

CONFESSION OF SIN IN THE LIFE OF
CHRISTIAN EXCELLENCE AND THE ORDER OF
SALVATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN WESLEY

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The figure of John Wesley continues to attract and repel the twentieth century theological and ecclesiastical mind-set. Past interpretations have looked upon Wesley as a rigid ascetic who never recovered from an early tragedy in romantic love and, because of this, much later married eventually for pragmatic and unwise reasons; as a crypto-Roman Catholic—either because of his rigid sacramental views and practices or his misunderstanding of the evangelical doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone; as a rigid ecclesiastic who refused to see the implications of his essential position and hence would not leave the Church of England; as a crypto-Calvinist for his emphasis upon free grace as over against free-will;¹ as a devout mystic and saintly Christian leader; as a Barthian before his time who combined intensity of Christian commitment with an emphasis upon the awful holiness of the God revealed in Jesus Christ;² as a Pelagian who robbed God of His sovereign grace because he argued that man was a free creature;³ as a religious fanatic who actively promoted emotional excesses for the sake of religion;⁴ or as a forerunner of modern religious liberalism because he held that orthodoxy constitutes but a very minor part of true Christianity, rather emphasizing the love of God to man and the religious possibilities of man as a religious creature.⁵ The list could be multiplied, for a man of Wesley's Catholic interests, efforts, and accomplishments cannot of course be understood by being funneled through one perspective alone.

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It is not unfair to argue that Methodism arose as, and should be understood as, a redemptive movement in essence whose inner nature released energies for the transformation of the individual and society. When this approach is taken, Wesley's views of the possibilities of redemption and the effects of such redemption in the lives of the men and groups claiming soteriological powers is a necessary field of investigation. Wesley, himself, argued that God had raised up the Methodists to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land. The claims of Wesley's soteriology and the character and state and activity of those professing its power can be looked upon then as phenomena needing continuous clarification and development. This is especially true when it is seen that the universal Christian Church has always perceived herself as a redeemed body whose unity rested in her redemption.

The truths on which we should be able to agree concern the fact and guilt of sin, the possibility of forgiveness and the need for confession . . . So much is agreed among us. We are guilty sinners. Our merciful God offers us forgiveness through Jesus Christ. We must confess our sins.⁶

The idea of confession, however, raises problems, such as its nature, to whom it should be made, and its relations to other aspects of the order of salvation. Confession is intimately related to repentance as a sign of genuine repentance and is necessary before forgiveness is bestowed (I John 1:9). Confession also recognizes sin and guilt in the confessor. "We admit that we are sinners and disclose specific sins in confession."⁷ Four kinds of confession have arisen in the historical church: secret confession to God, private confession to the offended individual, public confession to the church, and auricular confession to the priest.⁸ Wesley believed in the first three of these, but came to see that the fourth was unscriptural.⁹ These four kinds together deal with acknowledgement of sin; a fifth meaning of confession simply is the content of an individual's or group's theological stance which they make known publicly. In this study we shall confine ourselves to the first of these, i.e. confession by the individual of his sin to God.

Wesley's distinctive view of the order of salvation as over against other perspectives (Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, etc.) raises a particular problem for those who freely attempt to be his religious and doctrinal descendants, for the original Wesleyan theology claims a perfection possible in this life which, at least formally, excludes sin. Would the confession of sin or sins be irrelevant to such a person? If not, why not; if so, why? The tensions and perplexities are many, once the essential problem surfaces. In the following statement of Wesley, delineating the order of salvation, it is important to note the freedom of God to

work as He pleases, yet at the same time to note that there does seem to be a normative pattern for Him.

Indeed, how God may work we cannot tell; but the general manner wherein he does work is this: Those who once trusted in themselves . . . are convinced they are poor and naked . . . In their trouble they cry unto the Lord, and he shows them that he hath taken away their sins, and opens the kingdom of heaven in their hearts . . . In this peace they remain . . . and commonly suppose they shall not know war anymore; till . . . their bosom sins assault them again . . . Then arises fear that they shall not endure to the end . . . But it is seldom long before their Lord answers for himself, sending the Holy Ghost . . . to bear witness continually with their spirits that they are the children of God . . . the witness . . . heightens . . . the inexpressible hunger they feel after a full renewal in his image . . . Then God is mindful of the desire of them that fear him, and gives them a single eye, and a pure heart . . .¹⁰

In this classical statement may be found the essential elements of the Wesleyan understanding of the order of salvation: unbelief, conviction of sin, confession, faith, pardon, the new birth, struggle with sin, the witness of the Spirit, desire for holiness, and purity of heart. This paper focuses on this point: Is repentance and confession of sin always a necessary, constituent element in the Wesleyan idea of salvation in terms of the specific content Wesley gives to the last element of the order, i.e. purity of heart. If a person is pure in heart, why would he need to confess sin?

The problem is focused for us in that Wesley used the term “perfection” to describe the attainable state of the forgiven, indwelt, growing believer. “Wesley also acknowledged sinfulness in believers; nevertheless, he propounded a doctrine of perfection.”¹¹ This perfection described the level of Christian experience after initial justification and beginning sanctification. Wesley more precisely described the justifying and sanctifying operations of God.

By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favor of God, by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God. All experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified . . . it gradually increases from that moment . . . till, in another instant, the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man . . . But even that love increases more and more.¹²

Perfection was the term which Wesley used to describe in some sense any stage of the Christian life. The justified, born-again believer could be called perfect. “But even babes in Christ are in such a sense perfect, or born of God . . . as, First, not to commit sin.”¹³ They do not commit outward sin, or at least, they need not. “Wesley did not

claim that a Christian was not able to sin, but that by the indwelling Spirit he was able not to sin”¹⁴ He took the term “perfection” and used it also in two additional different ways. The first concerned the time element as to when this perfection took place. Here, again, there is a recognition of the freedom of God to work as He sees fit, but also a normative process and structure which God manifests.

Perhaps it may be gradually wrought in some But it is infinitely desirable, were it the will of God, that it should be done instantaneously . . . and so he generally does.¹⁵

The perfection that God works, then, in the life entails both a gradual and an instantaneous element.

From the moment we are justified, there may be a gradual sanctification, a growing in grace . . . and if sin cease before death, there must, in the nature of the thing, be an instantaneous change Certainly we must insist on the gradual change, and that earnestly and continually. And are there not reasons why we should insist on the instantaneous also?¹⁶

The Christian, then, is being made perfect in some sense, and is already perfect, in another.

The second way Wesley used the term “perfection” concerns its content or its meaning. What does the word “perfect” mean in the life of the Christian? His interpretation is not hard to find.

Here, then, is the sum of the perfect; this is the true circumcision of the heart Let it be continuously offered up to God through Christ, in flames of holy love Let your soul be filled with so entire a love of him, that you may love nothing but for his sake. Have a pure intention of heart.¹⁷

And again, “This is the sum of Christian perfection: It is all comprised in that one word, Love . . . the love of God . . . Love thy neighbor as thyself.”¹⁸

This love Wesley defined as self-impartment and self-communication, the highest form of which was self-sacrifice.

How what is it to love God, but to delight in him, to rejoice in his will, to desire continually to please him, to seek and find our happiness in him¹⁹ If you have truly presented yourselves to God, you offer up to him continually all your thoughts, and words, and actions, through the Son of his love, as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.²⁰

This was love expelling sin, delivering from sin. This Christian perfection was a purification of motive, the love of God freed from all selfish interests and corrupt natural desire.

The word “perfect” and the phrase “salvation from all sin” raised a variety of questions and problems. Only God is “perfect” and even the most devout Christian is a human, limited, and finite individual. But

here, in his doctrine of perfection, Wesley re-defined sin so as to mean known and purposeful acts against a known law of God. Wesley argued that the perfection he taught “will perfectly well consist with salvation from sin according to that definition of sin (which I apprehend to be the scriptural definition of it) a **voluntary transgression of a known law.**”²¹ In this sense not all transgressions of the law are necessarily sinful, since not purposed. By refusing to call sins those deeds which are non-purposed and those present because of man’s depraved nature, he could and did maintain that “perfection” was attainable in this life.²² Even Wesley’s modern day, evangelical Anglican counterpart, J. R. W. Stott, when speaking of confession defines sin as “an infringement of God’s known will, a revolt against His authority.”²³ Elsewhere Wesley does seem to argue, however, that although known sin is the most intense form of sin, others may be present and should be called by that name.

Presumptuous sins (are those in which) . . . the willful sinner is not ignorant or surprised, but knowingly fights against God’s express commandment . . . and all other kinds of sins are more or less heinous, as they are nearer or farther off from sins of this dreadful nature; inasmuch as these imply the greatest opposition to God’s will, contempt of his mercy, and defiance of his justice.²⁴

In using such concepts as perfection, Wesley was charged with teaching sinless perfection or so re-defining the term “perfection,” or re-using it that it became meaningless, for it came to mean something akin to “imperfect perfection.” Wesley argues differently at different times and in different places concerning the term and his acceptance or rejection of it. He says, “And I do not contend for the term ‘sinless’, though I do not object against it.”²⁵ Again, he writes, “Secondly, you make sinless perfection necessary after justification in order to make us meet for glory. And who does not?”²⁶ Here, however, he re-defines the term “perfect” because it was a biblical word.²⁷ What he might have said was that it was an English and King James Version word with different meanings. On the other hand, he referred to “the scarecrow of sinless perfection”²⁸ and declared, “To the charge of holding ‘sinless perfection’ . . . I might likewise plead, Not guilty”²⁹

A tension arises between his word “perfection” and the word “repentance” which includes or leads to confession, for if a man is perfect why need he repent of any sin? Repentance for Wesley involves self-knowledge or conviction of sin,³⁰ utter helplessness,³¹ “producing real desires and sincere resolutions of amendment.”³² In one or more of these senses Wesley declared, “There is also a repentance and a faith . . . which are requisite after we have ‘believed the gospel’; yea, and in every subsequent stage of our Christian course, or we cannot ‘run the

race which is set before us.’ ”³³ At the point of Christian perfection, even, repentance is necessary. “Circumcision of heart implies humility . . . a right judgement of ourselves, cleanses our minds from those high conceits of our own perfections It convinces us, that in our best estate we are, of ourselves, all sin and vanity.”³⁴

Yea, suppose God has now thoroughly cleansed our heart . . . yet how can we be sensible enough of our own helplessness, our own utter inability to all good, unless we are every hour, yea, every moment endued with power from on high We have need, even in this state of grace, to be thoroughly and continually penetrated with a sense of this. Otherwise we shall be in perpetual danger of robbing God of his honour, by glorying in something we have received, as though we had not received it.³⁵

Here repentance is looked upon not only as acknowledgement and confession of one’s sins, but as recognition that one has not attained all that is possible for him and that, whatever one attains, he does not have from his own sinful, selfish person, but he receives it from God. As such, repentance and confession are a permanent necessary attitude of mind and life.³⁶

These terms—repentance, confession, and perfection—and the relationships among them point us toward the question as to whether the “perfect” Christian still needs forgiveness of sin, Christ as His priest, atonement for his sin, and the unmerited grace of God revealed in Christ. Wesley objected that any form of perfection which ruled out the merits of Christ’s atonement, i.e. the need for forgiveness, was not his position.

A perfection such as enables a person to fulfill the whole law and so needs not the merits of Christ—I acknowledge no such perfection; I do now and always did protest against it.³⁷

Wesley always felt the need for the atonement in the lives even of those Christians who are perfect in the love of God. The reasons he felt this were three.

The first was simply that the sanctified Christian’s continual supply of power and ability not only to maintain his current relationship with Christ but to increase its dominion in his life was predicated upon the mediation of Christ. The best of men “need Christ as their Priest, their Atonement, their Advocate with the Father . . . as the continuance of their every blessing depends on his death and intercession”³⁸ The perfect are never so perfect as to be independent of the source of their perfection.³⁹ “And whatever expression any sinner who loves God uses to denote God’s love to him, you will always upon examination find they directly or indirectly imply forgiveness,”⁴⁰ i.e. atonement. Wesley insists that sanctification, no matter how high,

is always dependent upon trust—not to say so is to re-establish salvation by merit not grace.

None feel their need of Christ like these [the perfect in love] ; none so entirely depend upon him. For Christ does not give life to the soul separate from, but in and with, himself. Hence, his words are equally true of all men, in whatsoever state they are . . . ‘without’ (or separate from) ‘me ye can do nothing.’ ” 41

The second reason why the best of men need the cross of atonement and Christ as their mediator is due to the results of the fall. Perfection in love does not mean present complete deliverance from the effects of the fall of Adam. When Adam fell, all men were rendered powerless to keep the Adamic law (the use of the natural faculties as originally created and intended) and the Mosaic law in its threefold form as political, ceremonial, and moral. Depth of love in the life does not completely overcome the weakness of natural faculty which in turn keeps one from ever loving in an absolutely perfect sense. Although not under the Adamic law of using correctly the natural faculties, “even against this, through the present weakness of our understanding, we are continually liable to transgress. Therefore every man needs the blood of the atonement, or he could not stand before God.”⁴²

Every such mistake, were it not for the blood of the atonement, would expose to eternal damnation If follows, that the most perfect have continued need of the merits of Christ, even for their actual transgressions, and may say for themselves [confess], as well as for their brethren, ‘Forgive us our trespasses.’ ”⁴³

The place of the Mosaic law in its moral form has a special function in Wesley’s order of salvation. The moral law brings guilt and shows helplessness, but it has been fulfilled through Christ in His life, death, and resurrection. He has fulfilled it through the love which He brought and demonstrated in these events. Hence the Christian is under the law of love or the law of faith. The third reason then why the perfect Christian needs the atonement and needs to confess his sins is that he never fully keeps the law of love in act although he may in motive. One can always love more or apply love in a more perceptive way.

For want of better bodily organs, they must at times think, speak, or act wrong; not indeed through a defect of love, but through a defect of knowledge. And while this is the case, notwithstanding that defect, and its consequences, they fulfill the law of love. Yet as, even in this case, there is not a full conformity to the perfect law, so the most perfect do, on this very account, need the blood of the atonement, and may properly for themselves, as well as for their brethren, say, ‘Forgive us our trespasses.’ ” 44

Again,

A man may be filled with pure love and still be liable to mistake . . . a mistake in judgement may possibly occasion a mistake in practise And a thousand such instances there may be, even in those who are in the highest state of grace. Yet, when every word and action springs from love, such a mistake is not properly a sin. However it cannot bear the rigour of God's justice, but needs the atoning blood.⁴⁵

Thus, while the Christian may in motive be delivered from purposely transgressing a known law, in a second and deeper sense in which sin is judged by the perfect will of God, even the perfect Christian is a sinner and under the need for continual repentance, confession and forgiveness. Here, as in Luther, Wesley declares that the Christian is **simul justus et peccator**. He envisages no holiness apart from the cross and is careful to exclude any reliance on human merit just as he does in justification. Here also stands Calvin. Yet justification is transformed, not superseded. There is no existential despair of guilt which cannot be countered by divine love and forgiveness. There is no despair over weakness which cannot be embraced by the divine power and grace. Hence, the Christian need not cry in defeat "My sins, my sins!" but can exult in Christ. Wesley was asked

Q. 10. May not, then, the very best of men adopt the dying Martyr's confession: 'I am in myself nothing but sin, darkness, hell; but thou art my light, my holiness, my heaven'?

A. Not exactly. But the best of men may say, 'Thou art my light, my holiness, my heaven. Through my union with thee, I am full of light, of holiness, and happiness. But if I were left to myself, I should be nothing but sin, darkness, hell.'⁴⁶

Wesley saw no contradiction or inconsistency between heights of "perfect" love and continuous need of the atonement. Although the absolute will and character of God judge the Christian necessitating pardon, the revealed will of God in Jesus Christ brings forgiveness and power to grow in the grace and knowledge of God our Saviour, to desire nothing but His glory, and to confess the perpetual need of Christ's mediation. "The Christian who is perfect is free from sin, not according to the objective standards of justice, but according to the measure of personal relationship with Christ."⁴⁷

In conclusion, let us note the following:

1) It might be better to dispense with the term "perfection" and use the one, "Christian excellence." This removes misunderstandings about "imperfect perfection" and absolute perfection residing in God alone. It permits growth beyond crisis which Wesley himself asserted but never quite satisfactorily developed.

2) It might be better to cease talking of the sanctified state or

perfected state and speak of unbroken relationship with Christ in the power and motive of love.

3) It might be better to cease speaking of holiness as a possession and bear witness to it as a gift. “. . . Holiness never becomes our possession, but is a gift that we must receive daily from Christ.”⁴⁸ We should never trust in possessed righteousness, but in the Mediator of it, Jesus Christ.

4) We might better cease speaking of levels of experience and speak of meeting-places or encounters. It is in the personal, daily crises that Christ meets us and in the two crises encounters that He focuses His work.

5) We ought to freely confess our sins corporately with the Christian body. Not to do so, is to avoid the corporate nature of sin in Christ’s people at the expense of personal righteousness.

6) We need to emphasize in a dialectical fashion the two-fold nature of sin and see that although a man need not purposely transgress a known law of God, he always falls short of the absolute law of God’s justice and righteousness and hence always needs to confess his sins and receive forgiveness.

7) In the light of the above study, it may be clearer why the man, who proclaimed that Christians could be perfect in that “they are saved in this world from all sin, from all unrighteousness; that they are now in such a sense perfect, as not to commit sin, and to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers,”⁴⁹ could also write

But to proceed, the best of men need Christ as their Priest, their Atonement, their Advocate with the Father, not only as the continuance of their every blessing depends on his death and intercession, but on account of their coming short of the laws of love. For every man living does so. You who feel all love, compare yourself with the preceding description. Weigh yourselves in this balance, and see if you are not wanting in many particulars.⁵⁰

and could himself confess through his weakened body as he faced death in three days, “I the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me.” When queried about his meaning in these words, he confessed, “Christ is all. He is all.” These words show his continuous and final sense of reliance upon the atonement, forgiveness, and purity of Christ,⁵¹ and his need for confession of sins.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Cp. I. W. Reist, "John Wesley's View of Man—A Study In Free Grace vs. Free-Will." *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. VII, No. 1 (Spring, 1972), 25-35, and "John Wesley and George Whitefield—A Study in the Integrity of Two Theologies of Grace," Paper read at a meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society, 5 April, 1972, Indianapolis, Indiana, and to be published in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, F. F. Bruce, editor.

² Cp. G. C. Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935).

³ This was a repeated argument of older hyper-orthodox Calvinism.

⁴ Wesley faced this charge during his own lifetime, and the emotional excesses of his 19th and 20th century descendants have contributed towards its popular reception.

⁵ Cp. U. Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion*. (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936).

⁶ J. R. W. Scott, "Confess Your Sins. The Way of Reconciliation." *Christian Foundations*. I. P. E. Hughes, editor. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 9, 12.

⁷ O. Michel, "ὁμολογεῖν" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. G. Friedrich, editor. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, Co., 1968), V. 207.

⁸ Stott, *op. cit.*

⁹ F. Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1970). 34, 152.

¹⁰ J. Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection." *The Works of John Wesley*. XI (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n. d.), 380. Hereafter referred to as PACP, p. no.

¹¹ R. C. Monk, *John Wesley, His Puritan Heritage*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966), 56.

¹² Sermon LXXXV, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," *Works*, VI, 509. From now on Wesley's collected works will be referred to as *Works*; his sermons as Roman numerals; the initial entry will give the sermon title and an abbreviation which will be used afterwards, followed by volume and page numbers.

¹³ Sermon XL, "Christian Perfection," *Works*, VI, 6. Hereafter, CP.

¹⁴ A. S. Wood, *The Burning Heart*. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 268.

¹⁵ Sermon XLIII, "The Scriptural Way of Salvation," *Works*, VI, 53.

¹⁶ "Minutes of Several Conversations Between Mr. Wesley and Others from the Year 1744 to the Year 1789." *Works*, VIII, 329.

¹⁷ Sermon XVII, "The Circumcision of the Heart," *Works*, V, 211-12. Hereafter COH.

¹⁸ Sermon LXXVI, "On Perfection," *Works*, VI, 413. Hereafter, OP.

¹⁹ Sermon CXXXIX, "On Love," *Works*, VII, 495.

²⁰ OP, VI, 414.

²¹ OP, VI, 417.

²² Monk, *op. cit.*, 116.

²³ *Op. cit.*, 11.

²⁴ Sermon CXXXVIII, "On Grieving the Holy Spirit," *Works*, VII, 492.

²⁵ PACP, XI, 446.

²⁶ "The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained." *Works*, VIII, 492. Hereafter "Principles."

²⁷*CP*, VI, 1

²⁸ “Principles,” VIII., 432.

²⁹ “A Letter to the Right Rev. The Lord Bishop of London.” *Works*, VIII, 484.

³⁰ Sermon VII, “The Way to the Kingdom,” *Works*, V. 81.

³¹ Sermon XIV, “The Repentance of Believers,” *Works*, V. 164; hereafter, *ROB*.

³² “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” *Works*, VII, 47.

³³ *ROB*, V. 157.

³⁴*COH* V, 203.

³⁵ Sermon LXXXIV, “On the Church,” *Works*, VI, 398.

³⁶ U. Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion*. (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), 192.

³⁷ “Letter CCXVII,” *Works*, XII, 257.

³⁸ *PACP*, XI, 417.

³⁹ C. Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 177.

⁴⁰ “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Opinion,” *Works*, VIII, 24.

⁴¹ *PACP*, XI, 395.

⁴² *OP*, 413.

⁴³ *PACP*, XI, 395.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 419.

45 *Ibid.*, 394-5.

46 *Ibid.*, 417.

47 Williams, *op. cit.*, 178.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *CP*, VI, 19.

50 *PACP*, XI, 417.

51 "The Life of the Rev. John Wesley," *Works*, V, 547.