

EDITORIAL

The Wesleyan Message

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“Methodism declares that perfection in Christian love, the completion of the new creature in Christ, is an essential portion of the Good News. The Christian’s self-knowledge and the vision of God in Christ, in their very tension, should excite the believer toward the realization of the perfect love he sees in Christ.” So ran a portion of “The Episcopal Address,” delivered at the General Conference of The United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, on April 22, 1968.

Prior to the above statement the “Address” declared that “many of our liberal ideas about the inevitable perfectability of man have come to shipwreck.” Whereas general history has demonstrated the fallacy of liberal humanism’s belief that man is capable of perfecting himself and, given sufficient time, will inevitably do so, Methodism at her historical best has demonstrated the fact that God’s redeeming grace is able to transform human personality so as to make it a partaker of His divine nature of *agape*, that is, so to complete the Christian in holy love that God Himself will not hesitate to call such a one *perfect*.

The cover and the title page of this Journal carry a subtitle which highlights the main objective in the publication known as *The Asbury Seminarian*. This particular issue is devoted to underscoring the *Seminarian’s raison d’être*—to interpret “The Wesleyan Message in the Life and Thought of Today.” While the articles by Drs. Harvey J. S. Blaney, Mel Thomas Rothwell, and Paul H. Wood major on this distinctive message “in the life and thought of today,” this guest editorialist will seek to accentuate what the distinctive *is* in the Wesleyan message that

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needs interpretation and application in the thought-forms and life-expressions in our time.

WESLEY'S MOST DISTINCTIVE DOCTRINE

Wesley himself disclaimed being an innovator in theology. He formulated no creed and regarded his *Standard Sermons* and *Notes Upon The New Testament*, and "Conversations" concerning doctrine—recorded in his "Doctrinal Minutes"—to be "the exposition of truths defined in the New Testament and restated in the Articles and Homilies of the Church of England." According to Nehemiah Curnock, editor of *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, Wesley's "nearest approach to a newly defined doctrine was that of Christian Perfection."¹ But even in this distinctive emphasis he claimed to teach nothing that he had not found plainly written in the Scriptures.

Wesley's study of "Christian Perfection" began concurrently with his own religious awakening in 1725. Between 1725 and 1729, the writings of three authors were most influential in shaping his views on this subject: Bishop Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, and William Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call*. But in the year 1729, Wesley affirmed, "I began not only to read, but to study, the Bible as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw, in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having 'the mind which was in Christ,' and of 'walking as Christ also walked' . . . not only in many or in most respects, but in all things."²

Wesley was frequently asked what he meant by "perfection" and was often attacked for his teaching on this subject. One of those attacking

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1. *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by Nehemiah Curnock (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), IV, 534; *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint), VII, 423-24.
 2. *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* by Rev. John Wesley (Boston: McDonald, Gill & Co., n.d.). Wesley wrote this in 1765, and at the conference in Leeds in 1766 made it part of the course of study. At that same Leeds conference the questions in the *Methodist Discipline* used in the ordination service—"Have you faith in Christ? Are you going on unto perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you groaning after it?"—were used first by Wesley. See: J. A. Wood, *Christian Perfection As Taught by John Wesley* (Chicago and Boston: The Christian Witness Company, 1885), p. 182; George Allen Turner, *The More Excellent Way* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Light and Life Press, 1952), p. 167.

him was Dr. Dodd, to whom Mr. Wesley directed the following message in 1756:

When I began to make the Scriptures my study (about seven and twenty years ago), I began to see that Christians are called to *love God with all their heart*, and to *serve Him with all their strength*, which is precisely what I apprehended to be meant by the Scriptural term “perfection.” After weighing this for some years, I openly declared my sentiments before the University, in the sermon on “*The circumcision of the heart*” [1733]. About six years after, in consequence of an advice I received from Bishop Gibson [then bishop of London, at Whitehall, in 1740], “Tell all the world what you mean by perfection,” I published my coolest and latest thoughts in the sermon on that subject [“On Christian Perfection”—Sermon XL]. I therein build on no authority, ancient or modern, but the Scripture.³

In the sermon “On Christian Perfection,” Wesley acknowledged that scarcely any expression or term in the English Bible had given “more offence” than the word *perfect*. “The very sound of it is an abomination” to many, he affirmed. “And whosoever *preaches perfection*, (as the phrase is,) i.e. asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man or a publican.”

When many urged Wesley to lay aside these offensive terms such as “perfect” and “perfection,” his reply was, “But are they not found in the oracles of God? If so, by what authority can any messenger of God lay them aside, even though all men should be offended?” To follow such entreaties, he said, would be tantamount to denying Christ, giving place to the devil, withholding from the people an essential portion of God’s Word, and thereby incurring guilt for others’ ignorance and sinfulness.⁴

In a letter to Mrs. Maitland in May, 1763, Mr. Wesley further defended his use of biblical terms and their meanings.

As to the word “perfection,” it is scriptural: Therefore

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3. *Methodist Magazine*, 1779, p. 434, quoted in J. A. Wood, *Christian Perfection As Taught by John Wesley*, p. 20.
 4. *Sermons On Several Occasions*, by The Rev. John Wesley, A.M. (New York: Phillips & Hunt, n.d.), 1, 355.

neither you nor I can in conscience object to it, unless we send the Holy Ghost to school, and teach Him to speak who made the tongue.

By Christian perfection, I mean (as I have said again and again) the so loving God and our neighbor, as to “rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks.” He that experiences this, is scripturally perfect. And if you do not, yet you may experience it; you surely will, if you follow hard after it; for the Scripture cannot be broken.⁵

Wesley devoted the rest of the letter to show what he did not teach, in particular some things which he had been accused of propagating. He disclaimed ever having taught an absolute or infallible perfection. “Sinless perfection I do not contend for, seeing it is not scriptural.” Neither did he teach a legal perfection, nor a “Christian perfection” that is no longer in need of Christ’s atoning merits.

A LOOK AT WESLEY’S JOURNAL ENTRIES

Wesley not only pressed upon his preachers the necessity of preaching often upon the theme of Christian perfection, but frequently did so himself. As a result of his own observations and practices, he could confidently declare that wherever this distinctive message is truly preached it produces revival and causes the whole work of God, in all its branches, to increase and prosper.

Few have taken the time to sample Wesley’s *Journal* entries to learn at firsthand the prominence given this “Wesleyan message” in Wesley’s own preaching. These selected entries, with his commentary, tell their own story.

—On Saturday evening I explained, at Bristol, the nature and extent of Christian perfection (*Journal*, Nov., 1739). . . .

—We had an uncommon blessing, at Manchester, both morning and afternoon. In the evening I met the believers, and strongly exhorted them to “go on unto perfection.” To many of them it seemed a new doctrine. However, they

5. *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), XII, 257-258.

all received it in love; and a flame was kindled, which I trust neither men nor devils shall ever be able to quench (*Journal*, April, 1761). . . .

—I came to London. I found the same spirit which I left here, both in the morning and evening service. Monday . . . I began a course of sermons on Christian perfection (*Journal*, Nov., 1761). . . .

—A large congregation attended at five in the morning, and seemed to be just ripe for the exhortation, “Let us go on unto perfection.” I had, indeed, the satisfaction of finding most of the believers here athirst for full redemption (*Journal*, April, 1764). . . .

—Hence we rode to Grimsby. . . . In the morning . . . I explained at large the nature of Christian perfection. Many who had doubted of it before were fully satisfied. It remains only to *experience* what we believe (*Journal*, April, 1764). . . .

—At seven I clearly and strongly described the height and depth of Christian holiness; and (what is strange) I could not afterward find that any person was offended (*Journal*, Nov., 1764). . . .

—At five in the morning, I began a course of sermons on Christian perfection; if haply that thirst after it might return which was so general a few years ago. Since that time, how deeply have we grieved the Holy Spirit of God! Yet two or three have lately received His pure love; and a few more are brought to the birth (*Journal*, Dec., 1767). . . .

—In the evening . . . preached on . . . Heb. vii. 25. Many rejoiced to hear of being “saved to the uttermost,” the very thing which their souls longed after (*Journal*, July, 1770). . . .

—The next evening . . . I preached on Heb. xii. 14: “Without holiness no man shall see the Lord” (*Journal*, April, 1777). . . .

—Forty years ago, I knew and preached every Christian doctrine which I now preach (*Journal*, Sept., 1778). . . .

—About ten, I preached at New Mills. . . . Perceiving they had suffered much by not having the doctrine of perfection

clearly explained, and strongly pressed upon them, I preached expressly on the head; and spoke to the same effect in meeting the society. The spirits of many greatly revived; and they are now “going on unto perfection.” I found it needful to press the same thing at Stockport in the evening (*Journal*, April, 1782). . . .

—In the evening, I exhorted them all to expect pardon or holiness, *to-day*, and not to-morrow. O, let their love never grow cold! (*Journal*, May, 1783). . . .

—Friday, 6, being the quarterly day for meeting the local preachers, between twenty and thirty of them met at West Street, and opened their hearts to each other. Taking the opportunity of having them all together, at the watchnight, I strongly insisted on St. Paul’s advice to Timothy, “Keep that which is committed to thy trust”; particularly the doctrine of Christian perfection, which God has peculiarly entrusted to the Methodists (*Journal*, Feb., 1789). . . .

—At nine I preached in the new chapel, at Tunstal. . . . My text was, “Let us go on unto perfection”; and the people seemed to devour the word (*Journal*, April, 1790). . . .

—We went to Wigan, for many years proverbially called *wicked Wigan*. But it is not now what it was. . . . The house . . . was more than filled; and all . . . seemed to be greatly affected, while I strongly applied our Lord’s words, “I will: be thou clean” (*Journal*, May, 1790).⁶

It is to be remembered that Mr. Wesley often used other terms with which to impart the message of Christian perfection. He frequently called this grace “entire sanctification,” “full salvation,” “holiness,” “a clean heart,” “cleansed from all sin,” “perfected in love.”

Wesley’s noted biographer, Luke Tyerman, writing to E. C. Estes, Esq., declared: “All who are acquainted with Methodist history, are well

6. Compiled by J. A. Wood, *Christian Perfection As Taught by John Wesley*, pp. 94-97.

aware that Methodism has always prospered most when the doctrine of entire sanctification has been most popular.”⁷

While many attacked Wesley for his teaching, none of his contemporaries were able to disprove it or to deny the transforming effects of it. Dr. George A. Turner discovered that “during fifty years of controversy, when theological passions were high, no one undertook to refute Wesley from a scriptural standpoint, in any worthwhile effort. His requests that he be corrected from the Bible, and his challenge to prove him unscriptural, were never acted upon.”⁸

THE THREEFOLD DISTINCTIVENESS IN WESLEYANISM

While all branches of mid-stream Christianity have held to some form of holiness teaching, it was Methodism which first put forth holiness as the center from which she viewed all theology. Dr. John M’Clintock, co-editor of the scholarly *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*⁹ and first president of Drew Theological Seminary, affirmed on the occasion of American Methodism’s centennial observance in 1866:

Knowing exactly what I say and taking the full responsibility for it, I repeat, we are the only church in history from the apostles’ time until now that has put forward as its very 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. Our preaching is to that, our church agencies are for that, our schools, colleges, universities, and our theological seminaries are for that. There is our mission—there is our glory—there is our power and

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7. Quoted in J. A. Wood, *Christian Perfection As Taught by John Wesley*, p. 110.
 8. George Allen Turner, *The More Excellent Way: The Scriptural Basis of the Wesleyan Message* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Light and Life Press, 1952), p. 220. Dr. Turner’s volume is based upon his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard University.
 9. Beginning this year the Baker Book House of Grand Rapids is reprinting this “classic encyclopedia” because much of the material found in it “is difficult, if not impossible, to find elsewhere.” Although first published in 1887, most of its contents have a “continuing relevance to today’s scholar.”

there shall be the ground of our triumph. God keep us true.¹⁰

That which distinguished Wesley's understanding of the biblical doctrine of Christian perfection from others' views can be summed up in three points: (1) its entirety; (2) its instantaneity; and (3) its certainty or "certification," through the witness of the Holy Spirit. In his book, *A Defense of Christian Perfection*, Dr. Daniel Steele claimed that these three points are "so related that they stand or fall together. The proof of any one of these points strongly supports the other two. The demonstration of two makes the third a necessary inference."¹¹

In brief, Wesley taught that initial sanctification begins at the moment of regeneration (the new birth) and sets in motion a process of gradual sanctification which normally leads the believer to the crisis of entire sanctification—preferably as soon after the new birth as knowledge and faith can make it possible. The crisis of entire sanctification, which cleanses the heart from "original" or inherited sin, is normally followed by a progressive or perpetual sanctification, a being preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thess. 5:23).¹²

When using the term perfection in relation to human nature, one must note that Wesley, implicitly or explicitly, made a distinction between these kinds and/or degrees of perfection: (1) the perfection Adam had before the fall; (2) the perfection of Old Testament believers before Christ, such as Noah, Abraham, Job, Moses, David, Asa and others; (3) the perfection which Jesus Christ possessed and practiced; (4) the

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10. Quoted in Olin A. Curtis, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1905), p. 372.
 11. Daniel Steele, *A Defense of Christian Perfection* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1896), p. 112. This volume was Dr. Steele's reply to Dr. James Mudge's book, *Growth in Holiness Toward Perfection*, which had as its thesis: sanctification will not be entire until the resurrection of the body; sanctification is gradually experienced by successive sanctifying acts of God, no one of which instantaneously cleanses from all sin; and the Holy Spirit does not witness to entire cleansing but only to one's present consciousness of cleanness; beneath the level of the believer's consciousness other layers or levels of depravity yet remain to be cleansed at some future moment when these emerge into the realm of consciousness for renunciation, confession and removal. In a word, Dr. Mudge countered the threefold distinctiveness in Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection.
 12. Leo George Cox, *John Wesley's Concept of Perfection* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1964), pp. 195-196.

perfection that is possible to Christians now—this side of Calvary and Pentecost—while still on earth and living in their mortal bodies; and (5) the perfection of the resurrected saints in eternity.

Eden's perfection is forever behind us. Eternity's perfection is still ahead of us. But "the evangelical perfection" of Christian love—which "The Episcopal Address" (quoted from at the opening of this article) affirms is an "essential portion of the Good News"—is a present and urgent possibility. Wesley emphasized the fullness of divine love, shed abroad in the believer's heart, as that which fulfills the law's demands upon Christians during this Gospel era (Rom. 13:8-10); hence properly called "evangelical" or *Christian* perfection.¹³

In spite of current challenges to the distinctive Wesleyan message such as those in J. Sidlow Baxter's *His Deeper Work in Us* (London, 1967), pages 227-234, and in William E. Hulme's *The Dynamics of Sanctification* (Minneapolis, 1968), pages 117, 178-181, there are, to this writer, no basic refutations of, or phenomenal improvements upon, that which Wesley himself taught and which contemporary Wesleyan scholars in America have faced and adequately answered. Some contemporary non-Wesleyan scholars are seemingly unaware of such studies as George A. Turner's *The Vision Which Transforms* (1964), Kenneth Geiger's three volumes (as compiler and editor), namely, *Insights Into Holiness* (1962), *Further Insights Into Holiness* (1963), *The Word and the Doctrine* (1965), and W. Curry Mavis' *The Psychology of Christian Experience* (1963).

With all the valued contributions of the various disciplines, to many of us within the Wesleyan tradition to whom this teaching is a priceless empirical treasure, neither the exegetical labors of biblical scholars nor the "insights of psychology" have altered the basic validity of the Wesleyan message.¹⁴

13. *Ibid.*, *passim*; cf. Delbert R. Rose, "Christian Perfection, Not Sinless Perfection," in *Insights Into Holiness*, ed. Kenneth Geiger (*Ibid.*, 1962), pp. 107-128; Daniel Steele, *Milestone-Papers* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Fellowship, n.d., reprint), pp. 17-23.

14. George Allen Turner, *The Vision Which Transforms* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1964), pp. 264, 319, 321-326. Drs. Turner and Mavis currently are professors at Asbury Theological Seminary. Dr. Geiger, a general superintendent of The Missionary Church, served as president of the National Holiness Association from 1960 to 1964.