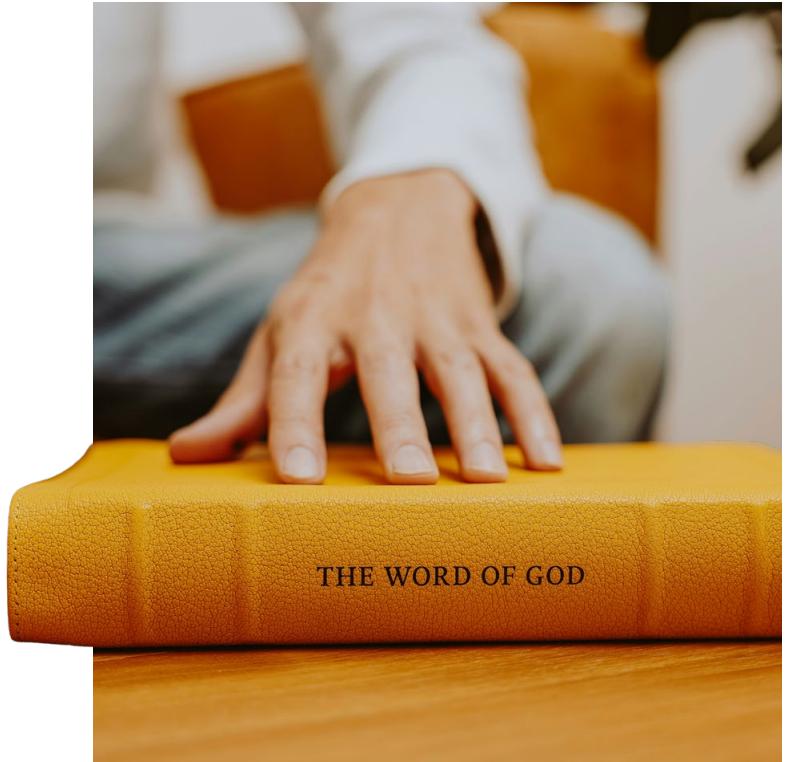


Bible Study

The 'Four Alls'

G A R E T H H I G G S



The 'Four Alls' are precious jewels of Wesleyan evangelicalism which distil the fundamental ethos of Wesleyan theology. Any work of renewal and revival calls a movement back to its roots, and so this study seeks to reflect on the biblical roots of the 'Four Alls', that they might call us freshly back to the very essence of our movement.

ALL NEED TO BE SAVED

We have been conditioned to believe that the gospel is 'good news' and of course that is true, but it is only true if we understand some of the bad news first. John Wesley's pattern for preaching was, first, on visiting a place, to preach law and judgement. When his hearers had suitably wrestled with their conscience and come under conviction of sin, often on his next visit, Wesley would preach the gospel of grace.

Read Romans 3:9-26

Romans 1-3 is perhaps the clearest explanation in all the New Testament of the plight of humanity before a holy God. Paul reminds his hearers that no-one has any standing or status of their own before God (v. 9). We know this to be true wherever we look, and perhaps most clearly when we stare into a mirror. The world is plagued by war, corruption, violence, hatred, division, bitterness, injustice, exploitation and we could go on. Neither, it pains us to acknowledge, is the church immune to these failings. However alien a concept it is to our culture, our natural state is to be in sin. There is a need, then, amidst such apathy towards sin in the church, and in our culture, for our conscience to be sharp and clear. We don't lower God's standards to the level of others: 'it's ok, I'm not as bad as them'. Our comparison is

not horizontal between each other, but vertical between us and God. The way to remain sensitive to the conviction of the Spirit who brings us to an awareness of our sinful state is to continue to avail ourselves of the means of grace – God's word, prayer, fellowship with others etc.

The holiness of God and the fallibility of human beings is incompatible – like oil and water – and we are powerless to help ourselves (v. 19-20). William Temple once famously said: 'the only thing I can contribute to my salvation is the sin from which I need to be saved.' All of us stand, then, in our humanity – regardless of our heritage, culture, pedigree, learning – as those who have fallen short of God's glory (v. 23), unable to help ourselves and do anything to change the situation. All need God's pardoning rescue. All are in need of God's grace. All need to be saved.



For reflection:

- How do you view sin? Do you really feel a sense of guilt/shame when you do something wrong, or is your conscience dulled to habits and repeated patterns?
- How do others (outside the church) respond to the idea that all are guilty before God?
- If this is an alien concept, how do we begin to share with others their need of a Saviour?

ALL CAN BE SAVED

If we stopped where we ended the last section, we would be devoid of all hope: all of humanity needs to be saved. Yet, though every human has fallen short of God's glory (v. 23), so all of humanity has the potential to receive God's gift of pardoning grace through Jesus Christ.

Recently I attended an event, in the bright sunlight that had some fireworks as an accompaniment. In

the bright summer sun, they were little more than coloured puffs of smoke. Set fireworks against a bleak, dark sky and suddenly their beauty can be seen all the more. Similarly good news is only so good, in the context of its backdrop. Easter Sunday is so miraculous because of the desolation and despair of Good Friday.

God has made a way in Jesus Christ for sinners to be forgiven – justified, declared 'not guilty', 'free to go' – on the basis solely of Jesus death in our place (v. 24-25). Jesus' declaration from the cross, 'It is finished', forms the basis for our freedom and forgiveness. As he died where we deserved to die, we are given freedom and grace in place of guilt. There is indeed a Redeemer, Jesus, God's own Son. It is a complete transformation – saved from condemnation and guilt, now made righteous (v. 22) in Christ. 'No condemnation now I dread, Jesus and all in him is mine' (Charles Wesley). William Jay once wrote, quoting John Newton: 'My memory is failing but there are two things I never forget – that I am a great sinner and that Jesus Christ is a great Saviour.'

This message is great news and is at the heart of the Christian faith. How we long for our churches to be joy-filled expressions of delight and wonder when we gather to rehearse and rejoice in all God has so freely given us in Christ.

For reflection...

- How do we balance the presentation of the whole gospel, i.e. the serious state of humanity, with the offer of hope in the gospel?
- How could you, or your church, share better the wonderful hope held out in Jesus?

ALL CAN KNOW THEY ARE SAVED

Read 1 John 4:7-19

Not only can we experience salvation in Christ, but we can know with confidence that we belong to him. The first step to Christian assurance is to remember that it is much less about us and much more about Christ (v. 10). Our standing before God rests on what God has done, not on what we have achieved. God's grace is so scandalous because it is entirely undeserved. So it is God who keeps us, not ourselves and our own efforts.

Secondly, it is part of the work of the Holy Spirit to bring us assurance (v. 13-15). God wants us to know that we belong to him. Although there have been wobbles and times of self doubt along the way, it was this sense of assurance that I remember most at the occasion of my own conversion. I was privileged by some providential circumstances to be sitting in the Bournemouth International Centre in April 1997, listening to Rob Frost proclaim this good news of which I'm writing now. As a guilt-ridden insecure teenager, I was amazed at the sense of peace that came on accepting Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I experienced His peace and knew in that moment my sins forgiven. My experience echoes thousands of Methodists down through the decades, who like Mr Wesley at Aldersgate realised with certainty that Christ died for them. We seek, then, the infilling of the Spirit to confirm us as God's children.

Thirdly, this same Spirit brings us to awareness of the extent of God's love for us. Verse 17 even suggests that we are mysteriously invited in to partake of the love that holds together Father, Son and Spirit in perfect unity.

For reflection...

- How do we respond to the concept of the Holy Spirit allowing us to experience assurance?
- Have you had any similar experience when you 'felt' forgiven?

ALL CAN BE SAVED TO THE UTTERMOST

Read Philippians 2:12-18

Perhaps the greatest gift of the Wesleyan tradition to the wider Church is our focus on holiness and sanctification. Our salvation is all gift, yet there is work to do to put it into practice (v.12). If justification is being declared 'not guilty' or 'free to go', sanctification is the process of being made more and more into the likeness of Christ. For Wesley, this was both a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, but also a process where we had to play our part. In the gardening world, we can aerate the soil, add good quality compost, plant seeds, clear out weeds, feed and water plants, even pray over them (!), but we cannot make them grow. Growth is a product of the co-operation between gardener and Creator. Both have a role to play.

God is looking for spiritual growth in us, the fruit of his life in us (Galatians 5:22-23). That will come by us putting ourselves in the best position for God to bring spiritual growth. We take responsibility for creating the right conditions for growth to occur – by taking up the means of grace. As we do this, so we will discover a greater freedom over sin, a greater power to persevere, a deeper sensitivity to those things which displease God and a growing sense of wholeness as God, little by little makes us complete, able to reflect his glory fully to him and to others (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is the uttermost work of salvation – complete transformation – or

as Wesley described it, 'Christian Perfection'.

Holy people are attractive people. Don't mistake holiness for piousness. To be holy is to be evermore consumed by the transforming presence and power of God, by his Holy Spirit. Such people, in such a culture (and even such a church?) as ours, will 'shine like stars' (v. 15) and find that they are an object of wonder, who draw others to the Christ who lives in them.

For reflection...

- Have you noticed a growth in your spiritual life in the last year? What has caused (or prevented) this?
- How effective is the church at equipping you to mature as a Christian?
- Do you continue to seek the help of God's Spirit in making you more like Jesus?
- Do you think 'holy people are attractive people'? How does holiness impact God's mission through us?

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