

What John Wesley Taught about Christian Perfection

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The doctrine of Christian perfection is the "grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up."¹ So wrote John Wesley in 1790, near the end of his life. But because this doctrine is probably the most-disputed, least-understood, and least-taught of Methodist beliefs, and since I despair of cogently explaining it in my own words, and of answering all the objections to it, here is a catena of quotations from Wesley's writings under various headings. Wesley himself is the inspiration for this device, and Peters' work provides a helpful model.² The headings themselves are modeled on Wesley's own summary.³

1. Believers may attain the state of Christian perfection.

Wesley knows that Christian perfection exists because Jesus taught that it did:

It is the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Those are his words, not mine: ... "Ye shall therefore be perfect as your Father who is in heaven is perfect" [Matt 5:48]; And who says ye shall not? It is the doctrine of St. Paul [Rom 6:1-18; 1 Thes 5:23], the doctrine of St. James [James 1:4; 3:2], of St. Peter [1 Peter 1:15, 22; 4:1-2], and St. John [1 John 3:6-9; 4:17-18]; and no otherwise Mr. Wesley's than as it is the doctrine of every one who preaches the whole and pure gospel.⁴

2. Christian perfection does not occur at justification.

Wesley's main argument for this assertion is that he has never known it to happen: "But we do not know a single instance, in any place of a person's receiving, in one and the same moment, remission of sins, [i.e., justification] the abiding witness of the Spirit, and a new clean heart."⁵

3. Christian perfection may be obtained long before death.

Wesley argued this point from Scripture, reason, and experience. From Scripture:

"True", say some, "but not till death; not in this world." Nay, St. John says, "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because, as He is, so are we in this world." [1 John 4:17] The apostle here, beyond all contradiction, speaks of himself and other

¹John Wesley to Robert Carr Brackenbury, 9-15-90, in *Letters* 8:238.

²See Outler, pp. vii, 123-133, and Peters, pp. 32-54.

³*PACP*, p. 106.

⁴*PACP*, pp. 108-109. See also *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62 for a list of questions which assert that perfection is possible. For an elaboration of the comment that perfection is taught by Paul, James, Peter, and John, see "Christian Perfection" in *Works* 6:6-15. For more scriptural proof, see "On Perfection," *ibid.*, pp. 415-6. Not only does perfection exist, but to fail to teach it is to fail to declare the whole counsel of God, and may bring blood-guiltiness. (*Ibid.*, p. 1) This section is condensed in *PACP*, pp. 16-21.

⁵*PACP*, p. 24. Wesley's argument on this point is entirely experiential and practical. Here and *ibid.*, p. 80, he argues that he has never known a case in which justification and entire sanctification occurred at the same time. In "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Works*, 6:51, he makes the practical argument that to identify justification and entire sanctification "blocks up" the necessary pathway to real sanctification.

living Christians, of whom he flatly affirms, that not only at or after death, but "in this world," they are as their Master.⁶

From reason he argues that if God commands living people to do something, it must be possible for them to do it:

Q. But how does it appear that this is to be done before the article of death?

A. 1. From the very nature of a command, which is not given to the dead, but to the living. Therefore, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," cannot mean, Thou shalt do this when thou diest, but, while thou livest."⁷

While reluctant to put forward living examples of Christian perfection, Wesley does publish a letter from Jane Cooper who experienced it a number of months before her death.⁸

4. Christian perfection is not absolute, nor is it the same as angelic or Adamic perfection.

Only God is absolutely perfect; so far are his creatures from him that none can even "search out this God to perfection."⁹ Nor can anyone now become like the angels or regain the perfection that Adam lost: "I do not conceive the perfection here spoken of, to be the perfection of angels.... Neither can any man, while he is in a corruptible body, attain to Adamic perfection."¹⁰

5. Christian perfection is not infallibility.

Wesley probably spent as much time explaining what Christian perfection was not, as he did explaining what it was. Christian perfection does not free one from non-moral faults:

We ... believe that there is no such perfection in this life as implies an entire deliverance, either from ignorance or mistake, in things not essential to salvation, or from manifold temptations, or from numberless infirmities, wherewith the corruptible body more or less presses down the soul.¹¹

⁶*PACP*, p. 24. For other scriptural arguments see *ibid.*, pp. 35-8, and "Christian Perfection," *Works* 6:6. While Wesley firmly believed that Christian perfection could be attained long before death, he said it generally does not happen until the instant of death. See *PACP*, p. 112. However the reason it often is so late in coming is that Christians usually do not expect it to come until then. See *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷*PACP*, p. 37. Other arguments from reason appear in *ibid.*, pp. 61-2, and in "On Perfection," *Works* 6:418 in which he asserts "a promise is implied in every commandment of God." On the same page he makes another argument from reason asking rhetorically, "Why cannot the Almighty sanctify the soul while it is in the body?"

⁸In *PACP* he comments that if he knew an example of Christian perfection he would not tell his questioner, for "you do not inquire out of love. You are like Herod: you only seek the young child to slay it." (p. 38) The account of Jane Cooper is in *ibid.*, pp. 62-69. Other examples are mentioned in his journal. See *Works*, 2: 433, 508, 517, 518, 523-528, 530, and 13:349-358.

⁹"The Unity of the Divine Being" in *Works* 7:265. For the assertion that only God is absolutely perfect, see *PACP*, p. 106.

¹⁰"On Perfection," *Works* 6:411-412.

¹¹*PACP*, p. 28.

These bodily weaknesses cause people to make many mistakes and even lead them to do things that are wrong. These wrong actions, however, are not sins because they do not spring from evil motives. Wesley explains,

But even these souls dwell in a shattered body, and are so pressed down thereby, that they cannot always exert themselves as they would, by thinking, speaking, and acting precisely right. For want of better bodily organs, they must at times think, speak, and act wrong; not through a defect of love, but through a defect of knowledge.¹²

6. Christian perfection may or may not be sinless, depending on how one defines the term "sin."

Wesley does not think the term "sinless" worth disputing about.¹³ He even agrees to call the perfection he preaches "sinful perfection."¹⁴ It all depends on how one defines sin:

(1) Not only sin, properly so called (that is a voluntary transgression of a known law), but sin, improperly called (that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown), needs the atoning blood. (2) 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. (3) Therefore, sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself. (4) I believe, a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. (5) Such transgressions you may call sin, if you please: I do not, for the reasons above mentioned.¹⁵

7. Christian perfection is perfect love for God and neighbor.

Wesley has many terms which he equates with Christian perfection. He calls it the second blessing, second change, full salvation, entire sanctification, pure love, holiness, and the renewal of the image of God.¹⁶ But his favorite designation is love:

Q. What is Christian Perfection?

A. The loving of God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love.¹⁷

God is the primary object of this love, but it also extends to other people. Wesley says entire sanctification involves "loving our neighbor, every man, as ourselves, as our own souls" so that love fill[s]the heart,

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 75. Wesley makes or elaborates this same point in *ibid.*, pp. 16, 42-5, and 72, as well as in "On Perfection," in *Works* 6:412.

¹³*PACP*, pp. 73 and 112.

¹⁴"Remarks on Mr. Hill's Review," in *Works* 10:407.

¹⁵*PACP*, p. 45.

¹⁶Lindstrom, p. 127; "Christian Perfection," in *Works* 6:5; *PACP*, p. 110.

¹⁷*PACP*, p. 42.

expelling pride, anger, desire, [and] self-will."¹⁸ He then goes on to say that this love is the essence of all true religion: There is nothing higher in religion--there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark."¹⁹

8. Christian perfection is "improvable" in that one continues to grow in grace through eternity.

Wesley makes this point with a question, "Q. 29. "Can those who are perfect grow in grace? A. Undoubtedly they can; and that not only while they are in the body but to all eternity."²⁰

9. Christian perfection can be lost and regained.

Believers are perfect only as they abide completely in Christ. Once the slightest movement away from him occurs, perfection is lost: "They who are sanctified, yet may fall and perish (Heb. x 29)." He warns, "If, after having renounced all, we do not watch incessantly, and beseech God to accompany our vigilance with His, we shall be again entangled and overcome." There is hope, however, for those who fall away, "Q.31. Can those who fall from this state recover it? A. Why not? We have many instances of this also. Nay, it is an exceeding common thing for persons to lose it more than once before they are established therein."²¹

10. Christian perfection is an instantaneous event, preceded and followed by a gradual process.

The process of sanctification begins at justification, continues to the point of perfection, at which the heart is finally perfectly clean and full of love, and then continues.²² Wesley uses the image of a dying man:

A man may be dying for some time; yet he does not, properly speaking, die till the instant that soul is separated from the body; and in that instant he lives the life of eternity. In like manner, he may be dying to sin for some time; yet he is not dead to sin till sin is separated from his soul; and in that instant he lives the full life of love. ... Yet he still grows in grace, in the knowledge of Christ, in the love and image of God; and will do so, not only to death, but to all eternity.²³

11. Christian perfection comes about by God's action in response to human faith.

Exactly like justification, Christian perfection is by faith alone. Of course, both repentance and fruits meet for repentance are remotely necessary for one's continuance and increase in faith, but only faith is immediately and proximately necessary to justification or sanctification (Christian perfection). Wesley

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 71, 74.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 90. See also pp. 11-5, 29, 33, 82, 109-110, 112, and "Christian Perfection," and "On Perfection," in *Works* 6:6-22, and 413-415.

²⁰*PACP*, p. 85. See also *ibid.*, p. 112, and statement 10.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 79, 102, 85. See also *ibid.*, pp. 75, 82, 85, 112, and "On Perfection," in *Works* 6:419

²²Wesley says, "At the same moment that we are justified, yea, in that very moment, sanctification begins." "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Works* 6:44.

²³*PACP*, p. 53. See also *ibid.*, pp. 24, 27, 33, 81, 85, 112, and "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in *Works* 6:46, 53-4.

states this truth very boldly: "He is not sanctified till he believes. But the moment he believes, with or without those fruits--yea, with more or less of this repentance--he is sanctified."²⁴ He exhorts his hearers:

Look for it then every day, every hour, every moment! Why not this hour, this moment? Certainly you may look for it now, if you believe it is by faith. And by this token you may surely know whether you seek it by faith or by works. If by works, you want something to be done first, before you are sanctified. You think, I must first be or do thus or thus. ... If you seek it by faith, you may expect it as you are; and if as you are, then expect it now.²⁵

12. Until believers achieve Christian perfection they should continue in zealous obedience to God.

Q. How are we to wait for this change?

A. Not in careless indifference, or indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God. And if a man dream of attaining it any other way (yea, or of keeping it when it is attained, ...), he deceiveth his own soul. It is true, we receive it by simple faith; but God does not, will not, give that faith unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which He hath ordained.²⁶

13. Seekers of Christian perfection need the help of other believers to attain this state.

Wesley knew the process of growing in grace required the help of other Christians. Thus he established the societies and divided them into classes. The only requirement for joining the class was the desire to avoid going to hell. The goal of the class was to attain and sustain justifying faith. After justification, however, believers needed continued help to move on to perfection. This help Wesley provided through the bands. A band was a single-gender group of believers assured of salvation but yearning for entire sanctification. They watched over one another's souls through regular meetings, strict accountability, and brutal honesty. In applying to join a band the candidate had to answer yes to these questions:

6. Do you desire to be told of your faults?
7. Do you desire to be told of your faults, and that plain and home?
8. Do you desire that everyone of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?²⁷

14. Believers may know they have attained Christian perfection only by the witness of the Spirit.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 49-50. See also *PACP*, pp. 27, 41, and 112.

²⁵"The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Works* 6:53.

²⁶*PACP*, pp. 53-54. See also *ibid.*, pp. 38 and 100, as well as "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in *Works*, 6:46, 51. How the remarks in this section fit in with those in the previous is unclear.

²⁷"General Rules of the United Societies," and "Rules of the Band Societies," *Works* 8:270-3.

While believers usually become more and more convicted of sin in their lives after justification, and then experience a great release as God instantaneously perfects them, the only sure test is the Spirit's assurance:

- Q. When may a person judge himself to have attained this?
A. When, after having been fully convinced of inbred sin, by a far deeper and clearer conviction than that he experienced before justification, and having experienced a gradual mortification of it, he experiences a total death to sin, and entire renewal in the love and image of God ... [But] none therefore ought to believe that the work is done, till there is added the testimony of the Spirit witnessing his entire sanctification as clearly as his justification.²⁸

And now, having excerpted and systematized Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, let us close by listening to one of his conversations with Charles Simeon, a Calvinist:

- Sir, I understand that you are called an Armenian; and I have been called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. [But first let me ask you some questions:]
Q. [Simeon] Do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God if God had not first put it into your heart?
A. [Wesley] Yes, I do indeed.
Q. And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?
A. Yes, solely through Christ.
Q. But, sir, supposing you were first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?
A. No. I must be saved by Christ from first to last.
Q. What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by god, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?
A. Yes, altogether.
Q. And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto his heavenly kingdom?
A. Yes, I have no hope but in him.
Then, Sir, with your leave, I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism ...²⁹

This episode reminds us that there is not a hint of Pelagianism in Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification.

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²⁸PACP, p. 52. See also *ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁹Quoted in Hopkins, pp. 174-175.

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