Wesleyan teaching is characterized by a conviction that God’s grace operates dynamically in the realm of man’s humanness. Biblical holiness fits human nature. In fact, that kind of holiness is the Christian answer to the question: what does it mean in the fullest sense to be a human being?

Few other interpretations of Christian faith, or theologies, have made for themselves the kinds of difficult problems which Wesleyans have raised by making this claim. How can fallible, imperfect, immature, ignorant, prejudiced, temptable, even contemptible, sinfully distorted human beings ever, in this life at any rate, become “holy”? The very claim seems to be the ultimate expression of sinful pride. Either “holiness” will have to be redefined downward to make it at home in human sordidness, or human beings will have to become something other than human to fit what holiness is conceived to be. Neither alternative does justice to what Wesleyan theology, in its responsible moments, believes or claims is either Christian or especially Biblical.

Wesleyan theology has raised questions that invade the disciplines of philosophy and psychology (among others). Especially related to the subject under consideration is an understanding of God, the nature of man and the interaction of God and man. These are essentially related subjects and must be looked at together.

The study of what man is and how he operates as a person is a relatively new science, only faintly previewed by thinkers until recently. John Wesley’s remarkable insights concerning man must claim our attention in any serious study of his thinking and in the advice he gave to troubled persons who came to his attention. Theology as a whole has

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suffered for the delay in discovering man — none more seriously, because of its emphasis on holiness in life, than the theologies rooted in Wesley.

Wesleyanism has made two terms more important (in a sort of parochial way) than other theologies have, i.e., crisis and process, as essential elements in the Christian life. These terms derive their specific Wesleyan meaning from the need to show the relationship of God’s grace to human nature, preserving the essential integrity of both. So long as crisis and process are considered means to an end, no insurmountable problems are encountered. It is when crisis and process become ends in themselves — become the content of what holiness means — that serious clashes begin between theological constructs and human nature.

It is at this point that those in the behavioral science field have contributed a much needed corrective to a naive concept of man. Particular helpfulness has been provided by Wesleyan Christian scholars who are interpreting human development in a way that can be useful to the serious theologian. Among the many insights from the developmentalists, as interpreted by Christian scholars, two insights are especially helpful in unraveling some of the sticky problems. I mention in particular two Christian scholars because they have introduced me to the subject, and because a specific emphasis of each contributes to the proposal I will attempt to make in the interest of a better understanding of crisis and process than I have been able heretofore to present.

Donald Joy’s monograph, “Human Development and Christian Holiness,” presents a schema of the stages, or levels of human development through which every human person passes on his way toward moral thinking. He uses Lawrence Kohlberg’s analysis. Joy then finds in Wesley’s writings and personal experience fascinating parallels with the Kohlberg findings. Finally, he relates this to the Wesleyan theological affirmations. The Joy insight gives a reasonable way to explain process in the Christian life on the way toward fulfillment.

Catherine Stonehouse’s studies in the same developmental field include another dimension to the same human potential and procedure. Her adaptation of Jean Piaget’s four causes underlying the movement from one level to another is tremendously suggestive for the understanding of the meaning and function of crisis in the Christian life. In brief, it is the ever-recurring “disequilibration” experienced as persons are forced into situations which demand resolution of some kind because a larger perspective is jarring the comfortable familiar world which cannot cope with the new experience. The creative trauma of this ex-
Wesleyan Theology and Christian Development

experience can be a most fruitful way of explaining crisis. (Crisis is not necessarily a clock-time measurement but a radical new step in commitment).

But, now, the theologian in me (or what passes for theology) sits up and takes notice. "What are you doing with your Wesleyan commitment?" it wants to know. Are you letting your attractive new friends lead you out of the narrow way? Are you substituting developmental theories for the "two-ness" of Wesleyan theology? Joy proposes three levels with a multiplicity of intermediate steps in each and Stonehouse puts the dynamic of moving from one level to another in social transaction (of course these are very superficial charges). So, the Wesleyan theologian is faced with the question: Is all this apropos of what Wesleyans mean by "entire Sanctification?" My answer is, "yes" and "no," a judicious way of solving difficult problems. But this answer is what I hope to explain and defend.

The importance of this investigation could be expressed in this simple way: if a view of God and man is held which makes a dynamic relationship between them difficult to understand, this intellectual barrier will be reflected in the interpretation given to the normal processes of human development, and will make all the educational procedures in the Christian context confusing and inadequate to say the least.

The first step is to go back over our Christian affirmations and look at them in a fresh and more penetrating way, then examine our theological understandings against these and finally draw some conclusions. Here are three related, essential Christian affirmations which must be kept in focus in Wesleyanism if it is to be more than a mere label pasted over some other theological tradition:

Basic Christian Affirmations

God is revealed in Christ. The Christian God is not the impersonal Absolute of Greek thought. What is known of God is given us in the incarnate Christ who entered into relation with humanity. In this relatedness, God’s sovereignty is not threatened by His transacting with men. It is a two-way interaction. What man does matters to God. Only by positing this can love mean anything because love is in its deepest essence, risk and vulnerability on the part of both persons in the transaction. Love at its heart is the Cross, a suffering. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (II Cor. 5:19). If we learn anything from seeing God in Christ it is that God is not a philosophical Absolute but a Personal Being who can genuinely interact with us without losing his
God-ness. The foundation of our investigation rests on a God who is in His deepest being, love — and may we say, therefore, dynamic? 

Man is revealed in Christ. What a human being is or needs in order to understand what he should have completely baffles us until we see him in the light of his prototype, Jesus. Jesus is the Imago Dei: man was made in His image. He is “the firstborn of all creation.” Jesus was born as a human being and He had to progress through physical growth with all the stages entailed in that. Through discipline he acquired wisdom and favor with God and man (religion and social interaction). This does not mean that badness, or humanness, had to be beaten out of him, but that he needed to go through all the stages all men must go through to come to maturity. (I am interested in the fact that Dr. Joy’s schema of optimal development brings the achievement of full responsibility to about the age of 30, the age of Jesus when He began His ministry).

The process of the unfolding of the mature self was not, for Jesus, one “Seven League” step, but the same series of steps taken in the same sequence that all of us must take. Is it not to this point that Jesus may have been speaking, though in a different context, when He said to His bewildered disciples that “the servant is not above his master,” and that “it is enough for the servant to be like his master”? Jesus’ pilgrimage says to us that the steps we must take are not primarily the result of sin, but because we are terribly and wonderfully human.

Love (agape) is revealed in Christ. The New Testament writers use a word for love that avoids the sloppiness of our contemporary term. Agape is a relation word, a going outness, a centering in something or Someone. Its higher meaning is not a getting word but a giving word. It is the most personal, deliberate, responsible thing human beings can do. The awful risk of being human is that one’s agape can be set on things (“Demas has agaped this present world”). It was this risk that Jesus had to meet if He were truly to be one with us and to be true to the mandate of love. The temptation experience plumbed the depth of all that He would meet in the pursuance of His mission. The love, which was the fulfillment of all the Law, was not a sort of commodity that could be implanted in the psyche, a “works in the drawer” power source, but a relationship established with God in which the fulfillment of life and ministry could effectively proceed. Agape engages every possible totality of the whole person. Agape is dynamic and teleological and integrating.

After observing these three basic Christian truths that Christ is (1) the revealer of God; (2) the revealer of man; and (3) the revealer of agape, which is the relation between God and man, and after noticing...
the dynamic reality underlying every part, it becomes possible to attempt a coordination of Christian holiness and Christian developmentalism. We will suggest a way to understand the interaction of “Two-ness” and “Three-ness” without confusing them or losing the meaning of either, yet preserving the significances of both.

Some Theological Considerations

Some theological matters relating to our discussion. Two theological matters fall into focus in our discussion. (1) God’s love is expressed by what theologians have called “prevenient grace.” This simply means that God is a long way ahead of anything that man can do. This grace, antece dent to any human action, is presumed by all responsible Wesleyans. (2) The religious and developmental stages along life’s way must be distinguished carefully from each other.

Religious experience. The significance of “two works of grace” is not in a quantitative addition, nor a higher level of grace, or a certain kind of psychological experience. It is, rather, a religious relationship to God which includes forgiveness and discipleship. These belong together. They are not necessarily separated in time but usually are. Authentic religious life includes both aspects. But since it is religious relationship, it can become a genuine reality at any stage in the development of human life. Love is possible in any and all stages in life, but there are changes in love’s contour through life that cannot be implanted, whole, anywhere. It must go through the grid of growth. Baby love is right for a baby but disgusting in an adult. Adult love is totally beyond the capacity of a child. Baby love is not defective, only immature.

Self-understanding. If I understand developmentalism correctly, there are three identifiable levels of self-understanding. The Preconventional Level is motivated by prudence. It is the child stage. He is discovering himself — he must if he is to be a responsible self. His self-interest is not sinful of itself. The Conventional Level puts him in the world of others with whom he must learn to relate. He needs an authority to tell him what is right. Law codes are essential, and he obeys because he does not have to think things out for himself. He demands the same of others. The Postconventional Level motivation accepts the responsibility for dedication of the self to what is right, on principle, not prudence or the pressure of social demand. This over-simplistic presentation of a most intellectually invigorating study suggests the adaptations the Christian pilgrim must make in his pilgrimage from infancy to mature and responsible discipleship.
Some Conclusions

Obedient response, not instant maturity. In whatever human-development-level a person begins the Christian pilgrimage his religious experience will be interpreted according to the way he thinks in the level he is in. Since at every level all that God requires is the fullest measure of responsibility of which a person is capable at that point in time and place, there is no need to regret one’s past failures, as one recalls his immature past. In the case of children who grow up in the church, no one “trip to the altar” (or two trips) can be final. In the healthy religious life there will be many such responses as the expanding life finds the need for every new “awakening” to bring life into the orbit of the maturing life in Christ. Not all rebellions and doubts and fears are religious “backslidings,” but the “disequilibrations” typical of the on-going of human development. Failure to understand this has been the source of tragic disillusionment with Christian experience.

Entire sanctification. “Full sanctification” does not leap over the developmental levels, transporting a person into the highest level without the trouble of taking every step in between. One does not get “sanctified and sanctifier” as the levels are negotiated, but the life in Christ engages more and more of the self, the enlarging world of interlocking selves and the expanding relationships both in the world of persons and in the world of things.

Crisis as re-equilibration. Each developmental level leads to crucial “value” barriers which must be broken through. The expanding human perspective runs headlong into previous narrownesses, prejudices, un-disciplined self-interests, blind spots, insensitivities and entrenched, un-criticized dogmas that must be squarely faced if progress is to be made. Resolution of these through re-equilibration can result in such deep trauma as to shake the very existence of the self. They are often mistaken for “another crisis experience” more shattering than anything before. The danger is that the genuineness of all previous religious experiences may be questioned. To count these “crises” and try to make them add up to “two” only shows that the real nature of “two-ness” and the process of development has not been understood.

Christian vs. secular development. The “bumps” Catherine Stonehouse talks about are the places where we run into the blocked passage of past smallness which must be blasted away in order to become big enough to meet larger responsibilities and fulfillments. But in the Christian’s life the whole self comes to these encounters with everything the “first and second” is. Christian experience comes bumping
along with more ultimate success, perhaps, than the one who does not have the advantage of the religious orientation. Perhaps the goal of true fulfillment is only available to the person whose religious life has become open toward God.

A Final Word

With these insights in mind it becomes amazingly evident that the whole Bible bears testimony to the validity of what Joy and Stonehouse are helping us to see. The step by step awakening of Adam to his world, to himself, to Eve, and to his Creator is one hint. The whole history of Israel follows the same pattern. A dramatic illustration is Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The problem at Corinth was "arrested development," childishness in Christ. The solution was to "put away" childishness as Paul had done (I Cor. 13:11) and to chase after love which would build up the church rather than to puff up individuals in it. The way to a maturation in spiritual life was to break out of the destructive indifference to become responsible selves. Even Romans is built on this plan, presenting one of the finest recipes anywhere for moral maturation in the Christian life, personal and social (in the 12th through the 15th chapters).

Christian Developmentalism does have something very important to contribute to Wesleyan theology. We need to join hands, hearts, and minds to the task of preaching and teaching the glorious truth of Biblical holiness as the religious foundation for finding the fulfillment in this life of what it means to be genuinely human.