The association of the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” with John Wesley’s concept of Christian perfection was not, as is sometimes said, simply a later development within the holiness tradition as such (though there was a further working out of this idea). John Fletcher made extensive use of Pentecostal language in his writing on holiness. Likewise Charles Wesley freely alludes to Pentecostal terminology in his hymns on Christian perfection. In his sermon on “Christian Perfection,” John Wesley quotes Charles Wesley’s hymn, “The Promise of Sanctification,” based on Ezekiel 36:25ff., which clearly associates the experience of Pentecost with perfect love.

In this same sermon, Wesley exegetically supports his doctrine with Old Testament passages which anticipate Pentecost, such as Deuteronomy 30:6 — circumcision of heart — and Ezekiel 36:25 — sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean (cf. section II, paragraph 29), This equation of Christian perfection with the event of Pentecost can hardly be overlooked. Further, in section II and paragraph 26 of this same sermon on Christian perfection, Wesley quotes Acts 15:9 — “purified their hearts by faith” — as the meaning of perfect love. This would further seem to legitimize the connection between the baptism with the Spirit and Christian perfection which his contemporaries were making explicit. Similarly, in a letter to Joseph Benson, Wesley specifically identified Christian perfection with “filled with the Spirit” (Letters, V, 229).

It is true, however, that Wesley did not make systematic use of Pentecostal terminology in defining his doctrine of holiness. It is also true that Wesley discouraged the identification of “receiving the Spirit” with Christian perfection on the grounds that it might confuse some into thinking that believers at conversion do not have the

Dr. Wood is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Asbury Theological Seminary.
Spirit. It should also be noted that Wesley's caution in this regard is pragmatic, not exegetical. Unfortunately this caution has not always been heeded. Hence a similarly defective understanding of the Trinity has been fostered, and the consequences in such cases can be devastating for Christian experience.

While there is a unique reception of the Spirit in the life of the believer subsequent to this initiation into the Christian life, nonetheless it is the same Spirit whom we receive at conversion. Devotionally speaking, there is no difference between receiving Christ and receiving the Spirit, for the Spirit is the risen Christ. Theologically speaking, there is a real differentiation among the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, but it is a differentiation-in-unity. This triunity of God's being means that whatever unique function one of the divine persons has, the other divine persons share in the same activity (opus trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisica). The notion of the Trinity does not involve three independent centers of consciousness within the life. Nor do the progressive stages of Christian experience lend themselves to the notion that one can have the Son without the Spirit. Terminologically, we can speak of the “deeper Christian life” as the fullness of the Spirit without downgrading the reception of Christ in conversion even as we can speak of the unique coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost as a deeper revelation of God without downgrading the person of Christ.

To be sure, Pentecost was in one sense an unrepeatable event in salvation history, for it marked the birthday of the Christian Church. Hence all believers as members of the body of Christ are justified, converted, sanctified, and “filled with the Spirit” in the positional sense of being “in Christ.” Yet, in another sense, the fullness of the Spirit may not be actualized in all believers. It is one thing to be “in Christ,” but it is another thing for “Christ to be formed in us” in the actual sense that we fully appropriate His righteousness.

The point here is simple. Even as there were stages in salvation history in which God was progressively known as Father, Son, and Spirit, so there may be stages in one's personal history of salvation in which one may know God successively as Father, Son, and Spirit. Yet, it is the one God who is known. Further, the pattern of the disciples' experience along with others (e.g. Samaritans) in the narrative of Acts legitimates the terminological distinction between the “birth of the Spirit” and the “fullness of the Spirit.” One can hold this distinction without disregarding John Wesley's caution at this point.