

Our Wesleyan Heritage After Two Centuries

PAUL STROMBERG REES

I

Where Are the Doctrinal Issues?

One of the finest and, from the religious point of view, one of the most appropriate of the many statues in our National Capitol is the equestrian figure of Bishop Francis Asbury. In his speech of dedication, at the time the statue was unveiled, President Coolidge declared, "America was born in a revival of Religion. Back of that revival were John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Francis Asbury." Certainly that remark, made with ample historical justice, carries more than hint that there is such a thing as a "Wesleyan heritage" which the eighteenth century has passed on to us of the twentieth century.

Or, take Sangster's statement, made near the opening of his recent volume on *The Path to Perfection*: "Most students who have taken in hand a study of modern 'holiness movements' have traced their origin to Wesley's teaching." One would understand Sangster to mean their proximate rather than their final origin. I suspect that these movements would insist that ultimately they trace their origin back to the Holy Scriptures, even as Wesley himself so emphatically claimed. But Sangster's comment is significant as pointing to the fact that the evangelical awakening of the 18th century, with Wesley as its spearhead and symbol, marked an epoch of far-reaching consequence in the history of the Christian Church and in the doctrinal development of Christian sanctity. It is, in fact, this particular aspect of the Wesleyan legacy that now concerns us.

John Wesley, to be sure, was not the

only instrument that God used in the fashioning of our heritage. Besides the men who had gone before him, such as Clement of Alexandria, Macarius of Egypt, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas à Kempis, Tauler, and William Law—men to whom he stood more or less deeply in debt for their creative influence upon him—there were his associates who helped to give both range and color to the whole evangelical revival. Outstanding among these were John Fletcher, Adam Clarke, Richard Watson, Charles Wesley, Thomas Coke, and George Whitefield. Yet today, viewing the "awakening" through the perspective of 200 years, it is John Wesley's name upon which the church historian fixes as the guiding star of that amazing epoch. Indeed T. R. Glover, the distinguished ecclesiastical historian of Cambridge University, himself a Baptist, ranks Wesley with Paul, Augustine, and Luther as the four most important figures of the entire evangelical succession.

We are therefore justified, I take it, in using the adjective "Wesleyan" to describe this immense spiritual, theological, social, and ecclesiastical heritage which has come down to us from the 18th century. It is a vaster legacy than is dreamed by many of our contemporaries, even those who regard themselves as informed. I want to touch on some of these little-appreciated consequences of the 18th century revival when we come to the concluding address.

In this initial discussion I am venturing to set as our task a brief survey of the

doctrinal ground on which our Wesleyan heritage rests, with the particular intention of locating the points in the teaching and testimony of Christian Perfection that have been most open to debate. They might be called the points of strain in our theology. They are the areas in which our message has seemed, let us say, least convincing to those outside of the movement and where, at the same time, there are some obscurities and ambiguities even among those who stand within the tradition of Christian holiness.

As to what the Wesleyan position is, which comes under the scrutiny of friend and foe alike, it might, I suppose, be set out in the following simple, non-technical propositions:

1. Every Christian should aim at perfection.
2. That which is realizable in this life is the perfection of love.
3. Such love is ethical, that is, it involves the keeping of the moral law.
4. The perfection which consists of this love has freedom from sin as its implicate, sin being defined as a "voluntary transgression of a known law."
5. The experience of this Christian Perfection comes as a gift from God receivable instantaneously by faith.
6. To this experience God, by His Spirit, bears a witness of assurance, in which we may be as confident as we are of our justification.

These are the tenets—the things that may be said to characterize "Wesleyanism" whether in the "Methodism" of 18th century England or let us say the "Nazareneism" of 20th century America. We now ask, What criticisms, weaknesses or objections have been urged against any or all of these propositions, and what validity do the criticisms have?

I

There is, to begin with, the objection that, while aiming at perfection is proper enough, all claims to attainment or realization are unscriptural, presumptuous and, as many would add, fanatical.

Practically the whole weight of Reformation theology, whether that of Luther or Calvin, is back of this criticism. You see it in Calvin's assertion that "sin always exists in the saints till they are divested of their mortal bodies." You see it in Luther's dictum that "the saints are always intrinsically sinners; that is why they are declared righteous extrinsically." You see it in the Barthian theology of today, as represented, for example, by Emil Brunner when he defines grace as the "justification of the sinner, who though justified, continues to the last days of his earthly life to be a sinner and is as much in need of forgiveness as on the day of his conversion." And you see it in the teaching of Reinhold Niebuhr who, in his Gifford Lectures under title of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, insists that man is constitutionally and inevitably a sinner. After approving Schleiermacher's position that "to be tempted means in a sense to have sinned," he declares that temptation is a state of anxiety from which sin flows inevitably." If I have understood him correctly, Niebuhr would not say that it is a sin to be finite but he would say that we cannot be finite without being sinners.

Now to what extent are these objections valid? If they have any validity at all, it is limited, I should say, to the reminder they afford us that always we hold the treasure of grace in an earthen vessel and that, measured by a standard of absolute perfection, we are, even when redeemed by Christ, creatures of imperfection.

As for the weakness of the objections, two things may be urged against them. For one thing, they do not do justice to the strength and frequency of those passages in the New Testament in which sin is dealt with as conquerable through the grace of God and in which the life of the Christian is described as one in which sin is put away. It is a discerning and significant conclusion that is reached by Harnack in his *History of Dogma*, when, summing up the rise of Lutheranism, he says, "Through having the resolute wish to go back to *religion* and to it alone, [the Lutheran Church] neglected far too much

the moral problem, the *Be ye holy, for I am holy.*"

The other reply that may be made to the objections with which we are now dealing is this: They imply too large an emphasis on *Christ for us* and too mild an emphasis on *Christ in us*. *Christ for us* means pardon—pardon endlessly repeated, according to the view of the objectors, in order to cover the sins that are endlessly practiced. It would be unfair to say that Martin Luther, for example, had no vision of the power of *Christ in us*; but it would be quite within the facts, I am persuaded, if we were to say that his appreciation of this aspect of evangelical Christianity was not by any means as clear or full as it might have been. And this weakness prevails in lesser or greater degree in all theological systems in which there is despair of ever breaking the vicious circle of sin in the present life.

Is it a mere accident, or is there a profound Christian logic involved, when Paul, writing the last chapter of his Second Corinthian letter, raises the question, "Know ye not that Jesus Christ is in you?" and then goes on to say, quite flatly and confidently, "Do no evil . . . do that which is honest . . . be perfect . . . be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace?" Grace as *pardon* is our only hope with respect to an accusing past, but grace as *power* becomes our hope for a present and a future in which we may "serve God without fear in righteousness and holiness before him all the days of our life."

II

We come now to a second point at which the Wesleyan teaching is said to be weak and in need of further clarification. According to this criticism it makes an "inadequate analysis of the nature of sin." Both Flew and Sangster, among contemporary writers, make this charge, and both of them are, on the whole, sympathetic with the idea of Christian Perfection.

Both scholars are of the opinion that Wesley tends, for example, to look upon man's depravity as a *thing*, a *quantum*, an

entity in itself, which can be removed like a cancer or a bad tooth. I suppose one might cite Wesley's statement, "There must be a last moment wherein it (sin) does exist and a first moment wherein it does not."

In fairness to Wesley it should be pointed out that he is no more guilty of speaking of sin as though it were an entity than is the Apostle Paul. Witness Paul's words in Romans 7: "It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." What is important is *how* we are to interpret such language as this.

Flew is unquestionably right when he remarks that "sin is not a mere *thing*." Since it is a moral fact or phenomenon, our effort to conceptualize it leads us to employ metaphors. Sometimes the metaphors are obvious and sometimes they are implied. All of our thinking about spiritual realities shows more or less of this characteristic. So long as we realize that we *are* speaking in similes or metaphors, well and good. On the other hand, if we forget about it, confusion is bound to result and many a misguided argument is likely to arise.

Actually, of course, we cannot abstract sin from the personal agent, the man, who sins; nor can we abstract the quality of sinfulness from the living individual who is tainted. It is the individual himself who must be subjected to a change in which the acts of sins are no longer committed and of whom the corruption and disintegration of sin need no longer be affirmed.

We might well pause here to make an observation about the general relationship of theology to life and the more particular relationship of the theology of Christian holiness to the subtleties, the vitalities and the practicalities of life. All of our efforts to reduce life to rationally systematic form are in danger of sacrificing reality to logic. Theology tends to be static; life is always dynamic. Theology goes off in a corner and reduces religious phenomena to a set of neat, scrupulously defined propositions. We then go out and try to superimpose that system on life as we actually live it, and we find that inevitably there are com-

plications. By and large, I think it is a fair criticism of our traditional presentation of the doctrine of holiness to say that we have been too wooden in our approach.

That is to say, we have tended to overplay our hand in the use of illustrations and metaphors and create impressions of simplicity that are not true to life. We have resorted to the device of telling people that conversion is like cutting down the tree and entire sanctification like pulling out the stump and its roots. A much better illustration—one that is free from most if not all of the misleading implications of the tree-stump removal—is one in which we liken sin to a fever from which the body is suffering. The fever is not normal. An infection is indicated. The fever can be cured and the temperature returned to normal. On the other hand, there may be a recurrence of the fever if there is not a required observance of the conditions that make for the maintenance of health.

III

We come now to a third point of stress where the Wesleyan thesis of Christian Perfection has been challenged. I refer to the teaching with regard to *assurance* and *testimony*. Take this from one friendly critic: "A man may bear testimony to his awareness of a God who is willing and able to 'destroy the last remains of sins.' He cannot know himself well enough to claim that God has already done it." Or this from Sangster: "Other men may feel sure that a saint is in their midst. But he himself will not say, 'I am freed from all sin.' Rather will he say with Paul, 'I judge not mine own self . . . He that judgeth me is the Lord.'"

Incidentally, Sangster gives us every reason to infer that he believes John Fletcher spoke the truth when, according to Hester Ann Rogers, he testified, "I am freed from sin." Sangster's objection is not to the possibility or the actuality of such a thing, but only to the public profession of it in that form.

Those of us who have been born and reared in the Wesleyan tradition are proba-

bly predisposed to accept rather uncritically the tremendous claim that one makes when he testifies that he is indeed delivered from all sin. Do we realize how solemn and immense a claim it really is? Do we realize what is implied in our declaration that we are sure it is so?

Professor Flew is positive that we do not adequately cover the point by saying that it is no more daring to testify to freedom from all sin than it is to testify to conversion and the forgiveness of sins. He insists that when I say, "I know God has forgiven my sins," it is primarily a conviction that I have about *God*. But when I say, "I know I am freed from all sin," it is primarily a conviction about *myself*. And of course the question immediately follows, Can I be trusted to know myself well enough to make the categorical claim that all sin is gone?

If I say, "At least I *feel* no sin," the insistent critic may reply, "But do you dare trust the emotion of a moment regarding so immense a claim as this?" In this connection it might be pointed out that Wesley himself seems at times to lack consistency in his statements. Writing to one Mrs. Maitland, on some of the perplexities of Christian Perfection, he says, "Whether sin is *suspended* or *extinguished*, I will not say. It is enough that they [professors of perfect love] feel no sin." On the other hand, to Thomas Olivers he wrote, "Barely to feel no sin, or to feel constant peace, joy and love, will not prove the point." Here he was insisting on the importance of the sanctified *will* as being more determinant than good feelings.

Furthermore, to the person who simply says, "I feel no sin, therefore no sin remains," it may be replied, "Yes, *you* feel no sin, but perhaps that is because you have a conscience that is lacking in sensitivity to sin."

Speaking for myself, I am honor-bound to say that I feel in some measure the force of this criticism. And our problem is not made easier by all the findings of contemporary psychology regarding the deceptions, the evasions, the rationalizations with which we mask our selfishness. As

someone has very shrewdly said, "The prayer of the publican may be no better than the prayer of the Pharisee, if it be written carefully in a Journal and published by his literary executor." Or, he might have added, recited at regular intervals as a crowd-catching "Life Story." It is possible, in other words, to put a crude manifestation of the ego out the front door only to have it reappear as a religiously robed ego at the back door.

Nor are we helped with this problem by the fact that in the Wesleyan tradition we emphasize the distinction between "carnality" and "humanity", between sin and infirmity, while at the same time the line between the two is admittedly so fine that we have never been able to draw it precisely or clarify it to the satisfaction of ourselves, least of all our critics. This was vividly impressed upon me recently in a meeting of Free Methodist ministers in the East. More than a hundred preachers were present when this topic came up. It was revealing—and a bit disconcerting—to follow the discussion and see what differences of opinion were to be found among those excellent men.

Mr. Wesley probably felt the pressure of these and other considerations and, knowing how prominent was his position in the evangelical movement, was exceedingly cautious about his personal witness to the realization of Christian perfection. In my own mind there is no doubt that he

believed he was a recipient of this grace. It must be admitted, however, that he was extremely reticent about announcing it in the form of a personal testimony.

What is the upshot of this survey of our position regarding assurance and testimony? Shall we concede that there is no place for personal testimony to the grace of perfect love with its correlate of expelled sin?

No, there is no call for us to concede so much. We must, however, allow for the possibility of self-deception or presumption. We must watch against spiritual pride, even as Wesley and Fletcher so fervently urged. What else?

I think we can afford to take the emphasis from *our* sinlessness and put it on *Christ's* fulness within us. If one testifies, "I am entirely sanctified," he at least commits the impropriety of making the ego the springboard of his announcement. It is manifestly better to say, "Christ is now, by faith, my Sanctifier and my confidence is that His blood cleanses my heart from all sin." With one of Professor Flew's conclusions it is difficult to disagree—unless, of course, we are committed to some species of "eternal security" for the sanctified. "Since holiness," says Flew, "is given in response to faith, and since faith is no mere single response but a continuous succession of responses to the divine Giver, it follows that the ideal life is a 'moment-by-moment' holiness."