arrived in Christ, Wesley’s opponents ought never to “bring down the Christian dispensation to the Jewish standard.” As for the early church, even acknowledging Paul and Peter’s short-comings, Wesley would not always openly say that they committed sin. “It is said” they did. “Suppose... [they]...did commit sin. What is it you would infer from hence?” Wesley would not admit that these indiscretions—Paul with Barnabas, Peter at Antioch—were either typical of these Apostles, standard behaviour for any of the other Apostles or that subsequent Christians “in all ages, do, and will commit sin as long as they live.” Elsewhere, Wesley admitted that the worldly desires may once more consume a believer, but as long as he “abideth in faith and love and in the spirit of prayer and thanksgiving...[he] ‘doth not’ but ‘cannot’ thus commit sin.” The believers at Corinth were still carnal and only “partly renewed.” Babes in Christ may be saved from sin; it may not reign in them but it remains.

533 BE2, 119
534 BE2, 108
535 Although elsewhere he did say that Peter’s was “plain undeniable sin, committed by one who was born of God.” BE1, 438
536 BE2, 112
537 BE2, 112
538 BE1, 338
539 BE1, 436
540 BE1, 436
541 BE1, 327
If there was a mindset labelled ‘pessimism of grace’ in the Augustinian and Reformed mould which often seemed to prioritise the Fall and sin rather than the victory of the cross and the resurrection as the key events in history, Wesley represented an ‘optimism of grace.’\footnote{Wood, “Love Excluding Sin,” 3} For Wesley, sanctification was total salvation – this meant not deliverance from hell in the future, but deliverance from sin \textit{now}. Salvation was a synonymous term for holiness.\footnote{Wood, “Love Excluding Sin,” 4} However, Adamic perfection signified perfect obedience to every part of the covenant or law of works – prior to the Fall man was as sinless as the angels. This was perfection in nature. Christian perfection was based on the covenant of grace, the law of faith. In this way, it could only ever be perfect in degree, not in nature. If Adamic perfection was relative and subjective, Christian perfection concerned a man’s will and intention. It would always be ‘imperfect’ due to “the conditions under which man now lives since Adam’s fateful transgressions.”\footnote{Wood, “Love Excluding Sin,” 13}

In arguing his case for Christian perfection, it needs to be acknowledged that Wesley was heavily dependent on the ‘Johannine’ literature. Some scholars have estimated that John Wesley used primarily thirty passages in Scripture on which he based his doctrine of Christian perfection; 12 of these came from the Johannine corpus; 2 from the Gospel and 10 from 1 John.\footnote{William E. Sangster: \textit{The Path to Perfection} (London: Epworth Press, 1957), 46} Whether or not these statistics are strictly accurate, Wesley’s heavy use of the Apostle’s writings is beyond dispute. “If any man speak, in the name of God, let him speak as the oracles of God; and if he would imitate any part of these above the rest, let it be the First Epistle of St. John. This is the style, the most excellent style, for every Gospel preacher. And let him aim at no more ornament than he finds in that sentence, which is the
sum of the whole Gospel, ‘We love Him, because He first loved us.’ It is little wonder that Wesley referred to 1 John in an entry in his journal, dated 18 July, 1765 as “the deepest part of the Holy Scripture...above all other even inspired writings. I advise every young preacher to form his style. Here are sublimity and simplicity together, the strongest sense and the plainest language! How can anyone that would ‘speak as the oracles of God’ use harder words than are found here?” Indeed, it is to Wesley’s use of 1 John and the Fourth Gospel where attention now turns.

Wesley’s use of the Johannine literature

It is worthwhile to note that Wesley regarded John, the son of Zebedee, to be the author of all of the five books now called the Johannine Corpus. His use of these texts, however, rested solely on John’s Gospel and (primarily) 1 John. The concept of eternal life in both is the “great note of Johannine theology...which is mysteriously and gloriously a present possession.” Key texts from the Fourth Gospel and 1 John back up this claim, and these were Wesley’s “literary model” on which he based his doctrine of entire sanctification. A selection of key texts will be discussed. One important investigation is the issue of context and whether or not Wesley respected the milieu and purpose of the original texts, before examining how Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection fitted well with the later understanding of ‘realized’ eschatology of the Johannine literature. In his understanding of 1

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546 Sermons on Several Occasions, Preface. Quoted in Bullen, 182
547 Jones, 112-3
548 Notes, 902-3; 933
549 Sangster, 49; Cf. John 3: 16, 36; 5: 24; 6: 47
John 5: 20, for example, Wesley stressed that Jesus would not simply be eternal life but *is* eternal life.\textsuperscript{551}

In the Fourth Gospel, the clear teaching of the re-birth (John 3: 3) is a pre-requisite for enjoying life eternal. Neither sanctification nor perfection receive the full treatment that they do in 1 John, yet “there are scattered elements which speak of the ideal in clear terms.”\textsuperscript{552} It is Jesus’ intercessory prayer in John 17 which provides “the ultimate in definitions of the ideal.”\textsuperscript{553} There is a union between Father and Son through love. Jesus then prays that His disciples may be sanctified “by truth” so that they can be separated from the world (17: 15-17). In this way there is separation, consecration and cleansing.\textsuperscript{554} As the Father has bestowed love upon the Son, so believers can enjoy this perpetual union with Him (17: 23). Holiness then, in John’s Gospel, is the believer’s consecration and separation from the world. The ideal is that they love God as He loved them, in order that they may then be “in the service of God’s self-giving love for the world.”\textsuperscript{555} Separation from the world through union with the divine, in fellowship through love, is then extended to union with the community of believers – truly loving God and neighbour. “This is perhaps the highest expression of Christian perfection in the New Testament.”\textsuperscript{556} And this perfect love is a present possession. Similarly, the concept of eternal life in these texts tends to be a ‘realized’ experience, not simply for the future age. We live and love as Jesus did because we are in possession of eternal life now. In Christ, the *eschaton* has already arrived.

\textsuperscript{551} BE3, 95
\textsuperscript{552} Turner, 93
\textsuperscript{553} Turner, 94
\textsuperscript{554} Turner, 94
\textsuperscript{555} Richard Bauckham: “The Holiness of Jesus and His Disciples” in Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Eds.): *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 113
\textsuperscript{556} Turner, 94
The red line running through 1 John is that of *eternal life* in which that phrase appears six times.\(^{557}\) In 1 John, the concept of eternal life is a gift which believers are already in possession of. The promise of eternal life is to those who resist evil and confess the Son and this is repeated throughout and at key points, holding together the past and the present.\(^{558}\) It is a promise to hold on to and is evidenced in both the acknowledgment of the Son and in the subsequent behaviour of those born of God, namely love. There is a covenant relationship between Jesus and His disciples who are commanded to love one another. Jesus brings “the indwelling presence and the knowledge of God...in the life-of-love”\(^{559}\) which already exists between Him and God. Since sin is from the devil, it cannot dwell in the believer (1 John 3: 9).\(^{560}\) The relationship between Christ and the believer “is not forensic, as in Paul, but genealogical.”\(^{561}\) The result is eternal life which is the basic reason for faith and is ‘the supreme...conception’ of the Johannine literature.\(^{562}\)

Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection was largely based on key Johannine texts. From *John 8: 34ff*, Wesley made it clear that sin has its origin in the devil. Christ brings freedom “from all guilt and sin, ye shall abide in the house of God forever.”\(^{563}\) Those born of God are now emancipated fully “from that great root of sin and bitterness, pride...there is no room for this [evil] in a soul which is full of God.”\(^{564}\) Even wandering thoughts could be banished. Destruction of sin is full destruction; and freedom from sin is entire freedom. His

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\(^{559}\) Rekha M. Chennattu: *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 137

\(^{560}\) Turner, 95

\(^{561}\) Turner, 95


\(^{563}\) Notes, 340

\(^{564}\) *Plain Account*, s13
opponents stressed the Johannine concept of life without sin as being only a theoretical principle. For Wesley this was poor exegesis, denying the plain truth of the texts and, more worryingly, casting “aspersion on the Son who had promised to do this wonderful thing.”

Those who opposed Wesley based their counter-arguments less on exegesis than on experience. Had Wesley ever witnessed a ‘perfect’ Christian? His response was that “several persons have enjoyed this blessing without any interruption for many years. Several enjoy it at this day. And not a few have enjoyed it unto their death, as they have declared with their latest breath; calmly witnessing that God had saved them from all sin till their spirit returned to God.”

Wesley acknowledged that salvation could be “totally lost,” but he also stressed that there were numerous living examples of ‘perfect’ Christians - based on his definition of the term. Moreover, those who have not attained Christian perfection are exempt from the debate, “for they are not the persons we are talking of.” From here, the controversy descended into “weary circles of ill-defined terms.” In the end, Wesley stood firm against his opponents, even towards the end of his life.

Another key text was John 17: 20-23. Wesley used this text to illustrate Christ’s prayer was for the whole world – “For them who will believe – In all ages;” not just for Himself and the disciples but also for “all other believers...and let all the world believe.” And the glory of
Jesus Christ then “shines in all the sons of God. How great is the majesty of Christians!”

Wesley saw this prayer as a verbatim utterance of Jesus. Life is a dominant theme of this Gospel and its source is the Father. He is in union with the Son who then imparts this life to all believers. And because this life is perfect, there can be no evil in it; a perfect gift of life, given in perfect love. “God Himself was eternally present in the believer, through Christ who unites us with Himself as He is united with God.”

1 John 1: 7-10 provided Wesley with evidence that God in this life can destroy sin. God is “the light of wisdom, love, holiness, glory. What light is to the natural eye, God is to the spiritual eye.” If inward or outward actions and thoughts are not consistent with what Christians claim to believe, then that sin is proof that the truth is not in them. Only “the imitation of God...is the sure proof of our having fellowship with Him.” In which case, the blood of Jesus Christ then washes away all sin and unrighteousness (verses 7, 9), “both original and actual, taking away all the guilt and all the power.” The power of God’s grace meant that there was no necessity to sin and the Apostle put the issue “entirely out of dispute.” Verses 7, 9 then were evidence that the sins of verses 8 and 10 could all be washed away.

In 1 John 3: 6-9, the man born of God is living by faith, “whereby God is continually breathing spiritual life into his soul.” Therefore, since God abides in him, he does not sin. In fact, “he cannot sin because he is born of God – Is inwardly and universally changed.”

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572 Notes, 376
573 Sangster, 47-8
574 Notes, 904
575 BE2, 115
576 Notes, 911
Sinning is of the devil and this verse Wesley linked with 1 John 5: 18. Those born of God do not sin, for the wicked one is kept at bay. Wesley though saw sin on two levels. “At one level, sin is any deviation from God’s perfect law. At another level, sin is the deliberate transgression of a known commandment.” Taking the first definition, there can be no perfection in this life. Taking the latter there could be because Christians could live without wilfully violating God’s law. But any “infractions of the moral and spiritual law which...do not involve the will, Wesley labelled infirmities.”

However, a vitally important question needs to be asked: was John Wesley a respecter of context? He interpreted John 8: 34ff to promote a doctrine of entire emancipation from sin. Yet Jesus is simply saying that He is the ‘free’ Son who is able to deliver others from the bondage of sin. It is the Jews who are the ‘slave’ descendents of Abraham, who will “not abide in the house forever” (John 8: 35); only the Son will. This is an Old Testament allusion to Ishmael and Isaac. Of course in the Johannine sense, the ‘house’ is heavenly, not merely earthly. Another Old Testament allusion may be at play here, namely 1 Chronicles 17: 13-14, where the familial relationship is verified and “My house and My kingdom...his throne” are established forever. Jesus was not specifically saying that every sin was an act of slavery; simply that sinners, i.e. those who continue in sin, are slaves to it. Nowhere does the Apostle in this passage talk of emancipation from all sin in the manner in which Wesley uses the text. Rather he imposes Christian perfection upon it. In this respect, “Wesley’s approach to the Fourth Gospel was quite uncritical. He was neither helped nor hindered by

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577 BE2, 106-7
578 McGonigle, 250
579 McGonigle, 250
the thought of an inspired evangelist expounding an Hebraic message to a Graeco-Roman world."\(^5\)^

**John 17: 20-23** talks of unity between the Father and the Son, with believers then being unified in God and Christ. This is so that the world would then know that the Father had sent the Son. Jesus prays for unity between Himself and His followers in order that belief in the world would follow. But it is also about the world knowing that God loves His people, as He loves His Son.\(^6\) "The unity of the believers will be explicable to the world only on the basis of the divine love. It will transcend all humanity."\(^7\) So the unity of the followers of Christ, which mirrors that between the Father and the Son, allow them actually to participate in that unity; believers will both tell the world of God’s love and demonstrate it through witness and mission. The world will then realise that God loves them too.\(^8\) Interestingly in his *Notes*, Wesley made no mention of verse 23 which talks of being made ‘perfect in one.’ Yet in this verse, ‘perfect’ “does not primarily suggest ethical perfection” of believers,\(^9\) which Wesley championed. Rather, perfection is the unity between Father and Son in which believers share. It is this *unity* which is perfect, because He is perfect.\(^10\) ‘Perfection’ then is the union of love between God and His people; “a relational dynamic of moral and spiritual maturation.”\(^11\) It is relational; a sociative union with God; the divine love affecting community.\(^12\) Wesley had an optimistic view of grace. Christians exhibiting a perfect love for God and man would lead to an end-time, widespread acceptance of the

\(^5\) Sangster, 47
\(^6\) Morris, 733-6
\(^7\) Morris, 736
\(^8\) Lincoln, 439
\(^9\) Morris, 735 n67
\(^10\) Stevens, 301
\(^12\) Walters, 164
Gospel. 590 Perfection was behavioural. In this regard, Wesley was moulded by his doctrine of Christian perfection which he brought to the text.

1 John 1: 7-10 was used as evidence for Christian perfection, but this text is not unequivocal. 591 Firstly, the Apostle here really speaks only of sin being washed by the blood of Jesus repeatedly and continually. It is ‘all’ sin since confession brings cleansing and believers are no longer condemned. 592 But this text does not speak of sin being totally destroyed in the life of the Christian in the literal sense Wesley used it. The Apostle is also tackling issues in his community brought about by a false view of Jesus Christ. Some with a ‘low’ Christology did not believe in His divinity and thus could not accept that He could offer atonement. Others with too ‘high’ a view of His person would not accept His humanity and therefore His ability to die for humanity. 593 The Apostle is thus stressing to His opponents that salvation and cleansing from sin “is a universal need which has been met in the sacrificial death of Jesus.” 594 Therefore, ‘all’ sin is removed in terms of the universality of the Cross, by Jesus who was a propitiation for the sins of “the whole world (1 John 2: 2).” 595 Secondly, these verses are polemical, possibly against early Gnostic influences which had pervaded the church. The Apostle is denouncing in strenuous terms the complacency of the secessionists in his community who assumed that they were ‘enlightened’ and so had already attained sinless ‘perfection.’

590 BE2, 494-5; Collins, Theology, 314-6
591 Sangster, 55
592 I. Howard Marshall: The Epistles of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 112
593 Stephen S. Smalley: 1, 2, 3 John (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 25
594 Smalley: 1, 2, 3 John, 26
1 John 3: 6-9 was also taken literally by Wesley, as was 1 John 5: 18. These verses seem to claim that Christians do not sin; “Sinneth not – so long as that loving faith abides in him, he neither speaks nor does anything which God hath forbidden.”\textsuperscript{596} Yet they appear to contradict the Apostle’s teaching in 1 John 8 and 10, as well as the normative experience of Christians. However, they cannot be understood primarily in either a grammatical or theological sense, but mostly in a situational one, through a “consideration of the background against which 1 John was written.”\textsuperscript{597} Another group of opponents seem to have become almost morally indifferent to sin – because they were ‘enlightened,’ holy living, became of little consequence. Sin was possible, but not an issue. John addresses this group in these verses,\textsuperscript{598} introducing the Devil to strengthen the polemic. This was the normal denunciation of opponents who schismed and wrecked the harmony of the community.\textsuperscript{599} Certainly, the Apostle seems to be addressing various groups in this epistle who “regarded perfection in different ways.”\textsuperscript{600}

John Wesley’s literal approach to these Epistle texts and his exegesis of them does not appear to take the above considerations into account. Wesley attempted to reconcile 1 John 3: 6-9 (and 1 John 5: 18) with 1 John 1: 7-10 in a way that does not do justice to the actual context of either passage above. Chapter one was handled by Wesley to mean pre-Christian sin: “Any child of man, before His blood has cleansed us.”\textsuperscript{601} The eighth verse is of the same sense as the tenth. The question is not whether “we have or have not sinned

\textsuperscript{596} 1 John 5: 18; Notes, 919
\textsuperscript{597} Smalley: 1, 2, 3 John, 162
\textsuperscript{598} Smalley: 1, 2, 3 John, 162
\textsuperscript{599} Grayston, 106
\textsuperscript{600} Smalley: 1, 2, 3 John, 163
\textsuperscript{601} Notes, 904
heretofore...neither of these verses asserts that we do sin, or commit sin now.”602 And the ninth verse explains both of the verses around it by moving onto confession. The Cross cleanses the believer from all sin as all have sinned and are in need of cleansing. To deny that we have sinned is to make God a liar; hence the need for confession, “that we may go and sin no more.”603 Here Wesley stresses the Apostle’s use of the present tense, “for he saith not, ‘the blood of Christ will cleanse...but it cleanseth’ at the time present.”604 And for Wesley this cleansing was complete – all unrighteousness was vanquished. Wesley took the Apostle literally. Even after this, however, believers “still...retain, even to our lives’ end, a deep sense of our past sins.” Verse 10 then refers to the memory of those pre-Christian sins committed in verse 8. In short, this first chapter describes pre-Christian sin, namely the child of man. The third chapter, describes the Christian; the child of God. Wesley concluded, “In conformity therefore, both to the doctrine of St. John, and to the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion: ‘A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin.’”605 So Wesley approached these texts being predisposed to his doctrine of Christian perfection which he then imposed upon them.

However, to make things that clear-cut would be to do Wesley an injustice. The Apostle also seems to be saying that sin is possible for the Christian but those who sin no longer abide in fellowship with the Son. Wilful sin is not inevitable. Indeed it is impossible for those constantly abiding in God; hence the seeming contradiction between 1 John 1 and 3. Sin is a relational malady more powerful than a mere temporary lapse.606 Sin is a conscious

602 BE2, 115
603 BE2, 116
604 Plain Account, s12
605 BE2, 116
606 Walters, 174
transgression against God and His people and this is what some of the schismatics in 1 John were accused of. Wesley, even if he did not respect context, did understand and adhere to the main tenet of the passage: sin only occurs when those born of God, fail to abide in fellowship with Him.

Moreover, there is also an eschatological aspect to these Johannine texts. From his Jewish background, the Apostle would have known that when “God inaugurates the age to come it will be characterized by perfection, and those found worthy of admission to it will be free from sin.” Therefore, in the light of the Christ event, 1 John expresses the possibility of a life delivered from sin. Yet Paul had to warn Christians who regarded themselves as ‘perfect’ and as already experiencing the age to come in all its fullness, that in fact they were living in a time of ‘overlap’ between the old age and the new. This period was still characterized by sin, temptation, imperfection and mortality – the new life in the Spirit could be grasped now and the Christian moulded into the likeness of Christ; but this process will only be completed at the consummation of all things. So the Apostle John also counters the assertions of those in his community who claimed to be free from sin. The Apostle is in fact describing “the eschatological reality, the possibility that is open to believers, which is both a fact (‘he cannot sin’) and conditional (‘[if he] lives in Him’). It is a reality which is continually threatened by the tensions of living in the sinful world, and yet one which is capable of being realized by faith.” Those in the community of God enjoy the fullness of God’s anointing now, but this fullness becomes greater through maturation and a deeper relationship with the Son. It is the “process of Love’s actualization in the world, an

607 Marshall, 182
608 Philippians 3: 8-17; 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11; 10: 1-13
609 Marshall, 182
610 Marshall, 182
eschatological relationship with God now consummated by Christ and imparted to those in His fellowship."\textsuperscript{611} Liberation from sin is being in the fellowship destined for humanity in the purpose of God.

1 John 2: 8 is important: “Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.”

If the ‘old’ commandment was the mutual love of which Jesus spoke and which believers had experienced ‘since the beginning’ (of their Christian experience), the commandment was ‘new’ in the sense that it was “continually being realized and actualized in the life of Jesus and His followers in the new age.”\textsuperscript{612} The commandment also ‘old’ in that there was a love for God; faith in Jesus made it ‘new.’ Loving neighbour as yourself was an ‘old’ commandment; the practice of loving one another in fellowship was ‘new.’\textsuperscript{613} One cannot have fellowship with God, without having fellowship with His people.\textsuperscript{614}

Jesus shows the reality of the new love of which this section speaks, namely the true love of God being ‘perfected’ in the believer.\textsuperscript{615} The darkness is going; the new era of Christian love is here and already shining. Yet darkness still remains and this is how the Apostle describes the ‘two ages’ which presently co-exist. And in this age, Christian obedience is characterized by love. But this love is not static. It is dynamic, hence the use of present tense language, being “constantly fulfilled in the experience of the Christian disciple.”\textsuperscript{616} So the Christian is to love and be perfected now, walking in the light and sharing this with others. Yet this age

\textsuperscript{611} Walters, 258
\textsuperscript{612} Marshall, 129
\textsuperscript{613} Grayston, 68
\textsuperscript{614} Marshall, 111-2
\textsuperscript{615} 1 John 2: 5
\textsuperscript{616} Smalley: I, 2, 3 John, 57
still anticipates the age to come. “The present tense of salvation is balanced by the future.”

So the Apostle in 1 John 3: 6-9 and 1 John 1: 7-10, seizes both upon the possibility of deliverance from sin and the danger of Christians succumbing to sin. Wesley does not specifically use 1 John 2: 8 as the backdrop to these verses, yet he saw the ‘new’ commandment as one instructing believers to love one another, knowing it to be ‘new’ in Christ and His people. He also realised the significance of the coming of Christ on the people of God: “For there is no comparison between the state of the Old Testament believers, and that which ye now enjoy: the darkness of that dispensation is passed away; and Christ the true light now shineth in your hearts.” Wesley therefore saw the eschatological reality of Christ’s coming in the present life of believers. His doctrine of Christian perfection was naturally rooted in the Johannine literature because of its present-tense experience. This was in some way an early offering of the ‘already-not yet’ tension understanding of eschatology developed by 20th century theologians.

Although 1 John was written to a specific body of believers in the late first century, Wesley saw both the Apostle’s ultimate focus as being wider than his intended recipients – all first century Christians. Ultimately though, the letter had a vast audience: all Christians in all ages. This gives us a vital insight into Wesley’s interpretation of Scripture generally. The Scriptures were a ‘means of grace.’ He did not interpret the texts critically, as has already been mentioned; but purely as a pastor. His main concern was always “how to land safe on

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617 Smalley: 1, 2, 3 John, 58  
618 Notes, 906  
619 Williams, 194  
620 Bullen, 184-5; BE3, 89
that happy shore." So Wesley “was always practical; he always spoke to the immediate situation. He always addressed himself to the needs of the hour.” So Wesley tended to approach texts as an evangelist. He also brought his doctrine of Christian perfection to the texts, often imposing it upon them, seizing upon the imperative mood and present tense language of the Apostle in order to defend his doctrine. But it could also be argued that Wesley was simply engaging in hermeneutics; objective exegesis will always proceed from an interpretative framework. The question is more about when this is acceptable and when it is not.

In fairness, if the Johannine texts are exegeted solely on their present tense language and imperative mood, ‘perfection’ – depending on how that word is defined - is attainable in the present life. Some have argued that for God to make demands of mere mortals which, in reality, they are totally incapable of fulfilling makes “nonsense of the moral passion of the New Testament.” However, nor do the New Testament writers claim overtly that either they were free from sin or that entire freedom from sin was possible. This is important, because Wesley insisted that not only was perfection possible on earth, but that knowing perfection was also possible. In fact, testifying to be this to be true was part of the experience. Wesley also had his own definition of sin. He certainly knew the pervasiveness of sin, nor did he ever diminish its seriousness or power, but he did define it “in a way that satisfied him,” enabling him to outline what entire sanctification was and was not. Yet taking the Johannine texts as a whole, nowhere does the Apostle allow for the narrower

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621 Sermon on Several Occasions 1746, Preface in BE1, 105-6
622 Turner, 228
623 So Sangster, 54
624 Collins: Scripture Way, 184
625 Bullen, 193
definition of sin as a ‘voluntary transgression of a known law.’ Indeed, “it remains true that
the Apostle is talking...about sin in general.” So Wesley did not prioritise the context of
these Johannine texts. Additionally, he often interpreted them too literally and could bring
his doctrine of Christian perfection to the texts, then imposing it upon them.

Yet Wesley certainly had a keen sense of the eschatological significance of these passages. It
was possible for Christians to live lives of perfected love for God and neighbour this side of
eternity. Entire sanctification was love replacing sin, and the image of God being renewed in
the life of the believer. Perfected love on earth was a preparation for their eternal
presence with God. For Wesley, a time was coming when there would be conversions to
Christ on an unprecedented scale before His return, evidenced by Christians enjoying
deliverance from sin now. The kingdom of God in Christ has so come into the world already
that believers are enabled by grace to live holy lives. Deliverance from known sin in this
life was a foretaste of that final and complete victory in the world to come. So, there is a
“possibility and necessity of a full and unreserved consecration” in this life. A love for God
is the final happiness of man and it fills him with a love for his fellow man. This is why
Wesley described present salvation using eschatological language, such as “the beginning of
heaven,” “a foretaste of eternal glory,” “walking in eternity,” “the beginning of heaven” and
“tasting of the powers of the world to come.” It is little surprise that Wesley seized upon

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626 Marshall, 179
627 Collins: Scripture Way, 177
628 Collins: Theology, 313-4
629 Bence, 52-3
630 Mercer, 61-2
631 Oden, 313
632 Lindström, 189
633 Bence, 52
the present tense language of the Apostle John.\textsuperscript{634} If any sin remains we are not cleansed from \textit{all} sin.\textsuperscript{635} This “is a blessing promised for this world and not just for eternity.”\textsuperscript{636} Only living a life free from sin is consistent with a perfect love of God. “Faith must be accompanied by love…as a living, saving principle.”\textsuperscript{637}

So Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection was consistent with the eschatological undercurrent of the Johannine literature. Indeed, “the call to be ‘perfect’ therefore…is a command given to living, not dead men. It would not have been commanded if impossible to fulfil.”\textsuperscript{638} Therefore these Johannine texts describe the “present Christian life, not merely an abstract description of a life that never happens.”\textsuperscript{639} Even though indwelling sin was destroyed in the entirely sanctified, they ought still to strive earnestly towards Christ-likeness and perfected love “that we may have boldness in the day of judgement; because as He is, so are we in this world (1 John 4: 17).” Believers must reflect the love which exists between Father and Son, however possible in this world, where “a complete likeness to Christ in the future is foreshadowed.”\textsuperscript{640}

If Wesley saw regeneration as deliverance from voluntary transgressions over a known law, then entire sanctification was cleansing from \textit{phronema sarkos} or indwelling sin. This was a foreshadowing of the sinlessness which would be enjoyed in the world to come. For Wesley, the possibilities in this life for the believer would also bring about global revival among non-

\begin{footnotes}
\item[634] Sangster, 49
\item[635] 1 John 1 : 7, 9
\item[636] McGonigle, 245
\item[637] Lindström, 199
\item[638] Oden, 331
\item[639] Oden, 331-2
\item[640] Smalley: 1, 2, 3 John, 259
\end{footnotes}
believers. Prevenient grace - given to all men, the free will God gave them to exercise that ability to respond to the Gospel, and then the preaching of that Gospel itself would lead to a widespread acceptance of it. And it was this Divine-human interaction which would intensify the ushering in of the eschatological era of Christian love around God’s world, which was already here in Christ.
Chapter 6 – Synergism

An important aspect of John Wesley’s eschatology was his synergistic soteriology. Here the whole question is raised between divine initiative and human agency in what has been described as Wesley’s “primary contribution to Western theology.” Wesley was seen to offer a third way between the “soteriological construal of West vs. East in terms of Pardon vs. Participation.” This third way was “Pardon in order to Participation.” Indeed, salvation for Wesley was not only a future hope, nor simply judicial in nature:

What is salvation? The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness...it is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death...it is not something at a distance: it is a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of...the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory.

And again,

By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy and truth. This implies all holy and heavenly tempers, and by consequence all holiness of conversation. Now, if by salvation we mean a present salvation from sin, we cannot say holiness is the condition of it; salvation, in this sense, and holiness are synonymous terms.

Thus, Wesley saw salvation as a deliverance from sin’s penalty, plague and presence. The latter had a particularly eschatological aspect for this led to the road of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection. What was perfected in heaven begins on earth in the present. This ‘realized’ or inaugurated eschatology also provides an insight into Wesley’s idea of future

641 Creasman, 69
642 Creasman, 69 n189 where he cites Albert Outler
643 BE2, 156
645 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 143
events, for both are inextricably intertwined. His ‘realized’ eschatology was born out of his doctrine of Christian perfection – it is possible for Christians to live lives of perfected love for God and neighbour this side of eternity. And he could not understand why anyone who claimed to love God should not yearn for this state. He asked, “Why should any man of reason and religion be afraid of, or averse to, salvation from all sin? Is not sin the greatest evil on this side of hell? And if so, does it not naturally follow that an entire deliverance from it is one of the greatest blessings on this side of heaven?” And this was to be a present reality. But with his characteristically optimistic view of grace, Wesley envisaged a widespread preaching of the Gospel and an extensive conviction of sin amongst mankind in the future. Indeed, Wesley believed this utopian era was already dawning.

Connected to all this is Wesley’s synergistic soteriology. God would not just do a mighty work globally; He would also do it individually. But He would also do both synergistically. Wesley, quoting Augustine, summed all this up beautifully, “Qui fecit nos sine nobis, non salvabit nos sine nobis: ‘He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves.’” It can be argued that the background to Wesley’s mature understanding of the relationship between grace and works finds its origins in his own evangelical experience at Aldersgate. Mankind was thus to participate in ‘working out their own salvation.’

It is important to understand, therefore, Wesley’s doctrine of original sin and how he viewed the state of ‘natural man.’ By ‘natural’ man, Wesley meant man totally apart from the grace of God. ‘Natural’ man’s condition for Wesley was very bleak indeed and one which

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646 BE3, 85
647 BE2; 490; BE3, 208
aligned Wesley closely with the Reformers. Indeed, Wesley could not have been clearer about ‘natural’ man’s condition,

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have this good will.⁶⁴⁸

Natural man is in “total darkness, blindness, ignorance of God, and the things of God.”⁶⁴⁹ But no man has been left to fester in the condition of sin, because God has restored their ability, exercised through free will, to respond to Him through an act of prevenient grace. Therefore, no man is without excuse because this grace enabled belief by restoring one’s ability to respond to the Gospel. Certainly prevenient grace, like saving grace, was resistible, but this work of God for all men meant, that despite their total depravity, there was no total inability in terms of being able to respond. This was a key difference between Wesley and the Calvinists. In fact, “no man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called ‘natural conscience.’ But this is not natural; it is more properly termed ‘preventing grace.’ Every man has a greater or less measure of this.”⁶⁵⁰ Indeed, “there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit that is wholly void of the grace of God.”⁶⁵¹ So it was possible for any man to come to faith in Christ. Wesley was totally “convinced of the primacy of Divine grace in the work of salvation...[but] found it important in his practical-theological activity to clarify the role of responsible human participation in this gracious work.”⁶⁵² A dynamic relationship between Divine grace and human response was thus central to Wesley’s soteriology.

⁶⁴⁸ Collins: Theology, 75 n175  
⁶⁴⁹ Notes, 16: Matt 1:16  
⁶⁵⁰ BE3, 307  
⁶⁵¹ BE3, 307  
⁶⁵² Maddox: Responsible Grace, 141
As stated, salvation was not merely a future hope for Wesley. Nor was it simply a momentary legal transaction ahead of eventual blessedness. For Wesley, salvation had three dimensions – immediate deliverance from the penalty of sin, progressive deliverance from the plague of sin and eschatological deliverance from the presence of sin. Wesley famously described the culmination of Aldersgate as him realising that his sins were taken away. But this was more than a mere juridical claim about pardon from the penalty of sin. Prior to Aldersgate, Wesley’s “driving passion had been to conquer the plague of sin” and be conformed to the model of Christ. Peter Böhler had led him to believe that this deliverance by simple faith could be instantaneous and would provide assurance of forgiveness from God. Two passages from Scripture on the morning of Aldersgate - 2 Peter 1: 4 and Mark 12: 34 - helped Wesley realise that he could both be a partaker of the Divine nature and that it could happen soon. Then a reading from Luther that night placed as much stress on the giving of a new heart by God’s grace to enable good works, as it did on forgiveness. The result would be full salvation from both the penalty and the plague of sin, even though he conceded that immediately after Aldersgate his “wound was not fully healed.”

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653 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 143  
654 BE18, 250  
655 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 144  
656 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 144  
657 BE18, 254
Wesley was now able to distinguish between “the instantaneous restoration of our responsive participation in God (the New Birth) and the resulting gradual therapeutic transformation of our own lives (sanctification proper).” Sin was the inherent problem of mankind. But this was not just the issue of guilt; sin was also debilitating whereby it afflicted the whole person. Therefore, salvation could never simply involve pardon from the penalty of sin; it had to involve healing from its plague also. But salvation would also need to involve a deliverance from the presence of sin because, although salvation is perfected in heaven, it is inaugurated here on earth. It is a present experience received now already as a foretaste and pledge of eternity; it is the end of faith.

And it is here where Wesley’s soteriology and eschatology again merge because if deliverance from the presence of sin in the life of the believer involved human co-operation with the Divine, then so did a person’s initial conversion. Men did not simply respond to God after they were converted. Despite their innate and total depravity, they were able to co-operate with the Divine prior to justification. It is here that Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace, namely grace that comes before or pre-venio, requires discussion. This was a “preliminary work of the Spirit in all humans enabling them to freely respond to God.” And Wesley believed in this prevenient grace of God being supplied to every man, so nobody needed to be left unable to respond to the Gospel. Whilst Wesley held to the inherent wickedness of mankind, this state was not the abiding experience of anyone,

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658 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 145
659 Notes, 374: 1 Peter 1: 9
660 Creasman, 70
unless they had fully quenched the Spirit, because of God’s universal ‘preventing grace.’ This allowed Wesley to hold in tension the Reformed doctrine of total depravity with his belief in human responsibility. The maxim “no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath” fully bears this out. Indeed, it has been said that Wesley held the vital truths of God’s work and our participation as “co-definitive of Christianity: without God’s grace, we cannot be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but un-coerced) participation, God’s grace will not save.”

For Wesley, “every salutary human action or virtue, from the earliest expression of faith to the highest degree of sanctification is grounded in the prior empowering of God’s grace.” Additionally, the saving work of God before justification allowed Wesley to deny the Calvinist doctrine of predestination as being a natural legacy of total depravity. Wesley, of course, believed grace to be enabling; it inspired but did not overpower. It demanded reaction. Wesley had been consistent on this issue since the early days of his preaching ministry. In the 1748 sermon, ‘The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God’ he wrote, “one who is born of God...who continually receives into his soul the breath of life from God, the gracious influence of his Spirit...by a kind of spiritual re-action returns the grace he receives in unceasing love.” Furthermore, Wesley’s “doctrine of grace as preventing, co-operant and sanctifying is hardly to be found...anywhere else in the body of Anglican divinity.” If God breathed into the human soul, then the human soul breathed back what

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661 BE3, 207
662 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 19. Maddox calls this ‘responsible grace.’
663 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 84
664 Williams, 44
665 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 86-7
666 BE1, 435-6
it had received from the Divine in a “re-action of the soul upon God.” Wesley continued this theme in sermons towards the end of his ministry also e.g. in the 1785 sermon, ‘An Israelite Indeed’. His text here was John 1: 47 and once more the co-operant nature of grace was obvious, “whoever improves the grace he has already received...will surely retain it...whereas whoever does not improve this talent cannot possibly retain it.”

Prevenient grace was thus co-operant in nature. His sermon ‘On Working Out Our Own Salvation’ is his classic articulation of his commitment to human agency in the process of salvation. The text for this 1785 sermon was Philippians 2: 12-13. Our participation had to be un-coerced. This did not point to any deficiency in God’s grace, somehow needing to be topped-up or supplemented by our own effort; on the contrary, this requisite human participation, not imposed upon us by God, in fact reinforces God’s sovereignty. Whilst individuals had to strive and be disciplined and thus self-effort was required, Wesley made it clear that this could only be done after God’s initial empowering grace had been bestowed upon them. Human endeavour is possible because of prevenient grace and then becomes imperative because of that grace. Failure to re-act to God’s gracious initiative would result in those overtures ceasing. No man, therefore, is without excuse.

Out of love, God does not force Himself upon any man. God will do the work in us preveniently, but we must then respond, “If God ‘worketh in you,’ then ‘work out your own salvation’...‘Your own’ – for you yourselves must do this, or it will be left undone forever. ‘Your own salvation’ – salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly)

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668 BE1, 442
669 BE3, 284
670 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 92
'preventing grace'; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning His will, and the first slight, transient conviction of having sinned against Him." And this was God’s desire for all men, not simply some. "The God of love is willing to save all the souls that He has made." These quotations came from the mature Wesley who had moved from a Gospel of moral rectitude, to one of faith alone and now, finally, to one of faith working by love. In this respect his theology came full circle from his seminal prose ‘The Circumcision of the Heart’ of 1733. So the late Wesley reaffirmed co-operation in salvation; this and subsequent holiness were a work of God’s grace but neither could be effected “apart from our responsive participation.”

Prevenient grace then, restored mans’ ability to respond to the Divine and to discern good and evil. It also allowed men to respond to God by exercising free will. A need for healing and forgiveness was not sufficient; men also had to have their liberty restored so they could respond to God and enjoy Him and His salvation once more. The alternative was the unpalatable Calvinist doctrines of irresistible grace and unconditional election. Prevenient grace was also resistible in the sense that constantly rejecting God’s overtures could result in our hearts being hardened, but the Divine instigator of it could never be driven from our lives. Prevenient grace was God’s initial move towards restoring a relationship with fallen humanity. Inherited guilt was moved, by virtue of the work of Christ and then partial healing of mans’ afflicted nature provided sufficient grace for fallen men to be able to respond to God. By this God invited a closer relationship with individuals. But these overtures, this

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671 BE3, 203
672 BE4, 148
673 Outler: BE4, 139
674 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 148
675 BE3, 559-563; BE4, 23-4; Maddox: Responsible Grace, 88 n165
offer, had to be accepted for “a grace-empowered relationship of co-operative and progressive transformation”\textsuperscript{676} to be commenced. And this grace was both universal and resistible. The opportunity was open to all; but their enjoyment of it was conditional upon their willing participation.

*Eschatology and Social Concern*

If human agency was involved in salvation, then it is little wonder that Wesley recognised the value of ‘good works.’ This is important, because while he rejected the idea of any saving merit within men themselves, he rejected strongly “the classical Protestant notion that heroic services...may be nothing more than ‘splendid sins.’”\textsuperscript{677} God not only works His salvation out in and beyond personal history but also in and beyond human history. God interacts synergistically with mankind, not only in regeneration but likewise in good works. This is why there was always a social aspect to Wesley’s eschatology also.

As an aside, using the term ‘synergist’ to describe Wesley is not without its controversy and there has been debate about this issue.\textsuperscript{678} Wesley was certainly not a ‘monergist’ if by that term is understood the Calvinistic interpretation of God’s power working alone, with any human endeavour being imposed irresistibly. But if that term simply means men being dependent upon God’s power in order to live in obedience to Him, then Wesley would have little issue with this. Moreover, if by ‘synergistic’ is inferred that humans initiate salvation or do so out of their own power, then Wesley would reject this. In this case, a wider definition

\textsuperscript{676} Maddox: Responsible Grace, 90  
\textsuperscript{677} Outler: BE3, 400  
\textsuperscript{678} Maddox: Responsible Grace, 91 nos. 182-7
of the term outlining “the preservation of a role for grace-empowered human co-operation in salvation”\textsuperscript{679} is clearly more apt. Indeed, it is this understanding of the term which is assumed here.

For Wesley, works of mercy were a means of grace. In his sermon ‘On Visiting the Sick’ published in 1786, he wrote “surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace.”\textsuperscript{680} Indeed, “by including works of mercy into the means of grace tradition, Wesley considered works of mercy as not only orthopraxis (good works), but a means that channels God’s grace for a deeper character formation of those who minister personally to the poor, the sick, and the needy in humility and meekness.”\textsuperscript{681} So eschatology for Wesley was a motivation for social action and good works. Indeed, good works were neither insignificant nor hindrances to salvation. Rather they were “the perfection of religion...the highest part of that spiritual building whereof Jesus Christ is the foundation,”\textsuperscript{682} despite the protestations of antinomians and Calvinists who labelled Wesley a papist or a crypto-Catholic for his stress on the importance of good deeds.\textsuperscript{683} Interestingly, Wesley even prioritised good works ahead of personal devotion, labelled ‘works of piety’ and ‘works of mercy.’ “Whenever...one interferes with the other, works of mercy are to be preferred.”\textsuperscript{684} Indeed, Christians should be “more zealous for ‘works of mercy’ than even for works of piety. Yet ought they to be more zealous still for holy tempers – lowliness, meekness, resignation; but most zealous of all for that which is the sum and perfection of

\textsuperscript{679} Maddox: Responsible Grace, 91
\textsuperscript{680} BE3, 385
\textsuperscript{681} Wong, 195-6
\textsuperscript{682} BE3, 405
\textsuperscript{683} Outler: BE3, 402
\textsuperscript{684} BE3, 314
Wesley’s synergism is evident in the union of personal eschatology and good works. Social concern and personal accountability at the final judgement were inseparable. So much so in fact that some have described Methodist piety as almost transgressing “the limits of legalism.”

Works were not only the fruit of genuine saving faith, but were part of the believer’s accountability at the judgment seat of Christ, when they would be asked, “‘How didst thou employ the worldly goods which I lodged in thy hands? Wast thou accordingly a general benefactor to mankind? Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the sick, assisting the stranger, relieving the afflicted according to their various necessities?’” So Wesley’s eschatology was also personal, resulting in interest and action in and for society. Here Wesley was at odds with the mystics who separated a love of God from a love of neighbour. No matter how wicked society was, Wesley would never sanction a piety segregated from it. “‘Holy Solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness.” Indeed, holiness was not simply avoiding evil. In his sermon ‘On the Wedding Garment’ he wrote,

How many take holiness and harmlessness to mean one and the same thing! Whereas were a man as harmless as a post he might be as far from holiness as heaven from earth. Suppose a man therefore to be exactly honest, to pay everyone his own, to cheat no man, to wrong no man, to hurt no man, to be just in all his dealings...yet all this, though it is good as far as it goes, is but a part of Christian holiness...What then is that holiness which is the true wedding garment, the only qualification for glory? ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy

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685 BE3, 319
686 Creasman, 71 n63
687 BE2, 295
688 Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739). Jackson: Works (CD), 14: No. 5
neighbour as thyself.’ In a word, holiness is the having ‘the mind that was in Christ,’ and ‘walking as Christ walked.’

Wesley believed in a proper balance between faith and works. Those who have the kingdom of grace within them automatically express its fruits “through living a responsible eschatological life in God’s created world. The inner dimension of the kingdom of grace is intrinsically related to its outer dimension, i.e. living out the fruits of sanctification.”

Again, this is sanctification and eschatology going hand in hand for Wesley. Justice, peace, hope and joy flow naturally from those living out the kingdom of grace, bringing about soothing and healing to the present world, so wounded by sin, pain and misery. Here eschatology in the lives of believers ushers in renewal in the here and now as a foreshadowing to the new creation when all things will be made new.

So part of Wesley’s eschatological vision was to spread “the Reign of God in individual lives, social structures and creation at large.” Individually, Wesley was also concerned about his people. He desired that they live holy lives and developed the General Rules for Methodists as part of some character-building disciplines on how to do so. In terms of creation, he not only foresaw a widespread preaching and acceptance of the Gospel which would transform lives, he also urged for the humane treatment of animals and a respect for the ecology of the planet in the present, as part of “affirming God’s ultimate purpose of restoring all creation.”

He also foresaw their re-admission into the new heavens and new earth as part of his wider belief in the balance between Divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

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689 BE4, 146-7
690 Wong, 171
691 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 243
692 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 246
These personal and ecological ethics are mentioned only in passing to illustrate how Wesley’s present eschatology would impact the new heavens and the new earth.

Death was merely a transition into an eternal life which would continue long after the destruction or renewal of the present earth. But, again, we see this most acutely in the area of Wesley’s social ethics. Holiness was not simply the character of the individual but also the welfare and justice of others in a corporate context. Wesley’s concern for society stemmed from his tenaciously held belief that everything ultimately belongs to God; men are to use these resources as God directs and that this use ought to meet not only our needs but also those of our families and others in want. Indeed, wasting money on luxuries and spending excessively on ourselves is nothing short of robbing God.693

Property and wealth can be accumulated by means consistent with social responsibility, but there must still be an emphasis on self-denial in what one does accumulate and any such accumulation must only be sufficient to meet our own needs; excess must be used to meet the needs of our neighbours, the poor and the community at large. This was social responsibility and formed the basis for his sermon ‘The Use of Money’ midway through his ministry in which he taught ‘Gain all you can...save all you can...give all you can.’ Neither God nor our own consciences would provide peace unless we be “faithful stewards...[and] manage the Lord’s goods...[and] employ whatever God has entrusted you with in doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree, to the household of faith, to all men.”694

693 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 244
694 BE2, 279
The later Wesley seems to have moved away from “his inherited model of self-sufficiency”\textsuperscript{695} to one which consistently mirrored his belief in the Reign of God on earth. His doctrine of prevenient grace would reject a “dichotomy between ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ forms of achieving God’s purposes.”\textsuperscript{696} But a note of caution should be expressed here in terms of Wesley’s millennialism. He foresaw the first millennium as being a golden age for the Gospel. But this did not mean that he foresaw it as being characterised by Christianity taking over political institutions and imposing itself on society. He did not see this 1000 year period as being one of political action, as well as spiritual advancement, as was the case with later postmillennialism.\textsuperscript{697} Wesley remained a political conservative – although he campaigned for the abolition of slavery - but he would see the spread of the Gospel impacting on society at large. Governments should do all they could to inhibit evil; but advancements in society would only come through regenerated lives and this was God’s work. But through His prevenient grace men were empowered to respond to Him and then freely engage in social action for the well-being of His created order.

Indeed, Wesley in his sermon ‘The Good Steward’ (1768) attested to the fact that man has a responsibility to act as a steward of God’s creation. The situation of humanity in God’s created earth is illustrated by the kind of service which God expects from His creatures to each other. A steward is not free to use what is placed in his hands as the steward so

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{695} Maddox: Responsible Grace, 245
\item \textsuperscript{696} Maddox: Responsible Grace, 245 n100
\item \textsuperscript{697} The later 19\textsuperscript{th} century Social Gospel has been seen by many as a servant of the Church, nurturing peace and justice through the work of the Spirit in areas such as legal justice, inequality, liquor, crime, racial tensions, slums, bad hygiene, child labour, weak labour unions, poor schools and war prevention, e.g. Rauschenbush. Social reforms then were a natural result of this postmillennial eschatology. But some more unsympathetic and cynical descriptions of the Social Gospel have seen it as Christian ethics almost being imposed on society, whereby the second coming could not happen until humankind rid itself of social evils by human effort. In this view, the Church was thus seen as a controlling agent, similar to that envisaged by modern Dominion Theology. I am grateful to Professor Randy Maddox at Duke Divinity School for his private e-mail correspondence on this issue. 13 January, 2011
\end{itemize}
pleases; only as his Master pleases. Similarly, he has not the right to dispose of anything placed in his hands. Again, that act must only be done according to the will of the Creator. Man is not the proprietor of those things placed under his care because they have merely been entrusted to him by Another; there are conditions attached. All things shall only be managed by the steward “as his Master orders. Now this is the case of every man with relation to God.” And this is because “we are now indebted to Him for all we have.” Indeed, everything about a man’s being should be used only for the glory of God, who has provided all things. “Our souls, our bodies, our health, our strength, our understanding, our thoughts, our imagination, our memory, our beauty, our time, our talents, our goods, all the honours which we enjoy, all the power which we exercise, and all the influence which we have over others have all come from God and continue to belong to God.”

Responsible stewardship then is an outward expression of an inner work of grace. It defines eschatological living, separating real Christians from the world in a spirit of gratitude and accountability towards the Creator, from Whom they merely lease their resources. This also acts as a witness to the fallen world in which they live. This is especially true with money, which Wesley considered as “one admirable instance of the wise and gracious providence of God.” Amidst warnings of its flagrant misuse, Wesley still saw money “of unspeakable service to all civilized nations in all the common affairs of life. It is a most compendious instrument of transacting all manner of business and of doing all manner of good...an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends.”

698 BE2, 283
699 BE2, 283
700 Wong, 173
701 BE2, 267
702 BE2, 268
Here then is another point where eschatology and soteriology became inseparable for Wesley. Good works and civic concern were not to be added to the Christian life; they were a central part of it. And this stemmed from Wesley’s firm belief in synergism - human collaboration working in tandem with God’s grace and end-time judgment being a religious motivation for good works in the present. Working through His Church, God would not only transform individual lives but also the structures of society of which they were a part. It was never simply either souls or society which needed saving; for Wesley it was both.703

Eternity In Time

This was consistent with Wesley’s golden age millennial view and demonstrates that, in his metaphysics, the boundaries of time and eternity were thus blurred through “a dynamic merger of concern for personal salvation and social activism.”704 Time and eternity are unified and there was a huge motivation for good works in the world because it was the world, and not just individuals in it, that God was redeeming. And this synergism was a natural consequence of a ‘realized’ eschatology whereby eternal life, through Christ, had broken into the present world already.

Wesley’s view was that God will not save the lost without themselves. God’s grace is not irresistibly imposed upon his creatures but assists them, and they then exercise free will in response.705 Therefore, grace is both co-operant and resistible. This divine-human interaction or synergism is a clue to Wesley’s non-apocalyptic, prophetic approach to

703 Creasman, 79
704 Creasman. 78 n223
705 Outler: John Wesley, 33
eschatology. God will not act unilaterally by destroying mankind in some apocalyptic interruption in time and history, as occurred in the Flood, but will interact with mankind to preserve it by bringing about wholesale repentance.  

The ‘logic’ of Wesley’s later millennialism raises questions about the “destruction – recreation” model. Certainly he could not dismiss the destruction of the earth as his exposition of 2 Peter 3: 7-13 demonstrates. He certainly took this passage to mean that the earth, sun, moon and stars would be dissolved and that the new creation would be “raised as it were out of the ashes of the old; we look for an entire new state of things.” And this seems to be consistent with his view outlined in his sermon ‘The Great Assize’ published in 1758. However, even there despite the destruction, Wesley remained open to the possibility of the conservation of basic matter to some degree. But his later views would suggest a change of emphasis, perhaps coinciding with his more mature understanding of the millennia which would precede the new heavens and the new earth.

In 1787, he abridged the Swiss naturalist Charles Bonnet’s ‘Conjectures Concerning the Nature of Future Happiness’ (1785), which emphasized that there must be some ‘seed’ or ‘germ’ in the human that is not destroyed but blossoms in the next life. Wesley described Bonnet’s work as “one of the most sensible tracts I have ever read.” Both Bonnet and

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706 Creasman suggests that Wesley believed in the “destruction of creation” and cites his sermon ‘Human Life A Dream.’ This is a late sermon, dated 1789, and so would be interesting in the light of Wesley’s belief in a worldwide acceptance of the Gospel written of elsewhere. But this sermon does not explicitly talk of creation being destroyed and Wesley here is talking there of someone looking at earth from the vantage point of being in the spirit world and of human life on this earth as being a dream of sorts compared to the reality of life after death, wherever it is spent. BE4, 108-119; Creasman, 42 n100
707 Notes, 899
708 BE1, 367-8 n87
Wesley also seemed to imply that ‘primitive’ elements of the body, i.e. the animal or terrestrial, may be destroyed but the spiritual, ethereal or glorious body would be transported “from one world to another.”Bonnet even hinted that he hoped in the next life to move from one planet to the next, exploring the glories of God’s creation! Indeed, the “spiritual and celestial body...shall succeed the perishable body.” Furthermore, they stressed that “death is not a break in the chain: it is the link which connects the two lives.” In short, human attributes would continue to develop and progress in the life to come. So there seemed to be an unresolved tension in Wesley’s later thought about how the fate of the present earth and the new creation would manifest itself.

It is safest to say that Wesley never reached a firm conviction on this but that the later Wesley, in keeping with his optimistic vision of God doing a restoring work individually, in society and in creation at large, would possibly have understood the present earth to be renewed, rather than destroyed. Certainly this was more in keeping with Wesley’s concern that “the therapeutic grace of God was now truly universal (reaching all creation) and truly responsible (allowing for continual growth in responsiveness and transformation)” even to the new creation. This was cosmic redemption. Eschatology then, for Wesley, is simply part of the whole salvation process; “the entirety of God’s redemptive activity from the resurrection to the consummation of all things.”

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710 Abridgment of Bonnet, 20-1
711 Abridgment of Bonnet, 22
712 Abridgment of Bonnet, 23
713 Wesley himself had hinted at this as early as 1763 when he said that the perfect could grow in grace “not only while they are in the body, but to all eternity.” Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection. Jackson: Works (CD), 11: Question 29
714 Bence, 52
One could argue against parts of the following thesis that, “Wesley’s approach to eschatology is more practical than theological, more individualistic than corporate, more futuristic than present. Also, his general understanding of Biblical eschatology is highly literalistic, which is typical of the eschatology of his day. His view is likewise ‘apocalyptic’, but without forfeiting the social emphasis.”\textsuperscript{715} Certainly there are apocalyptic aspects to Wesley’s eschatology in terms of his understanding of judgement and Hell, but he did not hold to the implicit fatalism which characterised either some of the eschatologies of his day, nor later Dispensationalism. Wesley did not see the Church Age descending into chaos with redemption simply coming beyond history. He believed God would act through the Church now in present time and history. Secondly, it can be accepted that Wesley’s eschatology was more practical than theological, as shown above. However, it can be questioned whether Wesley’s focus was more individualistic than corporate, as has been shown, and certainly whether his eschatology was more futuristic than present. In fact, his ‘realized’ and present-tense understanding of God’s work was a hallmark of his eschatology.

As demonstrated, the major aspect of this ‘realized’ eschatology, which emphasized preparation for the end as providing motivation in the present, was Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection. And this was another example of synergism at work. The Reformers had claimed that justification took place solely on Christ’s righteousness (\textit{solus Christus}) being imputed to the believer in a judicial sense and being appropriated by faith alone (\textit{sola fide}). No human merit could be involved in salvation and the believer in and of himself remained a guilty sinner (\textit{simul iustus et peccator}). In a sense Christ’s righteousness covered his guilt. But this was not sufficient for Wesley. At justification, the believer had

\textsuperscript{715} Mercer, 63-4
righteousness imparted to him by means of the indwelling Spirit and, through participation with Him, could achieve actual righteousness, rather than simply the legal status of righteousness. The believer was not inherently righteous but righteousness could nevertheless be achieved through co-operation with the Holy Spirit. For Wesley then, righteousness was not merely imputed, but imparted also. Despite opposition from many, such as Count Zinzendorf, Wesley stood firm. The Moravian leader had claimed that anyone who believed in inherent righteousness was denying Christ and even that Wesley had changed his religion! But Wesley responded that through imparted righteousness Christians became or were made righteous by participating with “Christ’s own Spirit that works in true Christians to achieve their perfection.”

Interestingly, Wesley neither affirmed nor denied the inherency of mans’ righteousness in this dialogue with Zinzendorf. But one can become bogged down with semantics here, as Wesley himself conceded. Indeed, meanings can fluctuate over time and in different contexts. In this regard, there is room for some ambiguity in the word ‘inherently.’ One could argue that it means that believers are either ‘actually’ righteous or ‘actually and independently’ righteous. Wesley it seems had the former meaning in mind and so would not deny that a Christian was inherently or ‘actually’ righteous. Certainly Wesley would deny any semi-Pelagian definition which insinuated inherent human righteousness which was independent of God’s grace. Human righteousness for Wesley was not latent. Indeed, he utterly opposed any form of antinomianism based on the error that because Christians were given the imputed righteousness of Christ, they could sin wilfully without affecting their

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716 Outler: John Wesley, 367
717 Outler: John Wesley, 369
718 Outler: John Wesley, 370
719 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 91 nos. 181, 188
standing in Christ. This could only lead to debauchery and licentiousness. So Wesley would not deny that Christians were 'inherently' or 'actually righteous.' But they were not independently so. They still had to confess involuntary transgressions but it was hoped they would not daily deliberately, flagrantly and openly disobey the law of God. This he made clear. The merits of Christ were still needed and “sin is only suspended in them [Christians]; it is not destroyed.” In short, Christians were therefore not righteous in and by themselves. They were only righteous as they continued to abide in Christ in a synergistic relationship and participate in His perfect righteousness. Indeed, those who did had an even greater sense of their need for Him, as Wesley wrote, “Every moment, Lord, I want the merit of thy death!”

In summary, the Divine was interacting even with the unregenerate through prevenient grace, enabling them to respond to Him in repentance through the mechanism of free-will which He had given them. Additionally, in a synergistic relationship between God and believers, Christians could work towards their perfection. This was the eternal world already breaking into human existence with the earthly lives of God’s people experiencing, in part, the world to come. So for Wesley, the lives of believers in this world took on an “eschatological dimension precisely because those experiencing salvation were participating in the eternal life of God” in the here and now.

720 I am grateful to Dr Tom Noble of Nazarene Theological College, Manchester for his guidance on the issue of what Wesley meant by the word ‘inherent.’ Private e-mail correspondence. 12 January, 2011
721 Plain Account, s26
722 Plain Account, s26
723 Creasman, 77 n221
John Wesley believed in a literal millennium, although a case can be made for arguing that Wesley’s millennial eschatology evolved and developed over time. Certainly the sermon evidence seems to back up this claim. But certainly in his later ministry he was settled on the notion of a millennium. He saw this written in the pages of Revelation 20 and therefore was comfortable with the fact that the millennium would occur. There is no hint either that Wesley saw the 1000 year period therein described as Biblical figurative language for a vague lengthy period. Not only would there be a millennium it would last one thousand years and Wesley believed that he was living on the cusp of it. This millennial understanding was contrary to the amillennial eschatology which had dominated Church history since Augustine. Of course, more accurately Wesley believed in two millennia, with the second period commencing straight after the first.

This thesis has demonstrated that there is very little premillennialism in John Wesley. Certainly some of the language he used and the conversations he had could, on the surface, appear premillennial. But many of the texts quoted could equally be used to promote a postmillennial position and the limited dialogue he had about the millennium with others needs to be seen in context. Wesley agreed with those who taught a millennium, but he did not necessarily endorse the premillennial position they may have held. Some have also tried to label Wesley a premillennialist because they read that scheme into Bengel. This may be, in part, because Bengel’s millennialism does allow for a ‘return’ of Christ in some form in 1836, followed by the two 1000 year periods. But this thesis has clearly demonstrated that Bengel did not believe in an actual and literal return of Christ in 1836, and this was
fundamental to historical premillennialism. The *parousia* took place only at the end of the double millennium. Only then would Jesus return personally and physically. Thus Bengel can never be neatly fitted into a premillennial category. Moreover, given Wesley’s heavy reliance on Bengel for his own millennial conclusions, any argument which claims Wesley to have been a premillennialist is thoroughly unconvincing. And, of course, Wesley never endorsed Bengel’s 1836 speculation anyway; only his idea of two millennia.

If one defines postmillennialism *chronologically only*, then Wesley could be seen as a postmillennialist; he believed in the return of Christ *after* the millennium. But one cannot make swift millennial judgements on Wesley precisely because of his heavy use of Bengel’s millennial model. Following Bengel, Wesley believed in two successive millennial periods. In classic postmillennialism, the millennium is characterised by a period of Church growth on earth, during which there is widespread spiritual revival. This is certainly in keeping and consistent with Wesley’s first millennial epoch. But Wesley’s second millennium, is more similar in character to an amillennial understanding of Revelation 20 in that its focus is on the saints reigning in heaven, with events on earth being one of constant struggle for the Church. Of course, this second millennium is literal and future, not the present Church age and so the comparison with amillennialism ends here. But the point is this: events on earth during Wesley’s second millennium do not share this classic postmillennial optimism. In fact, the era of the widespread preaching and acceptance of the Gospel message which Wesley

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724 Some postmillennialists believe that the millennium is yet in the future. Other postmillennialists believe the millennium to be the present Church Age. The difference between this latter group and amillennialists is that the Church Age is being, or will be, characterised by worldwide conversions and Church growth, with the earth enjoying spiritual improvement before Jesus’ return. This will then have a positive effect on society at large. Their focus is more earthly; amillennialists do not necessarily share this optimism and, for them, the events of Rev 20 occur in heaven. Some postmillennialists believe in a literal thousand year period, others think that Rev 20 denotes merely a lengthy period of time.
envisaged, would be ancient history by the time Christ returned; it would be a thousand years in the past. So the character of the millennium which occurs just before Jesus’ return in Wesley’s thought is vastly different from the millennium envisaged by postmillennialists.

Certainly Wesley believed in ‘latter-day’ glory during a millennium and the nature of his first millennium is consistent with classic postmillennialism in its belief that God’s power will manifest itself through His Church and usher in a prolonged period of grace on earth, resulting in mass conversions to Christ. Society at large and creation itself will also share in this blessing. Moreover, the parousia chronologically follows this utopian period. But for Wesley, Jesus’ returns after millennia not after a single millennium, and this is inconsistent with the postmillennial belief in a golden age because events on earth during the second millennia become brutal. Wesley’s sermons which envisage ‘latter-day’ glory all focus on the first millennium, not the second. Because of this, the sermon evidence has often been interpreted in a way that leans towards a postmillennial bias in Wesley. It is also unwise to use post-19th century eschatological language and models and impose them on an 18th century evangelist who would have been unfamiliar with their meaning.

Generally, the term ‘millenarian’ came to mean ‘chiliast’ or premillennialist, although it can also conceivably be appended to those who hold to postmillennialism.\textsuperscript{725} Normally it has this narrower ‘either...or’ definition in that one is either an amillennialist or a chiliast, namely a premillennialist. But the term ‘millenarian’ requires a broader definition when it is used to describe Wesley, and by extension Bengel. The term ‘millenarian’ should be defined more vaguely to describe their belief in a literal millennium generally – or in their case a

\textsuperscript{725} “Millenarianism” in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Eds.): The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (New York: Oxford University Press. 2nd edition, 1990), 916
double millennium - whatever its nature and wherever it fits in their eschatological timetable. Using this broader definition, it is thus wisest to label John Wesley a ‘millenarian.’

Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection was heavily influenced by the Johannine literature and its present-tense theology. It is here that entire sanctification and his eschatology are inextricably linked. Of course, Wesley would never have used the term ‘eschatology’ nor would his understanding of the end-times and how they impinge on the present be as formally developed as they are today. However, eschatology for Wesley began with God working preveniently and synergistically in humanity in an act of resistible grace. Convincing grace then became the first step proper to salvation; namely repentance before justification. Those who responded to this wooing of God then became a new creation of God, through His justifying grace. Then, by God’s sanctifying grace it was possible for believers to be perfected and entirely delivered from sin in the present life. Throughout this way of salvation, Christians are open to the infusion of God’s love, which provides healing through the purging of sin so that the image of God is restored in them.

In Wesley’s writings the term “kingdom” referred to eternal glory, inward religion, or the gospel dispensation. For Wesley, it was both a state on earth and a state in heaven; both the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of glory. “The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are but two phrases for the same thing. They mean, not barely a future, happy state in heaven, but a state to be enjoyed on earth.” The kingdom on earth was the perfecting of

726 Lindström, 113
727 Wong, 2
728 Deschner, 143
the Christian and the gathering of a redeemed society, which occurs through regeneration, apportioned by the victory of Christ over death.

This is why Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection is crucial to his understanding of the first millennium. Entire sanctification was not only worked within the individual, but anticipated the eschatological victory of Christ on earth, even in the present age. Coming with power at Pentecost, the kingdom spread throughout the world as the gospel was proclaimed and accepted with the moral law of God being obeyed. As for the kingdom in heaven, this "involves the eternal perfecting of the saints, as they move from one level of glory to another and a continuation of the society which Christ formed on earth. Both states comprise one kingdom."  

Wesley’s ‘realized’ eschatology was inward holiness reaching out to a social holiness; inward religion as a foretaste of perfection and social religion as a present realization in part of the future, consummated kingdom of God,  

Christianity...is ‘inward holiness, a purity in heart; this he urged against the chill Deism and formal church-going. Christianity is equally ‘a social religion,’ so much so that to ‘turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it;’ this he declared in opposition to all forms of mysticism which were in effect a retreat from the obligations and privileges of neighbourliness and from ‘commerce’ with one’s fellows. His teaching on Perfect Love is only rightly understood when these truths are considered together.  

This life of new creation was characterised by a thirsting for God’s sanctifying grace. Christians should yearn for this sanctifying grace for several reasons. Although the believer

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729 Reasoner, 243 n13
730 Mercer, 58
is justified, they are not thereby sanctified. Sin remains in them.\textsuperscript{732} Wesley maintained that only “holiness completes what forgiveness begins.”\textsuperscript{733} God seeks not only to forgive and reconcile men. He desires believers to grow in grace and continue after perfection in the entire gradation of Christian sanctification until they are formed in Christ. The justified believer is “indeed ‘born again’... as a ‘newborn babe he gladly receives the... sincere milk of the word, and grows thereby’...in the might of the Lord his God, from faith to faith, from grace to grace, until he comes unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”\textsuperscript{734} Sanctifying grace forms and shapes the Christian in the light of the glory of the kingdom of heaven.

Salvation then can be seen as an eschatological-teleological process. It is never completed after justification. It continues until God’s salvific work is completed in the kingdom of glory. It is “the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory.”\textsuperscript{735} Salvation is pardon, holiness and heaven, or salvation begun, continued and finished.\textsuperscript{736} Wesley thus laid stress on God’s sanctifying work in the present being consummated in the future. Sanctification now is preparation for glorification in the new creation. And this sanctifying work of God would only increase throughout the world through a general spread of the Gospel, creating the golden age of spiritual revival which Wesley believed would manifest itself during the first millennium. And the onset of this first thousand year period he understood to be imminent.

\textsuperscript{732} BE1, 350  
\textsuperscript{733} Wong, 79 n5  
\textsuperscript{734} BE1, 124-5  
\textsuperscript{735} BE2, 156  
\textsuperscript{736} Outler: John Wesley, 159
Wesley triumphed the possibility of instantaneousness\textsuperscript{737} in the eschatological-teleological process of entire sanctification. Nevertheless, he also conceded that it could take time and gradual development to restore the distorted image of God and to form Christ-likeness of mind in the life of the believer. John’s first epistle, with its threefold distinction of believers, from little children, to young men and then on to fathers in the Christian faith was important to Wesley.\textsuperscript{738} There was often a gradual development in degrees love, peace, joy, self-denial, and sincerity, as well as degrees of God’s favour, faith and assurance.\textsuperscript{739} Indeed, “both inward and outward holiness can also be expressed in degrees.”\textsuperscript{740} An eschatological pilgrimage of Christian maturation is in view. However, this was not merely ascending steps to heaven; it was “an earth-grounded pilgrimage toward God with both the eschatological hope that our original righteousness will be restored and the teleological vision that seeing God face to face will one day be realized when believers are glorified in the new heaven and new earth.”\textsuperscript{741} And so Christians were to live eschatologically because those who had a genuine experience of inward holiness would express it in lives of outward holiness.

In envisaging a widespread acceptance of the Gospel, Wesley believed that the first millennium, which he was living on the cusp of, would be characterised by this state of spiritual utopia. The ushering in of the millennium would occur because Christians were being perfected; an “experience of faith purifying the soul from all sinful tempers and issuing in love to God and man,”\textsuperscript{742} brought about by a reign of grace in and through the

\textsuperscript{737} Certainly from around 1763-5; McGonigle, 257
\textsuperscript{738} BE2, 105
\textsuperscript{739} Lindström, 120-1
\textsuperscript{740} Lindström, 121
\textsuperscript{741} Wong, 81
\textsuperscript{742} McGonigle, 256
Church. Those in whom the kingdom of grace was present do God’s will on earth by the transforming power of the Spirit; and so heaven is thus anticipated on earth.\footnote{Maddox: \textit{Responsible Grace}, 240 n55 quoting Charles Wesley}

But Wesley also knew that this state would not continue because the nature and character of men on earth would once more decline when the first millennium ended. This needs to be emphasised, lest an inaccurate view of Wesley’s millennial eschatology be formed. There would be no ‘latter-day’ glory on earth immediately before the \textit{parousia}. Indeed, a thousand year period would elapse between this era of revival and the Lord’s return. This is why caution must always be exercised when attempting to place Wesley into modern day millennial categories. Nevertheless, Wesley focused mostly on the first millennium because it was here where God’s transforming power would be experienced in all its glory. There would be an interior transformation in the individual lives of Christians being entirely sanctified, which would result in a transformation of society leading to widespread spiritual revival. And this is where heaven and earth would meet. This truly would be the ‘joy of earth to heaven come down!’\footnote{Wesley, Charles: \textit{Love Divine, All Loves Excelling}}
Appendix A – Eschatological Terminology

The purpose of this appendix is not to provide an overly in-depth analysis of eschatological models or the history of eschatological and millennial thought throughout church history, although both will be touched upon. Rather, this appendix hopes to define in brief some of the most common words and terms which have, from around the nineteenth century onwards in particular, become familiar to those interested in the end-times. Only very general and simple definitions will be given in order to facilitate the comprehension of terminology used in this area of theology. This appendix therefore does not aim to be complicated or convoluted and intends to keep complex definitions and descriptions to a minimum.

Eschatology

The word eschatology itself is derived from the Greek words εσχατος meaning ‘last’ and λόγος meaning ‘discourse’ and is thus the doctrine of the last things. The term was apparently only first used in England in 1844, and then in an unfavourable light because the end times had little place in the traditional accounts of Jesus life and ministry, other than in what was yet to happen at the end of all things. Indeed, when the eschatological predictions of the New Testament were not fulfilled in the literal sense as expected by the first Christians, with their expectation of an imminent parousia, then the tendency was simply to say that, since the day and hour was not known, it could happen at any moment. Accompanying this was the warning that believers must live their lives with the expectation

745 “Eschatology” in Oxford Dictionary, 469
that Jesus could return immediately. Others proposed allegorical meanings to Biblical teaching on the last things or interpreted eschatological predictions individually, rather than cosmically.

With the rise of higher criticism in the nineteenth century, Jesus’ use of the phrase ‘kingdom of God’ came under closer scrutiny. If Jesus did not necessarily mean the Christian church as it evolved in history then it came to refer to an immanental kingdom; a spiritual one enjoyed by the followers of Jesus. This idea was part of the quest for the historical Jesus to be stripped off the “dogmatic constructions of the early church.” Thus descriptions of impending cataclysm and prophecies of future woes were no more than a by-product of the apocalyptic atmosphere of which the early Church was a part. Therefore eschatology, and indeed Christology and ecclesiology, were merely “part of the dispensable wrappings in which the Jesus of history was encased.”

But in 1892 Johannes Weiss attempted to again emphasize a consistent eschatological interpretation of the Gospel accounts, believing that Jesus’ central mission was the proclamation of an imminent, transcendental kingdom of God with Christ Himself as God’s Messiah. And Albert Schweitzer in the early twentieth century adopted a futurist eschatology which understood Jesus as expecting an imminent end of the world. Finding previous attempts at uncovering the real historical Jesus to be insufficient, his The Quest of

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747 The ‘Four Last Things’
748 Hanson: “Eschatology” in Christian Theology, 184
749 Hanson”Eschatology” in Christian Theology, 184
750 “Weiss, Johannes” in Oxford Dictionary, 1464
the Historical Jesus interpreted Christ’s life on the basis of a “thoroughgoing eschatology.” Here, Jesus was mistaken in expecting an imminent end and so concluded that He Himself must suffer and die to save His people from the impending tribulation preceding the final days. Eschatology was key to a proper understanding of His life. Jesus initially did not envisage a Church Age whereby there would be an interval between his death and the consummation of the age to come, originally believing that sending out the Twelve would bring to consummation the approaching eschatological climax. When this did not materialise Jesus decided to take upon Himself the apocalyptic woes which would then allow God to usher in the New Age. Schweitzer maintained that either Jesus is seen the light of his theory of consistent eschatology or critical scholarship is forced once more “to relapse into almost total scepticism about the life and significance of Jesus.”

By contrast, in the 1930s C. H. Dodd’s ‘realized’ eschatology saw the kingdom as a present power and already accessible. In Christ, the eschaton had already arrived. Jesus’ life, teaching, ministry, death and resurrection were the coming of the kingdom. In this sense He both ushered in the kingdom and was the kingdom. Focusing mainly on the parables, Dodd argued that Jesus was little concerned about the future with many of the apocalyptic prophecies found in the Gospels being implanted by the early Church. Others have proposed an ‘inaugurated’ eschatology; Jesus saw the kingdom as associated with His ministry but knew it would not be fully revealed and in operation until after His death and vindication. Certainly the New Testament supports this form of ‘realized’ eschatology in that the most

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751 Schweitzer, Albert in Oxford Dictionary, 1248
752 Hanson, p184
753 Hanson, “Eschatology” in Christian Theology, 185; Oxford Dictionary, 470
important eschatological event has already happened in Christ\textsuperscript{754} but with the clear belief in an ‘already but not yet’ tension because the full consummation of this present age is yet to come.

**Interpretative Approaches to Revelation**

Of course, the time of the end has throughout history brought fervent Adventist speculation. Many have attempted to predict the time of the *parousia*, only to alter their eschatological predictions to another time or to claim a ‘spiritual’ advent when their calculations have proven to be mistaken. Linked with Adventism is Millenarianism or Chiliasm. This is a belief in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth before the consummation. But the millennium is only part of Revelation and it is worthwhile to examine the various ways in which the book is read generally.

The preterist interpretative approach to Revelation tends to take two forms. The first requires an early dating of the Revelation itself with the book being a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in 70CE. Apostate Israel helped Rome in persecuting Christians and is ‘Babylon the Great.’ A major problem with this approach is that it limits the prophecies of salvation and judgment to only a few years up to 70CE. The prophecies are also limited to only unbelieving Israel, whereas Daniel 2 and 7, which are alluded to throughout Revelation, anticipate universal judgment. The second preterist interpretation extends the time-frame by a few centuries. The Roman Empire is ‘Babylon the Great’ and is the persecutor of the saints of God which would fall in the 5th century CE. Revelation thus encourages believers with the

\textsuperscript{754} 1 Cor 10: 11; Hebrews 6: 5
assurance that their tormenters would be judged. Certainly Rome is a more viable ‘Babylon’ than Jerusalem and this form of preterism does not require an early dating of the book. Yet it still rules out any scope for many of the book’s prophecies having a future fulfilment. 755

The **historicist** approach has Revelation predicting major events in Church history. Generally, the seals, trumpets and bowls are interpreted as being successive, rather than being seen as recapitulation of the same events. So these symbols have been seen as invasions of the Christian empire by Goths and Muslims, the increasing corruption of the mediaeval Papacy, the reign of Charlemagne, the Protestant Reformation and the decimation brought by the rules of Napoleon and Hitler. All of these things were foreseen by John.

Of course, a major problem with this approach is that Revelation would have had little relevance to its contemporary readers and hearers. The response by historicists to this is that Christ’s coming would have appeared as imminent to them. Secondly, it limits the scope of the book to the Western Church only, not taking into account events in the history of the worldwide Church. Finally, as time moved on with no return of Christ, historicists have had to change the meanings of the symbols; in a sense updating them to fit more contemporary events. As such, there remains little agreement as to what the symbols mean. John Wesley and Johann Albrecht Bengel, for example adopted the historicist approach which was very common in the eighteenth century. But they could only, of course, attach

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755 Beale, 44-46
the symbols of Revelation up to the time that they were writing. So the rise of the Third Reich, for example, could never have been in their scheme.\footnote{Beale, 46}

The \textbf{futurist} position takes the prophecies of Revelation as commencing from chapter 4 until Revelation 22:5 and referring to a time as yet in the future which will immediately precede the end of history. It takes two forms. The most popular form is the one typically associated with Dispensationalism. This involves a very literal interpretation of Revelation. Ethnic Israel is restored to her land, the Church is raptured into heaven, there is a seven-year tribulation period and a reign of Antichrist, with a coalition of evil gathering to fight over Jerusalem. Then Jesus returns, these nations are vanquished, the millennium commences and at its end Satan’s final rebellion is quashed before Christ’s eternal reign commences in the new heavens and the new earth. The second or modified form of futurism does not hold so strictly the visions as being represented by a chronological sequence of future history. Here there is no dichotomy between the Church and true Israel; they are one. Nor is there a ‘pre-tribulation rapture’ of the saints. Rather, Christians experience the final period of trial and suffering on earth.

Some modified futurists also believe that 4:1 to 8:1 covers the period of the resurrection up to the end of history with 8:2 to 22:5 being the future tribulation and following events. Whilst there is certainly a futurist aspect to the prophecies of Revelation, both forms would fail to have had any relevance to the book’s first century audience. Again, futurists would argue that the first century readers would have understood Christ’s coming to be imminent and so the symbols would still have been relevant to them but this is harder to argue for.
 stricter futurists who, for example, believe 1948 to have been a significant year with Israel becoming a nation only then.\textsuperscript{757}

Finally, the \textbf{idealist} position sees Revelation as depicting a tussle between good and evil or God and Satan generally. The conflict is often seen as timeless and the extreme form of this position would not depict any final consummation in history, whether that be God’s final victory or in a last judgment of the realm of evil. The problem faced with this more radical form of idealism is the opposite to that faced by historicists and futurists, since it identifies none of Revelation’s symbols with particular historical events.

However, a modified position of idealism is possibly the best interpretative approach to Revelation. No specific historical events are discerned in the book except for Christ’s second coming, judgment and the consummation of the new creation. The symbols in the book are thus trans-temporal since they are applicable to events through this ‘Church Age.’ So historicism would be right in the precise identification of a symbol to a particular historical event; but wrong in limiting that symbol to this event only. The same would apply to preterism, especially the Roman version. And aspects of futurism would thus also be correct; Jesus Christ will return and this present age will end.\textsuperscript{758}

\textit{Millennialism}

The word millennium comes from the Latin \textit{mille} – thousand and \textit{annus} – year. The corresponding expression in Greek used Revelation 20, the only chapter in Scripture to

\textsuperscript{757} Beale, 46-8
\textsuperscript{758} Beale, 48-9
mention explicitly a millennium, is *chilia étē*, hence the term ‘chiliasm’ which is a synonym for ‘millennialism.’\(^759\) The words pre, post and a-millennial originate only from the nineteenth century, although of course the eschatological models they represent do not.

Controversy as to where this millennium is situated in end-time chronology, as well as its nature, has reigned since the early period of Church history. The first interpretation of the millennium is **historical or classical premillennialism**. Premillennialists generally believe that Jesus Christ will return just before the millennium, which will be characterised by a literal 1000 year period (or simply a long-time) of peace and prosperity, during which Christ will reign physically on earth. This period will be ushered in suddenly, by a demonstration of overwhelming Divine power. Before Christ returns however, there will be a period of great apostasy, wars, famines, natural disasters and the appearance of Antichrist during a time of great tribulation. Christ will then come to defeat Antichrist and bring in His millennial reign. Jews will be converted on a large scale, evil will be held at bay and even nature will share in the utopian blessings. Then, at the end of the millennium, wickedness will rise once more during a time of final rebellion, nearly over-running the saints of God. Then Satan is vanquished and the Christ ushers in the new creation. The resurrection also takes place at this time; with some premillennialists believing that the resurrection of the dead in Christ occurs before the millennium. Certainly the unrighteous are raised to judgement at the end.\(^760\)

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\(^759\) Montgomery, “Millennium” in *Bible Encyclopaedia*, 3: 355  
\(^760\) Robert G. Clouse (ed.): *The Meaning of the Millennium – Four Views* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), 7-8
A 19th century form of premillennialism, often called dispensationalism or dispensational premillennialism, proposes a series of chronologically successive dispensations or periods of history of which the millennium is only one. Dispensationalism breaks Christ’s coming before the millennium into two parts. A secret rapture of the Church occurs before the Great Tribulation causes havoc on earth. This is then followed by Christ returning with His saints to defeat Antichrist and set up the millennial kingdom. The final dispensation is then the eternal state. Dispensationalism also sees a clear distinction between the Church and Israel.

Postmillennialism understands the kingdom of God as being extended through the Church by the preaching of the Gospel. This will ultimately result in the world being Christianized and experiencing an extended period of prosperity and peace called the millennium. Again, this period may or may not be a literal thousand year period. The changes in the world could be subtle, with a gradual conversion of the population on earth. Evil, whilst not eliminated, would be reduced to a minimum as the spiritual and moral influence of Christianity gathers pace. The Church then assumes greater importance in social, economic and educational affairs. Only after this golden age does Christ return, are the dead resurrected and the new heavens and new earth ushered in.

Amillennialism holds that the Revelation 20 does not predict a period of universal peace and righteousness before the world ends. Rather, good and evil co-exist until the second coming of Christ when the dead shall be raised and judgement occurs. The ‘millennium’ is really a symbol for the Church Age; the period between the two comings of Christ, who is

761 Clouse, 12
762 Clouse, 8
presently ruling though the Word and the Spirit. After Christ returns, the new creation will commence. The ‘millennium’ then is occurring in heaven now, being the reign of Christ with the souls of deceased Christians.  

During the first three centuries of Church history, historical premillennialism held sway. Its adherents included Papias, the author of the Epistle of Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Julius ‘Africanus,’ Victorinus of Pettau, Cyprian and Lactantius; perhaps the Clementine epistles, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, Melito of Sardis, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Lyons martyrs, Methodius of Tyre and Commodian also. Origen, however provided active hostility to the chiliast position and cautioned over both Montantist excesses and attempts at date-setting which always proved erroneous. There was therefore a shift to the amillennial position, especially under Constantine in the fourth century. Of course, no theologian influenced this eschatological interpretation more than Augustine, himself a former chiliast. Augustine “followed the symbolical-mystical hermeneutic system of the fourth-century donatist Tyconius” who interpreted the thousand year period of Rev 20 as being the interval between Christ’s incarnation and His second coming. Augustine articulated the position which saw the millennium being a non-literal time-period referring to the Church age; the thousand year reign was thus not future but Christ and His saints ruling in heaven. The Council of Ephesus in 431CE endorsed this teaching and, in fact, belief in a literal, future millennium was condemned as superstition.

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763 Clouse, 8-9
764 Montgomery, “Millennium” in Bible Encyclopaedia, 3: 358
765 Montgomery, “Millennium” in Bible Encyclopaedia, 3: 359
766 Clouse, 9
Indeed, other than amongst a few pockets of believers, amillennialism continued to be official Church doctrine throughout the Middle Ages. But premillennialism would stir once more under the influence of men such as Thomas Müntzer, who would adopt a “militant, bloodthirsty chiliasm, proclaiming that the end of the age was near.” He was an apocalyptic priest of the German Peasants’ War but was beheaded in 1525. However, his ethos would live on. In Münster in 1534 Jan Matthys was convinced he was Enoch preparing the way for Christ’s return in a city labelled the New Jerusalem. He accrued a large Anabaptist following, which continued under his successor Jan Bockelson (John of Leiden), which was hounded and persecuted by both Protestants and Catholics. Episodes like this likely persuaded many of the Reformers to remain with Augustinian amillennialism. Luther, despite his literal approach to the Scriptures, and Calvin were both very cautious in their millennial interpretations, again probably because of the excess of many Anabaptists.

What was basic to all amillennial models was a ‘historicist’ reading of the Book of Revelation, namely that its symbols were linked to and thus interpreted by events in England, Europe and further afield from early church history to the 17th century.

The re-birth of premillennialism owes much of its roots to Johann Heinrich Alsted. His views changed gradually over time from typical Augustinian amillennialism to his later chiliastic position. He still read Revelation historically but his move towards millennialism and a more ‘pessimistic’ eschatology was moulded by the horrors of the ‘Thirty Years War’ and the continued strength of the Papacy, despite the Reformation. He set the date for a now future millennium, the conversion of the Jews and the return of Christ at 1694, with Gog and

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767 Toon, 19
768 Clouse, 10
Magog and the eternal state occurring in 2694. Significantly he held to a literal and physical first resurrection – a departure from the spiritualized resurrections of others. Others were influenced by Alsted, most significantly the English Puritan Joseph Mede who described himself as the first ‘English Puritan millenarian.’ Again, the seals, trumpets and vials of Revelation were consecutive and mirrored events from Church history and into his own time.

Thomas Goodwin was another in this line of millenarians. He believed Scripture should be read literally and so saw the millennium as actual. There would be a gradual purity of church worship and doctrine before the millennium – with the Congregational churches the pattern. Then pristine New Testament churches would exist in the millennium itself. This would be the Fifth Monarchy (Daniel 2: 44). Jesus’ power would peak at 1666; then the Papacy would be destroyed, along with the Turks, before the physical resurrection and the onset of the millennial reign of Jesus in 1700.

Interestingly, all these millenarians were vague both about conditions during the millennium and on details of Jesus’ descent. Views ranged from Jesus’ power ruling through His Church with only a brief return personally, to Christ bringing part of heaven with Him. The literal, physical and visible return of Christ is not established here. More extreme millenarianism would follow with the Fifth Monarchist movement of the later 17th century. They wanted to create conditions whereby the millennium would be ushered in. They celebrated the removal of episcopacy and monarchy and wished to establish Old Testament law and order in Government, using all political and physical means – sometimes violently – to ensure it.

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769 Toon, 42-65
They firstly saw Oliver Cromwell as God-sent but would later align him to the figure of Antichrist. The movement petered out in the 1660s after the Restoration. Historicism, date-setting and a desire to see Jews converted where again aspects of this more fundamentalist premillennialism. Key Fifth Monarchists were Christopher Feake and John Tillinghast.770

Then there was the ‘internalised’ eschatology of the Quakers – a group led by George Foxe who preached a merged justification and sanctification, a doctrine of the ‘Light Within’ which could supersede Scripture and the sacraments. Moreover, the outward work of Christ on the cross, though significant, meant little without an inward work of Christ within men. A manward or anthropological soteriology, rejecting the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, was the result. Their eschatology was what would today be called ‘realized.’ Because outwardness was seen as of the Devil, baptism, the sacraments (and even public ordinances such as prayer, preaching and singing) and most forms of churches, whether Anglican, Anabaptist or Presbyterian were rejected. Furthermore, their time was an age of apostasy – 42 months in which Antichrist reigned. But it was coming to an end.

Christ’s second coming had already occurred inwardly to the generation who He said would not pass before He came again. This was the Apostles. But Quaker eschatology was experiential and soteriological so they could use past, present or future language to describe it. Christ had come a second time already in the present to the Quakers. but He could come again in the future a second time. But their concept of the marriage of the Lamb and the Bride and the Lamb’s War was present in their struggle with earthly powers. The result was

770 Toon, 66-90
a spiritual battle between God and Satan which could result in earthly persecution for the Quakers.

The Quakers were vague on the resurrection of Christ, seeing His body as spiritual and being raised within them or through the Church. His ascension and descension then, from and to heaven was with an eternal, spiritual body. So the bodily resurrection of men – which could be past or future - was more an inward, deliverance from sin with their new bodies being heavenly or spiritual. Judgment too was spiritual to some degree because men were being judged by not coming into the light of Christ. A future judgment, the millennium and the New Jerusalem – with Satan destroyed – were not denied but the Quakers saw this all as hiding behind the future. Christ was worth more than outward devotion. Inward devotion and actual righteousness were for the here and now. Otherwise, Christ was put ‘far off.’

In reaction to the excesses of Puritan eschatology, millenarianism appeared to fall into disfavour by the eighteenth century. However, Augustinian amillennialism was not the beneficiary. Postmillennial doctrine, namely the hope of a utopian age of Gospel preaching and acceptance, had started to enter into Puritan writing primarily from the 17th century. This envisaged a ‘Latter Day Glory’ millennium on earth before Jesus’ return. This view held some similarities to the amillennialism which had existed in the Church since Origen, namely that the Church Age is what Rev 20 had in mind even if this period was as yet future. The similarities were that, despite there being a millennium (though perhaps not a literal 1000 year period), the historicist reading of Revelation was still prevalent. Secondly,

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771 Toon, 91-103
even some of the proponents of what we now call amillennialism, believed to some degree in the progress of the Gospel (e.g. Calvin). Date-setting was also prevalent. The background of this hope grew out of the Reformation itself. If the Pope/Catholic Church was Antichrist, then the spreading of the true Gospel would bring its end. The Jews would also be converted and, after the millennium, God and Magog (the Turks and the spread of Islam) would be quashed. Proponents of this view sometimes read into Revelation 20 a golden age, for and through the Church, on earth before Jesus came back. Key Puritans within this movement were Thomas Brightman, Henry Finch, William Gouge, John Cotton, John Owen and James Durham.  

Daniel Whitby would popularise this eschatology in the later 17th and early 18th centuries, with optimistic views of progress in morality and religion. It also “accorded well with expansive evangelical ideas of mission.” Indeed, the evangelical revivals of the 18th century would result in the founding of missionary societies at the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. The postmillennial hope was in the eventual Christianization of the world; only after this would Christ return. Opposing premillennialism, these progressives believed that peace and prosperity would be brought about without any supernatural, apocalyptic intervention; opposing amillennialism they opposed the “pervasive allegory of the Augustinian school,” holding to the hope of a literal millennium. Whitby and his followers gave life to this tradition which would influence the Calvinist eschatology of Jonathan Edwards in the New England revival. Postmillennialism in fact, in line with 18th century Enlightenment thinking, was adopted by many preachers and

773 Toon, 23-41
774 Rack, 473
775 Sandeen, 5
776 De Jong, 120
commentators of that period. It was against this background that John Wesley’s view of mission and optimism should be understood. Whilst not a millenarian sect, Methodism and Wesley “sometimes thought they might be living close to the ‘last times’ and a millennial outpouring of the gospel on earth.”

Into the nineteenth century, premillennialism would once again receive widespread attention, partly because of the unrest in Europe caused by the French Revolution. A renewed interest in the fate of the Jews also played a part. A Church of Scotland minister called Edward Irving (1792-1834) was a writer of prophecy and an organizer of the Albury Park prophecy conferences in London. He would articulate a dispensationalist understanding of premillennialism. His views would find support amongst the Plymouth Brethren, one of whom was John Nelson Darby (1800-82). At his death, Darby left forty volumes of written work and “some fifteen hundred assemblies around the world.” He would have a major influence on later commentators, including C. I. Scofield who would, of course, produce the Scofield Bible which made dispensational eschatology an integral part of its Bible notes. D. L. Moody and, later, Hal Lindsey, would be amongst the other most famous of those influenced by Darby.

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777 Rack, 382
778 Clouse, 12
Appendix B – A Plain Account of Christian Perfection

John Wesley’s most comprehensive exposition of his doctrine of Christian Perfection was published, probably in February 1766, under the title *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Reverend John Wesley, from the year 1725, to the year 1777*. Six editions were published with the date of the last revision being the end date in the title. Therefore, it should not be assumed that Wesley altered his views on this doctrine after 1777. Moreover, that the title start date was 1725 is illuminating enough, given what has been said in chapter four of this thesis.

Wesley’s yearning for piety from 1725 up to his 1738 ‘heart-warming’ at Aldersgate, moulded Wesley’s perfectionist theology, with the literary outcome being *A Plain Account* which provided a mature and settled description of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection. Yet *A Plain Account* evolves as it proceeds since it was edited continually and Wesley was careful as to what material was included in it. Moreover, it was not altered after 1777. All of Wesley’s key teachings on perfection, in the light of Aldersgate, are included: freedom from inward sin, a renewal of believers and the possibility of its instantaneousness, as well as a full reliance on the Atonement. Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection was examined more fully in chapter five of this thesis. Here, briefly, consideration must be given to the contents of *A Plain Account* as a means of helping us recognize why Wesley wrote it.

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779 Olson, 5-8
780 Olson, 1
781 *Plain Account*, s12
782 *Plain Account*, s13, 18
783 *Plain Account*, s16
Wesley’s stated purpose for writing *A Plain Account* is clear at the outset; “to give a plain and distinct account of the steps by which I was led, during a course of many years, to embrace the doctrine of Christian Perfection.” But if this was his purpose, why was it necessary? What was his motivation? The tone of the document is apologetic and this provides the answer to that question. Wesley constantly had to defend himself over the course of his ministry against his doctrine of Christian Perfection and his alleged inconsistencies in proclaiming this inward and outward holiness. Indeed, Wesley devoted a whole chapter to the opposition his doctrine had faced. As a result, Wesley ended this document in a similarly apologetic tone, making an appeal to these opponents asking them to examine again a doctrine he found to be wholly biblical. These criticisms and Wesley’s desire to face them without reserve also formed the backdrop to his polemical sermons on perfection.

The sermon *Christian Perfection* was published in 1741. Bishop Edmund Gibson at a meeting in Whitehall had had his fears so assuaged by Wesley when the evangelist clearly explained to him what perfection was and was not, that he instructed Wesley, “if this be all you mean, publish it to all the world.” But the Bishop seemed to be in the minority. Most Christians were fearful of Wesley teaching any sort of perfectionism in this life, amidst concerns of promoting pride and works-righteousness. It was precisely this opposition which occasioned Wesley to publish this sermon. A further summary and defence of his position was provided in 1741 in the preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, which Wesley referred to

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784 Plain Account, s1
785 For example, see Olson: Plain Account, 6: 16-17; 10: 30; 13: 33; 15: 20; 17: 24 and 27: 13
786 Plain Account, s11
787 Olson: Plain Account, 27: 3-10; 28: 1-12
788 BE2, 96-124
789 Outler: BE2, 97
Another sermon, entitled *On Perfection*, was published in 1784. It is reconciliatory in tone. By this time there had been years of “endless confusions generated by protracted discussions” over the issue. Wesley attempted here to make the focus of the doctrine even clearer, namely its definition in terms of deliberate sin and loving God and neighbour.

Of course, Wesley had spoken of the inward piety necessary for Christian Perfection as early as 1733, in his sermon ‘The Circumcision of the Heart.’ It would remain Wesley’s classic treatment on the subject of holiness and one which he regarded as such until the end of his life. “Holiness to the point of ‘perfection’ had always been Wesley’s religious goal,” although it may not have been until about the late 1750s that Wesley taught it as an instantaneous gift; possibly because he was now starting to see evidence for it happening in this way. Indeed, the Bristol Conference of 1758/9 demonstrated that the doctrine was being debated and Wesley became more and more open to the suggestion that God could “cut short the work” and provide the gift of perfection in a moment, rather than gradually.

Wesley’s tract entitled *Thoughts on Christian Perfection* published questions and answers on the issue, devised for the conference in the light of some young preachers who went to the extreme of proclaiming that “a believer till perfect is under the curse of God and in state of

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790 Plain Account, s12
791 BE3, 70-87
792 Outler: BE3, 70
793 BE1, 398-414
794 Rack, 334
795 Maddox: Responsible Grace, 183
damnation.” These Thoughts were abridged in A Plain Account but rather than act as a thorough defence of the doctrine or indeed to prove it, it was simply provided to outline Wesley’s sentiments on the issue, giving him the opportunity to argue what Christian Perfection both was and was not. Yet within three years further disruption occurred when two Methodist preachers – Thomas Maxfield and George Bell – claimed an almost ‘angelic perfection’ whereby it was impossible for them to sin or be tempted. They even denied that they would die. Wesley would denounce this enthusiasm in the strongest terms, claiming it to be a perversion of perfection. Wesley at first tip-toed around Bell and Maxfield, despite their claims to healing and prophecy, wishing rather to see the positive aspects of their ministries. It would not be until 1763, when Bell predicted the end of the world that a complete break took place.

So A Plain Account then was written in the midst of revival, criticism and schism over the doctrine of perfection and was borne out of a desire by Wesley – in the light of all of these controversies which made some preachers too scared to even say that word – to “publish a definitive statement on what he believed concerning Christian Perfection.” Confusion had to be clarified, direction given and God’s path for the Methodists made clear. And for Wesley, Christian Perfection was God’s purpose for His people.

Indeed, A Plain Account was also written out of a pastoral concern. Wesley was convinced that it was biblical and that many were already experiencing God’s perfecting grace. His

796 Rack, 335
797 Olson: Plain Account, 19: 5-105
798 Olson: Plain Account, 20: 3 and n3
799 Olson: Plain Account, 22: 1-2
800 Olson: Plain Account, 22: 1-2
801 Olson, 13
journal entries dated from the first half of the 1760s testify to this. A *Plain Account* also cites the “living and dying” testimony of a Jane Cooper as an example. Wesley knew the potential pitfalls of Christian Perfection – as exemplified by Bell and Maxfield – and so sought to provide pastoral advice to those who claimed to have attained perfection. These *Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection* form a large part of *A Plain Account* and were written after the controversies and criticisms addressed in sections 20-23. The Scriptural basis for perfection is discussed before Wesley devoted a large section on how one knows that the state has been attained – this is the work of the Holy Spirit and is evidenced by fruit. Wesley then wanted to ensure against pride and excessive enthusiasm and so discussed one’s behaviour towards others before providing some “reflections” for people’s deliberation at the end of the section. A summary statement forms the next small section.

So from 1725, after his “conversion to perfection,” Wesley sought to preach “perfect love [as]...the natural and habitual characteristic” of every Christian. This journey started with the impact of the works of à Kempis, Taylor and Law on Wesley’s life and ministry. However, it should be stressed that when these men are cited in the early chapters of *A Plain Account*, this must not be taken as their “supports or defences of his doctrine of perfection as presented in *A Plain Account*.” He did not appeal to these men as evidence; rather the early part of *A Plain Account* reflects his own views held in the early part of his own spiritual journey. However, these writings led Wesley into the direction he would eventually go and

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802 BE21, 331, 335-6, 344, 376, 383-4, 414-5; BE22, 18-20
803 Olson: *Plain Account*, 24: 1-33
804 *Plain Account*, s25
805 *Plain Account*, s26
806 Olson, 15
807 Olson, 15-16 n36
A Plain Account is a fully matured delivery of his doctrine of Christian Perfection which believed in a transforming God being able to transform a believer’s disposition so fully that perfect love would be a habitual characteristic.

However, reconciling this doctrine with the existence of evil in the world and defending this doctrine against enemies within the people of God, was the motivation behind A Plain Account. In fact, the latter category was most problematic – spiritual elitists on one side who believed in sinlessness in a temptation free life, and defeatists on the other, who only saw limited transformation in this life. A Plain Account appeals to Scripture, experience and reason in its defence of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection. And striving towards whole sanctification brought an eschatological motivation – eternal destiny in the hereafter being the impetus for inward and outward holiness now.\footnote{Creasman, 1}
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