

## Appendix 4: John Wesley

John Wesley, in his sermon on 2 Thessalonians 2:7, ‘The Mystery Of Iniquity’, declared:

How soon did ‘the mystery of iniquity’ work... and obscure the glorious prospect! It began to work (not openly indeed, but covertly) in two of the Christians, Ananias and Sapphira. ‘They sold their possession’, like the rest, and probably for the same motive; but afterwards, giving place to the devil, and reasoning with flesh and blood, they ‘kept back part of the price’. See the first Christians that ‘made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience’... the first that ‘drew back to perdition’ instead of continuing to ‘believe to the’ final ‘salvation of the soul!’ Mark the first plague which infected the... church; namely, the love of money! And will it not be the grand plague in all generations, whenever God shall revive the same work? O believers in Christ, take warning! Whether you are yet but little children, or young men that are strong in the faith, see the snare; your snare in particular – that which you will be peculiarly exposed to after you have escaped from gross pollutions. ‘Love not the world, neither the things of the world! If any man love the world’, whatever he was in times past, ‘the love of the Father is not’ now ‘in him!’

Wesley went on the speak of the troubles caused by party spirit (Acts 6), the false teaching of the *pseudadelphoi* who argued for the law (Acts 11 and 15),<sup>1</sup> dissension between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark (Acts 15). In *sum*:

Such is the authentic account of ‘the mystery of iniquity’ working even in the apostolic churches! – an account given, not by the Jews or heathens, but by the apostles themselves. To this we may add the account which is given by the Head and Founder of the church; him ‘who holds the stars in his right hand’, who is ‘the faithful and true Witness’. We may easily infer what was the state of the church, in general, from the state of the seven churches in Asia. One of these indeed, the church of Philadelphia, had ‘kept his word, and had not

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley wrongly limited this to ‘the ceremonial law’.

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denied his name' (Rev. 3:8); the church of Smyrna was likewise in a flourishing state: But all the rest were corrupted, more or less; insomuch that many of them were not a jot better than the present race of Christians; and our Lord then threatened, what he has long since performed, to 'remove the candlestick' from them. Such was the real state of the... church, even during the first century.

Wesley contrasted the scriptural record with the rose-tinted view of many:

How contrary is this scriptural account of the ancient Christians to the ordinary apprehensions of men! We have been apt to imagine that the primitive church was all excellence and perfection.

Wesley continued his account until the time of the outbreak of persecution followed by Constantine:

Persecution never did, never could, give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity. But the greatest [wound] it ever received, the grand blow which was struck at the very root of that humble, gentle, patient love which is the fulfilling of the Christian law, the whole essence of true spirituality,<sup>2</sup> was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honours, and power upon the Christians; more especially upon the clergy... When the fear of persecution was removed, and wealth and honour attended the Christian profession, the Christians 'did not gradually sink, but rushed headlong into all manner of vices'. Then 'the mystery of iniquity' was no more hid, but stalked abroad in the face of the sun. Then, not the golden but the iron age of the Church commenced... At once, in that unhappy age, broke in all wickedness, and every deadly sin: Truth, modesty, and love fled far away, And force, and thirst of gold, claimed universal sway.

Such was Wesley's assessment of Christendom – one with which I concur. He knew, however – and so do I – that other believers adopt a very different stance:

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<sup>2</sup> Original 'religion'.

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And this is the event which most Christian expositors mention with such triumph! Indeed, which some of them suppose to be typified in the Revelation, by ‘the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven!’

Wesley would not budge:

Rather say it was the coming of Satan and all his legions from the bottomless pit: Seeing from that very time he has set up his throne over the face of the whole earth, and reigned over the Christian as well as the pagan world with hardly any control. Historians, indeed, tell us, very gravely, of nations, in every century, who were by such and such (saints without doubt! [Wesley was being ironical – DG]) converted to Christianity: But still these converts practised all kinds of abominations, exactly as they did before; no way differing, either in their tempers or in their lives, from the nations that were still called heathens. Such has been the deplorable state of the [so-called – DG] Christian Church, from the time of Constantine till the Reformation. A Christian nation, a Christian city... was nowhere to be seen; but every city and country, a few individuals excepted, was plunged in all manner of wickedness.

Has the case been altered since the Reformation? Does ‘the mystery of iniquity’ no longer work in the Church? No: the Reformation itself has not extended to above one third of the Western Church: so that two thirds of this remain as they were; so do the Eastern, Southern, and Northern Churches. They are as full of heathenish, or worse than heathenish, abominations, as ever they were before. And what is the condition of the Reformed Churches? It is certain that they were reformed in their opinions, as well as their modes of worship. But is not this all? Were either their tempers or lives reformed? Not at all. Indeed many of the Reformers themselves complained, that ‘the Reformation was not carried far enough’. But what did they mean? Why, that they did not sufficiently reform the rites and ceremonies of the Church. You fools and blind! to fix your whole attention on the incidentals of religion! Your complaint ought to have been, the essentials of true spirituality<sup>3</sup> were not carried far enough! You ought vehemently to have insisted on an entire change of men’s tempers and lives; on their showing they had ‘the mind

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<sup>3</sup> Original ‘of religion’.

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that was in Christ', by 'walking as he also walked'. Without this, how exquisitely trifling was the reformation of opinions and rites and ceremonies!

Wesley has made a telling point. It is one thing to change outward behaviour – witness the many twists and turns demanded of the *hoi polloi* in their observance of 'public worship' in England during the 16th century – but a change of heart? How many during the reign of Elizabeth, for political reasons became nominal Protestants but, in heart, in reality, remained Romanists!<sup>4</sup> A change of outward behaviour can be coerced; a change of heart is God the Spirit's prerogative.<sup>5</sup>

Wesley:

Now, let any one survey the state of Christianity in the Reformed parts of Switzerland; in Germany, or France; in Sweden, Denmark, Holland; in Great Britain and Ireland. How little are any of these Reformed Christians better than heathen nations! Have they more, (I will not say, communion with God, although there is no Christianity without it,) but have they more justice, mercy, or truth, than the inhabitants of China or Hindustan? O no! we must acknowledge with sorrow and shame, that we are far beneath them!...

Is not this the falling away or apostasy from God, foretold by... Paul in his second letter to the Thessalonians? (2 Thess. 2:3.) Indeed, I would not dare to say, with George Fox, that this apostasy was universal; that there never were any real Christians in the world, from the days of the apostles till his time. But we may boldly say that wherever Christianity has spread, the apostasy has spread also; insomuch that, although there are now, and always have been, individuals who were real Christians; yet the whole world never did, nor can at this day, show a Christian country or city.

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<sup>4</sup> In truth, a great many.

<sup>5</sup> I know of a case where a father demanded that his young son stood during hymn singing, when the boy wanted to sit. He conformed to his father's wishes, but was heard to say that while he was standing outside, he was sitting inside.

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How stupid, then, how wrong, according to Wesley for anybody to talk of 'a Christian England' or 'a Christian America'. For what it is worth, Wesley has my endorsement!