

# Book Review

*Sean Hanley*

*Wesley and Men Who Followed*

**Iain H. Murray**

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Perhaps no figure since Jacobus Arminius has polarized the church as much as the subject of Iain Murray's recent portrait: John Wesley (1703-1791). Murray introduces Wesley in the spiritually impoverished landscape of 18<sup>th</sup> century British Anglicanism. Starting from his early days of study at Oxford University, Wesley is portrayed as navigating a hostile terrain of contemporary religious indifference. Towards the end, the book spends more time defending Wesley and his followers, than of clearly explaining the message of Methodism. Indeed, the book from beginning to end in seeking to preserve Wesley for evangelical Christianity turns a blind eye to much of his heretical doctrine and apostasy. The emotionally charged portrait of Wesley and his preachers is so captivating, that the reader is tempted time and again to overlook the historical reality and embrace the fictitious man of piety who is horribly confused and misunderstood.

In addition to the life and ministry of John Wesley the book provides an overview of the lives of three of his preachers, William Bramwell, Gideon Ousely and Thomas Collins. Regretfully in attempting to capture the heartfelt dedication of these men, Murray all but ignores what they were saying in favour of what they were doing. He even attempts to excuse their opposition to the sovereignty of God by pointing to their spiritual sincerity. Murray writes "In theory, Methodists denied divine sovereignty ... yet the prayerfulness which characterized their lives gives the clearest practical proof of their dependence on God" (p. 171). The sacrifices and hardships faced by these men fill many pages within the book and provide a useful deterrent to those who would seek to question their theology and doctrine. The book therefore attempts to seduce the reader with the satanic lie that sincerity and zeal are suitable replacements for truth and orthodoxy.

In the chapter entitled "The Collision with Calvinism," Murray provides a revisionist escape route by suggesting that Wesley, the great apostle of Armini-



anism who was intimately acquainted with Calvin and the Puritans, misunderstood what Calvinism really is (p. 74). Yet Wesley himself expresses his own understanding of Calvinism as teaching that “the salvation of every man” is dependent “wholly and solely upon an absolute, irresistible, unchangeable decree of God, without any regard to faith or works foreseen.”<sup>1</sup> Wesley clearly understood Calvinistic theology and yet he continued to attribute it to Satan and refer to it as “deadly poison” (p. 74). He also warned his Methodist society members to stay away from Reformed churches that taught a particular atonement. Even Murray is forced to admit that over time, Wesley’s “opposition to Calvinism stiffened rather than weakened” (p. 68). How else could one honestly explain the vindictive barrage of attacks on the sovereignty of God in Wesley’s *The Arminian Magazine*?

With all this in mind, it is important to view Murray’s book as an apologetic work, not solely of John Wesley or his preachers, but of Evangelical Arminianism. Why else would so much ink be employed in the defense of one who said that Calvinism was his enemy?<sup>2</sup> Towards that goal, Murray excuses Wesley time and again as a sincere victim of his environment. When Wesley calls predestination “a doctrine full of blasphemy” and the God of predestination “as worse than the devil; more false, more cruel, more unjust” this is excused as a well-meaning response to the hyper-calvinism of his day.<sup>3</sup> In similar fashion his erroneous view of Christian “perfectionism” is practically excused by Murray as a heartfelt attempt to counterbalance the false teaching of antinomianism.<sup>4</sup> Indeed *Wesley and Men who Followed* does much to promote the lie that the church today needs a little bit of both Wesley and Whitefield in order to achieve proper “balance.” The book, therefore, misses a good opportunity to mark one whose writings have continued to plague the church with division and false doctrine (Rom. 16:17).

Murray’s revisionist portrait also extends to Wesley’s blasphemous view of justification. Wesley held to a theory of justification that is virtually indistinguishable to that of sanctification. He openly taught that justification is not

<sup>1</sup>*The Works of John Wesley* (Baker, 1996), vol. 11, p. 494.

<sup>2</sup>Wesley declares, “Is not Calvinism the most deadly and successful enemy?” (p. 74).

<sup>3</sup>Murray writes, “There is however something to be said in defence of Wesley’s misconception. The Reformers and Puritans had never had to deal with Hyper-Calvinism ... the Dissenting churches had to be brought from Hyper-Calvinism, and no doubt at times the Wesleyan Methodists helped in that deliverance” (pp. 61, 63).

<sup>4</sup>Murray states, “... in his fear that Calvinism was allied to Antinomianism, Wesley committed himself to the beliefs of his earlier years on Christian perfection, as already noted” (p. 66).



only forensic (a legal declaration), but that it depends on the “moment to moment” obedience of the believer. Murray trivializes the issue and defends Wesley from criticism by suggesting that his inconsistencies on the subject were due to working “too fast and with too much indifference to strict consistency” (p. 225). Yet Wesley himself noted that his own position on the subject was “a hair’s breadth” from “salvation by works.” His doctrine can perhaps be best summarized by his favorite writer, William Law who wrote, “We can not have security of our salvation but by doing our utmost to deserve it.”<sup>5</sup> This concept of “deserving it” is a major theme within Wesley’s sermons and one could hardly be blamed for mistaking them as a byproduct of Rome’s Council of Trent. Wesley clearly affiliated himself with a conditional gospel of works when he insisted that election is based on the future works and faith of men. Wesley comments:

This decree, whereby whom God did foreknow, he did predestinate, was indeed from everlasting; this, whereby all who suffer (allow) Christ to make them alive are elect according to the foreknowledge of God.

Another fatal weakness within the book is the omission of so much incriminating evidence against Wesley. For example, while Murray does briefly touch upon Wesley’s belief in baptismal regeneration, he completely overlooks his advocacy of prayers for the dead. Wesley writes “Prayer for the dead, the faithful departed, in the advocacy of which I conceive myself clearly justified.” The book also ignores Wesley’s belief that there will be unconverted Moslems and other heathen who will be accepted on the basis of their good works. The words of our Lord in John 3:7, “Ye must be born again,” contrast sharply with Wesley’s own view that “the merciful God” sees Moslems and “regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas.”<sup>6</sup> Also neglected is Wesley’s very strange belief in ghosts and fondness for drawing lots.

Wesley’s ecumenical approach toward Romanism is also overlooked and can best be appreciated by Wesley’s own correspondence to a Roman Catholic, “Let the points wherein we differ stand aside; here are enough wherein we agree, enough to be the ground of every Christian temper, and of every Christian action. O brethren, let us not still fall out by the way.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, while Murray hints at Wesley’s favorable disposition toward women preachers, he does

<sup>5</sup>William Law, *Christian Perfection* (Creation House, 1975), pp. 137-138.

<sup>6</sup>*The Works of John Wesley* (Baker, 1996), vol. 7, pp. 353-354



not provide us with the clarity that we find in Wesley's own writings. Wesley wrote the Manchester Conference in 1787 that we should "give the right hand of fellowship to Sarah Mallet, and have no objection of her being a Preacher in our connexion ..."<sup>7</sup> In light of all these omissions one can only imagine what other skeletons Murray uncovered from the closet of one who was arguably the greatest enemy of evangelical Christianity in the eighteenth century.

In conclusion the target of *Wesley and Men Who Followed Him* could hardly be more clear. Murray offers far more critical fire on the Reformed detractors of Wesley than of a man who taught baptismal regeneration, promoted women preachers, maligned the saints of his day and fought against Calvinism his entire life. The target in the cross hair is the uncompromising Calvinist who will not accept Arminianism as a legitimate expression of God's truth. How else could one explain why Wesley's well-documented campaign of lies against Augustus Toplady, the defender of sovereign grace, is hardly even mentioned in the book? Murray's book is all about tolerance and acceptance of the Arminian lie of human sovereignty and diminishes the antithesis between grace and works. Murray has failed to offer anything other than a revisionist history that places the blame on everyone and everything surrounding John Wesley in order to preserve him for the modern day evangelical church. One wonders if the book would have been more appropriately entitled *Wesley and Murray Who Followed Him*.

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<sup>7</sup>*The Works of John Wesley* (Baker, 1996), vol. 10, pp. 80-86.

<sup>8</sup>Zechariah Taft, *Biographical Sketches of Holy Women* (Methodist Publishing, 1992), vol. 1, p. 84.

John Owen: "Neither let any deceive your wisdoms, by affirming that they are differences of an inferior nature that are at this day agitated between the Arminians and the orthodox divines of the reformed church ... you will find them hewing at the very root of Christianity ... one church cannot wrap in her communion [Augustine] and Pelagius, Calvin and Arminius ... The sacred bond of peace compasseth only the unity of that Spirit which leadeth into all truth. We must not offer the right hand of fellowship, but rather proclaim ... 'a holy war,' to such enemies of God's providence, Christ's merit, and the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit" ("A Display of Arminianism", *Works*, vol. 10, p. 7).