

John Wesley's Personal Experience of Christian Perfection

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So intimately and correctly is John Wesley's name associated with the doctrine of Christian Perfection that it comes as a surprise to some to read the increasingly frequent assertions that Wesley never professed to have personally experienced what he taught as possible and necessary for others. The result of such assertions is that many feel that Wesley was inconsistent and that this may have been more of a theological abstraction or theory than a question of practical value.

One would be less surprised if these assertions were limited to writers outside the pale of Methodism. But when one finds the denial that Wesley ever professed this as a personal experience being circulated by some who fill the highest offices in Methodism it cannot be brushed aside as of no consequence. This matter deserves an accurate and exhaustive study of the words of those who make the denial and of Wesley himself. If it be true that Wesley did not profess the experience, or, what is of more value, that he did not possess it, those who assert that he did should know the truth and desist from circulating erroneous claims for Wesley. If on the other hand it can be shown that he did possess and profess the experience, those who deny that he did should know the truth and desist from circulating further denials.

Unfortunately, the question as to Wesley's personal experience of Christian Perfection is not answered by a simple "Yes" or "No." To ascertain the facts it is necessary to make careful research and to document the material. It is not enough to say: "Wesley said . . ." Neither are fragmentary quotations desirable, although an article of this nature allows only brief quotations from original sources. These will be cited in order that those who wish to refer to them may do so. Wesley complained to Bishop Lavington that he (the bishop) had cited and murdered four or five lines from one of his Journals; and objected to his using "incoherent scraps (by which you may make anything out of anything)" instead of using "entire

connected sentences." Wesley argued that such a procedure misinterpreted and misrepresented his actual position.¹

I. SOME UNDENIABLE FACTS

1. Wesley's entire life was marked by a quest for holiness which he in his mature years taught as a doctrine to be believed, an experience to be received, and a life to be lived. 2. Some of his statements on this doctrine appear confusing and at times contradictory unless one bears in mind that Wesley was more concerned with the life of holiness than with any theory about holiness;² and that he was "more interested in the experience than in its psychology";³ and that Wesley wrote for those in all stages of spiritual development from the awakened penitents who desired "to flee the wrath to come" to those maturing fathers in Christ. Thus one finds him speaking and writing, to various ones at different times, of this great experience as a present, instantaneous attainment (which he acknowledges some to have experienced), and at other times he writes and speaks of it to others as a future and (to them) as yet "unrealized ideal."

3. Despite the fact that his teachings on Christian Perfection subjected him to abuses and calumnies by avowed enemies, and became the basis for unwarranted extremes by professed "friends" of his views, Wesley considered *his* teachings on the subject to be a vital part of his message on a free, full and felt salvation. It was discussed frequently in the "Conferences" and occupied a large place in his writings and sermons because he felt it to be a truth which God "peculiarly entrusted to the Methodists." He also declared in a letter written in September, 1790, that this was "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the Methodists."⁴

4. The preaching of Christian Perfection as a present possibility aroused hostility in Wesley's day, even as it does in our own

¹ See Wesley's *Works*, IX:22, 29, 3rd London edition: Mason, 1830, to which edition all references to *Works* in this article are made.

² Bishop Neely, *Doctrinal Standards of Methodism*, p. 274: Fleming H. Revell, New York, 1918.

³ Sydney G. Dimond, *The Psychology of the Methodist Revival*, p. 242: Whitmore and Smith, Nashville, Tenn., 1926.

⁴ *Works*, iv:445.

⁵ See *The Letters of John Wesley*, Standard Edition, edited by Telford, viii:238: Epworth Press, London 1931.

day, because, as Dimond says, it "challenged both the moral standards and the current orthodoxy . . ."⁶ 5. Nor can one dispute the fact that there is an increasing number of writers who deny that Wesley ever professed to have personally experienced the Christian Perfection which he preached to and required of others. The first such author of which this writer is aware is L. Tyerman, *The Life and Times of John Wesley*.⁷ This work appeared eighty years after Wesley's death. Bishop Edwin D. Mouzon,⁸ Dr. J. S. Simon,⁹ Dr. R. Newton Flew,¹⁰ Dr. Maximin Piette,¹¹ Bishop Francis J. McConnell,¹² Dr. W. E. Sangster,¹³ and Bishop John M. Moore,¹⁴ with one voice agree that Wesley never professed to have personally experienced Christian Perfection.

6. On the other hand, there is no disputing the fact that the writers who were personally acquainted with Wesley's terminology and profession not only do not deny his personally experiencing this great privilege and duty of the Christian life, they never intimate anything to raise a question about his having experienced it. We shall later consider statements made by some of Wesley's contemporaries; but in the meantime it seems strange for Methodist authors to repeat what Tyerman suggested about Wesley's personal experience of Christian Perfection when some of them suggest that his words about Wesley's life at College are too strong. It reminds one of the adage that what a man had rather were true, he the more readily believes. The evidence is that the farther Methodism gets from realizing that Christian Perfection is its "grand depositum," and the more unpopular its proclamation as a present, personal experience becomes, the more frequent are the denials that Wesley ever professed it as a personal experience. As long as Meth-

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 241.

⁷ 3 vols.: Harper and Brothers, New York, 1872.

⁸ *The Fundamentals of Methodism*: Lamar and Barton, 1923.

⁹ *John Wesley the Master Builder*: Epworth Press, London, 1927.

¹⁰ *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*: Oxford University Press, London, 1934.

¹¹ *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism*: Sheed and Ward, New York, 1937.

¹² *John Wesley*: The Abingdon Press, New York, 1939.

¹³ *The Path to Perfection*: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943.

¹⁴ *Methodism in Belief and Action*: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, New York, 1946.

odism put the emphasis on a free, full, felt salvation by faith there was neither time nor place for such a denial. But when salvation by culture began to receive attention there was no felt need for the second birth; and theologians who do not proclaim the second birth cannot be expected to promote "the second blessing, properly so called," as Wesley designated it.¹⁵ History has vindicated Wesley's views that this doctrine was vital to Methodism's spiritual progress.

II. A GLIMPSE OF WESLEY'S DAY

A better understanding of Wesley and the question at issue will be possible if he is measured against the prevailing conditions in Eighteenth Century England. It is unfair to judge any man by conditions which prevailed two centuries before or after his day. Green, *A Short History of the English People*,¹⁶ deals with Wesley's day as "The Revolution." Chapters 9 and 10 will afford a clear picture of conditions between 1660 and 1815. A perusal of other sources, particularly Dr. J. S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies*,¹⁷ will show that despite the spiritual apathy of the most of the clergymen of that period, there was considerable religious activity. But that did not prevent its being a period of conflict and controversy, in religion as well as in politics, for the two were intimately connected through the State Church. Thus it is no wonder that often Wesley and his cause were attacked at the same time by opposing groups, one of which called him a Papist and the other a Puritan; for each feared that the Methodist movement aimed at restoring the other to power.

The clergy in general was so fearful of offending some of the contenders in the controversies that an inoffensive, colorless, impractical and ineffective type of preaching became popular. In order to maintain "moderation" and avoid the charge of "enthusiasm," theology was allowed to lose its definiteness and its vivifying power, with the result that "preaching too much generated into the mere moral essay."¹⁸ Many came to fear that the spiritual consciousness of the masses was beyond hope of recovery. The outlook seemed almost hopeless, unless man endured as seeing the invisible.

¹⁵ *Letters*, vi:116.

¹⁶ Revised Edition: Harper and Brothers, New York, 1898.

¹⁷ Epworth Press, London, 1921.

¹⁸ Overton, *The Evangelical Revival in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 4: A.D.F. Randolph, New York, 1886.

Wesley's day was also characterized by extravagance as well as controversy. The religious controversy over "the most fundamental points" became as acute as the political controversy, with the result that "questions of directly practical import" were ignored. England faced the sad fact that "the doctrine (of Christianity) was accepted, but the life was not lived."¹⁹ To those who were thus so nearly morally and spiritually deadened "the grand controversy was who could outeat, outdrink, and outdress his neighbor." It is no surprise that in such an age Wesley's pure and practical teachings, coupled with his exemplary piety and noble aspirations, evoked opposition. Where he hoped to find sympathy with his religious ideals he too often found unbelief and criticism. His display of kindness and charity was rewarded with barbarous and vulgar abuse. His simplicity in speech was scorned by those who wanted the elaborate, ornate, and vehement in oratory which made them appear to possess great learning. Wesley carefully avoided all "nice and philosophical speculations" and "perplexed and intricate reasonings," as well as "those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity."

The frankness with which Wesley reproved any professor of religion for his inconsistencies provoked bitter persecution. He knew "Oxford University . . . to be the residence of rakes and idlers and debauchees." It was not uncommon for clergymen to be so intoxicated, even when expounding the Bible, as to require assistance from others lest they fall. One Oxford lad wrote his mother that he had seen his tutor "carried off perfectly intoxicated." And it is said that one Oxford professor "died after drinking late at his own house with the Vice-Chancellor (who is the actual head of the University) and some others."²⁰

Dr. George Peck, in *The Scriptural Doctrine of Christian Perfection*, pp. 199-200,²¹ says that Wesley was called a Papist, a Ranter, a Pelagian, an enthusiast, and a heretic. He also quotes the *Works of Augustus Toplady*, wherein Toplady declares: "The

¹⁹ Overton, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁰ See President Little's brochure, *John Wesley, Preacher of Scriptural Christianity*, pp. 12-15 (copyrighted 1903 by the author), for a description of conditions at Oxford and the sermon which separated Wesley from Oxford University.

²¹ Lane and Sandford, New York, 1842.

supposition of possible perfection on earth is the most fanatic dream, and the most gigantic delusion which can whirl the brain of a human being." A more complete view of the various extremes and extravagances of his age can be gleaned from Dr. J. H. Whiteley's *Wesley's England*,²² in which he paints life-size, natural-color pictures of the "artificial society" which Wesley attacked, and which in turn attacked Wesley.

As an aid to a clearer understanding of what may be involved in the question at issue—Did Wesley personally profess to have experienced Christian Perfection?—it will be well to bear in mind Whiteley's words about eighteenth-century language; for it is with *words* that we shall have to do in considering that question. Said he:

This artificial society was also fond of hounding to death for a brief time some inoffensive word, utterly regardless of the word's derivative or accidental meaning . . . As with other centuries, the eighteenth had its full share in the change of the meaning in words themselves, and many everyday words became elevated or degraded in significance and narrowed or widened in meaning through the course of these hundred years . . . Wesley's hymns, letters, and diaries also exemplify this perpetual change in word meanings . . .²³

III. THE BASIS OF THE CONTENTION

Before quoting Wesley it seems best to consider the contention of those who deny that he professed Christian Perfection as a personal experience. The first assertion will be that of Dr. L. Tyerman, who, in *The Life and Times of John Wesley*, ii:598, after quoting Wesley's letter to *Lloyd's Evening Post* (London) on April 3, 1767, in which he answered attacks repeatedly made on him in the *Christian Magazine*, says:

The above is an important letter, were it for nothing else than showing that Wesley preached a doctrine he himself did not experience. For above thirty years he had taught the doctrine of Christian perfection; but here he flatly declares, that, as yet he had not attained to it: he taught it, not because he felt it, but because he believed the Bible taught it.

In *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley*, annotated by Dr. E. H. Sugden,²⁴ is this comment in the introduction Dr. Sugden

²² Epworth Press, London, 1938.

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 221, 224, 226.

²⁴ Epworth Press, London, 1921.

wrote to Sermon xxxv on Christian Perfection:

He (Wesley) never professed himself to have received it. Logically, he could see no reason why the ideal could not be at any time realized, provided a man had the requisite faith; but he came more and more to see that it was an ideal, to which the believer approximates ever more closely, though it may be impossible to say that he has absolutely attained it.

Bishop Edwin D. Mouzon in his introduction to *Fundamentals of Methodism*, wrote: "In the genesis and growth of Methodism, the true order is: First, *experience* and a *holy life*, and then *Christian doctrine*. Doctrine grows out of experience and life";²⁵ and on page 68 he declared:

It is interesting to know that Wesley did not himself profess it (Christian Perfection). To one who had objected to the doctrine, Mr. Wesley wrote: "I tell you flat, I have not attained the character I draw." The nearest he is known to have come to professing it was when the question whether he had ever experienced the blessing of perfect love, he replied by quoting Charles Wesley's hymn: "Jesus confirm my heart's desire . . ."

Thus it is seen that Bishop Mouzon refers to the letter Tyerman quoted, and since that letter is apparently the basis for the denial that Wesley professed to have personally experienced Christian Perfection, the letter will be given special attention in a subsequent section of this article.

Dr. J. S. Simon, in *John Wesley the Master Builder*,²⁶ says:

It is well known that he (Wesley) never made any claim to have reached "perfection"; but he never lost sight of the goal. He pressed forward, longing to attain daily approval of his sympathizing Judge."

Dr. R. Newton Flew, who writes in a sympathetic vein, seems more inclined to raise a question than to assert a denial; although in mentioning Thomas Walsh, "Wesley's typical helper," he says: "It is notable that he, like Wesley himself, never claimed to have attained the goal."²⁷ On pages 329-330, after conceding that Dr. Curtis's theory that he had found the exact time when Wesley professed to have experienced Christian Perfection could not be proved or disproved and that the passage Curtis cited was "one indication among others that he himself (Wesley) had entered into the super-

²⁵ p. 8.

²⁶ The Epworth Press: London, 1927, p. 69.

²⁷ Flew, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

natural realm of conquest and abiding peace . . . ,” Flew commented: “But the difficulty still remains. How did it come to pass that the apostle of the Evangelical Revival . . . himself never bore such a testimony? Was it some fastidiousness, some half-unconscious suspicion that avowal would be perilous to the health of his soul?”

Father Piette, the Catholic writer whose research on Wesley was vast, when treating “The Wesleyan Doctrine” asks:

“And what of perfection? Can absolute perfection be attained in this world? Wesley, at times, had said so; and some of his followers have, here and there, claimed to be in this state of perfect sanctity . . . but Wesley had the good sense never to believe that he had attained to the heights of sanctity — a fact which, seeing the life he lived, says much for his deep-seated humility.”²⁸

But Wesley’s Sermon on Christian Perfection²⁹ refutes the suggestion that he taught that absolute perfection was attainable in this life.

In one of his earlier books, Bishop Francis J. McConnell wrote: “Careful students of John Wesley’s life have insisted that he never claimed the blessing of entire sanctification for himself.”³⁰ But in his *John Wesley*, the bishop declared:

It will be recalled that Wesley never claimed himself to have reached what he called “Christian Perfection.” Psychologists and theologians have perused the *Journal* line by line to find some single statement on which they could themselves base a claim for such an experience for him. Some have fancied that they have found, not a claim, but a proof in a passage here or there . . .³¹

A comparatively recent author, whose book has been widely read and discussed, suggests:

It will be felt by many that Wesley was inconsistent in making this doctrine (Christian Perfection) central in his teaching, urging his people to “press on to perfection,” and to testify concerning it, yet never testifying himself . . . but whatever testifying he urged upon his people, he never said himself, “I am freed from sin . . .”³²

²⁸ Piette, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

²⁹ *Works*, vi:411-424.

³⁰ *The Essentials of Methodism*, p. 21: Methodist Book Concern, New York, 1916.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 314. Used by permission of copyright owners.

³² Sangster, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-143.

One other denial will be considered sufficient. This one is from the pen of Bishop John M. Moore.

Mr. Wesley believed in the doctrine of Christian perfection, perfect love, holiness, and entire sanctification, but he never claimed for himself the experience . . . he never gave any date for a second experience that brought Christian perfection or entire sanctification . . . He was far from being dogmatic in his opinion as to when and how sanctification came. That could not have been so with him had he been convinced by any Scripture text as to the time and manner of the experience.³³

Only two of those who issued denials that Wesley ever professed to have experienced Christian Perfection cited any authority for their denials: Tyerman and Bishop Mouzon; and both of them cited the same document. But these two disagree on other points, for Tyerman asserts that Wesley taught Christian perfection "not because he felt it"—evidently meaning that he did not experience it—"but because he believed the Bible taught it." Bishop Mouzon compared the genesis and growth of Methodism to the history covered by the New Testament, and declared: "The true order is: First, *experience* and a *holy life*, and then *Christian doctrine*. Doctrine grows out of experience and life."

Apropos of the relation of doctrine to experience and life, Dr. Samuel Chadwick, a renowned English Methodist author, who also served as a College Principal, a President of the Methodist Conference, a President of the Southport Convention, and editor of a religious publication, wrote:

Methodism was born of God in the warm heart of its founder . . . Wesley preached Christ as he realized Him in his own soul. The Methodist doctrines of conversion, assurance, and full salvation can be traced to marked crises in his own experience of the saving grace of God. The Methodist peculiarities of fellowship, testimony, and aggression were all first exemplified in the religious life of the first Methodist.³⁴

Both Dr. Sugden and Father Piette used words that Wesley shunned to relate to personal experience. They used the terms "absolutely attained" and "absolute perfection." Knowing man's frailty, Wesley avoided any term which might suggest that man could reach a state on earth where improvement was not possible

³³ Moore, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52. Used by permission of copyright owners.

³⁴ Chadwick, *The Call to Christian Perfection*, p. 9: Epworth Press, London, 1936.

or desirable. And in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*,³⁵ Wesley declares that to have infallible proof that one has attained the experience he might profess, it would be necessary for God to endow him "with the miraculous discernment of spirits." And Wesley was so fearful that the Methodists would rest in an attained "state" that he avoided using that term, for he believed and taught that beyond the crisis of cleansing of the heart there was a necessary progressive development of the sanctified life.

Dr. Flew's query as to why Wesley did not give clear testimony to his personal experience will be treated in a subsequent section. But Dr. Sangster's denial and contention, based on Wesley's not using a specific pattern moulded for him by another a century and a half after his death, seems unreasonable—and doubly so when one knows the variety of terms Wesley used in describing this experience. He believed in the destruction of sin, and contended for it, according to his *Letters*.³⁶ In his correspondence with Joseph Benson Wesley declares that he used the word "destroyed" because St. Paul used it, and he did not find the word "suspended" in the Bible. In a letter to Benson, dated December 28, 1770, Wesley says:

And you allow the whole thing which I contend for—an entire deliverance from sin, a recovery of the whole image of God, the loving God with all our heart, soul, and strength. And you believe God is able to give you this—yea, to give it to you in an instant. You trust He will.

But as to using anything which suggested "sinless perfection" Wesley avoided all such references. He knew what use his enemies and the misguided and uninformed would make of such an expression. "Sinless perfection is a phrase I never use lest I should seem to contradict myself." "Is, then, the term, *sinless perfection*, proper? It is not worth disputing about."³⁷

Dr. Sangster's objection begins to lose much of its weight when one considers the varied terminology Wesley used in connection with this experience. He spoke of it as "perfect love," "glorious liberty," "full salvation," "the whole image of God," "pure love of God," "the second change," "the second blessing," "renewed in love," "full sanctification," "holiness," "a clean heart," "entire

³⁵ *Works*, xi:398.

³⁶ v:204, 215, etc.

³⁷ *Works*, xi:396, 418; and *Letters*, ii:280; v:90.

sanctification," "Christian perfection," "perfected in love," "saved from sin," "entire deliverance from sin," "the root of sin taken away," "full redemption," "full renewal in His image," "sanctification," "cleansing from all sin," "renewed in love," "full liberty," etc.³⁸

Bishop McConnell, in *John Wesley*, suggests that the denial that Wesley professed Christian Perfection as a personal experience presents a "strange situation" since for a half century Wesley preached it as "the heart of Methodist belief and practice." The bishop then raises two questions: (1) Whether Wesley's followers "assumed" that his personal experience was up to the standard he urged upon them; or, (2) whether they were willing to let Wesley be what he wanted to be and to say what he wanted to say, without bothering to ask questions. Since there is preserved sufficient quantities of the correspondence which passed between Wesley and his colleagues, and many others, no prolonged consideration need be given the question as to whether questions were asked about his personal experience. We know there were. He was severely criticized by some of his enemies who did not know whereof they spoke, and who were incensed because Wesley did not, for reasons he deemed sufficient to himself, tell them all he knew.³⁹ The select societies afforded ample opportunity for close questioning by each member concerning the personal experience of the others present. Many of the questions asked and the replies given were both forthright and unadorned. They were soul-searching. The other question as to whether his followers assumed that Wesley's experience was up to "the type" he set for them will be considered in a subsequent section of this article.

IV. WESLEY SPEAKS FOR HIMSELF

As one studies the citations from Wesley's own writings he will have a better understanding of his meaning and will be aided in arriving at a clearer conception of Wesley's position if he will bear in mind, as Piette mentions, that the years prior to 1741 were Wesley's "formation years." In them he was shaping his views and maturing them. Wesley seems to have been always "fascinated"

³⁸ See Wood, J. A., *Christian Perfection as Taught by John Wesley*: McDonald and Gill, Boston, 1885.

³⁹ See *Letters*, v:25-27.

by the practical side of religion and he seems not to have had time for "flights of speculative imagination." At times one will question whether or not there is any coherence between some of his writings, but if it be borne in mind that all Wesley's writings are characterized by an appeal to personal religious experience he will be found to be consistent and coherent. Piette felt that

Since practical experience and experimentation had been triumphant in the field of natural science, Wesley was led to transport it to the religious domain—to the field of the supernatural life. Around his own personal experiences, and those he was familiar with in his disciples, he gathered and polarized all his theological writings.⁴⁰

It will also greatly assist one in better understanding Wesley's writings to remember what an incessant traveler and preacher he was, in addition to his task of preparing voluminous publications for the press, much of which was done while riding or being entertained away from access to his reference books, etc. If at different times he may be found to express himself in different ways it may be far more correct to consider that his later writings were "corrections" of his former views than contradictions of them. Bishop Neely says:

Where we can find what he meant to be an exact use or definition, then the other uses should be explained by, and harmonized with, that, and not the exact use by the others. The precise and clear statement is to be used to interpret the uncertain, and not the reverse.

And he concludes his chapter on "Interpreting Wesley" by saying: "When one undertakes to interpret John Wesley he should take first, his specific statements, when he seeks to be exact; and, second, his maturest expressions."⁴¹

In Wesley's earlier days he had "an exceeding complex idea of sanctification, or a sanctified man."⁴² On January 1, 1773, he preached a sermon before Oxford University on "The Circumcision of the Heart" which became the first of his published writings; and in that sermon Wesley said:

It is that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies, the being cleansed "from all

⁴⁰ Piette, *op. cit.*, p. 436.

⁴¹ Neely, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁴² *Works*, i:476.

filthiness of flesh and spirit"; and, by consequence, the being endued with those virtues which were in Christ Jesus; the being so "renewed in the image of our mind" as to be "perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."

In the same sermon he also said: "'Love is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment.' It is not only 'the first and great command, but all the commandments in one.' . . ." And in 1771 he declared that this was the "view of religion I then had, which even then I scrupled not to call *perfection*. This is the view I have of it now, without any material addition or diminution."⁴³

In the Preface to the second volumes of Hymns (1742) Wesley, recognizing that the dispute over Christian Perfection was now "at the height" and seeking to dispel as much as possible of the "general prejudice" which had arisen from "a misapprehension of the nature of it," set forth, as clearly as words afford, a practical description of what he meant by "one that is perfect." Such a person was one.

in whom is "the mind which was in Christ," and who so "walketh as Christ also walked"; a man that "hath clean hands and a pure heart," or that is "cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit" . . . and one who, accordingly, "does not commit sin" . . . one whom God hath "sanctified throughout in body, soul, and spirit" . . . one who "walketh in the light as He is in the light, in whom is no darkness at all; the blood of Jesus Christ His Son having cleansed him from all sin" . . . In other words, to be inwardly and outwardly devoted to God; all devoted in heart and life.⁴⁴

The Conference Minutes of 1759 contain this record:

Q. What is Christian Perfection? A. 1. The loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves, which implies deliverance from *all sin*: 2. That this is received *by faith*: 3. That it is given *instantaneously*, in one moment: 4. That we are to expect it (not at death) but *every moment*: 5. That *now* is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.⁴⁵

In Wesley's examination of those who professed to be sanctified he was exceedingly careful to ask not only whether they committed outward sins, but to ask whether they felt any inward sin. His *Journal* for March 12, 1760, reports that he spent the greater

⁴³ *Works*, xi:369.

⁴⁴ *Works*, xi:383-385.

⁴⁵ Myles, *A Chronological History of the People Called Methodists*, Fourth edition, p. 84: Thomas Cordeux (Agent), London, 1813.

part of the day "examining . . . one by one" many who professed to believe that they were saved from sin. He was convinced (1) that they feel no inward sin, and to the best of their knowledge commit no outward sin; (2) that they see and love God every moment, and pray, rejoice, give thanks evermore; (3) that they have constantly as clear witness from God of sanctification as they have of justification. "Now in this I do rejoice, and will rejoice, call it what you please; and I would to God that thousands had experienced thus much, let them afterward experience as much more as God pleases." Thus while he did not contend over the name by which the experience was called, he was careful to see that those who professed to have the experience manifested the life that proved Christian perfection to be practical as well as theoretical. His words about experiencing as much as God pleases shows that he did not consider this a finality, but a fitness for service.

In 1767 Wesley wrote: "By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions . . . I do not contend for the term sinless, though I do not object against it . . ." One has said that Wesley was not dogmatic about the time and manner of receiving the experience; but he does speak clearly and positively about "the manner and time of receiving it" in his writings.

As to the manner. I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by a simple act of faith; consequently, in an instant. But I believe a gradual work, both preceding and following that instant. As to the time. I believe this instant is generally the instant of death . . . But I believe it may be ten, twenty, or forty years before. I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within five years or five months after it, I know no conclusive argument to the contrary. If it must be many years after justification, I would be glad to know how many . . .⁴⁶

Wesley, with his realistic view of life, admitted that there usually was a delay between the two experiences, because some times there were those who needed to be instructed as to the nature and conditions of the experience. But such a delay was not *necessary*. The great theological controversies of the day often raged about the words "necessary" and "necessity" and so Wesley demands proof that a long delay is necessary.

His letter to his brother Charles, dated June 27, 1766, shows

⁴⁶ *Works*, xi:446.

how urgent John Wesley was to have the instantaneousness of this blessing pressed.

O insist everywhere on *full redemption*, receivable by faith alone! Consequently to be looked for *now*. You are *made*, as it were, for this very thing. Just here you are in your element. In connexion I beat you; but in strong, pointed sentences you beat me. Go on, in your *own way*, in what God has peculiarly called you to do. Press the *instantaneous* blessing: then I shall have more time for my peculiar calling, enforcing the gradual work.⁴⁷

At the Conference of 1768, following several years of disappointments and controversies and apparent decline of the work, the question arose as to how God's work might be revived and enlarged. One suggestion was: Preach Christian Perfection! It was to be preached "as a gradual and instantaneous blessing" with believers reminded that it was their privilege. Thereupon, Mr. Wesley said:

That we all may speak the same thing, I ask, once for all, shall we defend this Perfection, or give it up? You all agree to defend it, meaning thereby, as we did from the beginning, Salvation from all sin by the love of God and our neighbor filling the heart . . . You are all agreed, we may be saved from all sin *before death*. The *substance* then is settled. But as to the circumstance. Is the change *instantaneous* or *gradual*? It is both the one and the other. From the movement we are justified, there may be a *gradual sanctification*, or a growing in grace, a daily advance in the knowledge and love of God. And if sin cease before death, there must in the nature of the thing be an instantaneous change. There must a last movement when it does exist and a first moment wherein it does not . . .⁴⁸

The conclusion of the matter was:

Whoever would advance the gradual change in believers should strongly insist upon the instantaneous because when the hope of an instantaneous deliverance from sin is destroyed, "salvation stands still, or rather decreases daily."

Lest some one say that this desire to press the instantaneous blessing waned as Wesley grew older, consider his letter to Sarah Rutter, dated December 5, 1789 (sixteen months before his death): "Full deliverance from sin, I believe is always instantaneous—at least I never yet knew an exception . . ."⁴⁹

In his sermon on *The Scriptural Way of Salvation*, Wesley de-

⁴⁷ *Letters*, v:16.

⁴⁸ Myles, *op. cit.*, p. 124f.

⁴⁹ *Letters*, viii:190.

finer "salvation" as including "the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory." That agrees with Wesley's views that sanctification begins in regeneration, is made full or entire in the second crisis or experience which Wesley designates "the second blessing" or "the second change" as he may choose, and is subsequently perfected and developed by growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.⁵⁰ "This (salvation) consists of two general parts, justification and sanctification. Justification is another word for pardon."⁵¹ And in the state of pardon, with sanctification begun, "we wait for entire sanctification; for a full salvation from all our sins—from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief; or as the Apostle expresses it, 'go on unto perfection.' But what is perfection? The word has various senses: here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul . . ."⁵²

Bishop Mouzon quotes Wesley thus: "I mean loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. I pin all its opponents to this definition. No evasion. No shifting the question." In his words to those who cavil about professors of holiness not meeting their expectation, because, as Wesley told them, they included more in *their* demands of such "perfect" Christians than the Scriptures warranted, he said: "Pure love reigning alone in the heart and life—this is the whole of scriptural perfection."⁵³ It will be well to remember the words of this paragraph when considering the alleged denial of perfection as a personal experience by John Wesley.

As to the *condition* for receiving sanctification, Wesley declared that it is received by faith.

Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of sanctification, exactly as it is of justification. It is the *condition*: none is sanctified but he that believes; without faith no man is sanctified. And it is the *only condition*: this alone is sufficient for sanctification. Every one that believes is sanctified, whatever else he has or has not. In other words, no man is sanctified till he believes: every man when he believes is sanctified . . . But what is that faith whereby we are sanctified—saved from sin, and perfected in love? It is a divine evidence and conviction, first, that God hath promised it in

⁵⁰ For a detailed study of Wesley's views on sanctification as a part of the process of salvation, one is referred to Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation: Epworth Press, London.

⁵¹ See Sugden, *op. cit.*, ii:445.

⁵² *Ibid.*, ii:448.

⁵³ *Works*, xi:401.

the holy Scriptures . . . secondly, that what God hath promised He is able to perform . . . thirdly, that He is able and willing to do it now. And why not? . . . To this confidence, that God is both able and willing to sanctify us now, there needs to be added one thing more— a divine evidence and conviction that He doeth it. In that hour it is done . . .⁵⁴

Faith, scriptural faith, meant to Wesley that “attitude of the human mind by which it realizes the invisible, the imponderable and intangible, and actualizes them in time and space for divine purposes. It cooperates with the will of God.”⁵⁵ Thus to John Wesley, if one had true faith in the power, promises, and purposes of God there was nothing unreasonable in the believer’s praying for Christian perfection and expecting God to give it to him when he prayed and believed for it, thus granting him his prayer for deliverance from sin and the assurance of the Spirit.

V. THE CAUSE OF THE CONTENTION

Two sentences in one letter that John Wesley wrote seem the basis of the insistent denial that he ever professed to have experienced perfect love, or entire sanctification. This letter to the Editor of *Lloyd's Evening Post* (London), dated March 5, 1767, was published on April 3, 1767. An explanation of its origin and contents is in order. In 1756 a popular young clergyman of London, afterward the famous Dr. Dodd, questioned Wesley on his views concerning Christian Perfection, and Wesley, then twice the young man’s age, courteously replied. The young man was admittedly one of London’s most popular young ministers, able but extravagant and vain. To augment his income he wrote for the religious press, and the *Christian Magazine* gave him one hundred pounds per year for his services. At length, after Dodd, using an assumed name, had misrepresented Wesley’s views and had unjustly misrepresented the Methodists and their cause, Wesley reluctantly made a public reply. The letter, too long to be quoted here, may be found in Tyerman’s *Life and Times of John Wesley*, ii:597-598; and in *The Journal of John Wesley*, Standard edition by Curnock, v:197-198;⁵⁶ or *Letters*, v:43-44. Seven years after this letter was published,

⁵⁴ Sugden, *op. cit.*, ii:451, 457, 458.

⁵⁵ Eayrs, *John Wesley, Christian Philosopher and Church Founder*, p. 160: Epworth Press, London, 1926.

⁵⁶ Epworth Press, London, 1938.

Dodd's effort to secure a lucrative appointment by bribery exposed him to public scorn and he retired to France, where he lived for three years. Returning to England in 1777, he forged a draft for a large sum. He was convicted and sentenced to be hanged, and despite a great appeal in his behalf he was hanged as a felon. But between his arrest and his execution he sought help from Wesley and the Methodists whom he had misrepresented and abused, and they kindly ministered to him until his execution. In this, they returned good for evil, as they preached.

In his correspondence of March 12, 1756, Wesley declared to Dodd that by his teaching on Christian Perfection "I never meant any *more* by perfection than the loving God with all our heart and serving Him with all our strength. But I dare not say *less* than this . . ." Wesley also made it plain to him that in his view of perfection there was the possibility and need for continual development in the life of one who had been made perfect in love. But it was Dodd's misrepresentation of statements in Wesley's article entitled *The Character of a Methodist* that caused Wesley "to enter the lists with him." Dodd had said: A Methodist, according to Mr. Wesley, is one who is perfect, and sinneth not in thought, word, or deed." That was making Wesley say words he never used and did not intend to use. Wesley was careful with his words and wanted each one used as *he* intended it, and as he interpreted it. Repeatedly in his controversies he showed the unfairness of adding, omitting, or otherwise misusing even *one* word. Thus, this exact man in the midst of careless men would not allow a wilful misrepresentation of his supposedly direct words to go unreprieved. He knew that Dodd held erroneous views on perfection, and that he sought every possible opportunity to misrepresent the Methodists, whom he accused of intending a secession from the Church. Desirous of defending the truth and of rebuking such flagrant abuse of one's words, Wesley sent a letter to the public press in which appear these sentences: "I have told all the world, I am not perfect; and yet you allow me to be a Methodist. I tell you flat, I have not attained the character I draw . . ." Then Wesley passes to deny the charge that "other Methodists have" attained perfection in the sense Dodd had intended to claim for them. His words are: "I say no such thing." He thereupon declared that after setting forth a scriptural portrait of a perfect Christian he had written: "By these marks the Meth-

odists *desire* to be distinguished from other men; by these we *labor* to distinguish ourselves." In this letter Wesley does not deny Christian perfection as a personal possession any more than he denies that any Methodist possessed it. He denied being perfect in the incorrect, unscriptural and unreasonable sense that Dodd and his school of thinkers would have liked to have fastened upon them; but the seeker after truth must consider the words in their setting and not isolate them from their context and from the situations facing Wesley in this controversy.

In this connection, Wesley knew that those who enjoyed the highest possible state of grace attainable on earth must dwell in shattered bodies and were thereby so pressed down at times that they could not always exert themselves as they would by speaking, thinking, and acting precisely right. He was consistent therefore in denying that he or his followers professed to be "perfect" in the sense their detractors charged. Wesley had written:

For want of better bodily organs, they must at times think, speak, or act wrongly; 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.⁶⁷

But to get the full sense of Wesley's meaning in these two sentences, and to appreciate the purpose of the whole letter in question, one ought to read the last few lines of this "important" letter. Wesley's attackers consider the profession of "perfection" to involve practically a renunciation of one's dependence upon the mercy of God and the merits of the Savior. Wesley's denial of that kind of perfection for himself and the Methodists was laudable, not blameable. He was thinking of their going to the table of the Lord for communion, and by his denial of any professed experience that trusted in self instead of the Savior, he was removing them from the suspicion of insincerity when they went to the table of the Lord. Thus a great deal more was at issue in the letter Wesley wrote than whether or not he personally professed a certain experience which he taught as desirable and possible, as well as scriptural.

Concerning this letter and the use now made of it, perhaps it will be well to bear in mind that Wesley lived twenty-four years after it was published. Insofar as can be ascertained, he was never called in question by a colleague or the Conference over it, nor did

⁶⁷ *Works*, xi:419.

he deem it needful to offer any explanation for it in his writings. None of his contemporaries who wrote an account of his life and times felt it needful to mention, explain, or otherwise account for the statement. Insofar as is known to this writer, Tyerman, who published his works more than a century after the letter appeared in print, is the first to use it as a proof that Wesley disclaimed Christian Perfection as a personal experience. It is apparent that Wesley, his followers, and his critics understood what he meant and were satisfied with his explanation.

One of the bishops quoted as affirming that Wesley did not profess the personal experience of Christian perfection bases his position on Wesley's not saying so in the exact words of a forthright claim. But the bishop took the position that one's profession to be perfect would be the positive proof that he was not perfect. By that line of reasoning one might expect him to concede that Wesley possessed the experience but modestly refrained from professing it lest he be accused of boasting. But, instead, he feels that he did not have it, or he would have professed it; although his reasoning would be that if he had professed it that would have proved he did not have it.

VI. DID WESLEY PROFESS CHRISTIAN PROFECTION?

It is believed that there is evidence enough to satisfy any unprejudiced person that Wesley did profess Christian Perfection. Since it was his correspondence with Dodd that evoked the letter which has been cited to deny Wesley's profession of Christian Perfection, consistency would lead one to study their correspondence on the subject of Perfection. On March 12, 1756, Wesley wrote Dodd and mentioned his sermon on *Salvation By Faith* and dealt with Dodd's use of his words about the believer's freedom from sin. Then comes this comment: "I must still aver they (the Scripture used) speak both my own experience and that of many hundred children of God whom I personally know."²⁸

Wesley's personal experience was criticized by some who claimed that by their discernment he was not living as close to God as he should. Candidly Wesley asked who knew whether he lived more or less closely with God, and attributed such accusations to their "surmisings" with which God was not pleased. He acknow-

²⁸ *Letters*, iii:168.

ledged in this letter that it was hard for him to speak of himself, but he said: "*You* know something by my *own* testimony." Thus Wesley indicated that he did speak more freely to some than to others about his personal experience and relationship to God. But in this connection there are other words that are highly important in this study of his personal experience. He said that if his critics would observe his "outward walking"—which was the acid test of a profession, in Wesley's estimate—he was "bold to say" that they would "see nothing but what might become Gregory Lopez."⁸⁰

It is the mention of Lopez that arrests our attention. No student of Wesley's personal experience of perfection seems to have given this reference serious thought. Lopez was a Spanish missionary to the West Indies, and Wesley read and re-read his life, carrying a long account of his life and labors in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1780 and including a life of Lopez in his *Christian Library*. Wesley's words in connection with Lopez are these:

For years I despaired of finding any inhabitant of Great Britain that could stand in any degree of comparison with Gregory Lopez or M. de Renty. But let any impartial person judge if Mr. Fletcher was at all inferior to them.⁸¹

By thus connecting and comparing his own "outward walking" with Lopez, and by connecting Lopez with the sainted Fletcher, Wesley is modestly and truthfully testifying to his own attainments in the grace of God. Lopez further influenced Wesley in his reticence about speaking all he knew. Wesley vindicated his silence, when words would have satisfied many, by saying: "I answer with him (Lopez), 'I do not speak all I know, but what I judge needful.'"⁸² Thus there was a reason for Wesley's silence as well as for his speech.

In the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, the question is asked: "How may we certainly know one that is saved from all sin?" And after an explanation as to the difference between knowing "infallibly," which would involve the possession of the divine gift of discernment of spirits, comes the answer:

⁸⁰ *Letters*, v:25-26.

⁸¹ *Journal*, iii:42.

⁸² Tyerman, *op. cit.*, iii:13.

We would deem these to be sufficient proofs to any reasonable man, and such as would leave little room to doubt either the truth or depth of the work: (1.) If we had clear evidence of his exemplary behavior for some time before this supposed change. This would give us reason to believe, he would not "lie for God," but speak neither more nor less than he felt; (2.) If he gave a distinct account of the time and manner wherein the change was wrought, with sound speech which could not be reproved; and, (3.) If it appeared that all his subsequent words and actions were holy and unblamable.⁶²

In reading the *Plain Account* one detects a decided change of tone in some of the questions which, in view of the different views of some members of the "Conference" out of which these questions and answers grew, is of importance. At some points Wesley generalizes with such expressions as "we," "you," "one," "he," etc. But when he cites his own views he uses the first person, "I." A case in point: They were discussing how to distinguish between "temptation" and "corruption of the heart." There Wesley uses the personal pronoun, "I." "I feel no pride"; "I feel no anger at all"; "I feel no desire or lust at all"; and he continues by saying: "The difference is still plainer when I compare my present state with my past, wherein I felt temptation and corruption too." This personal testimony is followed at once by a specific question: "How do you know that you are sanctified—saved from your inbred corruption?" The answer comes equally direct:

I can know it no otherwise than I know I am justified. "Hereby know we that we are of God (in either sense), by the Spirit He hath given us." We know it by the witness and fruit of the Spirit . . .

And in this same paragraph Wesley uses the expression: "When we were sanctified, He (the Spirit) bore witness that they (our sins) were taken away" (as distinguished from "forgiven" "when we were justified").⁶³

One of the authorities cited as denying Wesley's personal profession of Christian Perfection complained that Wesley did not bear "testimony." Let him ponder these words: "I have continually testified in private and in public, that we are sanctified as well as justified by faith." If Wesley's words mean anything the following quotation from a letter to Lady Huntingdon, dated June 19,

⁶² *Works*, xi:398.

⁶³ *Works*, xi:419-420.

1771, sheds light on the question:

Many years since I saw that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord." I began following after it and inciting all with whom I had any intercourse to do the same. Ten years after, God gave me a clearer view than I had before of the way to attain this—namely, by faith in the Son of God. And immediately I declared to all, "We are saved from sin, we are made holy, by faith." This I testified in private, in public, in print; and God confirmed it by a thousand witnesses. I have continued to declare this for above thirty years, and God hath continued to confirm the word of His grace.⁶⁵

This item is recorded in the *Journal* for October 28, 1762:

Many years ago my brother frequently said, "Your day of Pentecost is not fully come; but I doubt not 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 was now fully come.⁶⁶

A fuller description of this is given elsewhere. "Any unprejudiced person who has read the accounts in my Journals may observe, that it was now fully come."⁶⁷ And this author observed that Wesley "frequently noted the work at this time, as being what St. Paul calls, The Perfecting of the Saints."

During the Bell-Maxfield controversy, on November 2, 1762, Wesley wrote Thomas Maxfield and commented with his usual candor ("and he never failed in candor," according to Flew) upon what he liked and disliked in the teachings and conduct of Maxfield, Bell and their associates.

I like your doctrine of Perfection, or pure love; love excluding sin; your insisting that it is merely by faith; that consequently it is instantaneous (though preceded and followed by a gradual work), and that it may be now, at this instant . . . I dislike the saying, This was not known or taught among us till within two or three years. I grant you did not know it. You have over and over denied instantaneous sanctification to me; but I have known and taught it (and so has my brother, as our writings show) above these twenty years.⁶⁸

Many believe that the moment Wesley experienced Christian Perfection is recorded in his *Journal* for December 24-25, 1744.

In the evening, while I was reading prayers at Snowsfield, I found such

⁶⁵ Sugden, ii:453.

⁶⁶ *Letters*, v:258-259.

⁶⁷ *Works*, iii:116.

⁶⁸ Myles, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁶⁹ *Letters*, iv:192.

light and strength as I never remember to have had before. I saw every thought, as well as action or word, just as it was rising in my heart; and whether it was right before God or tainted with pride or selfishness. I never knew before (I mean not as at that time) what it was "to be still before God." I waked by the grace of God in the same spirit; and about eight, being with two or three that believed in Jesus, I felt such an awe and tender sense of the presence of God as greatly confirmed me therein: so that God was before me all the day long. I sought and found Him in every place; and could truly say, when I lay down at night, "Now I have *lived* a day."⁶⁹

That testimony, measured by the tests to which he subjected the professors of Christian Perfection, according to his *Journal* for March 12, 1760, bears striking resemblance in many respects. And Dr. Olin A. Curtis comments thus on the *Journal* entry for December 24-25, 1744:

To any one familiar with John Wesley's careful, realistic manner of speech it is evident that we have here the same sort of testimony to the experience of holiness that we have in his *Journal*, May 24, 1738, to the experience of conversion. If the one is not quite so near a full definition as the other, it surely is just as expressive of the fact. I find it almost impossible to read Wesley's words in the light of all his later utterances about the doctrine of Christian perfection, and not consider this date, December 24, 1744, as the probable time when he began to love God supremely.⁷⁰

This date agrees in general with the dates occasionally mentioned by Wesley in connection with the doctrine of Christian Perfection as it was understood and set forth by him and his brother. Unfortunately Wesley's dates were not always as specific as one might wish on some points, but this is nothing against the fact of his experiencing this great grace. Dr. Mae A. Tenney of Greenville College (Illinois), a careful student of Wesley, says:

Wesley does very little direct witnessing in his sermons and articles and *Journal*. Only once he wrote of his heart-warming. And note, moreover, that he does not in that instance employ theological phraseology. One feels that Wesley avoided conventional, rubber-stamp terms.⁷¹

The value of the hymns as testimonies cannot be overlooked. When John Wesley went to use one of Dr. Henry More's hymns on "The Descent of the Holy Ghost on the Day of Pentecost" in

⁶⁹ *Journal*, iii:157.

⁷⁰ *The Christian Faith*, p. 376: Eaton and Mains, New York, 1905. Reproduced by permission of the copyright owners.

⁷¹ *The Wesleyan Message*, p. 182: Light and Life Press, Winona Lake, Indiana, 1940.

the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*,⁷² he changed the phraseology of this godly and contemplative man so that his words dealt with a personal and present blessing, instead of a wistful hope. The words *were*:

Grant this, O holy God and true,
Who the ancient prophets did inspire;
Haste to perform Thy promise due,
As all Thy servants Thee desire.

But Wesley altered them to read, in the last two lines:

To *us* perform the promise due;
Descend and crown *us now* with fire.⁷³

Consider also, in connection with Wesley's profession, that grand old hymn that he and the early Methodists sang, which closed with these verses:

Saviour, to Thee my soul looks up,
My present Saviour Thou:
In all the confidence of hope,
I claim the blessing now.

'Tis done: Thou dost this movement save,
With full salvation bless;
Redemption through Thy blood I have
And spotless love and peace.

And so we conclude: despite Wesley's reticence in speaking of his own personal religious experience, lest he be accused of being a theological innovator or attract attention to himself and thereby detract attention from the gospel truths he wished men to accept; and lest he be accused of boasting and thereby injure the cause of Christ; and lest his testimony attract further hostility toward the members of the Methodists societies, we believe he did meekly, clearly and sufficiently witness to Christian Perfection as a personal experience and that his testimony leaves "no room for doubt that he professed to have the experience, and that he preached the doctrine of Christian Perfection and exhorted and encouraged his followers to seek it."⁷⁴

⁷² Number 185.

⁷³ *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, 1867, pp. 23-30.

⁷⁴ Bishop W. F. Mallalieu, in Wood's *Christian Perfection as Taught by John Wesley*, p. 7.