

ARTICLES

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN WESLEY

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The person and work of the Holy Spirit have a significant role in the theological thought of John Wesley. That role is primarily redemptive, and it is therefore interwoven in Wesley's doctrine of salvation, which was the chief burden of his more than fifty years of evangelism.¹ The two great poles of his doctrine of salvation were justification and sanctification, and the experiential basis of his thought is the soil out of which grew his deep concern with the work of the Holy Spirit.² For Wesley, every doctrine of the Christian faith is centered in the context of vital Christian experience in which the Holy Spirit is a key factor. The Trinitarian basis is apparent, for it was the office of Jesus Christ to reveal the Heavenly Father and thus make possible our salvation by His life and death, and in turn it is the office of the Holy Spirit to reveal the Son to sinful man and administer His atoning work in his soul. Hence, Wesley's theology is Christocentric and the person of Christ is essential to every other doctrine. The administrative role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the work of Christ makes it imperative to have a proper understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in Wesley's thought.

The focus of this investigation is the role of the Holy Spirit in entire sanctification in Wesley's writings. Four related aspects are emphasized: first, the preparatory work of the Holy Spirit antecedent to entire

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sanctification; second, the preliminary work of the Holy Spirit in entire sanctification; third, the purifying work of the Holy Spirit in entire sanctification, with Wesley's variation in nomenclature; and finally, the witness of the Holy Spirit in entire sanctification.

I. The Preparatory Work of the Holy Spirit Antecedent to Entire Sanctification

There is a vital activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the unbeliever without which Christian experience would be impossible. In his open letter "To A Roman Catholic" in 1749, Wesley affirmed his belief in the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, Who is not only perfectly holy in Himself, but

the immediate cause of all holiness in us; enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of the adoption of sons, leading us in our actions, purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies, to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.³

Wesley took his stand with Augustine, Luther, and Calvin in his insistence that man is totally corrupt by nature, and as a consequence is subject to the judgment and wrath of God. But to these somber facts he adds another principle, namely, the free gift of God's grace which he called preventing or prevenient grace, imparted to all men as a first, unconditional benefit of the atonement, not in the sense of regeneration, but as the spirit of awakening and conviction. For Wesley, God's prevenient grace, which goes before salvation, is related to the activity of the Holy Spirit.

For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by **nature**, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, **UNLESS HE HAS QUENCHED THE SPIRIT** [Caps mine], that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called **natural conscience**. But this is not natural; It is more properly termed, **preventing grace**. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man.⁴

Man must cooperate with God, however, if he is to come to salvation in Jesus Christ. Wesley agrees with Augustine's remark: "He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves."⁵

A primary task of the Holy Spirit is to reveal, testify, and defend the truth as it is in Jesus.⁶ In connection with His primary task, the Spirit performs a two-fold office, first toward the world (John 16:8ff.), and secondly toward believers (John 16:12ff.).⁷ It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convince the world, through the agency of preaching and miracles, of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. The Spirit will convict men particularly of the sin of unbelief, which is "the confluence

of all sins.”⁸ The law of God is applied by the Holy Spirit to the heart of man and deeply convicts him of his utter sinfulness and helplessness.⁹ The law becomes to us an occasion of wrath, and exposes us to punishment as transgressors.¹⁰ But God gives us the light of the Gospel that we might repent,¹¹ and the first step towards entering into the kingdom of grace is “to become as little children—lowly in heart, knowing yourselves utterly ignorant and helpless, and hanging wholly on your Father who is in heaven for a supply of all your wants.”¹² Wesley insists that “true repentance is a change from spiritual death to spiritual life, and leads to life everlasting.”¹³ There are two kinds, or stages of repentance prior to initial salvation, according to Wesley’s interpretation. The first he calls “legal” repentance, which is “a thorough conviction of sin,” and the second is “evangelical” repentance, or “a change of heart (and consequently of life) from all sin to all holiness.”¹⁴ Discussing the universality of sin and its consequences in his sermon on “The New Birth,” Wesley concludes by stating “hence it is, that, being born in sin, we must be ‘born again.’ Hence every one that is born of a woman must be born of the Spirit of God.”¹⁵

From this brief analysis of the preparatory work of the Holy Spirit prior to entire sanctification, it is quite apparent that Wesley’s presentation of the gospel was characterized by New Testament realism. In his sermon “On Grieving the Holy Spirit” he stresses that

there can be no point of greater importance to him who knows that it is the Holy Spirit which leads us into all truth and into all holiness, than to consider with what temper of soul we are to entertain his divine presence; so as not either to drive him from us, or to disappoint him of the gracious ends for which his abode with us is designed; which is not the amusement of our understanding, but the conversion and entire sanctification of our hearts and lives 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.¹⁶

It is interesting to note that this sermon was written in 1733, five years prior to Wesley’s heart-warming experience at Aldersgate.

Concerning born-again believers, Wesley expressed the conviction that it is universally allowed that the Holy Spirit, together with the Father and Son, indwells those who believe. The Holy Spirit first inspired, “and still preserves, the life of God in our souls.”¹⁷ The internal agency of the Holy Ghost is generally admitted as well, for He leads the believer into all truth and glorifies Christ in his life. The bodies

and souls of believers are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling in them.¹⁸ In regard to the biblical phrase, “receiving the Holy Ghost,” Wesley insisted that this occurs at justification. Writing to Joseph Benson on December 28, 1770, respecting entire sanctification, he exhorted him to confirm the brethren “with all zeal and diligence” in a two-fold manner, first, “in holding fast that whereto they have attained—namely, the remission of all their sins by faith in a bleeding Lord,” and secondly, “in expecting a second change, whereby they shall be saved from all sin and perfected in love.” Immediately following the second point, Wesley adds this important comment,

If they like to call this “receiving the Holy Ghost,” they may: only the phrase in that sense is not scriptural and not quite proper; for they all “received the Holy Ghost” when they were justified. God then “sent forth the Spirit of His Son into their hearts, crying Abba, Father.”¹⁹

II. The Preliminary Work of the Holy Spirit in Entire Sanctification

Prior to the actual experience of entire sanctification there is an important ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer to indicate clearly and forcefully the need of sanctifying grace as a second crisis experience following the new birth. Since sanctification is “entire holiness of heart and life,”²⁰ the Holy Spirit is given to convince the followers of Christ of this truth and to enable them to be holy.²¹ Therefore, to despise the Apostle’s commandments to holiness of heart and life is to despise God Himself. The significance of entire sanctification as a definite second work of grace for Wesley is evident in his strong insistence that “a deep conviction of our demerit, after we are accepted . . . is absolutely necessary in order to our seeing the true value of the atoning blood; in order to our feeling that we need this as much, after we are justified, as ever we did before.”²² The Holy Spirit seeks to engender “a deep conviction that we are not yet whole; that our hearts are not fully purified; that there is yet in us a ‘carnal mind,’ which is still in its nature ‘enmity against God’; that the whole body of sin remains in our heart, weakened indeed, but not destroyed.”²³ In such strong language, Wesley sought to safeguard against a shallow notion of remaining depravity, and further, to produce an earnest expectation of deliverance through the sanctifying grace of God. It is important to note that his conception of sin was more inclusive than “voluntary transgression.” Sin was not a material substance or “thing,” however, for Wesley expected deliverance from all sin in this life.²⁴ He spoke of the “mischievousness of that opinion” that “we are wholly sanctified when we are justified; that our hearts are then cleansed from all sin.”

It is true, we are then delivered, as was observed before, from the dominion of outward sin; and, at the same time, the power of inward sin is so broken, that we need no longer follow, or be led by it: but it is by no means true, that inward sin is then totally destroyed; that the root of pride, self-will, anger, love of the world, is then taken out of the heart; or that the carnal mind, and the heart bent to backsliding, are entirely extirpated.²⁵

A timely warning along these lines for those in the present day who share the Wesleyan-Arminian heritage is sounded in a perceptive, scholarly discussion by Merne A. Harris and Richard S. Taylor on "The Dual Nature of Sin," particularly in regard to those "who know secular psychology better than they know the Bible and Christian theology."²⁶

III. The Purifying Work of the Holy Spirit in Entire Sanctification

Wesley uses the word "purify" as well as other terms or phrases to signify the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit in a definite second work of grace. It is the office of the Holy Spirit to sanctify.²⁷ Wesley used the term "inspiration" or "perceptible inspiration" for the general ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian. He defines "inspiration" as the "inward assistance of the Holy Ghost which helps our infirmities, enlightens our understanding, rectifies our will, comforts, purifies, and sanctifies us."²⁸

Just as Wesley had received help from the Moravians in regard to the true nature of justifying faith, there is evidence that he also received illumination concerning the experiential reality of a pure heart. While he was with the Moravians at Herrnhut, Wesley records in his *Journal* for August 8, 1738, that he had the blessing of hearing Christian David preach four times.

Thrice he described the state of those who are "weak in faith," who are justified, but have not yet a new, clean heart; who have received forgiveness through the blood of Christ, but have not received the constant indwelling of the Holy Ghost. This state he explained once from, "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven;" when he showed at large, from various Scriptures, that many are children of God and heirs of the promises, long before their hearts are softened by holy "mourning;" . . . before they are "pure in heart," from all self-will and sin . . . ;²⁹

Approximately two years after his visit to Herrnhut, there is an interesting entry in his *Journal* regarding a sermon he preached at the Foundery on June 24, 1740, in which he used the text, "Cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward" (Heb. 10:35). His message was directed to those "who have known and felt your sins forgiven."

Your finding sin remaining in you still is no proof that you are not a believer. Sin does remain in one that is justified, though it has not dominion over him. For he has not a clean heart at first, neither are 'all things' as yet 'become new.' But fear not, though you have an evil heart. Yet a little while, and you shall be endued with power from on high, whereby you may 'purify yourselves, even as He is pure'; and be 'holy, as He which hath called you is holy.'³⁰

"You shall be endued with power from on high" in the quotation, which Wesley addressed to believers, is obviously a reference to the promise of Jesus recorded in Luke 24:49, thus clearly indicating that Wesley connects the coming of the Holy Spirit as He came at Pentecost with the purifying of the hearts of believers.

Commenting on John 7:38 in his sermon on "Christian Perfection," Wesley observes that at that time in Jesus' earthly ministry "the Holy Ghost was not yet given in his sanctifying graces, as he was after Jesus was glorified." Later, however, "when the day of Pentecost was fully come, then first it was, that they who 'waited for the promise of the Father' were made more than conquerors over sin by the Holy Ghost given unto them."³¹ Also commenting on Matthew 3:11, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire," Wesley states that "He shall fill you with the Holy Ghost, inflaming your hearts with that fire of love which many waters cannot quench. And this was done, even with a visible appearance as of fire, on the day of Pentecost."³²

For Wesley the word "sprinkle" in Ezekiel 36:25 ("Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you")

signifies both the blood of Christ sprinkled upon their conscience, to take away their guilt, as the water of purification was sprinkled, to take away their ceremonial uncleanness and the grace of the spirit sprinkle en [sic.] the whole soul, to purify it from all corrupt inclinations and dispositions.³³

"From all your uncleanness" in verse 29 of the same chapter means for Wesley "salvation from all uncleanness, including justification, entire sanctification, and meetness for glory."^{33a}

Wesley used a variety of terms in his discussions concerning entire sanctification, including pneumatological phrases or terms.³⁴ Writing to Walter Churchey in 1771, he stated that "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" ³⁵ Obviously, he used the two terms, entire sanctification and Christian perfection synonymously, and it is incorrect to interpret the latter term merely as a process in Wesley's thinking.³⁶ Crisis and process are never

divorced in Wesley's conception of entire sanctification or Christian perfection, but he did expect a crisis with the process, whether one or the other term was used.³⁷ As the word "crisis" implies, Wesley stressed the instantaneousness of entire sanctification. He made a significant observation in a letter to Sarah Rutter on December 5, 1789, approximately fifteen months before his death: "Gradual sanctification may increase from the time you were justified [sic.]; but full deliverance from sin, I believe, is always instantaneous—at least, I never yet knew an exception."³⁸

Another set of terms was used by Wesley when he considered "St. John's three-fold distinction of Christian believers: little children, young men, and fathers. All of these had received the Holy Ghost; but only the fathers were perfected in love."³⁹ Writing to Joseph Benson in 1771, he observed that "a **babe** in Christ (of whom I know thousands) has the witness **sometimes**. A young man (in St. John's sense) has it continually. I believe one that is **perfected in love**, or **filled with the Holy Ghost**, may be properly termed a **father**. This we must press both babes and young men to aspire after-yea, to expect. And why not now?"⁴⁰ Here the expressions "perfected in love" and "filled with the Holy Ghost" are used synonymously, while "a babe in Christ" or "little children," "a young man," and "father," suggest experiential or maturation stages or levels in the Christian life.

In distinguishing justification and sanctification, Wesley wrote "the one implies, what God does for us through His Son; the other, what He works in us by His Spirit."⁴¹ It is apparent, however, that Wesley did not conceive the work of the Son and that of the Holy Spirit as mutually exclusive, as this quotation might suggest, but intimately related. What Christ made possible through His atoning work, the Holy Spirit makes actual in the lives of believers. As Wesley suggests in his commentary on Hebrews 2:10, "it is His (Christ's) atonement, and His Spirit carrying on 'the work of faith with power' in our hearts, that alone can sanctify us."⁴²

The petition of our Lord for his disciples in John 17:17 ("Sanctify them") is a prayer to "consecrate them, by the anointing of Thy Spirit, to their office, and perfect them in holiness by means of Thy Word."⁴³ For those who are heavy-laden with the guilt and power of sin, it is Christ alone who can freely give "rest from the guilt of sin by justification, and from the power of sin by sanctification."⁴⁴ And it is the Holy Spirit Who takes the things of Christ and reveals them to believers (John 16:14). The blood of Christ "cleanseth us from all sin," according to the Apostle John, and Wesley says this means "both

original and actual, taking away all the guilt and all the power.”⁴⁵ Wesley insisted that “faith is the condition, and the only condition, of sanctification, exactly as it is of justification.”⁴⁶

In Wesley’s commentary on Acts 8:15 and Acts 19:2 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, a clear distinction is made between the miraculous or supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit and “His sanctifying graces.” The term “receive the Holy Ghost” is used in both passages of Scripture, and Wesley’s comments show that he interpreted this phrase as referring to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷

There is an interesting observation to be made in regard to Wesley’s understanding of “receiving the Holy Spirit.” He employs the term or idea in various aspects of Christian experience, including the time or conditions prior to justification, as well as in regeneration and entire sanctification. For example, in his treatise, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” Wesley states that “the author of faith and salvation is God alone.” Furthermore

there is no more of power of merit in man; but as all merit is in the Son of God, in what he has done and suffered for us, so all power is in the Spirit of God. And therefore every man, in order to believe unto salvation, must receive the Holy Ghost.⁴⁸

Obviously Wesley is speaking of man’s need prior to actual justification. The reception of the Holy Spirit is necessary for a soul to be brought into a justified relationship. Also, we have already noted in his letter to Joseph Benson in 1770 he expresses the view that all believers “received the Holy Ghost” when they were justified. Similarly, in his comment on Romans 8:9 where the Apostle says that “if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his,” Wesley’s frank note is “He is not a member of Christ; not a Christian; not in a state of salvation. A plain, express declaration, which admits of no exception.”⁴⁹ We have also observed that the expression “receive the Holy Ghost” in Acts 8:15 and Acts 19:2 is interpreted by Wesley as a reference to the Spirit’s sanctifying work. Perhaps there is a clue to his varied usages of this term in his comment on Romans 8:15 in which Paul speaks of “the spirit of bondage” and “the spirit of adoption.”

The spirit of bondage here seems directly to mean, those operations of the Holy Spirit by which the soul, on its first conviction, feels itself in bondage to sin, to the world, to Satan, and obnoxious to the wrath of God. This, therefore, and the **Spirit of adoption**, are one and the same Spirit, only manifesting itself in various operations, according to the various circumstances of the person.⁵⁰

Thus, for Wesley, the various operations of the Holy Spirit, while including conviction, faith, and regeneration, must also lead to and culminate in entire sanctification.⁵¹

There is also evidence in Wesley's writings that there is a dual usage of the phrase, "baptized with the Holy Spirit." His note on Acts 1:5, "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost," is: "And so are all true believers, to the end of the world."⁵² There is a strong intimation in his sermon, "Of the Church," however, that the term, "baptism of the Holy Ghost," is used to indicate the meeting of spiritual needs on different levels. "One baptism" in Ephesians 4:6 should not be interpreted in a figurative sense, according to Wesley, "as if it referred to that baptism of the Holy Ghost which the Apostles received at the day of Pentecost, and which, in a lower degree, is given to all believers."⁵³ Wesley does not elaborate on this distinction. Obviously, the case is not air-tight that he always used the expression, "baptized with the Holy Ghost," solely in reference to conversion and justifying grace.

There are four expressions in regard to the Holy Spirit in Wesley's discussion of Cornelius and his household: "baptism of the Spirit," "received the Holy Ghost," "gift of the Holy Ghost," and "baptized with the Holy Ghost." These expressions are found in his commentary on Acts 10:47, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Ghost?" (Caps that follow are mine)

He does not say, They have **THE BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT**; therefore they do not need baptism with water; but just the contrary; If they have received the Spirit, then baptize them with water. How easily is this question decided, if we take the World of God for our judge! Either men have **RECEIVED THE HOLY GHOST**, or not. If they have not, 'Repent,' saith God, 'and be baptized, and ye shall receive the **GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST**.' If they have, if they are already **BAPTIZED WITH THE HOLY GHOST**, then, **who can forbid water?**⁵⁴

Concerning Cornelius and his household, Herbert McGonigle states that "Wesley held that they were already justified" prior to the encounter with Peter and his message at Caesarea (Acts 10).⁵⁵ Presumably McGonigle bases this on the expression regarding God's gracious favor in Acts 10:35, "Is accepted of him," and Wesley's commentary thereon.

Is accepted of him—Through Christ, though he knows Him not. The assertion is express, and admits of no exception. He is in favour of God, whether enjoying His written words and ordinances or not. Nevertheless, the addition of these is an unspeakable blessing to those who were before, in some measure, accepted: otherwise, God would never have sent an angel from heaven to direct Cornelius to St. Peter.⁵⁶

Perhaps the statement, “He is in the favour of God,” is tantamount to justification, though Wesley does not use the word “justified” in his comments. An interesting observation relates to Wesley’s earlier comment on Acts 10:4 concerning the prayers and alms of Cornelius. Wesley declares that “it is certain, in the Christian sense, Cornelius was then an unbeliever. He had not then faith in Christ.”⁵⁷ It is apparent that there is some tension in Wesley’s comments concerning Cornelius. Further, if McGonigle is correct in stating that for Wesley, Cornelius and his household were “already justified,” it poses the question, does God justify a man while he is still an unbeliever?—(in view of Wesley’s note on Acts 10:4). Or could it be that Wesley held that Cornelius was saved under Old Testament light, even though he was not yet a believer in Jesus prior to Peter’s ministry? In his comment on Acts 10:1 concerning “a certain man in Caesarea named Cornelius,” Wesley calls attention to the fact that Philip has been in Caesarea previously (Acts 8:40), “so that the doctrine of salvation by faith in Jesus was not unknown there.”⁵⁸ Presumably, that message had not yet reached Cornelius, according to Wesley, as his comment on Acts 10:4 implies.

In a sermon preached at Oxford University in 1744 entitled “Scriptural Christianity,” Wesley expressed the view that every Christian should be Spirit-filled, and the intimation is that anyone who is not Spirit-filled is not a Christian. The text for the sermon is Acts 4:31, “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.”⁵⁹

There is a similar emphasis in his sermon on “The First Fruits of the Spirit.” Those who “are in Christ Jesus” are “filled with faith and with the Holy Ghost.”⁶⁰ Later in the sermon Wesley points out that these “children of God” still have “the corruption of nature,” or “inward sin,” remaining in them.⁶¹ The problem is, of course, how a Christian can be filled with the Holy Spirit and yet have “inward sin” remaining. Presumably, for Wesley, they were not entirely sanctified.

We have already observed his threefold distinction of Christian believers: a babe in Christ, young men, and fathers, but in that context Wesley says only fathers are perfected in love, or filled with the Holy Spirit. In the two sermons just cited, all Christians should be Spirit-filled without distinction. Obviously, there is a lack of clarity at these points. In another context Wesley insists that it is impossible to be filled with love, or perfected in love, and still have inward sin. His very brief definition of entire sanctification or Christian perfection is that it is “love excluding sin.”⁶² Ostensibly, the Holy Spirit is the Divine Agent Who fills the Christian’s heart with love. Again, in the two sermons already mentioned, a Christian can be “filled with the Holy Spirit,” yet

inward sin remains. Sin cannot remain, however, if the believer is filled with love. It is apparent there is tension in these views.

The sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit is likewise an emphasis in the hymns of the Wesleys. The following verses are representative of this element in Wesleyan hymnology.

Thy sanctifying Spirit pour
To quench my thirst and wash me clean,
Now, Father, let the gracious shower
Descend, and make me pure from sin.

* * *

Within me Thy good Spirit place,
Spirit of health, and love, and power;
Plant in me Thy victorious grace,
And sin shall never enter more.⁶³

* * *

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit,
Into every troubled breast,
Let us all in Thee inherit
Let us find that second rest:
Take away our power of sinning
Alpha and Omega be,
End of faith as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.⁶⁴

* * *

Come then, and dwell in me
Spirit of power within,
And bring the glorious liberty
From sorrow, fear, and sin:
The seed of sin's disease,
Spirit of health, remove,
Spirit of finish'd holiness,
Spirit of perfect love.⁶⁵

* * *

Spirit of Faith, come down,
Reveal the things of God,
And make to us the God head known,
And witness with the blood:
'Tis Thine the blood to' apply,
And give us eyes to see
Who did for every sinner die
Hath surely died for me.

Inspire the living faith,
 (Which whosoe'er receives
 The witness in himself he hath,
 And consciously believes;)
 The faith that conquers all,
 And doth the mountain move,
 And saves who'er on Jesus call,
 And perfects them in love.⁶⁶

These many references from the writings of John Wesley give ample testimony to the fact that the purifying work of the Holy Spirit's ministry is conspicuously involved in the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification as a definite second work of grace.

IV. The Witness of the Holy Spirit in Entire Sanctification

Wesley regarded "the witness of the Spirit," or Divine assurance, to be "the main doctrine of the Methodists" and "the very foundation of Christianity."⁶⁷ The witness of the Spirit is twofold in nature regarding salvation: first, there is an inner impression of assurance called a direct witness, and secondly, there is the testimony of a changed life which constitutes the indirect witness.⁶⁸

In a similar manner, Wesley insisted that there is a Divine assurance to the reality of entire sanctification. In "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" (1777) he quotes from an earlier treatise, "Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection" (1761).

Q. 16. But how do you know, that you are sanctified, saved from your inbred corruption?

A. I can know it no otherwise than I know that I am justified. "Hereby know we that we are of God," in either sense, "by the Spirit that he hath given us."

We know it by the witness and by the fruit of the Spirit Indeed, the witness of sanctification is not always clear at first; (as neither is that of justification;) neither is it afterward always the same, but, like that of justification, sometimes stronger and sometimes fainter. Yea, and sometimes it is withdrawn. Yet, in general, the latter testimony of the Spirit is both as clear and as steady as the former.⁶⁹

Wesley urged those who had experienced entire sanctification to testify discreetly to it. Writing concerning this gracious experience, he advised:

Now, certainly, if God has given you this light, He did not intend that you should hide it under a bushel Everyone ought to declare what God has done for his soul, and that with all simplicity One reason why those who are saved from sin should freely declare it to believers is because nothing is a stronger

incitement to them to seek after the same blessing. And we ought by every possible means to press every serious believer to forget the things which are behind and with all earnestness to go on to perfection.⁷⁰

There is a biblical precedent, of course, for Wesley's encouragement to Christian testimony concerning the experience of a pure heart, or entire sanctification. Peter does so in Acts 15:8, 9, testifying that on a certain day, God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, purified his heart, with an accompanying Divine assurance that it was so. Wesley bore his own discreet and indirect testimony to a personal "Pentecost" in an entry in his *Journal* for October 28, 1762.

Many years ago my brother frequently said, "Your day of Pentecost is not fully come; but I doubt it will: And you will then hear of persons sanctified, as frequently as you do now of persons justified." ANY UNPREJUDICED READER MAY OBSERVE, THAT IT HAS NOW FULLY COME. [Caps mine] And accordingly we did hear of persons sanctified, in London, and most other parts of England, and in Dublin, and many other parts of Ireland, as frequently as of persons justified, although instances of the latter were far more frequent than they had been for twenty years before.⁷¹

In another entry on October 29, 1762, regarding his belief in instantaneous sanctification, he declared "I have known and taught it (and so has my brother, as our writings show) above these twenty years."⁷² In his significant sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," he recorded a strong, indirect witness: "I have continually testified in private and in public, that we are sanctified as well as justified by faith."⁷³

Conclusion

A result of the extensive research for this paper is, first of all, the conclusion that there is a plenitude of references in the writings of John Wesley in which the ministry of the Holy Spirit is associated with his discussion of entire sanctification and Christian perfection. Of necessity, the evidence presented has had to be selective, not exhaustive. The weight of evidence calls into question W. E. Sangster's criticism that Wesley did not "link the doctrine (i.e. Christian perfection or entire sanctification) enough (as Paul does) with . . . the Holy Spirit."⁷⁴ Sangster's helpful analysis of Wesley's teaching concerning perfection is centered primarily in the famous treatise, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection." His criticism is not made in a guarded fashion, however, as being confined only to the "Plain Account" which covers eighty pages in Wesley's *Works*.⁷⁵ There are other significant writings of Wesley that bear upon this subject, and especially his sermons, "On Sin in

Believers,” “The Repentance of Believers,” and “The Scripture Way of Salvation.”⁷⁶ Important insights can be gleaned from Wesley’s other writings as well.⁷⁷

Another conclusion relates to Wesley’s use of pneumatological nomenclature in regard to entire sanctification. Although he maintained that he had been consistent in his belief about the doctrine,⁷⁸ there are some areas of tension, perhaps ambiguity, in regard to his application of pneumatological phrases, such as “receiving the Holy Spirit,” “the baptism of the Holy Spirit,” and “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Various references from his scattered writings indicate that Wesley had not worked out fully every facet of his teaching on the Holy Spirit. In spite of some “loose ends” theologically, the judgment of Bishop William R. Cannon, a foremost Wesleyan scholar is noteworthy.

So far as I have been able to determine, in the entire range of historical theology, there has never been a more orderly, well-arranged, and consistent theologian than John Wesley. Others have been more profound than he. He has lacked the encyclopaedic breadth of Aquinas and Calvin. The range of his explorations was limited. But given what he tried to accomplish theologically, no one, so far as I can tell, essayed his task more clear-headedly or brought off his work more consistently than did the Founder of Methodism.⁷⁹

It is only fair to remember that Wesley was primarily an evangelist, and that his theological doctrines were in the service of his evangelism. His itinerant ministry across many years was exceedingly demanding. Once his evangelistic ministry began in the late 1730’s, the opportunities for leisured scholarship were virtually gone. A writer in an American horseman magazine has conjectured that John Wesley may have spent more time on horseback than any man in history—an estimated 175,000 miles, equivalent to seven times around the world.⁸⁰ When we view the abundance of his travels to spread the Gospel, the wonder is that Wesley found time to write anything at all, and when a survey is made of his extensive writings (roughly, 18,000 pages, plus!), an equal wonder is that he found time to itinerate.

It has been left to Wesley’s posterity to work out in greater detail some areas of the Wesleyan theological structure. Where there has been fidelity to Holy Scripture, these efforts have complimented and supplemented Wesley’s valuable insights, without altering in any way the doctrinal standards that he specified for Methodism.⁸¹

A final conclusion relates to Wesley’s vision for a universal penetration of the message of scriptural holiness through evangelistic zeal and the gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit. He regarded this biblical truth to be a special heritage entrusted by God to the people

called Methodist.⁸² The thrust of the doctrine was not sectarian or provincial, however, but truly Christian and universal, as expressed in one of Wesley's prayers.

May all the inhabitants of the earth do Thy will as willingly as the holy angels! May these do it continually even as they, without any interruption of their willing service; yea, and perfectly as they! Mayest Thou, Spirit of grace, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make them perfect in every good work to do Thy will, and work in them all that is well-pleasing in Thy sight!⁸³

In concluding this study of the role of the Holy Spirit in entire sanctification as understood by John Wesley, it is appropriate to call attention to "The Findings" of the first Institute of Methodist Theological Studies which was held at Lincoln College, Oxford in July 1959. A segment of "The Findings" expressed both gratitude for Methodism's founder and challenge to those who would "serve the present age, their calling to fulfill."

Is not the task of Methodists to perform with the Scriptures in the twentieth century a task like that which John Wesley performed in the eighteenth century? Our sense of indebtedness for the biblical insights of Wesley is profound, and we believe these insights will long continue to be relevant. Does not loyalty to this great contribution of the Wesleys require us now to go further and perform in the twentieth century a like task of bringing the world under the judgement of the Word of God? Is it not the proper work of the Holy Spirit in every generation to make Christ and His commands contemporary?⁸⁴

If we are to fulfill our Christian responsibility in this generation, working with God for the transformation of men and society, we need desperately both the purity and power of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying grace, as demonstrated so forcefully and successfully in the life and ministry of John Wesley.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Cf. William R. Cannon, "Salvation in the Theology of John Wesley," *Methodist History*, IX (October, 1970), 3. Cf. Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr. *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 33f, 45f.
2. John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation." Sermon L. in *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, Edward H. Sugden, ed. (Nashville: Lamer

- & Barton, Agents, Publishing House M.E. Church, South, n.d.), II, 445f. Hereafter referred to as *Sermons*. Cf. Starkey, *op. cit.*, 15.
3. *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, A.M., John Telford, ed. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), III, 9. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.
 4. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, A.M., Thomas Jackson, ed. (London: John Mason, 1829), VI, 512. Sermon LXXXV, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation." Hereafter referred to as *Works*.
 5. *Ibid.*, 513.
 6. *John Wesley, Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), 366. Note on John 14:17. Hereafter referred to as *N.T. Notes*.
 7. *Ibid.*, 371. Note on John 16:8.
 8. *Ibid.* Note on John 16:9.
 9. *Ibid.*, 685. Note on Galatians 2:19.
 10. *Ibid.*, 534. Note on Romans 4:15.
 11. *Ibid.*, 245. Note on Luke 11:33.
 12. *Ibid.*, 87-8. Note on Matthew 18:3.
 13. *Ibid.*, 438. Note on Acts 11:28.
 14. *Ibid.*, 23. Note on Matthew 3:8.
 15. *Sermons*, II, 231. Sermon XXXIX.
 16. *Works*, VII, 485-86. Sermon CXXXVIII.
 17. *N.T. Notes*, 623. Note on I Cor. 12:13.
 18. *Ibid.*, 366. Note on John 14:17.
 19. *Letters*, V, 215.
 20. *N.T. Notes*, 759. Note on I Thess. 4:3.
 21. *Ibid.* Note on I Thess. 4:8.
 22. *Sermons*, II, 396. Sermon XLVII, "The Repentance of Believers."
 23. *Ibid.*, 395.
 24. Cf. George Allen Turner, *The More Excellent Way*. (Winona Lake: Light and Life Press, 1952), 249, 236, 247, and the important footnote (74) on 266.
 25. *Sermons*, II, 394-95. Sermon XLVII, "The Repentance of Believers."

26. *The Word and the Doctrine*, Kenneth S. Geiger, compiler. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1965), 89ff., especially 115-17.
27. *Letters*, IV, 380.
28. *Ibid.*, 39.
29. *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, A.M. Nehemiah Curnock, ed. (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1909), II, 25. Hereafter referred to as *Journal*.
30. *Ibid.*, 359.
31. *Sermons*, II, 162. Sermon XXXV.
32. *N.T. Notes*, 24.
33. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*. (London: William Pine, 1765), III, 2385.
- 33a. *Ibid.*, 2386.
34. E.G., Roy S. Nicholson lists twenty-three terms used by Wesley. See Nicholson's article, "John Wesley's Personal Experience of Christian Perfection," *The Asbury Seminary*, VI (January, 1952) 74-5.
35. *Letters*, V, 223.
36. *A Compend of Wesley's Theology*, Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles, eds. (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 139, 195.
37. Cf. A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart—John Wesley, Evangelist*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 267, 269.
38. *Letters*, VIII, 190.
39. *Ibid.*, VI, 146.
40. *Ibid.*, V, 229.
41. *Sermons*, I, 119. Sermon V, "Justification by Faith."
42. *N.T. Notes*, 815.
43. *Ibid.*, 376.
44. *Ibid.*, 61. Note on Matthew 11:28.
45. *Ibid.*, 904. Note on I John 1:7. Cf. 801, note on Titus 2:14, "That he might redeem us—Miserable bondslaves, as well from the power and the very being, as from the guilt, of all our sins."
46. *Sermons*, II, 453. Sermon L, "The Scripture Way of Salvation."

47. *N.T. Notes*, 425, 471.
48. *Works*, VIII, 49.
49. *N.T. Notes*, 547.
50. *Ibid.*, 548.
51. See the helpful discussion by Leslie D. Wilcox, *Be Ye Holy* (Cincinnati: The Revivalist Press, 1965), 281f.
52. *N.T. Notes*, 393.
53. *Works*, VI, 395. Sermon LXXIV.
54. *N.T. Notes*, 436.
55. See McGonigle's helpful discussion, "Pneumatological Nomenclature in Early Methodism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, VIII (Spring, 1973), 61ff.
56. *N.T. Notes*, 435.
57. *Ibid.*, 432.
58. *Ibid.*, 431
59. *Sermons*, I, 92ff., especially 104-6, 110. Sermon IV.
60. *Works*, V, 88-9. Sermon VIII.
61. *Ibid.*, 91.
62. *Letters*, V, 223; *Works*, XII, 416.
63. *Sermons*, II, 175-76. Sermon XXXV, "Christian Perfection."
64. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, G. Osborn, ed. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1869), IV, 219.
65. *Ibid.*, XIII, 45.
66. Burtner and Chiles, *op. cit.*, 104-5.
67. *Letters*, II, 64.
68. See *Sermons*, Discourse I "The Witness of the Spirit," in I, 199ff., Discourse II "The Witness of the Spirit," II, 341ff.; and "The Witness of Our Own Spirit," I, 219ff.
69. *Works*, XI, 420.
70. *Letters*, V, 6.
71. *Journal*, IV, 532.
72. *Ibid.*, 536.
73. *Sermons*, II, 453. Sermon L.

74. W. E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection*. (New York, Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), 44.
75. *Works*, XI, 366-446.
76. *Sermons*, II, 360ff.; 379ff.; 442ff.
77. Research areas are: *Works*, 14 vols.; *Journal*, 8 vols.; *Letters*, 8 vols.; *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 3 vols.; and *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. Grand total: 18,173 pages, though there is some duplication. The total does not include the Osborn edition of *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, 13 vols., his *Christian Library*, 50 vols. nor his *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: or a Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, 5 vols.
78. *Works*, XI, 373.
79. Cannon, *op. cit.*, 3.
80. Victor D. Sutch, "A Man Who Valued a Good Horse," *The Western Horseman*, September, 1966, 72, 88.
81. The specified doctrinal standards are: (1) *The Standard Sermons*, (2) *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, and in addition for American Methodism, (3) *The Twenty-five Articles of Religion*.
82. *Letters*, VIII, 238.
83. *N.T. Notes*, 38. Prayer comment on Matthew 6:10.
84. *The London Quarterly & Holborn Review*, XXVIII (July, 1959), 163.