

# Distinctive Emphases of Methodist Belief

John Wesley believed that certain aspects of the Christian Faith required special emphasis. Methodists today still hold to these emphases. There is no more simple or indeed better way of presenting these distinctive emphases than by using the four statements that collectively are called the 'Four Alls'. Although this is a twentieth-century creation it admirably represents Wesley's mind and is certainly more comprehensive than any single statement of his. The 'Four All's' are:

1. All people need to be saved.
2. All people can be saved.
3. All people can know they are saved.
4. All people can be saved to the uttermost

## C.1 All people need to be saved

Wesley stressed the biblical analysis of the human condition that all men and women are sinners having 'fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3: 23). Like Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation, Wesley's sense of his own sinfulness gave a sharp focus to his theology. He was consumed with a passion for holiness and a living relationship with God. But his own life of ruthless religious discipline could not produce any relief from the consciousness of sin, or any real sense of fellowship with God. Even a period of missionary endeavour in Georgia served only to increase his feelings of alienation from God. As he wrote in his Journal towards the end of that period: 'This, then, I have learned in the ends of the earth – that I am fallen short of the glory of God... and having nothing in or of myself to plead I have no hope...' Wesley insisted that all of humankind was in this position and wholly incapable of extracting itself.

So everyone needs to be saved from sin and its consequences; there is nothing anyone can do to save himself or herself.

## C.2 All people can be saved

Into such a bleak and hopeless situation comes the grace of God with the gift of salvation. Since no one can save himself or herself, Wesley believed that salvation must be a gift of God. Yet as a gift he believed an individual must respond by accepting it, for God will not force that gift upon anyone. Here Wesley differed from Reformers such as John Calvin seeing God's grace as, first of all, setting the human will free in order to allow the individual the space to accept or reject God's offer of salvation (sometimes referred to as Prevenient grace). All can be saved but not all may choose to be saved. For followers of John Calvin such an idea was unthinkable, seeing God's grace as totally overwhelming. They believed that God had already chosen who would be saved, and his grace would finish the work. Wesley, however, could not accept what he saw as a limit on the grace of God. As Charles Wesley put it in one of the many hymns with a similar theme:

*Come, sinners, to the gospel feast,  
Let every soul be Jesu's guest;  
You need not one be left behind,  
For God has bidden all mankind.  
Sent by my Lord, on you I call;  
The invitation is to all;  
Come, all the world; come, sinner thou!  
All things in Christ are ready now.  
(Hymns and Psalms 460, verses 1-2)*

All men and women without exception have the opportunity of experiencing God's free gift of salvation.

So everyone can be saved because God makes it possible. All that is required is faith in Christ crucified.



### **C.3 All people can know they are saved**

What do people know when God's free gift of salvation has been received? They know that they have been justified (put in the right with God), pardoned and accepted by God. They know that they have a new life as a child of God and a new power with which to live this life. But how do they know? Wesley believed the 'how' was through the work of the Holy Spirit. He referred to the direct and the indirect witness of the Holy Spirit. He quoted from Romans when he stated: '(God's) Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children' (Romans 8:16). So deep within the believer there is what Wesley called the 'inward consciousness' of the assurance of salvation. While such an assurance may be accompanied by feelings it was more than emotion or feelings. The 'inward consciousness' is the direct and inward impression of the Holy Spirit on the individual. The indirect witness of the Spirit is the development of Christ-like attitudes and actions in the everyday life of the individual, described by Paul in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5: 22-23) as 'the fruit of the Spirit'. The words of Charles Wesley are again appropriate:

*How can a sinner know*

*His sins on earth forgiven?*

*How can my gracious Saviour show*

*My name inscribed in heaven?*

*His Spirit to us He gave,*

*And dwells in us we know;*

*The witness in ourselves we have*

*And all its fruits we show*

(Methodist Hymn Book 377, verses 1 & 7)

In the early years Wesley was quite dogmatic - 'unless they knew their sins were forgiven they were under the wrath and curse of God' but he mellowed in later years accepting that not every Christian did enjoy such assurance. Nevertheless he still maintained it to be the 'common privilege of the children of God' and urged every Christian to expect and pray for it.

So every person can know that he or she is saved. It is not simply a doctrinal truth but an assurance given them by the Holy Spirit in the heart.

### **C.4 All people can be saved to the uttermost**

Wesley maintained to the end of his life that Christian Perfection was the key emphasis of the Methodists. Convinced that there was no limit to what the grace of God could do in us and with us he used the concept to spell out what he saw as normal Christianity. In his classic essay, *The Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766), he concluded with six statements, which highlighted what he saw as essential in understanding Christian Perfection. So, in Wesley's words, Christian Perfection is:

- Loving God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves.
- Renewal in heart, not only in part, but in the whole image of God.
- Being cleansed from all pollution both of flesh and spirit.
- Having all the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.
- Devoting soul, body and substance, not in part, but all to God.
- Giving God all our heart with one design ruling all our tempers.

In Wesley's understanding this is what it means to be a real Christian. Both in terms of a relationship with God and relationships in the world this requires total commitment. Wesley refused to countenance the notion of being what he called 'half a Christian'. He held before the people a quality of Christian living that was dynamic and vibrant, like that described by Jesus Christ as 'abundant life'. It was a quality of Christian living available to all through grace, energised by the Spirit and continually encouraged by the means of grace, such as corporate worship, prayer, scripture, the sacraments, fasting and fellowship.

Of course the use of the term Christian Perfection has created confusion with notions of sinlessness and infallibility. Yet if properly understood and rightly presented this distinctive emphasis offers an effective way for the promotion of inward spiritual growth as well as outward social righteousness. Everyone can be saved to the uttermost. Everything is of grace. There can be no limits on what God can do in our lives.