

Wesley, John, 1703-1791
BF-Wesley, John

John Wesley's Doctrine Of Christian Perfection

by

Edward M. Panosian

The Psalter has much to say about holiness and purity and God's abhorrence of sin. The believer is in many ways recurrently warned against regarding iniquity in his heart. Psalm 130, verse 8, particularly attracted the attention of the Oxford reformer of the eighteenth century: "And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities." The word "all" in that verse provided occasion for his teaching of a doctrine the abuse of which has produced almost the counterreaction of neglect. This paper attempts to restore the doctrine to its context in the interest of a renewed balance on a Biblical truth.

"Christian perfection," John Wesley wrote, "is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodist; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up." Since this is the emphasis of the founder of Methodism, since it involved him in more controversy and odium than anything else he taught, and since students of modern "holiness movements" usually trace such movements back to him, we would seem not far astray in considering John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection: why it was taught, what it is *not*, what it is, and what have been its consequences.

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I. WHY IT WAS TAUGHT ⁰⁰⁹¹⁹⁷¹²



There are really two questions here: (1) why it was taught *when* it was taught and (2) why it was taught by Wesley (though, of course, the two are inseparable, since it *was* taught *when Wesley* taught it!). In the history of Christian doctrine it is abundantly clear that at no one time have all the doctrines of the church been exposed and emphasized equally. Rather, the particular need of the church in various periods of its history has dictated the doctrinal emphasis of each period. In the Nicene Age, for example, uncertainty of the meaning of the relationship between the human and the divine natures of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, led to the need for discussion and delineation of trinitarian theology and christology. In the late Middle Ages, the practical substitution of sacramental forms and meritorious works for justification by faith led to the reassertion, by protestant reformers, of Biblical soteriology. Similarly, I believe, the character of the eighteenth-century English church and nation led the Oxford reformer to amplify another Biblical truth as a concomitant of his preaching of the universality of the Gospel. That universality has often been expressed in four simple Wesleyan sentences: all men need to be saved; all men can be saved; all men can know they are saved (this is, of course, Wesley's doctrine of the "witness within"); all men can be saved from all sin. I believe I do not presume too much in concluding that my readers will, within their own theological frameworks, affirm the first three of these and at least in an ultimate sense, the fourth as well. But it is immediately clear that the fourth would provoke the most discussion. It is to a clarification of the sense in which Wesley believed that "all men can be saved from all sin" that this paper is addressed.

Eighteenth-century England was morally, socially, and politically so much in need of and so profoundly affected by the showers of revival blessing that came as God used the itinerant preachers of Methodism, that it is perfectly appropriate for one student and namesake—Dr. John Wesley Brady—to entitle his book *England Before and After Wesley*. It is spiritually instructive to consider the contrast in the period of the Enlightenment of the 1700's between, on the one hand, advancement in the sciences and arts and philosophy and technology and, on the other, the depravity of private and public morals, the flagrant drunkenness and political corruption. It was William Pitt, I believe, who said then of the members of

Parliament, "Every man has his price." And this was Protestant England with its noble Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, with which few would find major quarrel; with a church, theologically orthodox, but stagnant, lifeless, and apparently powerless to change lives. The Wesley brothers wanted to see God change lives. Against this background, one can see, I believe, why this doctrine of Christian perfection was taught *when* it was.

But it was taught particularly by Wesley. Bishop William Cannon discusses *The Theology of John Wesley* under the thesis that Wesley's doctrine of justification was the source and determinant of all the rest of his theology. He says *Reformation* theology generally views justification as "divine mercy which even in spite of sin claims the sinner and pardons him for Christ's sake and accepts him into the everlasting fellowship of the redeemed." He presents Wesley's view of a less inclusive concept of justification as the "means whereby a sinner, who stands in condemnation before the righteous law of God, is actually converted into a righteous person and is thereby enabled to meet the standards of divine holiness and, in a manner consistent with absolute justice, to merit the right of eternal fellowship with God" (p. 244).

From this concept of justification flow these consequences: (1) Man cannot in himself merit the right to be justified. Neither the quality of his works nor the nature of his character is of sufficient goodness to warrant God's acceptance. (2) This mercy is described by Wesley as universal—"free for all and free in all." The privilege of justification is denied by God to no one. (3) Active human responsiveness in the form of man's willingness to receive and his earnest desire to possess the gift of faith is the sole condition of his justification. (4) Justification is accompanied by regeneration (conversion) in which a man's life is changed, his character is rectified, and he is made into a new creature and set on the way to entire sanctification. So justification is a means to holiness. (5) After conversion a man is so far perfect as not to commit acts of sin, and love is the dominating motive of his life. But his old passions are still present, and they furnish occasion for his yielding to temptation and falling back into open sin. God's grace, however, is always present to sustain him, and God will not permit him to fail as long as he himself remains faithful to the heavenly vision. Thus he who finds the love of God shed abroad in his heart at conversion and is delivered from the bondage of sin in the act of justification is henceforth enabled to walk in the commandments of

God blameless and is carried on to that state of perfection without which no man can see God.

Thus, what God does for man expresses itself in a holy character and disposition, free from the hindrances of outward sin, progressively overcoming all inward desires that are evil, and being led on to perfect love, which is the highest gift of sonship and the final goal to be reached *on this earth* before admission is granted into the kingdom of God beyond the years. Wesley himself concludes, "Therefore they [the Methodists] maintain, with equal zeal and diligence, the doctrine of free, full, present justification, on the one hand, and of entire sanctification both of heart and life, on the other; being as tenacious of *inward* holiness as any mystic, and of outward, as any Pharisee."

So far, it should be clear in this discussion that the doctrine of Christian perfection was taught because (1) in Wesley's eyes the times required the doctrine and (2) the theology of Wesley naturally led to the doctrine. A *third* necessity, from Wesley's point of view, is self-evident: the Bible commands it: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5.48).^{*} The evidence for the proof that the Bible commands perfection consists chiefly of thirty texts: ten from Paul, ten from I John, and ten from the rest of the Bible. Those who may wish to examine his handling of those texts may find W. E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection*, chapters five and six, helpful. Though liberal in his embracing of the fruits of destructive Biblical criticism, Sangster discusses Wesley's primary proofs from Scripture to show how self-evident on this point was the *Word to Master John*. In passing, Sangster makes the suggestion that in the Scripture, Christian perfection is a matter of divine command or human longing (as attested by the imperative and subjective modes and the future tenses) rather than of attainment; no New Testament writer says "I am freed from all sin."

II. WHAT IT IS NOT

A. For Wesley, Christian perfection is not sinless perfection. Sin, to him, is defined narrowly as a voluntary transgression of a known law.

^{*} To the reader who immediately responds that "this word implies full development, growth into maturity of godliness, not sinless perfection" (as the Scofield note has it), I must reply that *sinless* perfection is no part of Wesley's meaning; more of this in the next section of the paper.

He says:

Not only sin properly so called, but sin improperly so called (that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown), needs the atoning blood. I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality. Therefore sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself. I believe a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please; I do not, for the reasons above-mentioned (from *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, John Wesley—best source).

B. It is not infallibility, nor perfection in knowledge, nor freedom from ignorance, nor freedom from mistakes concerning things not essential to salvation, nor freedom from bodily infirmities, nor freedom from errors of judgment or action, nor freedom from temptation; nor is it the perfection of angels who never left their first estate, nor is it Adamic perfection, since man is a fallen rebel, nor, of course, is it absolute perfection which belongs only to God. Further, "it is not so early as justification" nor "so late as death." It is not a dispensation from attending upon all the ordinances of God. It is not an entire deliverance from all with which the corruptible body presses down the soul. Least of all is it a license to sin. It is not a final state or condition which it is impossible to lose nor which is incapable of increase.

III. WHAT IT IS

It is time, with the advantage of this background, to determine what is Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. In Wesley's own words, it is nothing more nor less than

that habitual disposition of the soul, which, in sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin, "from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit;" and, by consequence, the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus; the being so "renewed in the spirit of our mind," as to be "perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."

Or, to put it in another way,

Here, then, is the sum of the perfect law; this is the true *circumcision of the heart*. Let the spirit return to God that gave it, with

the whole train of its affections. "Unto the place from whence all the rivers came, thither let them flow again. Other sacrifices from us he would not; but the living sacrifice of the heart he hath chosen. Let it be continually offered up to God through Christ, in flames of holy love. . . . Let your soul be filled with an entire love of him, that you may love nothing but for his sake.

He says in another place (*A Plain Account . . .*):

In one view, it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all, our soul, body, and substance to God. It is all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a renewal of the heart in the whole image of God, the full likeness of Him that created it. In yet another view, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Now take it in which of these views you please (for there is no material difference) and this is the whole and sole perfection which I have believed and taught these forty years.

Bishop Cannon (p. 241) states simply, "Christian perfection, for Wesley, means, therefore, only one thing, and that is purity of *motive*: the love of God, freed entirely from all the corruptions of natural desire and emancipated completely from any interest in self or in any other person or thing apart from God, guides unhindered every thought and action of a man's life." Love has entire possession of him.

Wesley says, "I advise you frequently to read and meditate upon the 13th chapter of the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians. There is the true picture of Christian Perfection! Let us copy after it with all our might." "It is loving God with all our heart and serving him with all our strength." This love is not merely an emotion but an attitude, a state of mind, a set will. It is, perhaps, nowhere better expressed than in Charles Wesley's hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."

How is this perfection achieved? Not by effort, but by faith; it is the free gift of God. All we can do is continue patiently in the faith that is given us and steadfastly believe that what God has promised He will perform. "Look for it then every day, every hour, every moment; why not this hour, this moment!" The act of faith, entire sanctification wherein perfection is finally wrought in the soul, is instantaneous, just as justification; but a process of development precedes it. This perfection is the *end* of which justification

is the beginning. And it is improvable, for growth in grace follows even more rapidly, as there are new occasions always for the demonstration of this controlling love. We may say that entire sanctification is a subjective event wrought by God in the human soul; and Christian perfection is the resulting objective life of holiness, never completed but always capable of further development.

In summary, love is the keynote of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection: perfect love toward God and man. Its by-product is the complete exclusion of conscious sin. It happens in a moment as a gift of God in response to faith and is maintained by humble dependence on Him.

IV. WHAT HAVE BEEN ITS CONSEQUENCES?

Now, finally, let us consider what this doctrine of Christian perfection has produced, and offer some comment.

In the first place, we discover commendation of this doctrine in learning that its author did not himself claim to have attained the goal which he preached. In a letter written two years before he died, but not published by his own request until after his death, he squelched the rumor that he "professed to be cleansed from all sin." He said.

I feel the constant witness of the Spirit of God that I am forgiven, and that I love God and my neighbor. I do not feel any evil tempers. I firmly believe that God will eternally save my soul. But whether all sin is taken out of my heart, and the possibility of grieving the Spirit of God, I do not determine; neither do I think that I love either God or my neighbor as I ought, or as I shall. I am helpless, but God is my strength. I live by faith. I am ashamed. I have no wish that anyone should believe I am saved from all sin.

This statement well illustrates the nobility of the observation by another that it is good to strive for perfection, but never good to claim to have attained it.

Contrast Wesley's self-estimate with his evaluation of the piety of his friend and colleague John William Fletcher, of whom, by the way, it is credibly reported that Voltaire, when challenged to produce a character as perfect as that of Christ, at once mentioned this Fletcher of Madeley. We are not surprised that, preaching Fletcher's funeral sermon, Wesley took as his text "Mark the perfect man," when we hear his estimate of Fletcher's life and character:

I was intimately acquainted with him for 30 years. I conversed with him morning, noon, and night, without the least reserve . . .

and, in all that time, I never heard him speak an improper word, or saw him do an improper action. Within fourscore years [Wesley died at 88] I have known many excellent men, holy in heart and life: But one equal to him I have not known, one so uniformly and deeply devoted to God. So unblamable a man, in every respect, I have not found either in Europe or America. Nor do I expect to find another such on this side of eternity.

Fletcher's wife, observing and sharing his toilsome and sacrificial life, who saw him when overtired and ill, and knew how often he was called from his bed at night during an epidemic of spotted fever (from which eventually he died), said that his life was "the most angelic I have ever known." So, while few great Methodists claimed assurance of this entire sanctification for themselves, some—like Fletcher, John Brash, and Benjamin Hellier—have been greatly acclaimed by others for their Christ-likeness.

Wesley, himself, in the second place, recognized how easily this doctrine could be abused. Hear him in his Sermon on Satan's Devices:

[Satan] is sensible, how few are able to distinguish (and too many are not willing so to do) between the accidental abuse, and the natural tendency, of a doctrine. These, therefore, will he continually blend together, with regard to the doctrine of Christian perfection; in order to prejudice the minds of unwary men against the glorious promises of God. And how frequently, how generally, I had almost said how universally, has he prevailed herein! For who is there that observes any of these accidental ill effects of this doctrine, and does not immediately conclude, this is its natural tendency; and does not readily cry out, "See, these are the fruits (meaning the natural, necessary fruit) of such doctrine?" Not so: they are fruits which may accidentally spring from the abuse of a great and precious truth: but the abuse of this, or any other scriptural doctrine, does by no means destroy its use. Neither can the unfaithfulness of man, perverting his right way, make the promise of God of no effect. No: let God be true, and every man a liar. The word of the Lord, it shall stand. "Faithful is He that hath promised: He also will do it" (Burtner and Chiles, p. 215).

In order to help guard his people who have received this gift against such abuse, he offers this advice (*Plain Account*, p. 45ff.):

1. Watch and pray continually against pride.
2. Beware of that daughter of pride, enthusiasm.
3. Beware of Antinomianism—making void the law through faith.
4. Beware of sins of omission; lose no opportunity of doing good in any kind.
5. Beware of desiring anything but God.
6. Beware of schism, that inward disunion, that dividing spirit.
7. Be exemplary in all things—little and large.

Also, Wesley is careful to underscore the perpetual need of Christ's atonement—even in cases where men have reached the state of Christian perfection—especially to make up for the defect which still remains between our perfection, which is only relative, and the absolute perfection of God. On Sunday, February 27, 1791, just three days before his death, he repeated the words: "I the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me!" Then his housekeeper asked, "Is this your language now?" "Yes," Wesley replied, "Christ is all! He is all!"

It is not necessary here to detail the historic perversion and the subsequent developments of this doctrine of the Oxford reformer. That the letter came to be substituted for the spirit there can be no doubt. That men sought the shell instead of the kernel is clear. That the holders of this doctrine of the second blessing too often forgot Wesley's warnings—and substituted works of social and economic altruism, at best, or fell into pride, enthusiasm, antinomianism, or schism, at worst—all this is true. But, as Wesley asked, was this necessary fruit or was it unfortunate abuse?

To those of us—this author among them—who look on sanctification as a gradual, progressive process completed in our promotion to glory, I would be less than fair or honest if I failed to include Wesley's own word on the question: his "queries humbly proposed to those who deny Christian perfection to be attainable in this life." Some of them follow:

3. Has God anywhere in Scripture commanded us more than he has promised to us?
4. Are the promises of God respecting holiness to be fulfilled in this life, or only in the next?
6. In what sense is "the righteousness of the law fulfilled in those who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit?" Rom. viii, 4.
7. Is it impossible for anyone in this life to love God with all his heart, and mind, and soul, and strength? And is the Christian under any law which is not fulfilled in this love?
10. If his blood cleanseth us from all sin while the soul and body are united, is it not in this life?
13. Has Christ anywhere taught us to pray for what he never designs to give?
14. Has he not taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven?" And is it not done perfectly in heaven?
15. If so, has he not taught us to pray for perfection on earth? Does he not then design to give it?

17. Do you sincerely desire to be freed from indwelling sin in this life?
18. If you do, did not God give you that desire?
19. If so, did he not give it you to mock you, since it is impossible it should ever be fulfilled?
21. Do you ever pray God to cleanse the thoughts of your heart, that you may perfectly love him?
22. If you neither desire what you ask, nor believe it attainable, pray you not as a fool prayeth?

However one responds to these queries, whatever terms he prefers to use for the truth for which Wesley contended, whatever may be thought of the exegetical and *hermeneutical* methods of the founder of Methodism, whatever refuge one may take in examining the *perversions* of this doctrine in history, one fact remains: we are not so perfect as we may be; we are not so free from sin, as, by the grace of God, we should be; we have need to press toward the mark. We may, furthermore, be encouraged in our holy resolution, for the same Lord who is rich in mercy and plenteous in redemption is able also to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think and, according to the power that worketh in us, to deliver us from the bondage of sin and to make us conformable to the blessed image of his Son.

God help us—everyone.

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