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"...THAT WE MAY PERFECTLY LOVE THEE." JOHN WESLEY AND SANCTIFICATION

by Victor Shepherd

"Strive for. . .the holiness without which no one will see the Lord"

Hebrews 12:24

"Christian perfection. . .is only another term for holiness." Sermon on Christian Perfection

"Question 4. What was the rise of Methodism, so-called?"

Answer. In 1729, two young men, reading the Bible, saw they could not be saved without holiness, followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737 they saw holiness comes by faith they say likewise that men are justified before they are sanctified; but still holiness was their point. God then thrust them out, utterly against their will, to raise a holy people." Works, VIII, 300

Demographic statistics for early-to-mid eighteenth-century Britain are available only for the City of London, yet the picture which they generate is typical of the industrial-era cities.

Three-quarters of all children died before age five. While irreversible disease accounted for a large percentage of the fatalities, the most callous neglect, not to say wilful cruelty, accounted for the rest. Among the poorest people, and amidst the human impoverishment which accompanies material deprivation, the child mortality rate was almost one hundred percent.¹ Mr. Hanway, a governor of the Foundling Hospital (established in 1739, one year after Wesley's conversion) commented on this aspect of English social life. "The pagan Chinese may legally drown female children; but an English Churchwarden, or 'Father of the Poor' . . . may suffer children to be starved to death or poisoned with noxious air."² Scores of thousands of children were entrusted to nurses who pocketed the paltry sum given them for "caring", permitting starvation to overtake the child who was too expensive to feed. And since remains were too expensive to inter, infant corpses were routinely thrown onto manure piles. At birth the very poorest children were commonly abandoned in the street to perish. Frequently destitute parents blinded, maimed or deformed their child in hope of teasing out a few more pennies when the child was sent forth to beg. "Saddling the spit" was the highlight of parish entertainment; parish officers commandeered the monies paid to the parish to care for resourceless children and treated themselves to a large-scale drunk. The children, as many as five hundred at a time, were simply forsaken.

In 1684 Britain distilled 527,000 gallons of spirits. By 1750 the flow reached eleven million. (For a total population of only five million people!) Of the two thousand houses in St. Giles, London, 506 were gin shops. The record of proceedings from the Old Bailey, England's principal criminal court, informs us of the tragedy of Judith Dufour. She had removed her young child from the workhouse, strangled her, thrown the body into a ditch, sold the child's clothing for one shilling and four pence, and finally spent the money on gin, which she then shared with another woman who had collaborated in the murder.

The sign in gin shop windows read:

Drunk: one shilling

Dead Drunk: two shillings

Free straw

Some shops advertised "*clean* straw," a concession to a better class of patron who preferred not to sleep in someone else's vomit. Parliament often foreshortened its debates "because the honourable members were too drunk to continue the affairs of state"³ Couples aimed at solemnizing their marriages in the morning; by evening solemnity had given way to sottishness.

Gambling was equally addictive. The well-to-do forfeited huge sums at the roll of dice, up to twenty-thousand pounds. The poor lost their money piecemeal yet lost it as surely to the government lotteries whose seduction they found irresistible. (Westminster Bridge and the British Museum were built largely by funds naively offered up by the poorest classes.) The degeneration which accompanied all of this need not be detailed. Its depth and scope are sufficiently attested in one advertisement for entertainment, "Champagne, Dice, Music, or your Neighbour's Spouse."⁴

Defiant and Disordered Self-Will

John Wesley was acquainted with all of the foregoing. He was certain of the reason for it, for he concurred with the Reformers' understanding of Total Depravity; i.e., there is no area or aspect of our humanity unaffected by sin, and hence there is no area or aspect which of itself can save the rest. Concerning this doctrine Wesley wrote, "Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but a heathen still."⁵ Humankind, in his opinion, was afflicted with an innermost corruption, a corrupt root which could yield only corrupt branches and fruits. The human heart, Wesley insisted in a sermon at Oxford on 11 June 1738 (three weeks after his conversion), is "altogether corrupt and abominable".⁶ He still held this perception of the human condition fifty years later. Like the Reformers, Wesley believed that the elemental problem in the wake of the Fall was that the human will is *in se curvatus*, i.e., it can will only its defiant and disordered self-will before God. This was not to deny that fallen persons are capable of some good. They are, and Wesley gladly acknowledged that there are "many, fair shreds of morality among them".⁷ Nonetheless, *before God* humankind remains imprisoned within itself: "whither-so-ever they move, they cannot move beyond the circle of self".⁸ While Wesley disagreed vehemently with the Calvinists of his own day on such matters as predestination, he admitted that with respect to the human situation he came "to the very edge of Calvinism":

In ascribing all good to the grace of God,
In denying all natural free will, and all power antecedent to grace,
In excluding all merit from man, even for what he has or does by the grace of God.⁹

Wesley readily admitted that people "acknowledge God's being" and as uncompromisingly insisted that "they have no acquaintance with him".¹⁰ In other words, the relationship with God for which humankind was created was forfeited with catastrophic results. Some of these results were touched on in the first part of this article. The all-pervasive "result" which is the cause of all subsequent personal and social deterioration Wesley states succinctly: "We have by nature, not only no love, but no fear of God."¹¹

Impute and Impart

In light of this diagnosis there can be only one cure: "the great end of religion is to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness. . . ."¹² With the Reformers Wesley argued that justification or forgiveness of sins was the ground of the Christian life. (He never surrendered this conviction.) At the same time, Wesley was sure that God could do something for penitent sinners beyond forgiving them. The righteousness which God *imputed* to them, in virtue of Christ's righteous obedience unto death, God could also *impart* in virtue of the Spirit's power and penetration. This doctrine of sanctification (or "perfection", a somewhat misleading synonym, as is made plain below), Wesley insisted, "is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly God appeared to have raised us up."¹³ His conviction here he amplified elsewhere:

By Methodists, I mean a people who profess to pursue (in whatsoever measure they have attained) holiness of heart and life; inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God; who place religion in a uniform resemblance to the great object of it; in a steady imitation of him they worship, in all his inimitable perfections; more particularly in justice, mercy and truth, or universal love filling the heart and governing the life.¹⁴

While Wesley had been influenced as early as 1725 by mystics and moralists (William Law, Jeremy Taylor, Thomas à Kempis) after his Aldersgate experience he renounced the moralist/mystic concern with self-purgation and emphasized instead God's gift of *faith* and God's ongoing work of restoring the defaced *image of God* through believers' faith. Whereas the Reformers had carefully balanced justification and sanctification, the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of the sinner, always reminding Christians that the work of restoration remained hidden and would be completed and revealed only in the end-time, Wesley massively emphasized the "new creature" which the Christian had become *now* through clinging in faith to the crucified one. His reading of Scripture yielded God's promise in this matter, and he never doubted the fulfilment of the promise. He saw no grounds for necessarily relegating this fulfilment to the end time.

At the same time it must be admitted that Wesley slightly obscured his theology in the matter of sanctification/perfection. He agreed with the Reformers that the Christian remains *simul peccator simul justus*, i.e. a sinner still yet justified: the Christian never moves beyond needing daily forgiveness. Even ". . . the most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ, even for their actual transgressions".¹⁵ Indeed, a favourite hymn-line of early day Methodists, sung as frequently as it was believed sincerely, was:

Every moment, Lord, I need
The merit of Thy death.¹⁶

Even the "perfect" live only by God's mercy. "They still need Christ as their priest", Wesley added, meaning that the most godly can live before God only by the constant efficacious intercession of the sin-bearing one himself.

Wesley's vocabulary, then, was not always precise in discussing this topic, especially in the writings which immediately followed his conversion. The impression has confused many, even as it spawned nineteenth-century conflicts within Methodism concerning the nature, conditions and end of sanctification. Nevertheless, when we assess the foundational statements of the doctrine, modifications to it and comments upon it -- all of this from the pen of a man who tested his theological formulations with his societies for fifty years -- a more coherent pattern emerges.

Residing But No Longer Ruling

Wesley's conversion reinforced his predilection for the Eastern Church's emphasis on *transformation* rather than the Western Church's emphasis on *transaction*. While he never disputed transaction as the *foundation* of the Christian life (the believer's status before God is changed through the vicarious work of Christ), transformation remained the theme of his theology. This "new birth" was instantaneous. (This is not to say that it had to be felt or identified as instantaneous.) While gestation is a long period preceding physical birth, Wesley argued, and physical development requires a long period after birth, the moment of birth is not protracted. So it is with those who are born of the Spirit. Undoubtedly God has been at work for no little time within believers, preparing them for this event ("prevenient grace"); God would certainly be at work long after the event. Yet the moment at which people pass from death to life, from being children of wrath to children of God, from those bent in on themselves to those whose life is characterized (ultimately) by self-forgetful love; the moment is just that, a *moment*. (Again, Wesley must not be thought to insist that all believers were *aware* of such a moment.)¹⁷

Once the penitent was "born of God" Wesley insisted, following St. Paul (Romans 6, *et al.*), that while sin *resides* in the new creature, sin no longer *rules*. While sin is present in believers, it does not characterize them. Believers are characterized by the one who now rules over them, Jesus Christ. Unlike some of the more effusive sects, Wesley never pretended that believers had ceased needing repentance and pardon. When faced with theological opponents who insisted that "Sin cannot, in any kind or degree, exist where it does not *reign*", Wesley's reply was clear and brief. "Absolutely contrary this to all experience, all Scripture, all common sense. Resentment of an affront is sin.... This has existed in me a thousand times."¹⁸ Believers, he knew from Scripture and his own heartsearching, ". . . are daily sensible of sin remaining in their heart, pride, selfwill, unbelief; and of sin cleaving to all they speak and do, even their best action and holiest duties."¹⁹ Lest they lose confidence in the reality and efficacy of their new birth, believers must be convinced ". . . that the whole work of sanctification is not, as they imagined, wrought at once".²⁰ And lest they capitulate in the struggle to "work out" that salvation which is entirely the gift of God, Wesley reassured them that Christ ". . . *is and dwells* in the heart of every believer who *is fighting against* all sin".²¹

Sanctification Impels Good Works

In his early post-1738 writings Wesley sometimes spoke of "new birth" (or "sanctification") and "entire sanctification" interchangeably. His inconsistent use of language cannot be rooted in a supposed failure to appreciate the ongoing sinfulness of believers. It was rooted, rather, in a promise which loomed so large and shone so brightly in the coming Last Day that it reached back into the present, constraining Wesley's heart and mind to foreshorten the penultimate days.

At the same time Wesley's zeal in this matter did not betray him into the errors he saw unfolding around him. He rejected the passivity of the quietists, insisting that so far from rendering good works superfluous sanctification impelled such works. In the face of the antinomians who anticipated the end time in such a way as to mimic the indiscipline of the Christians in Corinth, he maintained obedience to be essential to discipleship. Quakers he suspected inasmuch as they looked within themselves instead of to Scripture for the source and norm of Christian faith and conduct. When he was accused of departing from the tradition and wisdom of the Church Catholic with respect to his understanding of sanctification, he argued cogently that he was only faithfully reflecting Church of England teaching, which teaching was embodied in the liturgy. He cited the Prayer Book collect, ". . . cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee. . .," adding, "The perfection I hold is so far from being contrary to the doctrine of our Church that it is exactly the same which every clergyman prays for every Sunday."²² He maintained that he invented nothing; Scripture, the "Fathers" and the Anglican divines supported him. While forgiveness was never to be regarded lightly, he knew that *deliverance* was what people needed, as well as what the Gospel proffered. Convinced of this, he was adamant that he should set limits neither to *what* God could do in the grace-steeped heart nor to *when* God might do it. (Wesley insisted too that where faith lacked conviction of God's promise and power, the *reality* did not appear!)

Abiding In The Lord

"Perfection" comprehended three aspects: purity of intention; imitation of, or conformity to, Christ; and love to God and neighbour.²³ By "purity of intention" he meant "a wholehearted attitude to God unsullied by any kind of ulterior motive": more pithily, "one design and one desire".²⁴ Imitation of Christ was the formation of the new creation itself in those who abided in their Lord and who cherished his abiding in them.

Love to God and neighbour was, however, the essence of Christian perfection. Any notion of inner sanctity which undervalued human fellowship Wesley regarded as a contradiction of God's work. It was God's purpose to call and create a people whom love suffused wholly and whose actions love governed entirely. This purpose was realized as God's love created in men and women the capacity and the desire to love God unrestrainedly. While love for God was logically prior, love for God always implied love for the neighbour who was alike the beneficiary of God's love. Although Wesley never used the expression of Thomas Chalmers, "the expulsive power of a new affection", he was one with Chalmers' conviction that the Christian life flowed from this two-fold love, even as such love proved the only profound deterrent to sin.

To be sure, when Wesley spoke of perfection as a love unmixed with sin, his definition of sin-- "voluntary transgression of a known law [of God]" -- strikes the modern reader as unnecessarily and inaccurately narrow, suggesting a shallow understanding of sin. The Reformers were on surer ground when they spoke of sin effervescing hiddenly in such a way as to deceive even believers of its ubiquity. (Yet Wesley was certainly acquainted with sin's selfdeceptions: "As we do not then feel any evil in our hearts, we readily imagine none is there."²⁵) Furthermore, if perfection means that the "root" of sin is eradicated (as Wesley and subsequent Methodists affirmed²⁶) then could fully sanctified persons sin at all?

Wesley insisted they could. Those "perfected in love" were not thereby rendered invulnerable to temptation, since sanctification of *any* degree was never something they now "had" irrespective of their relationship to Christ. It was only believers' unremitting dependence upon the crucified one which kept them suffused with the love which Christ himself incarnated. Again, while to have the "root" of sin eradicated would appear to render sin impossible, with truer instinct Wesley commented, "That believers are delivered from the *guilt* and *power* of sin we allow; that they are delivered from the *being of it* we deny."²⁷ Consequently believers never moved beyond having to plead, "forgive us ... as we forgive others." The "perfect" (i.e., those whose sanctification was blossoming into love) do need forgiveness: "... the most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ, even for their actual transgressions. . . ."²⁸ Profound reflection on the matter did not subsequently change his mind: "They still need Christ as their priest."²⁹

A Limpid Simplicity

While the very mention of "perfection" would seem to fan the most prideful self-righteousness, Wesley took pains to emphasize that love, the *self-forgetful* heart overflowing to God and neighbour, precluded this dreadful sickness: the deeper the work of grace, the more humble the believer. At the same time he asserted that "self-forgetful" must never be confused with "self-deprecating". Wesley was as fully cognizant as any modern psychologist of the place of self-love in the healthy psyche. Self-love was not only permissible, even desirable; it was "an indisputable duty".³⁰ ("Inordinate" self-love, he rightly deemed sinful.³¹) Where Wesley differed from so many moderns, however, and what he would not allow his followers to lose sight of, was his recognition that self-love is genuinely *self-love* and is preserved from becoming "inordinate" only as it is a consequence of love *for God*. Only love for God prevents love for neighbour from curdling into stealthy manipulation or evaporating into empty sentiment, and prevents self-love from degenerating into a self-interest cloaked in religious rationalization. The foundation of all of this was a limpid simplicity which Wesley found in the catholic tradition: believers enjoy the extraordinary privilege of "delighting" in God. Fallen humankind may give credence to the notion that God exists, may have a vague awareness of God's power, may even cower before God in terror -- or may be indifferent to all of this. In no case does unsanctified humankind "delight" in God.³² Wesley reserved his pithiest comment on this topic for the address he delivered at the memorial service for George Whitefield: "Can anything but love beget love?"³³

Wesley always knew that the full flowering of God's grace *restored* men and women to authentic humanity; it did not render them superhuman or angelic. For this reason Wesley averred that the "entirely sanctified" were not lifted above finitude, not transposed beyond creatureliness. Accordingly, he told his readers that among the fully sanctified they would find errors arising from ignorance, mistakes due to poor judgement, defects in intellectual equipment, together with the personal and social complications arising from all of these. Concerning such people he disclaimed, "... we are no more to expect any living man to be infallible than to be omniscient."³⁴ Indeed, Charles Wesley wrote of him, "My brother was, I think, born for the benefit of knaves."³⁵

Sharing Now In God's Salvation

Wesley's doctrine of sanctification has always called forth detractors, among whom are some whose criticism is weighty. Not a few critics will fault Wesley's understanding for being both unrealistic and narrow. Unrealistic because they disagree with his contention that grace can banish *conscious* sin; narrow because the restriction to "conscious sin" is unjustifiable in view of the pool of contamination which lurks in all of us.

Nevertheless, he must be heard when he claims that any declaration of the Gospel which a priori limits the scope of God's deliverance in this life prejudices, even impugns, the character of God. At the same time it weakens the work and witness of the Christian community by inducing compliance towards sin (not to mention despair). Upon finding a decline in the quantity and quality of Methodists in one locality, Wesley blamed it on the fact that the teaching of perfection had fallen into neglect. "I was surprised to find fifty members fewer than I left in it in October. One reason is, Christian Perfection had been little insisted on; and when this is not done, be the preachers ever so eloquent, there is little increase either in the number or the grace of the hearers" ³⁶

Like the author of Hebrews who spoke of believers as those who have "tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5), Wesley knew that the "taste" was not a tiny sip but rather an experience of the full flavour of what is appropriated. Believers were sharers *now* in the salvation of God; and because sharers in it, credible pointers to its end-time fulfilment. (Wesley's "perfect" was much closer to the Greek *teleios*, meaning "mature" or "fulfilled", than to the Latin *perfectus*.) He ever held up a goal for the encouragement of the earnest pilgrim. Of course he had seen the doctrine mishandled so badly as to discourage God's people. Perceptively he asked, "Does the harshly preaching perfection tend to bring believers into a kind of bondage, or slavish fear? It does." ³⁷ With much pastoral sensitivity he was careful to exalt the doctrine so as to comfort and hearten those who heard it in faith. To this end he maintained it must be articulated "always by way of promise; always drawing, rather than driving". ³⁸ It must ever shine winsomely "so that it may excite only hope, joy and desire". ³⁹ Candidly he identified the malice, bitterness, jealousies and "evil surmisings" which fester within even the Christian's heart and infect the Christian fellowship, and then held up the Gospel-promise of deliverance from all "evil thoughts and evil tempers". ⁴⁰ Because he set no limits to the present efficacy of God's grace he refused to restrict the consequences of grace to the individual. "Christianity is essentially a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it." ⁴¹ Elsewhere he insisted, "The gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness" ⁴² -- and then exemplified his conviction in the work on behalf of the poor, the enslaved, the imprisoned, the unlearned, the addicted.

With the Reformers, Wesley insisted that the Gospel included justification and sanctification (regeneration). Unlike the Reformers he claimed that sanctification could progress, by grace, until love flooded the believer's consciousness and became the "temper" which characterized motive and mission. He never claimed this "perfection" for himself (although he claimed to have discerned it in such saints as John Fletcher, his Methodist colleague). He readily admitted that even within the love-saturated there remained buried sinfulness for which they had to pray for God's forgiveness. Still, all God's children were beckoned homeward by the bright light of a definitive sanctification. This one light singularly enlightened every aspect of his theology. It also brightened the lives of those who benefited from the compassion and industry of the regenerated. For had not Charles cried,

Yet when the work is done
The work is yet begun?

Not least to be considered was Wesley's awareness of a truth which our narcissistic age overlooks: "For it is not possible, in the nature of things, that a man should be happy who is not holy." ⁴³

Notes:

1. Brady, *England Before And After Wesley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939) p.142.
2. Ibid., p.143.
3. Ibid., p.147.
4. Ibid., p.155.
5. Wesley, *Sermon*, "Original Sin".
6. *Sermon*, "Salvation By Faith".
7. Works, IX, p.456.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *Sermon*, "Original Sin".

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. *Letters*, VIII, p.238.
14. *Advice To The People Called Methodists*.
15. *Works*, XI, p.395.
16. *Letters*, IV, p.208.
17. *Works*, XI, p.443.
18. *Sermon*, "Sin In Believers" (emphasis his).
19. Ibid.
20. *Sermon*, "The Wilderness State".
21. *Sermon*, "Sin In Believers".
22. *Works*, X, p.450.
23. *Sermon*, "On Riches".
24. *Letters*, VII, p.129.
25. *Sermon*, "Repentance In Believers".
26. *Sermon*, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation".
27. *Sermon*, "Sin In Believers" (emphasis his).
28. *Works*, XI, p.395 ("A Plain Account of Christian Perfection").
29. Ibid., XI, p.417 ("Further Thoughts on Christina Perfection").
30. *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Ephesians 5:28.
31. *Sermon*, "The Wilderness State".
32. *Works*, XI, p.60.
33. *Sermon*, "The Death Of Mr. Whitefield".
34. *Sermon*, "Christian Perfection".
35. Quoted in Sangster, *The Path To Perfection*, 87.
36. *Journal*, V. p.149.
37. *Works*, VIII, p.297.
38. Ibid., VIII, p.275.
39. Ibid., VIII, p. 297.
40. *Sermon*, "Repentance In Believers".
Sermon, "Christian Perfection".
41. *Works*, V, p. 296.
42. *Works*, (Emory edition), VII, p. 593.
43. *Sermon*, "The New Birth".

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