

Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection

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It is quite possible that for all of the accomplishments of John Wesley and the movement known as Methodism, Wesley and his followers are most known for their adherence to the theological position that would come to be known as “Christian Perfection.” Though modern Methodism has drifted far from its Wesleyan roots and rarely would one hear Perfection preached in a Methodist pulpit, many in other denominations still stress the reality of such an experience (though often using different terms that Wesley employed).

Though some type of Perfection has been taught by Christians since the time of Justin Martyr (or, many would argue, since the time of the New Testament authors), it was Wesley who popularized the doctrine of Christian Perfection during the mid to late 1700's and those who followed after him spread it far and wide. Wesley's view of Biblical Perfection was that it was not only attainable, but once having attained it, the Believer was able to walk in perfection through the power of the Holy Spirit all the days of his life.

Despite Wesley's influence and the teaching of those who followed in his footsteps regarding it, the doctrine of Christian Perfection has been a cause of division among serious Christians everywhere throughout the history of the church. Wesley himself stated:

There is scarce any expression in holy writ, which has given more offence than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them; and whosoever *preaches perfection*, (as the

phrase is,) that is, asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man or a publican.¹

Though Wesley's words were hyperbolic in nature, they do serve to illustrate the intense debate that has taken place regarding the idea of perfection among believers in Christ down through the centuries. Even in Wesley's day there were Believers who held to an unbiblical idea of Perfection that led to antinomianism and a denial of the reality of sin in the life of the Christian. In fact, many in the religious group that influenced Wesley more than any other—the Moravians—came to hold just such a view. This caused misunderstandings almost everywhere Wesley preached, as people equated his idea of 'Christian Perfection' with the Moravian doctrine of 'Quietism'—where the believer stopped doing any good works or acts of worship until he experienced a filling of the Holy Spirit and the attainment of Perfect faith.

It was this incorrect view of perfection that led Wesley to write and publish a tract entitled "*A short view of the difference between the Moravian Brethren, (so called,) and the Rev. Mr. John and Charles Wesley*" in order to clear up any misunderstandings that would arise as people, noting Wesley's former association with the Moravians, regarded him as teaching the same doctrine. In this tract, Wesley laid out the teachings of the followers of Count Zinzendorf (who himself had had a significant impact on Wesley's theology during his visit to Herrnhut in 1738) in detail and then proceeded to show point-by-point, how they inevitably led to antinomianism.²

Rather than this sort of 'Quietism' or other popular legalistic notions of perfection, Wesley's definition of what he termed Christian Perfection could be described as a relationship with God and with others that is characterized from moment to moment

¹ Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' *The Works of John Wesley* Vol. VI p.1

² Wesley, *Works*, pp.201-204

by divine love. Because of his belief that all sin involved rebellion against the known will of God, Christian Perfection was seen by him as the purity of intention and the dedicating of all of one's life to God. Wesley gives the following explanation: "Question. What is Christian perfection? Answer. The loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies, that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions, are governed by pure love."³

A feature of Wesleyan Christian Perfection that differs from others is that Wesley felt that Christian perfection was not instantaneous upon conversion (though he allowed that in some cases it could certainly be so), but was the result of a crisis event whereby after the Christian struggles with sin to no avail, he throws himself upon the mercy of God in faith and the remnants of sin that created the conflict and depression in his walk with God were rooted out from his heart once and for all. Furthermore his volitional capacity was totally cleansed from the effects of the fall which in turn resulted in a heart that was pure and desired nothing but to serve God in every way possible.⁴ Though he allowed that this could happen immediately upon justification, Wesley interpreted perfection most often as a subsequent work due to his reading of the Epistle to the Hebrews where the author urges Believers to "go on to perfection" in Heb. 7:1⁵ as well as to his own crisis of faith during his years in Georgia and his return to London that led to his famous Aldersgate experience where his heart was 'strangely warmed' in 1738.⁶

³ Works, vol.XI, p.394. Cf. Deiter, Melvin et.al., Five Views on Sanctification. p.21, 27

⁴ Wesley, Works, vol. IX, p.423. Cf. Deiter, et. al., p.19

⁵ Ibid, p.441

⁶ Works, vol.I, p.97-98

Though he never used the term “Sinless Perfection”, as some of his later followers and those he later influenced would, it was Wesley’s firm belief that Christian Perfection excluded sin in the life of the Believer. It was because of his relational understanding of sin (which resisted a Hellenistic equation of sin with humanity⁷) that Wesley could confidently hold to the idea of Believers who had experienced perfection being enabled to live free from sin entirely. In fact, it was because Wesley felt that perfection was so plainly taught in Scripture that he would hold to it so tenaciously. In his famous work “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection” Wesley writes:

But even babes in Christ are in such a sense perfect, or born of God as...not to commit sin. If any doubt this privilege of the sons of God, the question is not to be decided by abstract reasonings...Neither is it to be determined by the experience of this or that particular person. Many suppose they do not commit sin, when they do; but this proves nothing either way. To the law and testimony we appeal. “Let God be true, and every man a liar.” By His word will we abide, and that alone. Hereby we ought to be judged.⁸

He goes on to further clarify the nature of this perfection:

He that is, by faith, born of God, sinneth not (1). By any habitual sin; for all habitual sin is sin reigning: But sin cannot reign in any that believeth. Nor (2). By any willful sin; for his will, while he abideth in the faith, is utterly set against all sin, and abhorreth it as deadly poison. Nor (3). By any sinful desire; for he continually desireth the holy and perfect will of God; and any tendency to an unholy desire, he, by the grace of God, stiflenth in the birth. Nor (4). Doth he sin by infirmities, whether in act, word, or though; for his infirmities have no concurrence of his will; and without this they are not properly sins. Thus, “he that is born of God doth not commit sin.” And though he cannot say, he hath not sinned, yet now “he sinneth not.”⁹

As the above passage makes clear, though Wesley believed perfection to exclude all sin, he acknowledged that the Believer could still be in error and some errors might lead to

⁷ Ewell, p.842

⁸ Wesley, “Thoughts on Christian Perfection” Works, vol. VI, p.6.

⁹ Wesley, “Salvation by Faith” Works, vol.V, p.11

wrong actions, which others would see as sin. This is why he refrained from using the term ‘sinless perfection’—though he did not object to its use. In “A Plain Account...” Wesley dealt with the terminology that some employed: “Is it [perfection] sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is ‘salvation from sin.’”¹⁰

Wesley also sought to clearly distance himself from antinomian Perfectionists such as the ‘Quietists’ and others who had been influenced by his Moravian friends by proclaiming Christian Perfection to be in no way some type of spiritual plateau. Wesley’s idea of perfection was one that always looked to a continual increase, “so that how much soever any man has attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to ‘grow in grace,’ and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his savior.”¹¹

A final feature that sets Wesley’s doctrine of Perfection against many others’ is his understanding of ‘Positional’ sanctification. Many Christians claim that the believer, upon conversion, is ‘positionally sanctified’—that is, given the righteousness of Christ in God’s eyes regardless of present sins. Though he still sins every day, that sin is not imputed to him because he has been declared holy by God in light of Christ’s death. For Wesley, the notion of ‘positional’ sanctification apart from actual sanctification was unfathomable; the whole purpose of Jesus’ atonement and God’s initial justification was to transform the sinner into a saint, not in a ‘positional’ sense, but in an actual sense.¹² Righteousness and holiness were not only imputed, but also imparted to the Believer. The idea that a Believer was declared righteous, though he continued daily in sin, was nothing more than ‘legal fiction.’ It was this rejection of positional sanctification that would

¹⁰ Wesley, “A Plain Account...” Works, vol. XI, p.442

¹¹ Wesley, “Thoughts upon...” Works, vol. VI, p.5

¹² Wesley, “Justification by Faith” Works, vol.V, p.57

come to represent the main difference between those in the Wesleyan tradition and those who held to a traditional Lutheran or Calvinistic understanding of sanctification.

Resources on Wesleyan Christian Perfection

Deiter, Melvin E. et al., Five Views on Sanctification. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1987.

This is probably the best small book on sanctification out there because of its readability as well as the interaction between the scholars represented. Melvin Deiter offers a defense of the Wesleyan position and critiques the other views presented in light of Wesley's writings. Five Views... provides a good overview of the issues and is a great introduction to the subject. In the end, I found myself agreeing more with the Pentacostal position than with the traditional Wesleyan view.

Ewell, Walter A., Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984. This is a good resource on a broad range of theological topics. Both the entry for Wesley, as well as the section on Perfection/Sanctification are well written and balanced in their approach.

Wesley, John, The Works of John Wesley: Third Edition, Complete and Unabridged.

Baker, Grand Rapids, 1998. Wesley's Works should be on the shelf of every minister, regardless of denominational or theological background. Volume XI contains "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" which is Wesley's most in-depth treatment of the subject. However, volume X contains many of his shorter writings that also shed light on his doctrine of Perfection such as "An extract from 'A Short View of the Difference

between the Moravian Brethren...” and two essays providing “A Dialogue between an Antinomian and his Friend.”

Personal Reflections on Wesleyan Christian Perfection

While I hold to much of what Wesley teaches regarding Perfection (especially its emphasis throughout the Bible), Wesley's idea that perfection is a later blessing in the life of the Believer seems to be based more on his experience and observations than on Scriptural exegesis and, in my opinion needs to be somewhat corrected.

It seems that throughout the Biblical record, Justification and Sanctification both take place upon conversion. It should be noted that though the status and benefits of sanctification continue on in time (thus providing the basis for thinking of sanctification as an ongoing process), the actual sanctifying of something or someone is always the result of an act performed by God at an initial point in time. This is true in both the Old Testament as well as the New.¹³ Furthermore, Wesley's appeal to Hebrews. 6:1 is unwarranted exegetically, for there the author is using the phrase ἐπὶ τὴν τελειότητα φερώμεθα (let us be moved on to perfect things) literarily, not theologically. He is saying that the focus of the letter will now shift to the more mature matters of the faith, rather than dwelling on the elementary doctrines with which the audience is well acquainted.

While I agree with the Wesleyan critiques of those who claim Perfection to be either unbiblical or impossible in this life, nowhere in Scripture do I find God's cleansing of the sinner upon repentance to be seen as anything but total and instantaneous. 1 John 1:9, in fact, seems to make this point explicitly: *"If we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from ALL unrighteousness"* (emphasis mine).

¹³Cf. Exod. 29:43, 1Chr. 15:14, 2Chr. 29, Acts 20:32, 1Cor. 6:11, Heb. 2:11, 1Pet. 1:2