
In Pursuit of Holiness: Some Thoughts for the Asbury Community Near and Far

by Laurence W. Wood

John Wesley formulated nineteen exacting questions to be asked of every ordained Methodist minister. From the beginning until the present, every Methodist preacher has been asked these questions. The most jolting (some might say “presumptuous”) of these is the third question: “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?”

Membership in a United Methodist Annual Conference to this very day assumes that one expects to be made perfect in love in this life! Yet, do those of us who are United Methodist ministers or colleagues in the larger Wesleyan tradition really expect this? Do those of us who are teachers, students, and alumni of Asbury Theological Seminary really expect this? The Articles of Incorporation state that this Seminary intends to “send forth . . . sanctified, Spirit-filled” persons into the ministry and that “the instruction of this Seminary will fully recognize . . . entire sanctification as a second work of grace subsequent to regeneration.” (Section D, Articles IV, of the Articles of Incorporation).

I suppose no one would question that the Scriptures assume holiness to be the supreme ideal of the Christian life. But is holiness to be a reality in one’s life in this world? Can one fully and actually appropriate the righteousness of Christ now? Perhaps some would say that only a few, if any, might experience perfect love in this world. But certainly it is not normative for all believers. Others might not say this but really feel this way. They might affirm with their minds belief in the Wesleyan doctrine of holiness, but subconsciously feel that the doctrine is unreal and a gigantic hoax. This is like a neurotic reaction in which one is split into two personalities. The conscious

Dr. Wood is associate professor of philosophy of religion at Asbury Theological Seminary where he has served since 1976. He holds the Ph.D. degree from the University of Edinburgh.

personality affirms belief in holiness while the subconscious personality rejects it. Too many believers are defeated in their spiritual lives because of this inner split between what they think and what they feel. They try to live holy, while at the same time not realizing that their subconscious personality is telling them that holiness is not possible. Others, for whom these subconscious feelings have been allowed to surface to their conscious personality, have moved right out of the Wesleyan tradition, because this doctrine threatened their emotional and spiritual sanity. The expectation, for them, to be made perfect in love is a fantasy that results either in Pharisaical hypocrisy or in a nervous breakdown.

I suspect that too many of us at Asbury Theological Seminary give lip service to this doctrine but otherwise ignore it. I also suspect that this attitude reflects a confused feeling of loyalty to the Asbury tradition on the one hand, and of uncertainty about the doctrine of holiness and its applicability to life on the other hand.

I think this situation is unfortunate, but I suppose every tradition undergoes periods of reflection and reformulation of doctrinal issues. After all, theology is an ongoing process; it is never finished. Theologizing is attempting to interpret God's revelation in an appropriate and intelligent manner for every generation.

The Asbury tradition has always considered the doctrine of holiness to be one of its distinctive beliefs. With Wesley, it has perceived its mission to be "to spread scriptural holiness over these lands." It is only natural that the holiness tradition has had to undergo continuous reflection over the meaning of this doctrine. But my personal perception is that the larger Christian community is as much concerned with this issue as the immediate Asbury community. This is a day when our secular, pluralistic society seems to have no normative set of values and, therefore, the pursuit of holiness should especially be a part of the life of every Christian.

My hope in sharing my reflections on this issue is that the expectation of being made perfect in love will appear realistic and relevant. While these reflections arise from my dialogue with students, alumni, and colleagues, I should say I speak for nobody except myself. My remarks are intended to be no more than a few general thoughts reflecting my personal perspective.

First, some feel that we at Asbury turn the doctrine of holiness into an unhealthy obsession. It appears to them that we have an irrational fascination with a mere doctrine which, if intellectually accepted, will

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turn them into a superhuman person. Wesley in his day had to address this problem. He warned his preachers against “rank enthusiasm” and fanatical devotion. Whenever holiness is presented primarily as a logical system of thought to be embraced, rather than an experience of pure love for God and others, it quickly degenerates into a pious self-deception.

In addition to this perception that holiness is like a fetish which the mind is fanatically devoted to, there is a perception among some that we at Asbury teach holiness as merely a numerically “second” crisis that happens once-for-all in an absolute, static sense.

This perception is also related to the first. Both define holiness in a magical, fetish-like manner, as if spiritual things could be objectively manipulated through ritualistic practices which, if said and done in just the right ways, would produce the desired results. It may be that the American holiness movement has also often fostered this perception. To the extent that this has been the case, I hope we can correct that misconception without abandoning the seminary’s confessional statement.

The seminary confession says that the experience of perfect love is a “*second* work of grace.” This is, as I see it, a theological phrase intended to state the *logic* of Christian experience. A theology of two works of grace intends to make explicit *in logic* that one does not usually experience perfect love in the moment of conversion. To experience perfect love for God normally occurs after conversion.

The *logic* of Christian experience and the *psychology* of Christian experience are not the same. This has all too often been overlooked. Logically, we affirm two works of grace. Psychologically, we allow that one may experience perfect love on a number of occasions before it becomes a habit of life. John Fletcher, Wesley’s closest friend and the first systematic theologian of Methodism, says in regard to the question whether perfect love is experienced instantaneously or gradually, “both ways are good.” He says there is no prescribed manner in which God has to work in our lives. Fletcher says that one may be “*gradually* perfected” in love. That is, it may be that “by acts of feeble faith and feeble love so frequently repeated as to become strong, habitual, and evangelically natural to us” that one gradually comes to live a life of perfect love. (*Works of Fletcher*, II, 636). Fletcher’s experience of perfect love came about gradually. A similar way was the experience of Henry Clay Morrison, the founder of Asbury Theological Seminary. Only through repeated crisis

moments did he come to experience the life of perfect love. Both Fletcher and Morrison described their experiences of perfect love in dynamic (not static) terms of being filled with the Holy Spirit. John Wesley also defined entire sanctification as a dynamic, progressive experience when he said perfection means “to be filled more and more with the Spirit of Christ” (Sermon 89, “The More Excellent Way”).

Logically, there are two definitive works. *Psychologically*, there may be many works of grace in the life of the believers. “To be made perfect in love in this life,” as John Wesley put it in his charge to all Methodist preachers, involves both crisis and process. Crisis denotes a turning point; process denotes continuous operation. There may be many crisis points before the process is stabilized.

One may wish to refer to this gradual appropriation of perfect love as “progressive sanctification.” However, if one refers to entire sanctification as “progressive” or a process, this is not to be defined in the Reformed sense of a merely *approximating* the ideal, if one wishes to be Wesleyan in the historic sense. The Reformed tradition defines entire sanctification as more of a goal (or a mere ideal) to be approximated than a reality to be received. For Wesley, holiness is a process of becoming in reality what already is ours in Christ through the new birth. Holiness is the dialectic moment in which Christ’s pure love *becomes* an inner reality for the believer. This dialectic moment is a *becoming*, a process. It is a continuous happening through the indwelling of the Spirit.

To speak of two works of grace is a logical, theological phrase intended to say just this: Holiness is an ongoing process of continuously loving God with all the heart. It is a *becoming* where the believer is being remade in the image of Christ.

If the phrase “a second work of grace” generates a wrong perception for some, they might be well advised to drop it. I find the phrase helpful and an important way for explaining the message of perfect love. Others may not. The phrase does not appear in John Wesley’s writings (so far as I can determine). But John Wesley did use the phrase “a second blessing” and a “second rest,” and he insisted that perfect love for God was to be experienced “instantaneously.” However, holiness for Wesley was never a fetish. It was not a static, intellectualized doctrine, but a life continuously lived and always in process. Nor was it a sinless perfection in which one could never fall short of sanctifying grace.

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My colleague and friend, Dr. Jerry Mercer, has suggested that holiness be defined as *aspiration*. I will not try to be his interpreter, but I like that suggestion. For me, aspiration is a dynamic term, suggesting the idea of soaring to the heights. It comes from the Latin word, *aspirare*, meaning to breathe upon. The Holy Spirit is associated with God's breath. Jesus "breathed" on the disciples the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). Aspiration suggests living in the heights of God's presence by the power of the Holy Spirit. Holiness as aspiration is God breathing His life in us through the infilling of His Spirit. Aspiration in this sense does not mean merely *approximating* an ideal, but always *appropriating* and growing in the ideal of holiness through the sustaining breath of God.

A parallel term which could be used to describe the dynamic of holiness is "pursuit." Pursuit is derived from the Latin word, *prosequi*, which means to follow or accompany. To pursue something as a profession is to be actively engaged in it. It means that one's life and attention are given wholly to its development. The pursuit of holiness denotes a life wholly given to God, to follow His ways. This idea is expressed in Hebrews 12:14: "Be in pursuit (*δωκετε*) of peace with all men, and for the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord."

Hopefully, the message of holiness will not be forfeited for anyone associated with the Asbury community because of semantical problems. And hopefully the seminary statement about two works of grace will not be interpreted in a psychologically stifling manner. John Wesley counseled, in response to the question when holiness should be experienced, "Ask that it may be done now; today, while it is called today. . . . Today is His time, as well as tomorrow. Make haste, man, make haste" (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 63). Unless I expect to love God with all my heart, it is not likely that I will ever do it! That seems to me to be the intent of the logic of affirming entire sanctification as a second work of grace. Regardless of whether I come to a perfect love for God gradually or instantaneously, the point is that I *expect* to be made perfect in love in this life. The *expectation* is the decisive thing! I expect it now and always! I receive it now, tomorrow, and always.

A further concern: Apparently some among us expect perfection of love to mean the resolution of all problems. That is, if one comes "a second time" to the altar to be entirely sanctified, one ought not to be bothered with any more temptations or sins. This attitude is a

misunderstanding of the idea of a second work of grace. Whether one comes to the altar a second time or ten thousand times, one will always be subject to temptation and sin. A consequence of this misconception is that one may simply cast away his confidence in the Holy Spirit's power to sanctify or else he may deny the reality of his problems and live in a spiritual fantasy. The results of living in a fantasy world are psychologically devastating. The legalism, the perfectionisms, the harshness, the cantankerousness, the hypercriticism, the hypocrisy, the self-righteousness, the pious-self-deception, the defensiveness, the overbearingness, the domineering authoritarianism, are exacting prices many have had to pay for living in a sanctified world of make-believe.

In his day, John Wesley did not have the benefit of our contemporary psychology. Yet he pointed out the necessity of distinguishing between sins and weaknesses. He also pointed out the twin problems of setting up the standard of holiness too high or too low. A need we have in our tradition today is to integrate the theological and psychological implications of holiness. In fact, I believe that this integration has already been given by Frank Lake, a British psychiatrist, who is a member of the Church of England. Lake's extraordinary synthesis of psychological and theological categories in his book, *Clinical Theology* (London: Darton Longman, and Todd, 1966) has yet to be discovered by the Wesleyan community. The appreciation for Wesley's view of Christ's perfection, and the stress upon the Spirit-filled life by this brilliant psychiatrist, should not continue to be overlooked. His understanding of the psychological implications of theological categories is absolutely phenomenal! His interpretation of the Christian life can help resolve a number of psychological hang-ups from which many suffer.

I suppose one of the major psychological hang-ups comes from the use of the word, *entire* sanctification. That sounds like absolute perfection! Surely if one is *entirely* sanctified nothing possibly could be amiss in one's life! Here again it is necessary to distinguish between the logic of experience and the psychology of experience. *Entire* sanctification relates to the purity of love (intent), not to the perfection of performance. It denotes pursuit of love and only that! Why then should we use the word "entire" if it is so easily misunderstood and may have such terrible consequences psychologically? When we preach holiness, we will want to use this phrase in a

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most judicious way. But we cannot simply solve semantical problems by avoiding the uses of some words, the word “entire” sanctification has long been a part of our confessional formulation. Besides, it is a thoroughly biblical word. Paul says in I Thessalonians 5:23; “And the very God of peace sanctify you *entirely* (δολοτελῆς). And I pray God your entire (δολόκληρου) body and soul and spirit be preserved blameless” (but not faultless!). “Entire sanctification” is not a theological term coined by John Wesley but was first used by Paul.

A final concern has to do with the relationship between Pentecost and entire sanctification. Only on rare occasions did Wesley suggest a clear connection between the infilling of the Holy Spirit and entire sanctification, though there are a few scattered references where he made this equation. For example, in *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley equates perfect love with being “full of His Spirit” (London: The Epworth Press, 1970, p. 55). John Fletcher, however, made that connection explicit. The American holiness movement followed the lead of John Fletcher at this point, while at the same time giving added emphasis to the idea of an instantaneous, second work of grace. In some instances the American holiness movement too strongly emphasized the numerical idea of secondness to the exclusion of the process of holiness, unlike Wesley and Fletcher. But the question often asked in these recent days is, “Did the American holiness movement superimpose upon Wesley’s teaching the idea that entire sanctification is accomplished through the infilling of the Holy Spirit?”

I do not believe so. But if so, then the *Article of Incorporation* of Asbury Theological Seminary did this as well. In article IV, Section D, entire sanctification is equated with being “Spirit-filled.” “It will be the object of this seminary to prepare and send forth a . . . sanctified, Spirit-filled . . . minister.” When Wesley used the word “sanctified” he almost always meant entire sanctification. Likewise, in our Asbury tradition, we most often use the word sanctified when we mean entire sanctification. Anyone familiar with the tradition knows this. Also, anyone familiar with the Asbury tradition knows this confessional statement intends that “Spirit-filled” be in apposition with entirely sanctified. Is Asbury’s theological confession biblically sound in equating the Spirit-filled life with entire sanctification?

I believe it is. Pentecost is understandable only against the Old Testament background of God’s promise to Abraham that his

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descendants would occupy the land of Canaan, the intended place of God's abode. Their occupation was wholly contingent upon a perfect love for God. Their failure to live up to that standard occasioned their exile. The prophets foresaw the day when it would be possible for God's people to love him perfectly through the outpouring of the Spirit and once again the Kingdom would be restored. Pentecost marked that restoration, except the Kingdom was established through the Spirit in the hearts of believers and not geographically in Canaan. The new Israel, those who are true Israelites, are those circumcised by the Spirit so that they are enabled to love God with all the heart (Deut. 30:6). Peter says this cleansing of heart occurred for him at Pentecost (Acts 15:8-9).

I like the emphasis on the infilling of the Holy Spirit because it stresses the personal and dynamic overtones of entire sanctification, rather than simply implying an abstract, ethical concept. This dynamic quality is mirrored in Paul's words in Ephesians 5:18-19, where filled with the Spirit is equated with perfect love for God: "Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord *with all your heart* (worshiping the Lord with all your heart equals loving God with all your heart)." The whole idea of Pentecost is here linked to believers living a life of pure devotion and perfect love for God.

If holiness is loving God with all the heart, then certainly its pursuit is our supreme, existential concern. And if it is our supreme pursuit, loving God will be reflected in loving our brothers and sisters in Christ and caring for the needs of all persons. I suspect, however, that a too legalistic preoccupation with the doctrine of holiness has stifled its social implementations. On the other hand, I suspect that our efforts for social change will be superficial and short-lived without the dynamics of personal holiness. Personal holiness is the presupposition for social holiness. Social holiness is a test of personal holiness. This test poses a serious challenge to us. Whether or not we really believe in holiness depends upon our feeling it deeply enough to put it into practice. E. Stanley Jones put it this way: "Christianity that doesn't begin with the individual doesn't begin: Christianity that ends with the individual, ends."

