

## CHAPTER XXV

### LEX ORANDI: LEX CREDENDI

WESLEY believed in the Love of God, but he also believed in the hate of God. His heart assured him of God's universal love, freely offered to all mankind. His mind deduced from certain scriptural texts the grim doctrine of God's eternal hatred of those who fail to avail themselves of that offer.

At that time there was no challenge to the doctrine of eternal and intolerable punishment. The absence of revolt against this belief is one of the strangest facts in the history of Christianity, a fact which is only partially explained by the reluctance which Christians felt to doubt any belief apparently based on the explicit words of Christ Himself.

A few quotations from a sermon which John Wesley preached, may help the reader to realise what the world has gained by the virtual disappearance of one of the most revolting doctrines that ever darkened the mind of man.

Wesley chose for his text: "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark ix: 48) and he begins as follows:

"Every truth which is revealed in the oracles of God is undoubtedly of great importance. Yet it may be allowed that some of those which are revealed therein are of greater importance than others, as being more immediately conducive to the grand end of all, the eternal salvation of men. And we may judge of their importance,

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even from this circumstance,—that they are not mentioned once only in the sacred writings, but are repeated over and over. A remarkable instance of this we have with regard to the awful truth which is now before us. Our blessed Lord, who uses no superfluous words, who makes no 'vain repetitions,' repeats it over and over in the same chapter, and, as it were, in the same breath. So (verses 43, 44), 'If thy hand offend thee,' if a thing or person, as useful as a hand, be an occasion of sin, and there is no other way to shun that sin,—'cut it off: It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.' So again (verses 45, 46), 'If thy foot offend thee, cut it off: It is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.'

These opening sentences seem to me highly significant. To the Calvinists, Wesley had replied: "What will you prove by Scripture? That God is worse than the Devil? It cannot be. Whatever that Scripture proves, it never can prove this. . . . No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that His mercy is not over all His works."

And yet, in the sermon that follows, Wesley steels himself to prove that God's mercy is *not* over all His works. What is the key to this inconsistency? Wesley apparently discriminated between doctrines that Scripture appeared to prove but which he rejected because they conflicted with the central fact of his experience—the love of God, and doctrines which he dared not reject because they were based on the *ipissima verba* of Christ. Wesley was not a Higher critic. He did not question the accuracy of St. Mark's report of Christ's words. Still

less was he prepared to take their eschatological imagery in any but the most literal sense.

Wesley continues:

"And let it not be thought, that the consideration of these terrible truths is proper only for enormous sinners. How is this supposition consistent with what our Lord speaks to those who were then, doubtless, the holiest men upon earth?"

In other words, Wesley did not believe in a Hell tenanted only by Judas Iscariot and Nero. Even the apostles were in danger of hell, from which it was a fair deduction, that the number of the damned greatly exceeded the number of the saved.

Wesley then proceeds to describe in detail the sufferings of the damned. Few more impressive sermons can have been preached on this threadbare theme. In the Middle Ages "the crescendo of pious exaggeration," writes Dr. Coulton, "shows that Hell terrors had a tendency to wear dull among the multitude. The general mind tended to grow callous from excessive friction upon one spot." Familiarity robbed the most lurid imagery of its power to frighten the imagination. Repetition blunted the effectiveness of well-worn phrases. Wesley's unique sermon on Hell is impressive precisely because it is unique. He hated the theme too much to return to it. He never made use of Hell-Fire to precipitate a conversion, and even in this sermon he does not pile on the horrors. "Let us keep to the written word," he says. "It is torment enough to dwell with everlasting burnings."

And as the careful argument unfolds, we feel that every word is weighed, every phrase considered, and every deduction wrung from Wesley by relentless logic. The absence of rhetoric heightens the effect. Here is nothing but a reasoned summary of facts, beyond all possibility of dispute. From the major premiss, the words of

Christ which Wesley takes for his text, the argument moves irresistibly forward to its pitiless conclusion.

The punishment of the damned, says Wesley, will be "either *pœna damni*,—'what they lose,' or *pœna sensûs*,—'what they feel.'"

First as to the *pœna damni* "the punishment of loss."

"The soul loses all those pleasures, the enjoyment of which depends on the outward senses. The smell, the taste, the touch, delight no more. . . . All the pleasures of the imagination are at an end. . . . And nothing new, but one unvaried scene of horror upon horror. . . . At the same instant will commence another loss,—that of all the *persons* whom they loved . . . for there is no friendship in hell." And finally, the damned have lost their place "in Abraham's bosom, in the paradise of God."

And yet the negative punishment of loss is mild and merciful indeed compared to the positive punishment of pain.

Secondly as to the fire of hell. Away with all reassuring delusions.

"It has been questioned by some, whether there be any fire in hell; that is, any material fire. Nay, if there be any fire, it is unquestionably material. . . . Does not our Lord speak as if it were a real fire? . . . Is it possible then to suppose that the God of truth would speak in this manner, if it were not so? Does he design to fright his poor creatures? What, with scarecrows? with vain shadows of things that have no being? O let not any one think so! Impute not such folly to the Most High!

"But others aver, 'It is not possible that fire should burn always. For by the immutable law of nature, it consumes whatever is thrown into it. And, by the same law, as soon as it has consumed its fuel, it is itself consumed; it goes out. . . . But here is the mistake: The present laws of nature are not immutable. . . . Therefore, if it

were true that fire consumes all things now, it would not follow that it would do the same after the whole frame of nature has undergone that vast, universal change.

"I say, if it were true that 'fire consumes all things now.' But indeed, it is not true. Has it not pleased God to give us already some proof of what will be hereafter? Is not the *Linum Asbestinum*, the incombustible flax, known in most parts of Europe? If you take a towel or handkerchief made of this (one of which may now be seen in the British Museum), you may throw it into the hottest fire, and when it is taken out again, it will be observed, upon the nicest experiment, not to have lost one grain of its weight. Here, therefore, is a substance before our eyes, which, even in the present constitution of things, (as if it were an emblem of things to come,) may remain in fire without being consumed."

Paley in his argument from design clearly overlooked the true significance of asbestos.

Then follows a terrible illustration, an illustration which proves that Wesley did not run away from the grimmest consequences of his beliefs. The sermon is nothing if not logical.

"So even the tortures of the Romish Inquisition are restrained by those that employ them, when they suppose the sufferer cannot endure any more. They then order the executioners to forbear; because it is contrary to the rules of the house that a man should die upon the rack. And very frequently, when there is no human help, they are restrained by God, who hath set them their bounds which they cannot pass, and saith, 'Hitherto shall ye come, and no farther.' Yea, so mercifully hath God ordained, that the very extremity of pain causes a suspension of it. The sufferer faints away; and so, for a time at least, sinks into insensibility. But the inhabitants of hell are perfectly wicked, having no spark of goodness remain-

ing. And they are restrained by none from exerting to the uttermost their total wickedness. Not by *men*; none will be restrained from evil by his companions in damnation: And not by *God*; for He hath forgotten them, hath delivered them over to the tormentors. And the devils need not fear, like their instruments upon earth, lest they should expire under the torture. They can die no more: They are strong to sustain whatever the united malice, skill, and strength of angels can inflict upon them. And their angelic tormentors have time sufficient to vary their torments a thousand ways. How infinitely may they vary one single torment,—horrible appearances! Whereby, there is no doubt, an evil spirit, if permitted, could terrify the stoutest man upon earth to death."

And so he goes on, draining the last drop of horror from his theme.

"This is the sting of all! As for our pains on earth, blessed be God, they are not eternal. There are some intervals to relieve and there is some period to finish them. When we ask a friend that is sick, how he does; 'I am in pain now,' he says, 'but I hope to be easy soon.' This is a sweet mitigation of the present uneasiness. But how dreadful would his case be if he should answer, 'I am all over pain, and I shall never be eased of it. I lie under exquisite torment of body, and horror of soul; and I shall feel it *for ever!*' Such is the case of the damned sinners in hell. Suffer any pain, then, rather than come into that place of torment!"

## II

In Wesley's day, torture was still legal in Europe, the Inquisition had not been abolished, and women were still burnt alive in England for petty treason. It was there-

fore easier for Wesley than it would be for us to believe in a Creator who deliberately employed torture.

The belief in Hell still lingers in the Church of Rome. But the modern Catholic so far from regarding hell as an asset feels acutely embarrassed by this distressing liability which he has inherited from the past. He does his best to explain away a doctrine which it is no longer possible to defend. The medieval theologian was made of stouter stuff, and he delighted in emphasising the selectness of heaven and the overcrowded condition of hell. But hell is not what hell was. Depopulation is proceeding at such a pace that Judas will soon be, not only the oldest but also the only inhabitant. And we are beginning to have our doubts even about Judas. "We must state first," writes Father Martindale, S.J., in a masterly collection of Catholic essays entitled "God and the Supernatural," "that it is not revealed how many souls, or what proportion, are lost. Most Catholics would say that we know that Judas is." Note the "most."

Father Martindale also points out (p. 323) that the unquenchable fire and the undying worm are plainly metaphorical. Nothing is left of the old horrors,

*"Esse aliquid manes, et subterranea regna,  
Nec pueri credunt."*

The most interesting evidence of the complete change in theological climate is the evidence unconsciously provided by modern writers on Wesley.

The one sermon of Wesley's which is never quoted is the one sermon which exposes his deepest convictions on a subject which, to Wesley, seemed of supreme importance.

Not only have we ceased to believe in Wesley's hell, but we find it almost impossible to realise that this belief was ever real to Wesley.

Mr. Rattenbury, for instance, dismisses Wesley's ser-

mon on hell as unimportant. This sermon has "more literary ornament and is less alive than most. It is an artificial document."

Mr. Rattenbury is a good judge of literature—witness his masterly chapter on the hymns as literature—and he is certainly competent to discriminate between literary ornament and genuine thought. But I am sure that if he re-reads this sermon, he will be tempted to revise his hasty verdict. He must have forgotten that it was in this very sermon that Wesley condemned severely Dante's attempt to embroider by "literary ornament" the horrors of hell. The subject, he says, is too awful "to wander from the written word." The whole weight of evidence is against Mr. Rattenbury's view that this sermon is "an artificial production." Every line represents real thought on a subject of vital importance. Mr. Rattenbury, I feel, would have been more impressed by the tragic sincerity of this sermon, had he not been biassed by a sub-conscious conviction that no man as good and as great as Wesley could ever have entertained so absurd and revolting a belief. ✓

It is true, of course, that Wesley only preached one sermon on hell, and that he virtually made no use of hell-fire in his appeals to the unconverted. But it is a mistake to base any arguments on Wesley's reticences. He never allowed his mind to dwell for long on distressing subjects which he was unable to remedy. He focussed his attention on reparable tragedies. His practical sense forbade him to waste effort or even emotion on matters which he could not control or alter. Hell was a fact beyond his control, and he faced the grim implications of that belief, and passed on to consider how best to reduce the number of the damned, and to increase the number of the saved. ✓

His reticence on the subject of hell proves no more than the reticence on the subject of his wife or of his brother's death. Weeks passed after his brother died before he al-

luded to him in his Journal, and even then, the references are brief and few, as are also (for a very different reason) the Journal references to his wife.

There is one significant sentence in the sermon, a sentence which has already been quoted. After alluding briefly to the variety of fanciful tortures described in Dante's "Inferno," Wesley adds: "But I find no word, no tittle of this, not the least hint of it in all the Bible. And surely this is too awful a subject to admit of such play of imagination. Let us keep to the written word. It is torment enough to dwell with everlasting burnings."

"It is torment enough" . . . No wonder that Wesley turned with relief to the thought of God's love, and though his imagination was too sensitive to permit him "to dwell with everlasting burnings" and though hell was seldom alluded to in his sermons, the urge to save himself and others from "the worm that dieth not" and "the fire that is not quenched" remained the supreme motive of his life.

And, of course, if men were governed by reason, those who believed in a hell such as the hell which Wesley described, would have consecrated, as did Wesley, every waking thought to the problem of saving themselves and their fellow men from eternal agony. Against a background of never-ending torture, even the most seductive of temptations would soon lose their savour. The life that Wesley lived was, indeed, the logical result of the beliefs that Wesley held. But few men are as logical as Wesley, and so the sinners who profess to believe in hell continued cheerfully to sin just as if Hell was nothing more than the product of a diseased imagination.

✓ It is, of course, a commonplace that mankind is not much impressed even by the most appalling of prospects unless they are imminent. After the Messina earthquake, the inhabitants set to work to rebuild the town on the same

place, and so perhaps it is not very surprising that the belief in hell, even when it was most general, never succeeded in eclipsing the gaiety of nations.

Wesley was different. He had no use for half-beliefs. If he accepted a doctrine, he behaved as if that doctrine was true. Undoubtedly he believed in hell, and undoubtedly this belief had a profound influence on his life.

The very word "Hell" has lost most of its old meaning, and it is necessary to emphasise the fact that throughout this chapter the word "Hell" is used in its original and proper sense as the place of *eternal* torment. . . . The belief in hell is revolting, not because it implies punishment beyond the grave, but because it postulates a Creator who punishes with no hope of improving (since *eternal* punishment can have no remedial effect) and who is not sufficiently civilized to reject torture as a mode of punishment.

It is necessary to distinguish carefully between the belief in eternal punishment and the belief in punishment beyond the grave, that is, between Hell and Purgatory. Christ undoubtedly taught that those who persisted in sin should suffer in the next world, but there is nothing in His teaching which compels us to believe in the eternity of such suffering. The cardinal blunder of Protestantism was to reject purgatory and to retain hell. The Protestants should have rejected hell and retained purgatory.

For if hell is a fiction but purgatory a fact, it is still worth while to avoid the punishment of sin, a punishment which is often extremely unpleasant in this world, and which, for all we know to the contrary, may be even more unpleasant in the next.

It is all a question of proportion. To what extent should we treat this life merely as probationary, and this world *merely* as a platform from which trains start labelled "Heaven" or "Hell" respectively. That these aspects are

important, no Christian would deny. Are there, however, no legitimate interests in life excepting those which concern our eternal welfare?

To this question, Wesley would have replied with an unhesitating negative. He was not a Puritan by temperament. He had a natural love for beauty. He loved children and young people, and good talk and friendly folk, and all the innocent trivialities of life. But his belief in that particularly horrible hell, described in his sermon, coloured his outlook on beauty and on innocent pleasure. Among the Moravians, Wesley had heard a sour German proverb—"He that plays when he is a child will play when he is a man." And neither holidays nor play were included in the programme at his Kingswood school. The unfortunate children at this school rose at 4 A. M. both in winter and in summer.

Wesley believed, that from childhood upward every energy should be focussed, and every moment concentrated to the one thing which mattered in life, salvation from the wrath to come.

A gloomy, depressing creed. A creed which divorces grace from nature, and joy from God. It is a tribute to the sanity of John Wesley that in spite of his creed, he remained tolerant and large-minded. It would be a mistake to exaggerate, but it would be foolish to deny the influence on his life and character of the foulest doctrine ever grafted on the parent stem of the Catholic faith.

I agree with Mr. Rattenbury that "the dominant message of the Wesleys was love, not hell," but it is unsound to reject Wesley's belief in hell as a mere side issue in its effect on his life.

### III

Life is full of problems, but to Wesley all of them admitted a simple solution. There were few situations in

life which were not covered either by Christ's explicit commandments, or a logical deduction from those commandments. Useless to talk to Wesley of the "responsibilities of wealth," or to try to enlist his sympathetic consideration of the problems of the Christian's attitude towards money. "Where is the difficulty?" he would have replied, "provide yourself and your dependents with simple food and plain raiment, and give away the balance."

Wesley practised what he preached. As a young man he discovered that he could live on twenty-eight pounds a year. When his income was fifty pounds a year, he gave away twenty-two pounds, and when his income was four hundred (as it was often from the sale of his books) he still lived on twenty-eight and gave away the balance. "Money never stays with me," he wrote, "it would burn if it did. I throw it out of my hands as soon as possible, lest it should find a way into my heart."

This would not seem the proper place to quote his famous reply to the Commissioners of His Majesty's Excise who had written circular letters to all such persons who they had reasons to suspect had plate, etc.:

"Reverend Sir,

As the Commissioners cannot doubt but you have plate, for which you have hitherto neglected to make an entry, they have directed me to send you the above copy of the Lords' order, and to inform you that you forthwith make due entry of all your plate, &c.

N.B. An immediate answer is desired."

Wesley answered:

"Sir,

I have two silver tea-spoons at London, and two at Bristol. This is all the plate which I have at present;