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WESLEY'S ADVOCACY OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION.

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THERE are few facts in John Wesley's eventful life more interesting to serious-minded readers, or more illustrative of the courage with which he adhered to his convictions, than those which relate to his treatment of the question of Christian perfection. Only a man of heroic mold could have preached before the dons and students of Oxford University the sermon called "The Circumcision of the Heart," which he delivered in St. Mary's Church in 1733. He knew that spiritual religion was more despised than respected by both the learned dignitaries and the scoffing students who sat at his feet, and that, because of his relations to what was derisively called the "Holy Club," he was regarded by many, despite his high
scholastic reputation, as "a cracked-brained enthusiast." Yet he bravely, in the plainest terms, explained and enforced the duty of "being so renewed in the image of our mind as to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect!" Thirty-two years later he said: "This sermon contained all that I now teach concerning salvation from all sin and loving God with an undivided heart." Thus early and fearlessly did he proclaim the doctrine which subsequently became famous in Methodism; and he did this before he had received the witness of the Holy Spirit that he was the child of God. His conviction that it was taught in the word of God was the inspiration which enabled him to speak as he did with a courage which under the circumstances was truly heroic.

During the first year of his more public ministration, the rage of his adversaries was mostly directed against the doctrine of the pardon of sin witnessed by the Holy Spirit, and the theory of general redemption, which he and his coadjutors proclaimed with ap-
peals to Scripture, and to their personal experiences, which nothing but the most stubborn prejudice could resist. Public attention was not, therefore, at first especially drawn to his views of Christian perfection. Yet he continued to preach it. In 1739 he emphasized it in his preface to the life of Halyburton, in his tract entitled *The Character of a Methodist*, and subsequently in a published sermon, and in other writings. By this persistent presentation of the question he led many of his own immediate followers and other serious persons to inquire what he meant by "Christian perfection." It also provoked much opposition both to himself and to his marvelously increasing work. Nothing daunted by hostility, nor alarmed by inquiry, he treated the former as something to be expected; to the latter he offered such explanations as each case demanded.

The opposition of really good men arose then, as now, not from their hostility to the spiritual life and ethical purity required by the Gospel, but to the meaning they gave to the
term "perfection." To them this word signified absolute freedom from sin, that is, *sinless perfection*. To this Wesley replied, "Sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself." What he taught was, not sinless but *Christian* perfection, which consists in the reign of Christ's love over the heart being so absolute as to exclude self­ismand to keep the will, the affections, the thoughts, the inclinations, the desires, and the actions in glad subjection to his will. But this delightful reign of holy love, he taught, does not necessarily imply freedom from ignorance and its consequent mistakes of judgment. Nor does it preclude the presence of mental defects and infirmities, or of improprieties of behavior and language. In admitting all this, Wesley came into conflict with all such as contended that these defects of mind and character are sinful, and therefore inconsistent with a proper definition and use of the term "perfection." His answer to their objections was, that such defects were not properly sins in men whose
“every word and action springs from love,” because they are “involuntary transgressions.” Under a strictly legal probation, adapted to unfallen creatures, they would be sins exposing the transgressor “to the rigor of God’s justice.” Under the Christian system they are not imputable offenses to him who obeys the law of love, to which alone, such is the grace of God, he is responsible. Therefore Wesley, believing, as he says, that “there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions,” refused to regard Christian perfection as “sinless perfection.”

Still further, Wesley contended that even the holiest believers needed the intercession of Christ because of “their coming short of the law of love. For,” said he, “every living man does so. You who feel all love, weigh yourselves in this balance and see if you are not wanting in many particulars.”

In making these distinctions between Adamic and Christian perfection Wesley took no new ground. They had already been made by No. 192.
such exceptionally pure minds as the learned Fénelon, and Madame Guyon, of whom Wesley said, she was "a woman of a very uncommon understanding and of excellent piety." What these saintly souls said of these distinctions the following extracts show:

In her conversations with Bossuet, Madame Guyon, speaking of the infirmities and involuntary transgressions of the possessors of pure or perfect love said, "Even when there is a heart which divine grace has corrected, and rendered entirely upright, there may still be errors of perception and judgment... which involve relatively wrong and injurious doing, and render it necessary therefore to apply continually to the blood of Christ."

And Fénelon, in his celebrated *Maxims of the Saints*, also says, "In the transformed state, or state of pure love, there should be not only the confession of sins properly so called, but also the confession of those more venial transgressions which are termed faults." Commenting on one of these maxims for the purpose of giving Fénelon's exact thought,
Dr. Upham says, "In the highest state of inward experience it would not be proper for any one to assert with absolute certainty that he is free from all deviation from God whatever. Our limited and imperfect knowledge does not admit of this."

It is therefore clear that Wesley's admission of an important difference between sinless perfection and the perfection in love attainable by Christians through faith, did not originate with himself, but was a conception begotten long years before in the minds of some of the holiest persons known to Christian history. But having conceded this distinction, Wesley held fast to the term "perfection," because he found it in the Scriptures, and because, after deducting all these concessions, it still represents a love which is expulsive of selfism, and which is, therefore, a divine force in the soul that saves it from every thing that can properly be called sin.

The preaching of this doctrine began to bear fruit in the experience of many persons after 1744. Many such declared that they
had been "saved from all sin," not by a gradual process, but by an instantaneous operation of the Holy Spirit. Wesley was staggered by these testimonies. Hitherto he had looked upon sanctification as a work beginning in one's regeneration, and gradually progressing to a completion not usually attained until a short time before death. He was slow, therefore, to believe these "exceeding strange" experiences, as he terms them. Hence he questioned, examined, waited, before making up his mind. At last, convinced by the "fruits" some of these persons bore, he was satisfied that entire sanctification, though gradual in most, was instantaneous in many, and might be so in all, provided it were earnestly and intelligently sought by faith. Hence he encouraged his followers to seek it as a present and instantaneous gift of the Spirit, but he forbore to censure such as gave evidence of "a gradual work of God in the soul," even though they did not attain perfection in love "in many years." He taught that God "does not invariably ad-
here” to one strict method of dealing with his children; “so that,” he says, “one may affirm the work is gradual, another instantaneous, without any manner of contradiction.” Does not this accord with the actual experience of the Church of Christ?

He displayed similar breadth of view in treating the question of professing the experience of this great salvation. He taught that it ought to be confessed, but not before “them that know not God, nor to others without some particular reason, without some good in view.” He advised that it should be preached, but “scarce at all to those who are not pressing forward; to those who are, always by way of promise; always drawing, rather than driving.” Personally Wesley preached it to his societies, and without doubt enjoyed it; but, as Tyerman affirms, it is not in evidence that he ever professed it himself. He cites the testimony of Bradburn, who knew him, perhaps, more intimately than any of his fellow laborers: “Wesley’s modesty,” says Bradburn, “prevented him saying much con-
cerning his own religious feelings. In public he hardly ever spoke of the state of his own soul, but in 1781, he told me that his experience might almost at any time be expressed in the following lines:

"O thou who camest from above,
   The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
   On the mean altar of my heart.

"There let it for thy glory burn,
   With inextinguishable blaze;
And trembling to its source return,
   In humble prayer and fervent praise."

It is a curious fact that John Fletcher, who was, perhaps, the most saintly soul known to early Methodism, was also very reticent concerning his spiritual attainments. Wesley said of him with apparent approval, certainly not with censure, that "he was upon all occasions very uncommonly reserved in speaking of himself whether in writing or conversation. He hardly ever said any thing concerning himself, unless it slipped from him unawares. Among his papers which he has
left there is scarce a page, except his account of his conversion to God, relative either to his own inward experience, or the transactions of his life."

This reticence harmonized with Wesley's views respecting the profession of perfect love, already cited. It was consistent with his teaching, which makes it evident that while he held that every possessor of that precious gift was under obligation to speak of his attainment, not to mixed assemblies, but to his brethren in Christ, he yet believed that each individual was at liberty to judge when, where, and to whom he ought to speak. His object in speaking at all must be, not for the mere sake of professing it, but for "some good in view," the animating and encouraging others—that is, "those who are justified"—to follow after the same blessing. This liberty Wesley exercised for himself. He taught others to exercise it for themselves. It is a liberty that belongs to every Christian.

Perhaps some may think that Wesley's views on this point were too conservative.
Possibly. Yet it must be kept in mind that it was his cautious treatment of the doctrine, of its relation to experience, and of its profession, that gave it currency in Methodism. Ultra­ism, incaution, overmuch enthusiasm in these things might, probably would, have led to fanaticism, which would have caused intelligent men to reject the doctrine altogether. But by combining firmness in maintaining it, with a truly scriptural conservatism with respect to its limitations and profession, he made it characteristic of our Methodism, and gave it a prestige in the whole Christian Church which it is not likely to lose, provided his example be followed. It is a high standard of life. It holds forth an unspeakable privilege. It presents an indispensable duty. Happy, therefore, is he in whose heart the pure love of God reigns without a rival! For “this is the whole of Christian per­fection.”