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# The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness

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by Frank Bateman Stanger

In this symposium we are focusing upon what may be called Methodism's most distinctive emphasis — *scriptural holiness*. John Wesley wrote: "Christian perfection 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." ("Thoughts Upon Methodism," 1768)

At the Methodist Conference in 1765 John Wesley, in discussing both justification and sanctification, declared: "... yet holiness was our object, inward and outward holiness. God ... thrust us out to raise up a holy people." (*Minutes of the 1765 Conference*)

Olin A. Curtis, distinguished Methodist theologian of the last century, wrote: "Wesley had almost the same epochal relation to the doctrinal emphasis upon holiness that Luther had to the doctrinal emphasis upon justification by faith, or that Athanasius had to the doctrinal emphasis upon the Deity of our Lord." *The Christian Faith*, p. 373)

John McClintock, who later became the first president of Drew Theological Seminary, declared at the Centenary Celebration of Methodism in New York City in 1866:

Methodism . . . takes the old theology of the Christian church, but it takes one element which no other Christian church has dared to put forward as a prominent feature of theology . . . we are the only church in history from the apostles' time until now that has put forward as its very

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## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

elemental thought — the great central pervading idea of the whole Book of God from beginning to the end — the holiness of the human soul, heart, mind, and will . . . Our work is a moral work — that is to say, the work of making men holy. (Curtis, O. A., *The Christian Faith*, p. 372)

Edwin Lewis, another of Methodism's distinguished line of theologians, once commented to a group of ministers: "Methodist preachers will either preach the doctrine of perfect love or they preach nothing."

Maldwyn Edwards, British historian and theologian of our day, in discussing the distinctive theological emphases of Methodism, said that the third great doctrine of Methodism is holiness, and that John Wesley declared that where holiness was not preached the societies languished.

Martin Schmidt, contemporary biographer of John Wesley, came to the conclusion that "holiness and happiness is Wesley's favorite formula." (*John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, Vol. 2, Part 2, p. 220)

Albert Outler, contemporary Methodist historical theologian, in a lecture at Asbury Theological Seminary in 1974, declared: "The 'whither' of Wesleyan theology depends in large part on the 'whither' of the Wesleyan doctrine of holiness of heart and life."

My assigned topic in this Symposium is "The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness." I shall make my presentation under four main headings:

1. The Sources of Wesley's Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness
2. How Wesley Defined and Described Scriptural Holiness
3. Some Misconceptions and Problems in Relation to Wesley's Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness
4. The Significance of Methodism's Emphasis Upon Scriptural Holiness in the Contemporary World

### **The Sources of Wesley's Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness**

The sources of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection were fourfold: (1) his study of Christian writings; (2) his study of the Holy Scriptures; (3) his inward longing for holiness of heart and life; (4) his intimate knowledge of the spiritual needs of others.

In his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766), Wesley presents what he hopes will be "a plain and distinct account of the

steps by which I was led . . . to embrace the doctrine of Christian perfection.” He begins by discussing his study of significant Christian writings. Here are his actual words:

In . . . 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor’s “Rule and Exercise of Holy Living and Dying.” In reading . . . this book, I was exceedingly affected; that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced . . . that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or myself . . .

In . . . 1726, I met with Kempis’s “Christian Pattern.” The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw, that giving even all my life to God . . . would profit me nothing, unless I gave . . . all my heart to him.

I saw, that “simplicity of intention, and purity of affection,” one design in all we speak or do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed “the wings of the soul,” without which she can never ascend to . . . God.

A year or two after, Mr. Law’s “Christian Perfection” and “Serious Call” were put into my hands. These convinced me, more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian; and I determined, through His grace . . . to be all devoted to God . . .

Will any considerate man say, that this is carrying matters too far? Or that anything less is due to Him who has given Himself for us, than to give Him . . . all we have, and all we are?

Even though there has been much scholarly research and diverse discussion in this area, Wesley was also undoubtedly influenced by the writings of the mystics. Albert Outler concludes that Wesley was influenced by three distinct mystical traditions: (1) voluntaristic, represented by à Kempis, Law, de Cástaniza (Lorenzo Scupoli); (2) quietistic, as exposed in Molinos, Guyon, and de Sales; (3) Eastern spirituality, as reflected in Macarius, and Ephraem Syrus. (Outler, *John Wesley*, pp. 251-2)

## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., in his doctoral thesis at the University of Bristol, wrote on the influence of the Roman Catholic mystics on John Wesley (1969). He summarizes his thinking in this regard in this footnote found in his later volume, *The Partakers* (p. 27):

Very briefly, there are five stages in classical mysticism: awakening (a moral or ethical awakening), purgation (in which one suppresses the flesh so that it no longer interferes with the Spirit), illumination (in which God sends “shafts of light” into the soul or “sensible comforts” so that the mystic has just for a moment an awareness of God’s presence), the dark night of the soul (in which God withdraws these comforts, forcing the mystic to come by naked faith or blind trust), and union with God (in which the mystic becomes one with God). Wesley, although eventually disillusioned with the dark night of the soul (faith as blind trust soon lost its appeal), continued to teach the first three stages, substituted the Reformation doctrine of faith as the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” for the dark night of the soul, and let that carry him through to union with God which he called perfection. To ensure perpetual growth beyond stage or union with God, Wesley defined this perfection as subjective and relative, not angelic, Adamic, or absolute.

Wesley turned also to a concentrated study of the Holy Scriptures. He writes: “In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to study, the Bible as the . . . only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw, in a . . . clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having ‘the mind which was in Christ Jesus,’ and of ‘walking as Christ also walked’ . . . not only in many or in most respects, but in all things. . . .” (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*)

W. E. Sangster, in *The Path to Perfection* (ch. 5), points out some of the biblical passages which Wesley believed supported the doctrine of scriptural holiness. Only one of the thirty passages on which Wesley chiefly relies for this doctrine is taken from the Old Testament (Ezekiel 36:25, 26, 29).

Three texts only are culled from the Synoptic Gospels: all from Matthew — 5:8, 48; 6:10.

Wesley took ten texts from the Apostle Paul: Romans 2:29, 12:1; 2 Corinthians 3:17, 18; 7:1; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 3:14-19; Philippians 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Titus 2:11-14.

Three of Wesley's foundation texts are found in the Epistle to the Hebrews: Hebrews 6:1; 7:25; 10:14.

Two texts are taken from the Gospel of John: John 8:34; 17:20-23 and no less than ten from the First Epistle of John: I John 1:5, 7, 8, 9, 10; 2:6; 3:3; 8-10; 4:17; 5:13.

Some in Wesley's day labeled his teachings on scriptural holiness as heresy and out of harmony with the Scriptures. To all these Wesley stoutly answered, "If I am a heretic, I become such by reading the Bible." (*Letters* IV, 216)

R. Newton Flew of Cambridge University, conducted an independent survey of the biblical evidence for Wesley's doctrine of scriptural holiness and found it more extensive in certain directions than Wesley himself supposed. (*The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*)

Another scholar, Vincent Taylor, writes: "Beyond doubt the New Testament teaches the absolute necessity of ethical and spiritual perfection . . . It would indeed be difficult to find any important doctrinal theme which is more broadly based or more urgently presented." (*Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, pp. 189ff)

But it was more than study which led Wesley to arrive at his doctrine of Christian perfection. His entire spiritual pilgrimage was essentially a search for personal holiness, and this always remained his chief preoccupation for Methodism. He had been brought up on the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. How deeply a prayer, so often repeated in Divine Worship, must have penetrated his mind and heart: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee, and worthily magnify Thy holy name." His inward craving for holiness motivated all his activities, both devotional and social, as a member of the Holy Club at Lincoln College, Oxford. After his Oxford days, he admitted that the primary reason for going to Georgia in the New World as a missionary was to save his own soul.

Wesley's failure to attain the inward holiness he hoped for simply by self-discipline and good works made him willing to listen to the doctrine of justification by faith as explained by the Moravians, and this later became for him the spiritual doorway to holiness of heart and life.

## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

Even before Aldersgate (1738), Wesley's two sermons, "The Circumcision of the Heart" (1733), and "On Grieving the Holy Spirit" (1733), revealed both his yearning for and his belief in the possibility of inward heart holiness.

In his sermon "The Circumcision of the Heart," Wesley declared to the university congregation at St. Mary's Church, Oxford:

The circumcision of the heart is that habitual disposition of soul, which, in the 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 image of our mind, as to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.

In his sermon "On Grieving the Holy Spirit," Wesley declared:

The title Holy, applied to the Spirit of God, does not only denote that he is holy in his own nature, but that he makes us so; that he is the great fountain of holiness to his church, the Spirit from whence flows all the grace and virtue, by which the stains of guilt are cleansed, and we are renewed in all holy dispositions, and again bear the image of our Creator. . .

This likeness to God, this conformity of our will and affections to his will, is, properly speaking, holiness; and to produce this in us is the proper end and design of all the influences of the Holy Spirit. By means of his presence with us, we receive from him a greater fulness of holy virtues: we take such features of resemblance in our spirits as correspond to his original perfections.

Wesley's Aldersgate experience on May 24, 1738, appears to have been the discovery of a personal sense of faith in Christ and experience of pardon, already recognized by him as theologically correct. But Aldersgate did not end his spiritual quest; the matter of faith remained. So holiness became the object of the continuing quest of faith. He wrote in a letter to Thomas Church (June 17, 1746): "Our main doctrines which include all the rest, are repentance, faith and holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself."

Wesley's personal search for holiness was supported by his awareness both of the spiritual needs of others, and by the fact that the other religious systems of the day were really not meeting such inward needs. John Fletcher of Madeley summed up Methodism's mission in these strong words: "to preach the doctrine of grace against the Socinians — the doctrine of justice against the Calvinists — and the doctrine of holiness against all the world." (Letter to J. Benson in app. XXIX of Wesley's *Standard Journal*, VIII:333)

Wesley sensed the need for an insistent emphasis on morality. But it was deepened beyond contemporary convention by his realization that "true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions." (*Journal* 1) This led to his adoption of the idea of Christian perfection as the end of religion; and to the realization that such holiness could only be attained by grace, not mere willpower.

Hence, Wesley's great contribution to post-Reformation Christianity was his insistence upon the possibility and necessity of unlimited moral progress in the Christian, depending on the grace of God. In doing so, he was opposing, on one side, the moral pessimism and unbalanced theories of justification which have so often afflicted Protestantism. On the other side, he avoided the belief of so-called "enlightened" eighteenth century Protestantism in the unaided natural goodness of persons. Wesley took sin seriously, but grace more seriously still. For him, the ultimate object of grace is always holiness.

Here then is a general chronology of John Wesley's publicizing his doctrine of Christian perfection:

- 1733 — His sermon, "The Circumcision of the Heart" — Oxford University
- 1733 — His sermon, "On Grieving the Holy Spirit"
- 1739 — Publication of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*
- 1739 — Tract — *The Character of a Methodist*
- 1740 — His sermon, "Christian Perfection"
- 1741 — Second volume of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*
- 1742 — Third volume of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*
- 1742 — Charles Wesley's sermon, "Have you Received the Holy Spirit?"
- 1744 — First Methodist Conference
- 1744 — His sermon, "Scriptural Christianity"
- 1744 — John Wesley's *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and*



## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

### *Religion*

- 1745 — John Wesley's *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*
- 1745 — Second Methodist Conference
- 1745 — *Hymns of Perfection and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father*
- 1746 — Third Methodist Conference
- 1747 — Fourth Methodist Conference
- 1749 — Two volumes of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*
- 1752 — Second edition of 1749 volumes of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*
- 1759 — John Wesley, *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*
- 1761 — John Wesley, *Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection*
- 1762 — His sermon, "Sin in Believers"
- 1766 — John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*
- 1766 — Methodist Conference at Leeds — questions "are you going on to perfection? do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? are you groaning after it?" first used by Wesley
- 1767 — His sermon, "Repentance of Believers"
- 1770 — His sermon, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield"
- 1785 — His second sermon on "Perfection"

### **How Wesley Defined and Described Scriptural Holiness**

For Wesley, scriptural holiness involves both an "event in grace" and the "process of grace." He spoke of the event as "entire sanctification" and of the process as "sanctification."

It is important to see how both event and process fit into Wesley's "order (schema) of salvation." Wesley's "order" in the stages of grace appears in this sequence: (1) prevenient grace, which creates an inward response to the need for personal salvation, and sequentially makes possible confession, repentance and faith; (2) initial salvation, which includes both justification and regeneration; (3) the witness of the Spirit to one's acceptance before God; (4) the beginning of the process of sanctification which continues throughout one's entire spiritual pilgrimage; (5) the experience of entire sanctification in which a believer voluntarily consecrates himself totally to the Holy Spirit, the result being both the crucifixion of the carnal mind and the cleansing of the inner life; (6) the unfolding life of holiness, aptly described as Christian perfection; and (7) finally, the consummation



of salvation in eternity which Wesley described as glorification.

But our exclusive focus in this paper is on sanctification and scriptural holiness. In his sermon on “The Repentance of Believers” (1767), Wesley points out the need of those who have already experienced “initial salvation” to repent. In response to the question “In what sense are we to repent?” Wesley says it is because one feels pride and self-will in one’s heart, feels the love of the world and the desire of the eye, feels the carnal mind which is manifest in jealousy, evil surmisings, malice, hatred, bitterness, covetousness, has participated in uncharitable conversation and is conscious of sins of omission.

But Wesley affirms that Christ is not only able, but willing to cleanse the Christian from all filthiness of flesh and spirit. Such an experience of spiritual cleansing is what Wesley means by entire sanctification, and marks the beginning of the life of scriptural holiness.

Wesley’s descriptive words concerning the nature of sanctification and holiness are so numerous in his sermons, letters, and other writings, that only a selective sampling can be given in such a paper as this. Consider the following descriptive insights in Wesley’s words:

It is evident . . . that (justification) is not the being made actually just and righteous. This is sanctification; which is, indeed, in some degree, the immediate fruit of justification, but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God and of a totally different nature. The one implies, what God does for us through His Son; the other, what He works in us by His Spirit. So that, although some rare instances may be found, wherein the term “justified” or “justification” is used in so wide a sense as to include “sanctification” also; yet, in general use, they are sufficiently distinguished from each other, both by St. Paul and the other inspired writers. (Sermon on “Justification by Faith”)

I believe it to be an inward thing, namely, the life of God in the soul of man; a participation of the divine nature; the mind that was in Christ; or, the renewal of our heart after the image of Him that created us. (*Journal*, Sept. 13, 1739)

Always remember the essence of Christian holiness is

## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

simplicity and purity; one design, one desire; entire devotion to God. (Farewell Sermon at Epworth, 1735)

... 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 . . . .

It is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves, (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 1766)

Christian perfection is pure love reigning alone in the heart and life. It is an ideal, to which the believer approximates even more closely. (Sermon on “Christian Perfection”)

Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is neither more nor less than pure love; love expelling sin, and governing both the heart and life of a child of God. The refiner’s fire purges out all that is contrary to love, and that many times by a pleasing smart. (Feb. 21, 1771, letter to Walter Churchey)

I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by a simple act of faith; consequently in an instant. But I believe a gradual work, both preceding and following that instant. (“Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection,” Jan. 27, 1767)

Perfect love is the goal and possible realization of the Christian life. It is by the work of this gracious Spirit that suddenly, in an instant, man’s bent to sinning is replaced by perfect love. (Sermon on “The Repentance of Believers”)

In his classic work, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*,

published in 1766, Wesley is careful to point out his basic convictions concerning the experience of entire sanctification. He writes:

(1) There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.

(2) It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to “go on unto perfection.” (Hebrews 6:1)

(3) It is not so late as death; for St. Paul speaks of living men that were perfect. (Phil. 3:15)

(4) It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone.

(5) It does not make a man infallible; none is infallible while he remains in the body.

(6) Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is “salvation from sin.”

(7) It is “perfect love.” (I John 4:18) This is the essence of it; its properties, or inseparable fruits are, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks. (I Thess. 5:16)

(8) It is improvable . . . one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.

(9) It is amissible; capable of being lost; of which we have numerous instances. . . .

(10) It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.

Wesley concludes his *Plain Account* with such statements as the following:

Therefore, all our preachers should make a point of preaching perfection to believers, constantly, strongly, and explicitly; and all believers should mind this one thing, and continually agonize for it.

. . . this we confess . . . we expect to love God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Yea, we do believe that He will in this world so “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit, that we shall perfectly love Him and worthily magnify His Holy name.

John Fletcher, vicar of Madeley, the systematic theologian of the

## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

Wesleyan Revival, said that Charles Wesley's hymn beginning "O for a heart to praise my God" is as accurate a description of perfect love as has ever been penned.

O for a heart to praise my God  
A heart from sin set free,  
A heart that always feels thy blood  
So freely shed for me!

A heart resigned, submissive, meek,  
My great Redeemer's throne;  
Where only Christ is heard to speak,  
Where Jesus reigns alone.

A humble, lowly, contrite heart,  
Believing, true, and clean,  
Which neither life nor death can part  
From him that dwells within;

A heart in every thought renewed,  
And full of love divine;  
Perfect, and right, and pure, and good,  
A copy, Lord of thine!

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;  
Come quickly from above,  
Write thy new name upon my heart,  
Thy new, best name of Love.

Time does not permit mention of Wesley's contemporaries and their advocacy of the doctrine of Christian perfection along with their leader. Nor can we pause long enough even to hear what contemporary Christian leaders have to say in support of scriptural holiness. But what formidable voices they are, affirming both the need and possibility of inward cleansing and the holy life, among them being W.B. Pope, Olin Curtis, William Taylor, Daniel Steele, William Oldham, Samuel Brengle, W.E. Sangster, E. Stanley Jones, Thomas Merton, C.S. Lewis, Arthur J. Moore, Albert E. Day, John Lawson, Albert Outler, Harold Lindstrom, Edwin Lewis and a host of others.

There is a significant insight into contemporary Methodism's official attitude toward the Wesleyan doctrine of scriptural holiness when we note that when the Evangelical United Brethren Church united with The Methodist Church in 1968 to form the present United Methodist Church, the article on sanctification and Christian perfection which appeared in the 1962 Evangelical United Brethren Confession was brought intact into the new denomination.

Note the following two paragraphs in this official statement of faith:

We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God's will, and to strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God. (*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 1980, p. 66)

### **Some Misconceptions and Problems in Relation to Wesley's Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness**

In any study in depth of the Wesleyan approach to Christian perfection there are certain misconceptions and problems that should be dealt with. However, it is impossible to treat all such issues adequately in this paper. I propose merely to mention some of these crucial issues, and then give without detailed documentation what I believe to be the Wesleyan answer. Here are the issues:

1. Did the progressive development of Wesley's theological thought tend to negate his earlier ideas about scriptural holiness or did it rather confirm them?

*Answer:* Many statements could be offered in support of the position that Wesley became more insistent, rather than less insistent, in his emphasis upon Christian perfection as he grew older.

## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

One illustration must suffice. On January 29, 1791, six weeks before he died, Wesley wrote to the Rev. John Booth the following: “Wherever you have the opportunity of speaking to believers, urge them to go on unto perfection. Spare no pains, and God, our God, will give you his blessing.”

2. Did John Wesley ever experience what he was advocating? Did he have a personal “event experience” of entire sanctification as well as participate in the process of sanctification?

*Answer:* Olin Alfred Curtis, Methodist theologian, raises this question in his volume *The Christian Faith*. He finds an affirmative answer in a quotation from Wesley’s *Journal*, December 23-25, 1744:

In the evening, while I was reading prayers at Snowfields, I found such light and strength as I never remember to have had before. I saw every thought as well as every action or word, just as it was rising in my heart; and whether it was right before God, or tainted with pride of selfishness. I never knew before (I mean not as at this time) what it was “to be still before God.” *Tuesday, 25.* I walked, by the grace of God, in the same spirit; and about eight, being with two or three that believed in Jesus, I felt such an awe and tender sense of the presence of God as greatly confirmed me therein, so that God was before me all day long. I sought and found him in every place, and could truly say, when I lay down at night, “Now I have lived a day.”

Curtis then adds this observation: “I find it almost impossible to read Wesley’s words in the light of all his later utterances about the doctrine of Christian perfection, and not consider this date, December 24, 1744, as the probable time when he began to love God supremely.” (pp. 375-6)

3. Why did Wesley emphasize the need of a second “crisis-experience” in divine grace? Must entire sanctification be an instantaneous experience?

*Answer:* Wesleyans believe that two definite works of grace are needed for several reasons. First, the two-fold nature of sin needs to be dealt with redemptively. Sin is both outward acts and inward nature. Initial salvation provides justification in relation to sins already committed and regeneration in effecting a new life of righteous conduct. Entire sanctification provides inner cleansing,

thus dealing with the sin-nature.

In the second place, the person seeking initial salvation is not aware of any need of a subsequent deeper experience of grace at that time. Such a one craves forgiveness: "God be merciful to me a sinner." It is only after receiving forgiveness that the believer senses the inward struggle with the inherited sinful nature.

Third, the person seeking initial salvation cannot meet the conditions of receiving the Holy Spirit in His fullness. The sinner is dead in trespasses and sins, and is capable of only confession. But the "born-again Christian" is able to present himself or herself as a "living sacrifice" unto God, in the "event" of entire sanctification.

Furthermore, the ministry of the Holy Spirit has a different redemptive focus in each of the two spiritual experiences of initial salvation and entire sanctification. In initial salvation the Holy Spirit performs a regenerating ministry. In entire sanctification the Holy Spirit effects a purifying work.

It is often asked, what does the fullness of the Spirit in entire sanctification do for a Christian which regeneration has not already accomplished? The answer is found in the experience of the early Christians after the day of Pentecost. Pentecost added two new dimensions to the Christian's life: inner purity as the result of the Spirit's cleansing, and spiritual power as the result of the Spirit's total control of one's life.

In relation to entire sanctification being an instantaneous experience, Wesley wrote:

A man may be dying for some time; yet he does not, properly speaking, die till the instant the 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. . . .

If ever sin ceases, there must be a first moment of its existence, and a first moment of our deliverance from it. (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*)

4. Is Wesley's concept of Christian perfection based upon a faulty concept of sin? Does Wesley advocate sinless perfection?

*Answer:* Wesley wrote that "Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God." (Letter to Mrs.



## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

Bennis, June 16, 1772) He insists that a person is morally responsible for only what he knows about God's standards of holiness. Wesley's emphasis in relation to both sin and holiness is on personal intention. A person can intend not to sin. A person can intend to have a pure heart. This is what the Apostle John wrote: "These things are written that you do not sin." (I John 2:1)

Wesley never taught sinless, or absolute, or infallible perfection. He declared that sanctified believers must be aware of the need to confess sin, if and when it occurs. Here again, the words of St. John are apropos: "But if any person sins we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (I John 2:1)

Wesley warned that it was possible to "lapse" from the experience of entire sanctification: "Those who are sanctified by the blood of the covenant, may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly." ("Serious Thoughts Upon the Perseverance of the Saints," 1751)

In the light of Wesley's definition of sin, his ideal of Christian holiness is discovered in the antithesis in a historical theological dictum: not *non posse peccare*, but *posse non peccare*. ("It is not impossible to sin, but it is possible not to sin.")

5. Does Wesley's ideal of Christian holiness have a faulty concept of human nature?

*Answer:* Wesley's *Plain Account* (1766) is a composite of excerpts from his writings on the subject of Christian perfection between 1725 and 1765. A cluster of "Seven Footnotes," including such matters as "ease in pain," "wanderings of thought," "no fear or doubt," "freed from temptation," is appended to one section of the first edition.

Concerning these "Seven Footnotes," Orville S. Walters writes:

(They are) the product of compassion, as Wesley tries to bring the likeness of a Christian from the remote ideal and the harsh absolutes of the *Preface* down into the realizable human dimensions, where infinite diversity prevails, and where the achievement of maturity is painfully slow.

Each amendment is the precipitate of a reaction between Wesley's early concept of the ideal and his mature acceptance of the realities of human personality. Having suffered himself under the tyranny of an overly demanding perfectionism, Wesley tried to save his followers from a similar bondage. ("John Wesley's Footnotes to Christian

Perfection” in *Methodist History*, October 1973)

6. Are “crisis” and “process” related logically in Wesley’s concept of scriptural holiness?

*Answer:* In the minutes of the 1768 Conference these words appear: “Is the change instantaneous or gradual? It is both one and the other.”

Wesley wrote: “God does not give them a stock of holiness. But unless they receive a supply every moment, nothing but unholiness would remain.” (*Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection*)

Wesley accepted the instantaneous experience as an almost invariable aspect of attainment to Christian perfection. Nevertheless, the dynamic elements in his conception of attainment were preserved by an unflagging emphasis upon continual growth, and upon the maintenance of an “every moment” relationship to Christ.

So, in relation to temptation and sin on the one hand, and the life of holiness on the other, Wesley made Christian perfection compatible with both probation and progression. As Wesley in his *Plain Account* offered practical advice about spiritual growth to those who are sanctified, he confirmed his conviction that the crisis of entire sanctification is not incompatible with spiritual growth, but antecedent to it.

7. How is entire sanctification related to the “baptism with the Spirit?”

*Answer:* More recent Wesleyan studies conclude that what Wesley had in mind when he spoke of the crisis of entire sanctification is practically synonymous with the Pentecost-concept of the baptism with the Holy Spirit recorded in Acts 2. It was John Fletcher, the theologian of the Wesleyan Revival, who pointed out, even in Wesley’s day, the similarities in this regard.

8. How is the experience of entire sanctification related to the gifts of the Spirit?

*Answer:* Wesley, as a New Testament Christian and scholar, believed in the “gifts of the Spirit.” However, he never identified any particular gift, or the sum total of the gifts, as necessary evidence of having been “entirely sanctified.” Rather, he wrote that “when the witness of the Spirit and fruit of the Spirit meet together, there can be no stronger proof.” Nevertheless, he exhorted Christians to be sensitive to the gifts of the Spirit and to use them, but not to misuse them. He reminded them to remember that always “love is the highest gift of God; all gifts are either the same with or infinitely

## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

inferior to it.” (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*)

### **The Significance of Methodism’s Emphasis upon Scriptural Holiness in the Contemporary World**

The Wesleyan emphasis upon scriptural holiness has both historical and contemporary relevance. It was the distinctive note in the Wesleyan Revival in England in the eighteenth century and in the spread of the Methodist movement in America, beginning with the last years of the eighteenth century. But the Wesleyan concept of holiness is as relevant in the contemporary world as it has been historically. So we consider, in a summary manner, several areas of such strategic contemporary relevance.

To begin with, the renewal of The United Methodist Church in its spiritual distinctiveness is in large part dependent upon the recovery of the focus on scriptural holiness. As was noted in the introduction, in observance of Methodism’s bicentennial this year, a significant series of books has been published under the general title *Into Our Third Century*. Scattered throughout the books are insights into both the present condition of the church and the imperatives for the church’s recovery to full effectiveness in life and mission.

In the series it is admitted that something is lacking in Methodism, and the emphasis is always on the need for the recovery of a sound theological base. There is the summons for Methodism to return to its roots: to a fresh study of Wesleyan theology, to a new emphasis upon Wesleyan experience, and to a consistent practice of the Wesleyan life-style of holiness. There is the insistence upon the recovery of the Wesleyan heritage of a vital spirituality, at the heart of which is the concept of holiness.

In the second place, the Wesleyan insistence upon holiness is imperative for Methodism to make its fullest contribution to evangelical theology. At the heart of our Protestant theology is the doctrine of salvation. But inherent in the doctrine of salvation is the ultimate objective of salvation. Wesleyans are quick to affirm that holiness is the summum bonum of God’s gift of His redeeming grace in and through Jesus Christ.

We refer again to Professor R. Newton Flew, of Cambridge University, who in 1934 published his book, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*. In it he addresses himself to the double question, which he posed in the introduction: “What is the Christian ideal for

the present life? And is it the will of God that by His grace we should attain to it?

Four-hundred pages later, in a rather long and involved sentence, Flew concludes:

The doctrine of Christian perfection — understood not as an assertion that a final attainment of the goal of the Christian life is possible in this world, but as a declaration that a supernatural destiny, a relative attainment of the goal which does not exclude growth, is the will of God for us in this world and is attainable — lies not merely upon the by-paths of Christian theology, but upon the high road. (p.397)

In his chapter on “Conclusions,” (Ch. XXII) Flew comments:

No limits can be set to the moral and spiritual attainments of a Christian in the present life.

If the church fails in its great task of sanctity, it must be because the Church is not taking God to be what He is.

It (the Gospel’s vision) is an ideal resting on the grace and the promises of God, a God whose command of holiness is mocked if men regard themselves as forever destined to moral frustration and defeat in their present battle.

Oswald Chambers wrote (and there seems to be a renewed interest in Chambers’ approach to spirituality in our day): “If once the moral equilibrium has been upset by conviction of sin, holiness is the only result or no peace forever.”

Methodism’s emphasis upon scriptural holiness also makes a significant contribution to the doctrine of the church. It illumines the nature of the church, as a spiritual organism, dependent finally upon the person and ministry of the Spirit of holiness.

It identifies the members of the church — a redeemed, cleansed, separated people, intent upon holy living, and yearning for the consummation of being presented to the Father as an adorned bride “without spot or wrinkle.” Wesley said “the church is called ‘holy’ because it is holy; because every member thereof is holy.” (Quoted in *John Wesley*, Outler, p. 316)

Because the church is holy, the ministries of the church are prioritized. Certain redemptive ministries have been committed to

## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

the church, and to no other institution on earth. The church is to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; to preach and teach the gifts and demands of a holy God; to unite persons in a holy, spiritual fellowship; to serve all those in need in the name of a holy Christ; and to offer healing as the doorway into wholeness. Such wholeness is impossible without holiness of heart and life.

Methodism's insistence upon personal holiness has been also the supreme stimulus to effective social action. Wesley said that he knew no holiness save social holiness. A study of the post-reformation centuries gives documentation that the greatest contributions in social concern and ministry and action have been made by those in whose heart was burning the holy love of Jesus Christ.

Interesting studies of the social influence of the emphasis upon perfection are found in Charles W. Ferguson's book, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, and Timothy Smith's volume *Revivalism and Social Reform*.

A third area of the contemporary relevance of Wesley's concept of scriptural holiness deserves mention. The emphasis upon the holy life, "going on unto perfection," is necessary for the undergirding of spiritual formation in the lives of the people called Methodist.

Spiritual formation is growth of the total person toward maturity in loving relationship to God, to self, to others, and to the whole of God's created world. It is growth in the grace and graciousness of Jesus Christ and in the knowledge of Him. It is the journey of the total person toward wholeness. It is growth in spirituality, according to the image of Christ. It is always growth in holiness.

Spiritual formation is needed in order to fulfill the divine ideal. God intends the image of Christ be formed in us. We are to become Christ-like. He calls us to be holy. Actually, it is more important what we are than what we do. In fact, we can do no more than we are.

Spiritual formation is needed to provide inner resources which are the only adequate support system for the manifold experiences of life.

Spiritual formation is needed to enable a person to perform effectively the redemptive ministries assigned by Jesus Christ.

Spiritual formation is needed in order for the Christian to achieve a wholesome balance between the material and the spiritual.

The concept of holiness, with its inherent imperatives of intention, totality, purity, perfect love, discipline, growth, and expectation of consummation, is an indispensable ingredient in a life devoted to

spiritual formation.

Finally, it is my conviction that the emphasis upon holiness is Methodism's most distinctive contribution to the ecumenical church. We are strengthened by the Roman Catholic affirmation of the City of God transcending the City of Man. There is something reassuring about the traditional continuity of Anglicanism. We are all benefactors of the Lutheran emphasis upon justification by faith. We rejoice in the possibilities of Christian freedom so insisted upon by the Anabaptists. The Reformed tradition speaks and acts eloquently concerning the parity of clergy and laity in polity and sacrament and worship. The Pentecostals have insisted the Holy Spirit return to the stage of the church's life as a living, vibrant Person, rather than a mere age-old, respected doctrine.

But the ecumenical church likewise needs the Wesleyan emphasis upon the realizability of holiness in the midst of the life of the world. So contemporary Methodists are challenged to be faithful in their insistence upon the holy life — a life entered into by an event in grace; sustained by burning devotion and unswerving discipline; manifested in both personal fruits and corporate reforms; and inspired by the ever-increasing approximation of the image of Christ which will at last be restored fully in eternity.

In the early days of ecumenical endeavor the quest for Christian perfection seems to have furnished not only common ground upon which the evangelical Protestant denominations could labor for unity, but an ideal and purpose central to their mutual concern. In the 20th century it is, therefore, not unreasonable to infer that once again barriers to Christian unity could be dissolved in a contemporary baptism of the Holy Spirit, which leads to the holy life. W.E. Sangster undoubtedly spoke prophetically when he declared: "The saints are the chief hope of re-union." (*The Pure in Heart*, p. 61)

### **Conclusion**

In his "Thoughts Upon Methodism" (1768), Wesley wrote:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America; but I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.

## *The Wesleyan Doctrine of Scriptural Holiness*

If, perchance, Methodism has reached even the beginnings of the “dead sect” stage (perish the thought!), there is available a process of resurrection. Repent of having missed the way. Rediscover the Wesleyan concept of scriptural holiness. Receive the Holy Spirit in His fullness. Reproduce the holy life before others. Relate holiness to every aspect of the world’s life.

If Methodism has been able to avoid the spiritual perils of such a condition of lifelessness (and I pray God that it has), we must be faithful to what has been committed to us. Scripture, tradition, experience, reason — all confirm that true holiness is the secret of life and ministry for both the Christian and the church — redeeming and abounding life; transforming and unbounded ministries.

