

# Christian Perfection

by Harald Lindström

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*Christian perfection is a state of entire sanctification, where a person is fully surrendered to God and lives in perfect love and obedience.*

**Scripture:** Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Philippians 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 1 John 4:18

**Topics:** "Christian Perfection", "Sanctification"

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## Description

Harald Lindström preaches about the importance and significance of Christian perfection according to John Wesley's doctrine. Wesley's view of salvation includes the idea of Christian perfection as a continuous theme in sanctification and salvation, essential for final justification and glorification. He emphasizes that Christian perfection is a higher plane in the Christian life, incorporating stages in the process of salvation, such as entire sanctification and perfect love. Wesley's doctrine of perfection is closely aligned with practical mysticism, emphasizing the need for surrender to God, obedience, and love as essential components of Christian perfection. He distinguishes between relative and absolute perfection, highlighting the continuous dependence on Christ for forgiveness and sanctification.

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## Transcript

The Importance and General Significance of the Doctrine.

The importance of the idea of perfection to Wesley is indicated by his frequent mention of it: in his sermons and other writings, in his journals and letters, and in the hymn books he published with his brother Charles. He never abandoned the general position with regard to Christian perfection which derives from his introduction to practical mysticism in 1725 and was then first expressed; it is a continuous theme in his sermons and books. The year before his death he says of it: "This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up."<sup>1</sup>

This, however, is not in itself enough to prove that the idea was a necessary, integral part of his view of salvation. It might still be a feature at variance with his basic outlook or but artificially and loosely juxtaposed. Yet such is not the case. If we consider his view of the process of salvation, discussed in the previous chapter, we see that the connection between the idea of Christian perfection and his whole conception of sanctification and salvation is an inner and essential one. As being synonymous with entire sanctification Christian perfection is incorporated as one of the stages in the process of salvation. It is a higher plane in the Christian life and the condition for final justification and glorification. This fixes its place

in his outlook and its general meaning. If the Christian life is regarded as a process towards the goal of perfection, the idea of perfection will be seen as a typical expression of the teleological alignment of his view of salvation. It is here that the ultimate consequences of his idea of sanctification find expression.

This is also seen in the various terms he uses to describe perfection. Following the general Christian tradition, grounded on the biblical conception of perfection (), he employs the expression 'Christian perfection'. This is the commonest term but others are also used. For instance, the words 'second blessing'<sup>2</sup> or 'second change'<sup>3</sup> can be used as a direct designation of Christian perfection as a second or higher stage in the Christian life as compared with new birth. Or the terms 'full salvation'<sup>4</sup> or 'entire sanctification'<sup>5</sup> are resorted to, bringing out with special force its character as the maturing and goal of the Christian life. In actual fact, of course, he distinguishes between sanctification and entire sanctification, but his terminology is inconsistent. In his Minutes for 1747 he himself points out the distinction. St. Paul used the term 'sanctified' of all who were justified, all true believers, and therefore, Wesley thinks, it ought not to be used of those who are saved from all sin without the addition of the qualifications 'wholly' or 'entirely'.<sup>6</sup> It is true that in practice he did not always observe the distinction, but he did in principle. Thus, and particularly in later years, 'sanctification' alone often designates Christian perfection.<sup>7</sup> With reference to its essence, it is called perfect love<sup>8</sup> or pure love<sup>9</sup>.

It was, as we have said, in 1725, under the influence of practical mysticism, that Wesley first became preoccupied with Christian perfection. On this point as in his outlook as a whole he believed himself to be at one with Anglican doctrine. He pointed to the longing for perfection and the general expression of it in the liturgy of the Church of England.<sup>10</sup> It is true that he was following the Arminian spirit of the liturgical tradition; but his view of perfection was not identical with that represented by the Thirty-nine Articles<sup>11</sup>, which reflect the Calvinistic conception<sup>12</sup>.

A preliminary general idea of Wesley's doctrine of perfection is perhaps best obtained from the angle of its relation to a practical mysticism of the type of Thomas à Kempis, and such Anglican High Churchmen as Jeremy Taylor, or William Law, who favoured the Arminian tendency in the Church. Wesley considered himself that his idea of perfection had not changed since its formulation in 1725.<sup>13</sup> At the end of his life he recorded his appreciation of the idea of sanctification in such a representative of the Roman Catholic devotional spirit as François de Sales.<sup>14</sup> Did the new Reformed outlook of 1738 have no effect, then, on his doctrine of perfection?

As in practical mysticism, Christian perfection became an essential theme in Wesley. This perfection, however, was not confined to any particular class of persons: it applied to all men. Here Wesley is in agreement with William Law, who shared this Reformed view.<sup>15</sup> The pull towards monastic piety, however, is also seen in Law<sup>16</sup>, and to a still greater extent in Taylor<sup>17</sup>. As in practical mysticism this perfection was conceived as an inherent ethical change in man and the Christian life represented as a progressive development towards it.<sup>18</sup> Such perfecting was the purpose of religion.<sup>19</sup> With Wesley as with the mystics everything was directed towards a change which would qualify man for glorification. In this general position just as in the teleological alignment of his theology, Wesley, after as well as before 1738, agrees with practical mysticism.

But the resemblance is still more pronounced. We find his definitions of perfection before and after 1738 are in some respects identical. At first he describes it as a surrender to God and obedience to Him: an inward obedience of the heart and an outward obedience of word and act. It is characterized by the fact that man is actuated by a single motive. It is also described as perfect inward and outward conformity with

Christ, as a circumcision of the heart, involving purification from sin, an entire renewal of the spirit. Above all it is seen in love to God and our neighbour, the love of a whole and undivided heart.<sup>20</sup>

The three points of view which determined Wesley's description of Christian perfection are reflections of the view which appears in à Kempis, Taylor and Law. As in à Kempis we find tendencies typical of the Catholic tradition in Taylor and Law, especially in the ideal of Imitatio Christi and the idea of intention.<sup>21</sup> Perfection in Wesley was given the primary meanings of purity of intention<sup>22</sup>, the imitation of Christ<sup>23</sup>, and love to God and our neighbour<sup>24</sup>. Even after 1738 these are still characteristic features. Purity of intention or "a single eye," for instance, is still the mark of perfection.<sup>25</sup> The eye of the perfect man is turned to God alone, whom he loves. God is the absolute master of his soul. All the motions of his heart are in full harmony with God's will.<sup>26</sup> His one intention is to live all the time to please<sup>27</sup> and honour<sup>28</sup> God. And this love of God is accompanied by obedience to all His commandments.<sup>29</sup>

Perfection is also still defined as the imitation of Christ. This meant possessing the temper of Christ and living as He lived, an inward and outward conformity with the will of God.<sup>30</sup> But the essence of Christian perfection he took to be love to God and our neighbour.<sup>31</sup> Against the hermitic ideal of the mystics, however, he held that human fellowship was an attribute of holiness<sup>32</sup>; and against Quietist mysticism he maintained that love of our neighbour was inseparable from love to God<sup>33</sup>. Love must be expressed in actions.<sup>34</sup> Thus, at variance with exclusively contemplative, but in agreement with practical, mysticism, Wesley contends that both inward and outward holiness are necessary.

Positively, then, perfection is firstly perfect love. Negatively it is perfect deliverance from sin. The heart is purified of all sin.<sup>35</sup> This means deliverance from "inward as well as from outward sin."<sup>36</sup> The perfect man is delivered from evil thoughts and evil tempers.<sup>37</sup> Perfect love to God "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."<sup>38</sup> This love is accompanied by a pure heart<sup>39</sup> and liberation from all sin<sup>40</sup>.

In connection with this preliminary description of perfection reference might also be made to two epitomes by Wesley of his doctrine of perfection. The affinity to mysticism is particularly apparent in *A Plain Account on Christian Perfection* (1766). Purity of intention, the imitation of Christ, and whole-hearted love of God and our neighbour, are here specified as the factors determining perfection. "In one view," he writes, "it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God. In another view, it is all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a renewal of the heart in the whole image of God, the full likeness of Him that created it. In yet another, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves."<sup>41</sup> In his sermon *On Perfection* (1788) it is defined in the following terms. It means: 1. To love God with all one's heart and one's neighbour as oneself; 2. The mind that is in Christ; 3. The fruits of the Spirit (in accordance with Gal. v.) unified; 4. The image of God, a recovery of man to the moral image of God, which consists of "righteousness and true holiness"; 5. Inward and outward righteousness, sanctity of life issuing from sanctity of heart; 6. God's sanctifying of man in spirit, soul, and body; 7. Man's own perfect consecration to God; 8. A continuous presentation through Jesus of man's thoughts and words and actions as a sacrifice to God of praise and thanksgiving; 9. Salvation from all sin.<sup>42</sup>

We see that the affinity between Wesley and practical mysticism is indeed close. To this extent his idea of perfection can be said to follow a consistent course. To this extent 1738 did not lead to deviation. Yet his

doctrine of perfection was not identical with that of practical mysticism. The new outlook of 1738 did in fact occasion considerable differences.

For Law true perfection was an unattainable ideal, although a goal for human effort. The perfection possible on earth was nothing but gradual development in sanctification. Fundamental in this perfection was "the inward Piety of the Heart and Mind."<sup>43</sup> It was synonymous with inherent personal holiness, and in this there were many degrees.<sup>44</sup> Life on earth was but "a State of Repentance and Sorrow for Sin."<sup>45</sup> During it man was "in a state of Probation<sup>46</sup>," and should live with the care required of a penitent sinner. His state of repentance involved a state of mortification.<sup>47</sup> The Christian life was one of moral effort and self-denial.

Up to 1738 Wesley was in full agreement with this attitude. Holiness was described as "a state of repentance and imperfection, but yet of sincerity of heart and diligent endeavour."<sup>48</sup> The Christian was called to live in singleness of heart, perfect self-renunciation, and sufferings.<sup>49</sup> Perfection was the goal of man's effort but could not be realized in this life. It was only in death that man was liberated from his sinful nature.<sup>50</sup> With the new vision of 1738, however, perfection came to be regarded as something that could and should be realized in this life.<sup>51</sup> It was now considered a gift of God and a work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>52</sup> Wesley's new view of grace had its repercussions on his doctrine of perfection as well as on his doctrine of justification. Man was justified by faith and by faith he would be fully sanctified too.<sup>53</sup> He explained the fact that perfect sanctification was not ordinarily accorded to the Christian until shortly before death<sup>54</sup> by pointing out that it was not expected earlier and therefore not prayed for in faith<sup>55</sup>.

Since the work of perfection is seen as a work of God bestowed on man through sanctifying faith it is also thought to be instantaneous; the latter being a consequence of the former. Because this entire sanctification occurs through faith and amounts to a powerful act of intervention by God Himself, it is regarded as an instantaneous work.<sup>56</sup> The instantaneous quality was motivated by the view of grace. Whereas in his view of sanctification as a gradual process Wesley is at one with practical mysticism, he diverges from it in his doctrine of perfection.

As we have already seen he made this entire sanctification one of the stages in the process of the Christian life. It became another and higher stage after new birth. A gradual and an instantaneous work were conjoined in the order of salvation. New birth, which took place instantaneously, was followed by a gradual sanctification preceding the instantaneous event of entire sanctification. A subsequent continued gradual development was thought to follow this. Whereas gradual sanctification was due to God's grace and man's obedience to it, instantaneous sanctification was considered exclusively God's own work. In this way he distinguished between gradual, and instantaneous sanctification, but to some extent the latter was nevertheless made dependent on the former. Man could not expect entire sanctification unless he had already undergone the previous gradual work of sanctification. Man, he considered, could not acquire the faith through which entire sanctification was bestowed unless he had sought it in obedience to the commandments and ordinances of God.<sup>57</sup> Thus man's activity in the preceding sanctification was linked up with a certain passivity in receiving the grace of perfection. Yet even in the work of perfection man would not be altogether passive. For it meant a total consecration or surrender by man of his whole heart to God.<sup>58</sup> This was made possible by the sanctifying grace accorded to him by God.<sup>59</sup> The connection between gradual and instantaneous sanctification is also seen in the way the hope of perfection is the motive for the gradual development.<sup>60</sup>

This modification of the idea of perfection, obviously the result of the influence of his conception of grace, did not mean, however, that perfection ceased to be a requirement. But just as the law in general was regarded by Wesley as simultaneously a gospel too, so perfection was seen simultaneously both as a requirement and as a promise. Indeed he regarded all God's demands and commandments as at the same time promises. God gives what he commands. Wesley pointed out that a greater measure of the Holy Spirit is accorded under the Christian than under the Jewish dispensation. The Christian's possibilities of salvation are quite other than those under the Jewish dispensation. It was only after the glorification of Jesus Christ that the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit was accorded to true believers in full measure.<sup>61</sup> Wesley found support for his doctrine of perfection in Christian experience as well as in the Scriptures.<sup>62</sup>

Thus his doctrine of perfection was not quite in conformity with the outlook of practical mysticism. The line of 1725 was crossed by another dating from 1738. But neither did his doctrine of perfection agree with the view of the Reformation. To Wesley perfection was an attainable and higher stage in the Christian life after forgiveness and new birth. To Luther on the other hand forgiveness, which at the same time meant the transformation of man, was in itself the highest expression of the Christian life. He saw the ethical change of man's will as an incomplete beginning.<sup>63</sup> Morally, that is, the believer was never perfect in this life; though he could be entirely righteous in the sense that he had received forgiveness in faith and been delivered from the sentence and punishment of sin.<sup>64</sup> To the Reformers perfection was perfection in faith<sup>65</sup>, but to Wesley it was an inherent ethical perfection in love and obedience. In his Apology of the Augsburg Confession Melancthon sees sanctification as fulfilment of the law.<sup>66</sup> In this sanctification, made possible by faith, man will progress, though he will remain imperfect in this life.<sup>67</sup> Evangelical perfection involves growth in the fear of God, in reliance on the mercy promised in Christ, and in loyal obedience in the call.<sup>68</sup> Both Calvin and Luther thought inherent ethical perfection came only with death<sup>69</sup>, Wesley that entire sanctification could be realized during life on earth.

Wesley also disagreed with Zinzendorf. Their conversation on 3 September 1741 in Gray's Inn Gardens<sup>70</sup> throws some light on the difference between them:

Zinzendorf: I acknowledge no inherent Perfection. Christ is our only Perfection.

Wesley: I believe, the Spirit of Christ works Christian Perfection in true Christians.

Zinzendorf: By no means. All our Perfection is in Christ. Faith in the Blood of Christ, is the only Christian Perfection. The whole Christian Perfection is imputed, not inherent. We are perfect in Christ. We are never perfect in ourselves.

Wesley: Is not then every True Believer Holy?

Zinzendorf: Certainly. But he is Holy in Christ, not in himself.

Wesley: But are not his Heart and Life Holy?

Zinzendorf: Undoubtedly.

Wesley: Is he not, by Consequence, Holy in Himself?

Zinzendorf: No, no. Only in Christ. He is not Holy in Himself. He has no Holiness at all in Himself.

Wesley: Has he not the Love of God and of his Neighbour in his Heart, yea, and the whole image of God?

Zinzendorf: He has. But this is not Gospel-Holiness. Faith is Gospel-Holiness.

Wesley: You grant as much as I affirm. You own, the whole Heart, and the whole Life of a Believer are Holy, that he loves God with all his Heart, and serves him with all his Strength. I desire no more. This is all I mean by Perfection or Christian Holiness.

Zinzendorf: But this is not Holiness. A Christian is not more Holy, when he has more, nor less Holy when he has less of, this Love.

Wesley: How! Does not a believer, as he grows in Love, grow in Holiness?

Zinzendorf: In no wise. The moment he is justified, he is sanctified wholly. And he is neither more nor less Holy, from that moment, to his Death.

Wesley: Is not then a Father in Christ Holier than a New-born Babe?

Zinzendorf: No. Entire Sanctification and Entire Justification are in one and the same Instant, and neither of them admits either of Increase or Decrease.

Wesley: But does not a Believer increase (or grow) in the Love of God? Is he made Perfect in Love, as soon as he is justified?

Zinzendorf: He is. He never increases in the Love of God. He loves God entirely at that Moment, as he is entirely sanctified.

This dialogue presents Wesley's view clearly enough, but does not reflect Zinzendorf's with exactitude. The latter's remarks, as Plitt says, are polemically sharpened.<sup>71</sup> All the same, the conversation undoubtedly expresses an essential difference between the two. From Zinzendorf's point of view Wesley's attitude must obviously seem legalistic. Accordingly, he calls an inherent ethical perfection which consists of love to God and one's neighbour a legal holiness, whereas evangelical holiness is identified with faith.<sup>72</sup>

Before attempting a closer analysis of perfect sanctification, some further general features of Wesley's view of Christian perfection require our attention. Its chief mark, we have already noticed, is perfect love. It is the essence of perfection.<sup>73</sup> And the fully sanctified man is also distinguished by the inseparable fruits of that love: "rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks." This state of mind is said to be particularly characteristic of the fully sanctified.<sup>74</sup> It is regarded as the expression of his complete submission to the will of God. In later years, clearly actuated by his experiences in the Methodist revival, Wesley altered some of the extreme statements he had made on the state of the entirely sanctified in 1740 in the preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. He finds, for instance, that he had gone too far in saying that the totally sanctified did not at all need to feel any doubt or uncertainty even in particular actions, and he modifies the statement thus: "Frequently this is the case but only for a time." Similarly he also corrects the statement that the Holy Spirit every instant instructs them what they should do and say. "For a time," he says, "it may be so; but not always." He also altered the statement that they had no need of "reasoning concerning it," saying that sometimes reasoning was necessary. Later, too, he came to believe that the fully sanctified could be tempted, even grievously.<sup>75</sup> As early as 1743 in *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* he declares that perfect sanctification does not exclude

temptations<sup>76</sup>, while in 1750 in a sermon entitled Christian Perfection he says that such perfection "belongeth not to this life<sup>77</sup>." For a long time he was inclined to believe that perfect sanctification could not be lost.<sup>78</sup> Early in the seventeen-sixties, however, he became convinced by facts that even the entirely sanctified man could fall.<sup>79</sup> The revival at Otley in 1760, for instance, must have impressed him; on this occasion several people claimed to have experienced perfect sanctification instantaneously and through faith.<sup>80</sup> However, as we have seen, Wesley had held this doctrine for a long time.<sup>81</sup>

II

### Christian Perfection in Greater Detail.

A more detailed analysis of perfect sanctification calls for further scrutiny of its relation to new birth. The two are regarded as distinct stages of the Christian life. We have already seen that both are conferred on man through faith. Also, man can receive assurance of both through a testimony of the Spirit and through outward fruits. The process of sanctification after new birth is comparable to the development of natural life. The Christian shall grow from a little child to a young man and from a young man to a father.<sup>82</sup> This is due to a development in faith. Faith and sanctity are directly proportionate to one another. When man grows in faith, he grows equally in sanctity, love, humility, and meekness. He grows in every part of the image of God "till it pleases God, after he is thoroughly convinced of inbred sin, of the total corruption of his nature, to take it all away; to purify his heart and cleanse him from all unrighteousness; to fulfil that promise which he made first to his ancient people, and in them to the Israel of God in all ages: 'I will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul.'<sup>83</sup> A weak faith can develop and grow strong. The fathers, the fully sanctified, are called "strong in faith."<sup>84</sup> Thus Christian Perfection could also be identified with "the full assurance of faith."<sup>85</sup>

This development in sanctification is focussed on the means and conditions of perfection. The essence of perfection and the goal of faith are, however, love. Seen in this way, therefore, the Christian life is a development in love. Perfection comes to mean perfection in love.

What, then, from this point of view, is the difference between new birth and perfect sanctification? Love has already been instilled into the heart of man at new birth. From then on there is a gradual development. This is thought to continue even after the stage of perfect sanctification until the very moment of death -- indeed after death too. There is therefore, Wesley thinks, no perfection of degrees, i.e. no perfection of concluded development.<sup>86</sup> The distinction between new birth and entire sanctification seems therefore to be nothing more than a difference of degree in a continuous development. But if so, how can they also be described as distinct stages in the Christian life?

If we consider the definition of perfection as perfect love, it is clear that this love must be of the same kind as that granted to man at new birth. In this respect indeed Wesley could not indicate any difference. Entire sanctification is not a new kind of sanctity in relation to the earlier experience of the believer. "It does not imply any new kind of holiness: Let no man imagine this. From the moment we are justified, till we give up our spirits to God, love is the fulfilling of the law; of the whole evangelical law, which took place of the Adamic law, when the first promise of 'the seed of the woman' was made. Love is the sum of Christian sanctification; it is the one kind of holiness, which is found, only in various degrees, in believers who are distinguished by St. John into 'little children, young men, and fathers'." The difference between them "properly lies in the degree of love." Here there is "as great a difference in the spiritual, as in the natural sense, between fathers, young men, and babes."<sup>87</sup> Consequently, when from this point of view Wesley

compares the stage of justification and new birth with that of perfect sanctification, the difference is only one of degree. The kind of life is the same in entire sanctification as in new birth.

Entire sanctification is seen more clearly as a distinct stage, higher and different from that of new birth, when we turn to perfection as liberation from sin. Entire sanctification involves a love incompatible with sin.<sup>88</sup> It is a love unmixed with sin, a pure love. Earlier sanctity was alloyed with sinful inclinations, which affected the soul. After the experience of perfect sanctification, however, there is "no mixture of any contrary affections: All is peace and harmony after."<sup>89</sup>

The difference of plane between new birth and perfect sanctification is also seen in the fact that the deliverance from sin takes place in an instant. Deliverance from sin in perfect sanctification is regarded as analogous with the entrance of death into the body. This deliverance from sin is the death of sin: "A man may be dying for some time; yet he does not, properly speaking, die, till the instant the soul is separated from the body; and in that instant he lives the life of eternity. In like manner, he may be dying to sin for some time; yet he is not dead to sin, till sin is separated from his soul; and in that instant he lives the full life of love. And as the change undergone, when the body dies, is of a different kind, and infinitely greater than any we had known before, yea, such as till then it is impossible to conceive; so the change wrought, when the soul dies to sin, is of a different kind, and infinitely greater than any before, and than any can conceive till he experiences it. Yet he still grows in grace, in the knowledge of Christ, in the love and image of God; and will do so, not only till death, but to all eternity."<sup>90</sup>

In this respect the distinction is that entire sanctification brings full deliverance from sin whereas in new birth the deliverance is only partial. As we have already seen it is true that extreme statements about the regenerate state, which confuse the difference between new birth and entire sanctification, occur immediately after 1738. Later, however, when Wesley concentrates on the distinction, it emerges clearly enough. The regenerate man was nevertheless already delivered from sin in the sense that he was no longer dominated by it.<sup>91</sup> It could be said of him that he did not sin. This meant that he did not commit outward sins.<sup>92</sup> And he was not only delivered from the power of outward sin: the domination of inward sin was broken too.<sup>93</sup> Yet inward sin still remained. The root of sin was still present; the fleshly temper was not entirely uprooted. Thus sin was still inherent in his heart as well as in his words and actions. He was also chargeable with numberless sins of omission and inward defects.<sup>94</sup> The regenerate man was still to some extent carnal.<sup>95</sup> His life was still lived in terms of two "contrary principles": nature and grace, the flesh and the Spirit.<sup>96</sup> In contradistinction to this state, entire sanctification is seen as full deliverance from sin. He who is full[y] sanctified is "freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers."<sup>97</sup> The perfect change implies "the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution."<sup>98</sup> It involves the experience of "a total death to sin, and an entire renewal in the love and image of God."<sup>99</sup>

In Wesley's opinion the perfectly sanctified man was delivered not only from the power of sin -- this happened at new birth -- but also from the root of sin as the source of inward and outward sins. By this he meant that man was also delivered from original sin. He began to concern himself with this idea of deliverance from original sin immediately after the experience of 1738. In his first evangelical sermon of that year, *Salvation by Faith*, he says that the salvation which is bestowed on man through faith and which is a present salvation, involves salvation from all sins, from "original and actual, past and present sin, 'of the flesh and of the Spirit'."<sup>100</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems* also expresses a yearning for salvation from "actual and from inbred sin," from "deep original stain."<sup>101</sup> God is willing, he writes in 1757 in *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, to redeem man from "all sin, both original and actual."<sup>102</sup> This further liberation from original sin as well is attributed to entire sanctification. Of the latter, which signifies a second change

after justification, he says: "Indeed this is so evident a truth, that wellnigh all the children of God, scattered abroad, however they differ in other points, yet generally agree in this: that although we may, 'by the Spirit, mortify the deeds of the body', resist and conquer both outward and inward sin: although we may weaken our enemies day by day; yet we cannot drive them out. By all the grace which is given at justification we cannot extirpate them. Though we watch and pray ever so much, we cannot wholly cleanse either our hearts or hands. Most sure we cannot, till it shall please our Lord to speak to our hearts again, to speak the second time, 'Be clean'; and then only the leprosy is cleansed. Then only, the evil root, the carnal mind, is destroyed; and inbred sin subsists no more."<sup>103</sup>

Yet the perfection he taught was attainable in this life was not absolute perfection. It was perfection subject to the limitations of human life. No one could be so perfect as to achieve deliverance from all defects. The defects inseparable from life on earth must remain. Thus no one could escape certain kinds of ignorance and the mistakes arising from it.<sup>104</sup> Infirmities too must remain, by which Wesley meant "not only those which are properly termed bodily infirmities, but all those inward or outward imperfections which are not of a moral nature." Here he is thinking of defects in man's intellectual equipment and their influence on his conversation and behaviour.<sup>105</sup> No deliverance from "actual mistakes" is to be expected "till this mortal puts on immortality." They are a natural outcome of the soul inhabiting the body: "For we cannot now think at all, but by the mediation of those bodily organs which have suffered equally with the rest of our frame. And hence we cannot avoid sometimes thinking wrong, till this corruptible shall have put on incorruption." Such mistakes "in judgement" or "in opinion" can also give rise to mistakes "in practice."<sup>106</sup> Thus even the most sanctified persons cannot avoid making such mistakes, and nor can they avoid "omissions," "shortcomings," and "defects of various kinds."<sup>107</sup> Such imperfection is seen as a result of Adam's fall. It was then that man's incorruptible body became corruptible, since when it has been "a clog to the soul," hindering its operations. So no man now can "apprehend clearly" or "judge truly," any more than he can "reason justly." Man must inevitably make mistakes. To do so is as natural as to breathe.<sup>108</sup> Thus even the most sanctified man lives in circumstances which necessarily limit his perfection. His knowledge is limited, his understanding dim, and it follows also that his "affections" are "disordered." And he acts accordingly. His life will therefore be stamped with ignorance and error and a "thousand other infirmities." Errors of judgment will lead to "wrong words and actions" and in some cases to "wrong affections."<sup>109</sup>

The idea of perfection was thus adjusted to the present circumstances of man. The idea of the law was similarly adjusted. This adaptation of the idea of the law is one of the basic conditions for his doctrine of perfection. The law to which man is subject since the Fall is said to be unlike that which obtained before the Fall. The Adamic law, given to Adam in his innocence, was a law of works. It required of man an undivided obedience in every respect to the law of God, and particularly love to God and one's neighbor. He was to fulfil all righteousness, inward and outward, negative and positive. The law further required that this obedience should be perfect in degree. Every commandment was to be fulfilled with all strength, in the highest measure, and in the most perfect manner. Further, this obedience had to be entirely uninterrupted.<sup>110</sup>

These requirements were proportionate to the powers originally possessed by Adam. Since he was created free from all defect both in understanding and affections, and since his body did not prevent him from understanding clearly and judging truly, it was required of him that he should "always think, always speak, and always act precisely right, in every point whatever."<sup>111</sup> Clearly, no man is now in a position to fulfil this law, essentially the same as the angelic law.<sup>112</sup> But neither does God ask this. The law to which

man is now subject is that of faith. Christ has abolished both the Adamic and the Mosaic law as a condition for either present or future salvation. Instead He has established "the law of faith." This means that it is only through faith that man can be sanctified and glorified as well as justified. As this law of faith is fulfilled through love Wesley can also call it the law of love. Faith is considered the foundation of "the Christian institution," love its end.<sup>113</sup>

Thus the perfection which is now attainable is neither angelic perfection nor the kind that Adam possessed before the Fall. It is instead a perfection achieved through faith, a perfection which means perfect love. Is it possible now to fulfil this law of love perfectly? Wesley believed that he who was fully sanctified fulfilled the law in so far as his whole disposition, his thoughts, words, and actions all have their source in love. To this extent he does not break the law. In this measure he is perfect. But in another sense he does not fulfil the law. For he is not infallible. Because of the inevitable defects which are part of him he must necessarily make many mistakes. These mistakes "will frequently occasion something wrong, both in our temper, and words, and actions."<sup>114</sup> The fully sanctified are more than ever conscious not only of "their own ignorance" but also of their "littleness of grace, coming short of the full mind that was in Christ, and walking less accurately than they might have done after their divine Pattern."<sup>115</sup> Yet in spite of these defects the perfected man can nevertheless be said to fulfil the law, for his breaches of it are due not to want of love but to want of knowledge.<sup>116</sup>

This accommodation to the present circumstances of man is also shown in the idea of sin. As we have seen the fully sanctified man can also be considered freed from all sin. It is clear that the concept of sin has also undergone adaptation. At the Bristol conference of 1758 a distinction was made between sin as a voluntary transgression of a known law and sin as an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown. The former was sin "properly so called," and the latter sin "improperly so called."<sup>117</sup> It is the former concept of sin that applies in the doctrine of perfection.<sup>118</sup> Only such transgression of the law as springs from man's own will and intention is considered sin. Here it is the individualistic line in Wesley's conception of sin that operates. Here he is clearly Arminian and not Orthodox.<sup>119</sup> The definition of perfection as deliverance from sin is taken by Wesley to mean that the fully sanctified do not deliberately transgress the law of love. Perfection comes to mean perfect purity in intention and will, and in actions in so far as these are determined by the individual will.<sup>120</sup>

As we have seen, Wesley thinks the Christian is delivered through entire sanctification from original sin as well as from actual sin. The former is described as an evil root, an evil inclination. It is the source of all special sins, an evil corruption which finds expression in such sins as pride, self-will, covetousness, and anger, which are the antithesis of love to God and our neighbour.<sup>121</sup> The corruption of sin, that is, is manifest in the evil will of the individual.<sup>122</sup>

Accordingly, entire sanctification in Wesley comes to mean total resignation of the will of man to the will of God. The self-will which remained in the believer, although he was not governed by sin, is now utterly annihilated.

We have now examined the sense in which he attributes perfection to the fully sanctified. The concept of perfection, like those of law and sin, has been modified by adjustment to the potentialities of man since the Fall. He finds this idea of perfection to be in accordance with the Scriptures; we may not, he says, set perfection higher than Scripture itself does.<sup>123</sup>

We have also noticed, however, that from another point of view the fully sanctified are not considered perfect. Parallel with the conception of perfection adumbrated above, another also emerges. Here perfection takes on an absolute character in that it is not restricted to the present powers of man. This explains why Wesley on the one hand describes perfect sanctification as deliverance from all sin and on the other nevertheless declines to call it sinless.<sup>124</sup> This apparent contradiction is due to his use of two different concepts of perfection and a corresponding duality in the terms law and sin. He employs a concept of relative perfection and a concept of absolute perfection. The former is subjective and concerns the intention and will, the latter objective and independent of man's potentialities. This duality means that on the one hand he does not regard the defects of the fully sanctified as sins in the proper sense of the word. There can be no sin, he says, when love is the only principle of action.<sup>125</sup> On the other hand these mistakes and defects can also be regarded as sins in the sense that they constitute deviations from the perfect law.<sup>126</sup> Not even such defects as necessarily pertain to man during his life on earth can "bear the rigour of God's justice."<sup>127</sup>

This point of view is again seen when we turn to the relation between entire sanctification and atonement. In what sense do the fully sanctified need atonement? Surely the idea of forgiveness will be overshadowed by that of sanctification, which here in the conception of Christian perfection is present in its most pronounced form. This is certainly the case when Wesley is thinking in terms of his relative and subjective conception of sin. Then the fully sanctified cannot be said to be burdened with guilt and in need of forgiveness.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless he insists that even these stand in need of the blood of atonement because of their transgressions. At this point the absolute and objective law and a corresponding conception of sin have again risen to the surface of his mind. In an absolute sense even the fully sanctified transgress the law because of their inescapable defects. "Therefore," he says of these defects, "(4.) Every such mistake, were it not for the blood of atonement, would expose to eternal damnation. (5.) It follows, that the most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ, even for their actual transgressions, and may say for themselves, as well as for their brethren, 'Forgive us our trespasses'."<sup>129</sup> Even the best of men "need Christ as their Priest, their Atonement, their Advocate with the Father; not only as the continuance of their every blessing depends on his death and intercession, but on account of their coming short of the law of love."<sup>130</sup> The entirely sanctified fulfil the law of love in so far as love is the sole motive for their actions, yet they transgress it because of the defects of understanding inseparable from life on earth.<sup>131</sup> This dual view of perfection is clearly seen in one of Wesley's letters. Here he maintains both the possibility of perfection on the one hand and on the other its relative character and the continuous need of forgiveness on the part of the fully sanctified. "The nicest point of all which relates to Christian perfection," he writes, "is that which you inquire of. Thus much is certain: they that love God with all their heart and all men as themselves are scripturally perfect. And surely such there are; otherwise the promise of God would be a mere mockery of human weakness. Hold fast this. But then remember, on the other hand, you have this treasure in an earthen vessel; you dwell in a poor, shattered house of clay, which presses down the immortal spirit. Hence all your thoughts, words, and actions are so imperfect, so far from coming up to the standard (that law of love which, but for the corruptible body, your soul would answer in all instances), that you may well say till you go to Him you love:

Every moment, Lord, I need

The merit of Thy death."<sup>132</sup>

For Wesley, Christians, even the most sanctified, must live on the basis of forgiveness. That this is so in spite of everything is due to the fact that alongside a relative and subjective perfection -- the concept of

perfection which makes possible his doctrine of perfection -- he retains the conception of an objective and absolute perfection and a corresponding idea of sin.

The connection between perfect sanctification and atonement, like the Christocentric alignment in general in his doctrine of sanctification, is given even heavier emphasis in another respect. The Christian life can persist only through unceasing contact with Christ. This applies to the fully sanctified too. These, he says, are particularly keenly aware of their total dependence on Christ, especially on his work of atonement. "None feel their need of Christ like these; none so entirely depend upon Him. For Christ does not give life to the soul separate from, but in and with, himself. Hence his words are equally true of all men, in whatsoever state of grace they are: 'As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. Without' (or separate from) 'me ye can do nothing' "In every state," he continues, "we need Christ in the following respects: -- (1.) Whatever grace we receive, it is a free gift from him. (2.) We receive it as his purchase, merely in consideration of the price he paid. (3.) We have this grace, not only from Christ, but in him. For our perfection is not like that of a tree, which flourishes by the sap derived from its own root, but, as was said before, like that of a branch which, united to the vine, bears fruit; but severed from it, is dried up and withered. (4.) All our blessings, temporal, spiritual, and eternal, depend on his intercession for us, which is one branch of his priestly office, whereof therefore we have always equal need."<sup>133</sup> This dependence on Christ is a dependence from moment to moment.<sup>134</sup> Man's holiness is due solely to the fact that through faith he is enabled to participate every moment in the power of Christ. Failing this, "notwithstanding all our present holiness, we should be devils the next moment."<sup>135</sup> The sanctity thus bestowed on man undoubtedly acquires the character of a quality in man, just as sanctifying grace is also conceived primarily as an indwelling power. But it does not become an independent quality of man's own as a result of this Christocentric view. Never for a moment can it be separated from Christ and His work. And it is accorded to man solely because of Christ's merit and cannot therefore be considered a merit of man.

The main points in Wesley's view of perfection can now be presented in tabular form. Let us first distinguish between the two kinds of perfection we find in him: Adamic perfection, which applied to Adam before the Fall, and Christian perfection, which man can now attain.

Adamic Perfection:

Christian Perfection:

Based on the covenant of works:

man must fulfil the law of works.

Based on the covenant of grace:

man must fulfil the law of faith.

Signifies perfect obedience to every point in this law. This holiness must be perfect in degree and continue without intermission throughout the whole of life.

Signifies perfect obedience in so far as this is attainable in the present circumstances of man. It means perfect love. This holiness is a perfection of motive, not of degree. It concerns man's will and intention.

This is a perfect fulfilment of the law and perfect deliverance from sin in the absolute and objective sense.

This is a perfect fulfilment of the law and perfect deliverance from sin in the relative and subjective sense.

The relation between Christian perfection and atonement can be expressed as follows, varying in aspect according to the point of view from which perfection is regarded.

From the absolute and objective standpoint:

From the relative and subjective standpoint:

He who is fully sanctified is imperfect.

He who is fully sanctified is perfect.

This means that because of innumerable defects he must transgress the absolute law. In this sense he is not free from sin.

This means that he perfectly loves God and his neighbour and is perfectly free from sin properly so called.

For this reason he is not free from guilt.

For this reason he is also free from guilt.

Therefore in order that he may not suffer damnation for his sin and guilt, he is every moment dependent on the merit and intercession of Christ.

Yet in order to remain perfect he is every moment dependent on the merit and intercession of Christ.

III

Further Characteristics.

Assurance is another characteristic feature of Christian perfection. Here, as has already been pointed out elsewhere<sup>136</sup>, the analogy between the stage of justification and that of perfect sanctification is again apparent. In both cases a direct and an indirect witness are present. As with assurance of justification, assurance of perfect sanctification derives both from the witness of the Spirit and from the fruit of the Spirit. "We know it," we are told, "by the witness and by the fruit of the Spirit. And, first, by the witness. As when we were justified, the Spirit bore witness with our spirit, that our sins were forgiven; so, when we were sanctified, he bore witness, that they were taken away. Indeed, the witness of sanctification is not always clear at first as neither is that of justification; neither is it afterwards always the same, but, like that of justification, sometimes stronger and sometimes fainter. Yea, and sometimes it is withdrawn. Yet, in general, the latter testimony of the Spirit is both as clear and as steady as the former."<sup>137</sup> The fully sanctified might also learn that this perfect sanctification had been accorded to them through the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, always abiding; by invariable long-suffering, patience, resignation; by gentleness, triumphing over all provocation; by goodness, mildness, sweetness, tenderness of spirit; by fidelity, simplicity, godly sincerity; by meekness, calmness, evenness of spirit; by temperance, not only in food and sleep, but in all things natural and spiritual."<sup>138</sup> The change at justification was mixed with selfishness and love of the world, but the fully sanctified undergo a total change.<sup>139</sup> He who judges according to all the marks pertaining to perfect sanctification need not in Wesley's opinion run any risk of self-deception.<sup>140</sup>

It was also his opinion that as in sanctification otherwise, the change in Christian perfection must be outward and visible. The Christian cannot, he thought, remain ignorant of his good works, which are yet not his own but done by God through him.<sup>141</sup> From outward works, however, one cannot distinguish between the fully sanctified and those who are only regenerate. Outward works must be measured according to the grace accorded to man and from which they spring. Right judgement can only be passed if regard be had to the inward state of his heart: his perfect love to God and total resignation to His will.<sup>142</sup> It is true that certain circumstances make it probable that a man is fully sanctified. Yet this cannot be known with certainty, any more than we can know whether a particular individual is justified, "unless it should please God to endow us with the miraculous discernment of spirits."<sup>143</sup>

Wesley links up the idea of humility with his conception of perfection. Humility is given the primary significance of man's self-knowledge before God. The meaning of the term varies according to the particular stage in the order of salvation at which the individual finds himself. Before justification it means conviction of sin and guilt and complete helplessness.<sup>144</sup> Here it is identified with the repentance that precedes justifying faith. It is not until in justification man has been accorded the gift of atonement that his nature can be imbued with "true genuine Christian humility." This is achieved by a sense of the love of God, who is reconciled in Christ. It is seen in man's continual sense of total dependence on God and of his utter inability to do good without the ceaseless communication of God's grace. Such a man will detest "the praise of men, knowing that all praise is due unto God only." At the same time he will feel "a loving shame, a tender humiliation before God, even for the sins which we know He hath forgiven us, and for the sin which still remaineth in our hearts, although we know it is not imputed to our condemnation." The conviction of inbred sin will be intensified in proportion as man grows in grace and the knowledge of God and thus also becomes aware of his alienation from God and of his carnal mind.<sup>145</sup> Here, then, humility chiefly means the same thing as repentance after justification.

With perfect sanctification humility comes to an even greater degree than before to mean man's sense of total dependence on God. The fully sanctified are aware that their perfection is solely due to the unceasing operation in them, instant for instant, of God omnipotent.<sup>146</sup> Thus in Wesley humility does not conflict with perfection. On the contrary humility is regarded as a fruit of love.<sup>147</sup> Progress in sanctification, the essence of which to Wesley was love, must be accompanied by progress in humility. And so from this angle, too, we see the difference between perfect sanctification and the earlier stages of the Christian life. Whereas earlier humility was mixed with pride, the fully sanctified are also perfect in humility.<sup>148</sup>

As to the general characteristics of sanctification, Wesley defines holiness as both inward and outward righteousness. In this he shows an intention which is everywhere apparent in his thought. He is contending against religious formalism on the one hand and Antinomianism and Quietism on the other.<sup>149</sup> He is strongly opposed to the kind of religion which consists of nothing but outward forms and insists that it should be a matter of the heart. Here he is in agreement both with practical mysticism and the Moravians. On the other hand he is just as opposed to Quietist mysticism<sup>150</sup> and the Antinomianism he detected among Zinzendorf and his followers<sup>151</sup>. He is opposed indeed to every kind of mysticism to which the inward temper was everything and which neglected the importance of its outward expression in works. Against such mysticism he also insisted on the importance of the means of grace.<sup>152</sup> He urges, that is, an inward against a purely outward religion, and an outward against such a purely inward type as Quietist mysticism.<sup>153</sup> It is in the combination of these that he sees sanctity.<sup>154</sup>

Entire sanctification becomes a perfecting of the personality. It is clear from what has been said that to Wesley perfection is not only perfection in actual acts; it embraces as well the whole disposition which lies

behind them, the soul with all its tempers. He sees perfection as perfection in obedience too, but this is an expression of the inward perfection of the individual personality or character. The day of judgment, he says, will reveal "every inward working of every human soul; every appetite, passion, inclination, affection, with the various combinations of them, with every temper and disposition that constitute the whole complex character of each individual." Then it shall be "clearly and infallibly seen, who was righteous, and who unrighteous; and in what degree every action, or person, or character was either good or evil."<sup>155</sup> Entire sanctification, which is reflected even in the smallest things in life, is seen in the harmony of the soul.<sup>156</sup> He calls the fully sanctified "patterns of strict holiness."<sup>157</sup> The perfection which makes them like Christ and qualifies them for glorification, is an inherent holiness.<sup>158</sup>

Thus to Wesley perfection means the perfected and harmonious personality. It is presented as a perfection of character. This is clearly seen in the delineation of perfection which, following Clemens Alexandrinus<sup>159</sup>, he gives in *The Character of a Methodist*, or in his account of John Fletcher's character in his biography of him<sup>160</sup>. Christianity in general can be considered not only as "a principle in the soul" but also as "a scheme or system of doctrine, which describes the character."<sup>161</sup> In this he links up with those early Fathers who influenced him.<sup>162</sup> Here his view shows affinities with the ideal of perfection that has its root in Greek thought.<sup>163</sup> And here he is also continuing the line of the practical mystics, Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law, on whose ideal of *Imitatio Christi* he modelled so much of his thought.

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