John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection



John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection

By James M. Hill

The Problem: Can Justified Christians Achieve Perfection Through a Sudden Working of the HOly Spirit in Their Lifetimes and Subsequently Live in Sinless Perfection?

Because God is perfectly holy, he cannot have fellowship with unrighteous, fallen people who descended from the seed of Adam after the Fall (Gen 3:6). Humans, as image bearers of God, lost fellowship with God, but God provided for their salvation by condescending in the form of the God-Man to atone for their sin. God gave new spiritual life to all that repent of their sin and trust in the finished work of the Son of God on the cross at Calvary. Through this spiritual rebirth, God imputed the righteousness of Christ and declared them justified before Him.[1] This treatise examines whether or not God, who declared believers positionally righteous (justified), also provided the means of grace to be instantaneously holy or sanctified. This is what came to be known as John Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection. Is God's grace a discrete, stair step affair, with justification as the first measure of grace in the lives of believers, Christian perfection the second, and sanctification everything upwards after the first step? Or is sanctification a lifelong process

unable to be totally completed in a believer's lifetime? Does the Holy Spirit impart a second, sudden working of grace such that believers are entirely sanctified, thus eliminating their sinful natures in their natural lifetimes? Are there three levels of people, the lost, the justified, and the entirely sanctified, or just the first two? Can accurate theology be developed or even validated upon the basis of personal experience, or is it a purely scholarly affair?

INTERPETATIONS THROUGHOUT THE CHURCH

Most Reformers and Evangelicals on Sanctification

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) states, "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die until sin, and live unto righteousness."[2] This view of gradually increasing holiness is typical of the Reformers and evangelicals, except for the traditions that arose out of the Wesleyan movement, including the Methodist, Holiness, and Nazarene traditions. Unlike the Roman Catholic doctrine that posits sanctification as the increase of justification, the tradition of the Reformers and evangelicals abides by a solid distinction between the two concepts, "while affirming that the two are inextricably related." [3] Lewis and Demarest summarize this theological position by stating:

In terms of differences, justification is a legal declaration of right standing before God (imputed righteousness), whereas sanctification makes the believer existentially holy (inherent righteousness). Moreover, justification is an instantaneous event, whereas sanctification is a lifelong process. Finally, justification allows for no degrees, whereas sanctification admits of degrees.[4]

One of the keystones of this position is the dual nature of the Christian. On one hand, believers are purified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Corin 6:11). They are accounted positionally righteous before God through faith in Jesus and his sacrificial death (Eph 2:8-9, Heb 10:10). On the other hand they still possess a sinful nature inherited from Adam as a result of the Fall, and don't always do the things that God calls them to.[5] Paul said in Romans 7:18, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not."[6] "Christians realize entire sanctification or moral perfection not in this life but in the life to come when they behold Christ (1 John 3:2)."[7] Calvin believed in a lifelong process of sanctification. Demarest and Lewis quoted Calvin as stating, "We teach that in the saints, until they are divested of mortal bodies, there is always sin; for in their flesh there resides that depravity of inordinate desiring which contends against righteousness."[8] Luther held a similar view and made the following statement in *Table-Talk* No. CCLVI:

Original sin, after regeneration, is like a wound that begins to heal; though it be a wound, yet it is in course of healing, though it still runs and is sore. So original sin remains in Christians until they die, yet itself is mortified and continually dying. Its head is crushed in pieces, so that it cannot condemn us.

Both Calvin and Luther denied "any perfection other than imputed perfection." Later Reformers, including the Anabaptists, reacted against an "under-emphasis on holy living." [9] This was likely one of the factors that led to John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, along with his dislike of Calvin's position on eternal security.

John Wesley on Christian Perfection

John Wesley was the seventeenth century founder of Methodism who formulated the doctrine of entire sanctification from 1739 to 1760. "In public address he used the terms "Christian Perfection," "Perfect Love," and "Holiness," as synonymous, though there are differences between them when examined critically."[10] The basis of his theory was that after a Christian become a believer by being spiritually reborn and indwelled by the power of the Holy Spirit, at some point after a period of growth in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ there was an instantaneous act of sanctification. Therefore, even though there was gradual growth in sanctification after the believer was justified by God, after a "final, all-surrendering act of faith in Christ, it reaches an instantaneous completion through the act of the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier."[11] According to Greathouse, the teaching of John Wesley was that this initial work of gradual sanctification may be "cut short in a moment, by faith, when the heart is cleansed from the inward root of sin – pride, self-will, atheism, or idolatry – and perfected in the love of God. As a consequence of this deeper cleansing of the heart the Christian is enabled to grow more normally toward perfected Christ-likeness."[12]

Greathouse's definition of Christian perfection is:

. . . the glorious teaching that through the provisions of the sacrifice of Christ and the personal agency of the Holy Spirit, and on the condition of simple faith, those who savingly trust in Christ may be cleansed from original sin, or depravity, and brought into a state of entire devotement to God and unselfish love for their fellowman.[13]

One would likely never find such a concise definition of Christian perfection among John Wesley's writings. Rather, John Wesley's normally accepted view as rendered by Greathouse developed gradually over the life of his ministry. Wesley said that he developed his unique view on sanctification because he "thought it was scriptural." In the same quote, John Wesley went on to say, "But I still think that perfection is only another term for holiness, or the image of God in man."[14] Wesley's doctrine seems to have very much been driven by his concept of holiness as Christians living out their lives in God's perfect image through his Son Jesus Christ.

John Wesley left some small amounts of room for interpretation of what he meant by perfection. In his sermon and subsequent tract *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he defined Christian

perfection by stating, "By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions." Wesley went on to excuse slight misdeeds by "perfected" Christians by saying, "there is no such perfection in this life, as implies an entire deliverance, either from ignorance, or mistake, in things not essential to salvation, or from manifold temptations, or from numberless infirmities, wherewith the corruptible body more or less presses down the soul." With the leeway given, Wesley went on to say, "I do not contend for the term *sinless*, though I do not object against it.[15] In the same tract, Wesley spoke about what he called the "Circumcision of the Heart."

It is the habitual disposition of the soul which, in the sacred writing, is termed holiness, and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit; and, by consequence the being endued with those virtues which were in Christ Jesus the being so renewed in the image of our mind as to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. . . . In what sense are they perfect? Observe, we are not now speaking of babes in Christ, but adult Christians. ***But even babes in Christ are so far perfect as not to commit sin*** (emphasis added).[16]

How then did Wesley define sin? In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley stated, "But does not the Scripture say, 'A just man sinneth seven times a day?' It does not. Indeed it says, 'A just man falleth seven times.' But this is quite another thing' for, first the words, a day, are not in the text. Secondly, here is no mention of falling into sin at all. What is here mentioned is, falling into *temporal affliction* (emphasis added)." Wesley admits that the apostles sinned, but because they sinned does not mean that all Christians have to sin. [17] Wesley's definition of active or overt sin was so telling of his whole theology that it was quoted completely from Carter as follows.

Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a ***voluntary transgression of a known law of God***. Therefore, every voluntary breach of the law of live is sin; and nothing else, if we speak properly. To strain the matter farther is only to make way for Calvinism. There may be ten thousand wandering thoughts and forgetful intervals without any breach of love, though not without transgressing the Adamic law. But Calvinists would fain confound these together. Let love fill your heart, and it is enough (emphasis added).[18] This is not far from what 1 John 3:4 says, minus the attacks on Calvin, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness."

Did Wesley agree that believers can be tempted, yet without sin? John Wesley made it clear that he believed so. In the questions and answers section in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he stated a variety of answers to various hypothetical questions. Question 14 was, "But can one that is saved from sin be tempted?" His answer was, "Yes; for Christ was tempted." In response to question 15 regarding the difference between temptation and corruption of the heart, he said, ""A woman solicits me. Here is a temptation to lust. But in the instant I shrink back. And I feel no desire or lust at all; of which I can be as sure, as that my hand is cold or hot."[19]

Wesley found scriptural support for his position on sanctification in various New Testament passages. He interpreted the seventh chapter of Romans not as a description of the experience of an advanced believer as has been taught throughout the centuries, but as that of an unregenerate man.

He posited that "entire sanctification" occurred by the eighth chapter and therefore described the experience of a wholly sanctified believer. [20] Orr, et. al., regarding Wesley's position stated, "Thus sanctification is gradual, but entire sanctification is instantaneous . . ."[21] Wesley also looked to 2 Corinthians 7:1, "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." Other Epistles were quoted by Wesley, such as Ephesians 4:13, "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Even though Wesley posited that the context of Romans 7 was that of an unregenerate man, he quoted just a few verses earlier in the previous chapter for support, "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin (Rom 6:6)." One wonders if Wesley understood that the translators added the paragraph breaks that were not in the original text. He also looked to Galatians 2:20(a), "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live," and sought support in 1 Thess. 5:23, "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly . . . ." In this passage "the word *sanctify* is a Greek aorist tense, signifying an act and not a process, as also in John 17:19, 'that they . . . may be sanctified in truth,' or truly."[22] The reasoning is that if Paul didn't think that God was able to accomplish these things during the natural lives of Christians, he wouldn't have written it. In the same light, Wesley also appealed to verses such as Matt. 5:48, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect," with Hebrews 10:14, "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified," along with 1 John 4:18, "perfect love casting out (all) fear. Finally, Wesley made frequent appeals to 1 John 3:9, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."[23]

In the same treatise, Wesley defended his position in light of the writings of St. John in 1 John 1:8-10, the latter which states, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (v. 10)." Again, his reasoning regarding this text was particularly telling of his whole theology. His entire response to the critics was as follows.[24]

(1.) The tenth verse fixes the sense of the eighth: "If we say we have no sin," in the former, being explained by, "If we say we have not sinned," in the latter verse. (2.) The point under consideration is not, whether we have or have not sinned heretofore; and neither of these verses asserts that we do sin or commit sin now. (3.) The ninth verse explains both the eighth and the tenth: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." As if he had said, "I have before affirmed, the blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin. And no man can say, 'I need it not; I have no sin to be cleansed from.' If we say we have no sin, that we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves and make God a liar. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, not only to forgive us our sins, but also to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, that we may go and sin no more. In conformity therefore, both to the doctrine of St. John, and the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion: *A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin* (emphasis added).[25]

Wesley found proof of the attainment of the second working of grace in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made

perfect in love." Wesley said that additional proof came from the testimony of the Holy Spirit, per 1 Corinthians 2:12, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God."[26] In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley clarified the spiritual evidence for the achievement of Christian perfection. In question he was asked, hypothetically, "But how do you know, that you are sanctified, saved from your inbred corruption?" In response, Wesley stated:

We know it 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 afterward 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.[27]

The Early Church on Sanctification

Augustine believed that even though the Christian was accounted positionally righteous before God through justification, their sanctification gradually conformed them to the image of Christ.[28] Greathouse, who seemed to stress the extent to which he thought (wrongly) that Augustine espoused the view, stated:

While Augustine can be cited as an advocate of this truth (Christian perfection), his pessimistic doctrine of Original Sin with its notion of ineradicable concupiscence has been the single greatest foe of the doctrine, especially in Protestantism. Developed in his controversy with Pelagius, this latter idea upstaged Augustine's earlier confidence in the possibilities of grace and became the standard view of most Reformed and Lutheran theologies. ***The permanent residue of Augustine's doctrine in the view that human nature is irretrievable sinful this side of the resurrection*** (emphasis added)**.**"[29]

Augustine seemed to dismiss the possibility of Christian perfection during the natural life. Demarest and Lewis quoted Augustine as saying, "There is not a man living in the present life who is not absolutely free from sin."[30]

Several church fathers held a view similar to John Wesley. Friesen quoted Ignatius as writing, "No man truly making a profession of faith sinneth; nor does he that possesses love hate anyone." "Irenaeus and the Shepherd of Hermas also believed that perfection was possible while Tertullian did not expect perfection until after death." [31]

BIBLICAL TEACHING AND THEOLOGICAL INTERACTION

Old Testament

In the OT the call of the prophets was a "demand for personal righteousness and social justice." This was evident in such passages as Psalm 18:30 stating God is perfect, but with Psalm 18:32, "It is God that girdeth me with strength, and maketh my way perfect." God instructed Abraham to be perfect, "And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect (Gen 17:1)." Greathouse tied God's requirement "And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might (Deut 6:5)" with a call to personal holiness. [32] The word translated "perfect" from the Hebrew is *tamiym*. According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, even though the root *tamam* indicates "a move towards that which is ethically sound," the fundamental idea is that of completeness. The *Wordbook* goes on to tie NT Pharisaism to the root word, something that the followers of Wesley should take careful note. "Those who make them (claims of perfection) do not profess to be absolutely sinless, but they do disclaim all fellowship with the wicked." It goes on to say, "other than (the) passages referring to God himself, the OT resists claims to ultimate perfection."[33]

The OT contains an important theological construct in the Pentateuch, that of unintentional sin, closely related to the sin of omission. In Leviticus 4 the Lord gave to Moses the process for the sin offering. Verse two states, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: Say to the Israelites: 'When anyone sins *unintentionally* and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD's commands' (NIV, emphasis added)."[34] The concept of unintentional sin is prevalent throughout the Pentateuch. In Leviticus applies the requirement for a sin offering to individual people (4:27, 5:15), leaders (4:22), the whole community (4:13), and the Gentiles alike (15:29). The concept of the sin of omission is also clearly found in the NT (James 2:15-16).

Gospels

In the Gospels and the rest of the NT, the key concept of perfection revolves around variations of the Greek word *teleioi*. In Matthew 5:48 Jesus said, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The word in the original is the Greek is *teleioi*, and as in to OT, means "complete." Friesen said, "In almost every case where the word 'perfect' is used in reference to people in the New Testament it is a translation of this word *teleios*." He went on to analyze the verse and concluded that in order to be perfect, the universal call to believers is that they must come follow Jesus.[35] In several of Wesley's sermons he argued how God could command perfection if man were unable to achieve it. In light of a more accurate translation of the Greek, perhaps Wesley should have looked to the concept of completion of God's promises to humanity in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us." Or,

Phil 1:6, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Other New Testament Literature

Paul provided on interesting insight into his own sinfulness in the seventh chapter of Romans. Paul said, "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin (7:14)." As stated earlier, Wesley interpreted the seventh chapter of Romans not as a description of the experience of an advanced believer as has been taught throughout the centuries, but as that of an unregenerate man. He posited that "entire sanctification" occurred by the eighth chapter and therefore described the experience of a wholly sanctified believer. An exegetical study of Romans shows that this was not Paul's intention. In 7:22 Paul stated, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law (NIV)." This hardly sounds like Paul reflecting on his sinful past prior to his conversion on the Damascus road.

In 1 Corinthians 2:6, the KJV uses the word "perfect" whereas the NIV renders *teleios* as "mature." This is similar to the NIV rendering of *teleios* in Luke 6:40 as "fully trained." The NIV is a much more accurate translation of the word, since in the longer context of the passage from 2:6 – 3:3 Paul describes the characteristics of mature people, the *teleioi*. "The *teleioi* are involved in a growing process. They are different from natural men and also from immature Christians and these differences are demonstrated by their behavior." In 1 Corinthians 14:20 Paul instructed the people to be adults (*teleios*) in their understanding (from the NIV). Friesen comments, "The *teleioi* are gifted and use their gifts to build up others in the Church. . . . Their concern is for the growth of those within the community and for those who have not yet experienced new life."[36] It is evident from the passages that the idea of perfection from the KJV translation is much more accurately reflected in the concept of spiritual obedience and maturity than sinless perfection.

The prison epistles speak to the concept of *teleioi* in Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. In Ephesians 4:13 Paul states, "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect (*teleios*) man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The NIV substitutes the word "mature." "The verses preceding 4:13 describe a process whereby maturity or perfection may be reached. God has given apostles . . . to the Church so that these person may equip all the saints for the building up of the Church."[37] The KJV rendering of "perfect" in Phil 3:12 illustrates the point even more: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect (*teleioo*) . . ." Here Paul states that he has not yet been made perfect, but is in the process of being perfected, pressing on towards "the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (v. 14)." In Colossians 1:28 Paul says, "Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect (*teleios*) in Christ Jesus." "Paul believes that he has done a part in bringing others to perfection. He does this by admonishing and teaching."[38] Clearly, Paul's goal is to utilize his spiritual gifts to so "that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ (2 Corin 11:2c)."

Perhaps the most prominent verse in the Epistles that speaks regarding Wesley's view of Christian perfection is 1 John 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in

us." Commenting on the verse, Adam Clarke (1760-1832), a prominent Wesleyan minister, theologian, and scholar born in Londonderry, Ireland said the following.

This is tantamount to 1Jo 1:10: If we say that we have not sinned. All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; and therefore every man needs a Savior (sic), such as Christ is. It is very likely that the heretics, against whose evil doctrines the apostle writes, denied that they had any sin, or needed any Savoir (sic). In deed, the Gnostics even denied that Christ suffered: the AEon, or Divine Being that dwelt in the man Christ Jesus, according to them, left him when he was taken by the Jews; and he, being but a common man, his sufferings and death had neither merit nor efficacy.[39]

Clarke's straw man argument that the passage was written to confront the Gnostic heretics is not justified in light of the historical context of this section of the text. Clark stated the overall purpose of 1 John by, "I therefore consider that which is commonly called the First Epistle of St. John as a book or treatise, in which the apostle declared to the whole world his disapprobation of the doctrines maintained by Cerinthus and the Gnostics."[40] Such a statement is true, except even a cursory examination of the first chapter reveals that the content of this section is more regarding "the fundamental tests of genuine fellowship," and the pericope containing verse nine is concerning "a biblical view of sin."[41] To say that verse nine speaks specifically to the Gnostic heresy is faulty logic from a straw man argument. Albert Barnes, holding to the opposite view, said, "he meant to say that if a man should claim to be perfect, or to be wholly sanctified, it would demonstrate that he deceived himself; and the two statements go to prove that neither in reference to the past nor the present can any one lay claim to perfection."[42] Spurgeon, commenting on the passage in 1 John 5 said, "We understand by this not that believers are perfectly free from sinning, but that they do not sin habitually, willfully, and openly as the unregenerate do."[43]

Wesley often quoted 1 John 3:9 regarding the ability for perfected believers to sin, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.." The word sin in this text is the Greek verb *hamartanein* in the present active infinitive tense. This indicates a continuing action of sin rather than discrete events. The passage literally means, "Born again Christians don't persistently sin in an ongoing manner." Barnes agrees, "If it can be used as referring to the doctrine of absolute perfection at all, it proves, not that Christians may be perfect, or that a portion of them are, but that all are. But who can maintain this? Who can believe that John meant to affirm this? Nothing can be clearer than that the passage has not this meaning." Rather, Barnes says, "This passage must (mean that) they who are born of God, that is, who are true Christians, do not sin habitually and characteristically." [44]

Wesley had a tendency of selectively applying verses to prove his doctrine of perfection. The Book of Hebrews declares in chapter 12, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (v. 14). Wesley declined to apply this verse to Christians in general, those justified and entirely sanctified. According to the ISBE speaking about Wesley, "The declaration 'without sanctification no man shall see the Lord' (Heb 12:14), does not apply to the saints, 'the holy ones.'"[45] Again we saw Wesley picking and choosing which verses, or portions of verses apply in order to create his doctrine of entire sanctification.

Friesen did an analysis of the concept of *teleioi* in all of the NT uses, including Hebrews. He made an excellent summary in Hebrews regarding his derivation of the meaning of perfection as meaning spiritual maturity and obedience. As we leave the scriptural study section, he note the following summation in his section on Hebrews:

In this letter we see that the *teleioi* are people who are able to move beyond the discussion of elementary doctrines and accept and even teach solid food from God's Word. They are holy people, but they are also in the process of being made holy. This progress is not merely passive growth – the *teleioi* are actively involved in the process of growth. (They) are able to discern good and evil because they constantly practice obedience.

The author couldn't state it any better than that. The concept of perfection in the Bible is that of believers constantly growing and being obedient to the commandments and image of Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest difficulties of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is found in James regarding the sin of omission. "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? (2:15-16)." Even if the Christian was perfect in outward behavior and somehow avoid sins of commission, they are often guilty of sins of omission as was shown by God's need to include deliverance for this sin in Leviticus.

CONCLUSION

Spiritual Perfection: A Theology of Experience

We concur with Lindstrom that Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is a "theology of experience."[46] What role does experience play in the development of any theological doctrine? Bett looked at in an interesting way and found that Wesley "founded religion and theology in the fact of experience."[47] Wesley objected to such criticisms, saying "if man is not to go astray it (theology) must be checked by the Bible.[48] It seems logical that theology could be evaluated on the basis of personal experience, but what role does bringing a "pre-understanding" to the biblical text have in developing doctrine in the first place? It is evident that every theologian brings along a certain level of pre-understanding, and Wesley was not different in that regard. Also, unless the theologian remains teachable, an overactive experiential pre-understanding brought to bear upon the text will produce alternative views from an otherwise plain exegesis. Perhaps a red flag for this type of theological development is their mandating of sudden contextual shifts within discrete areas of the biblical text. Such contextual deviations are evident in Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. It is evident that Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is indeed a doctrine of experience. More careful exegesis of the relevant verses would have revealed to Mr. Wesley that the central concepts of Christian perfection were that of spiritual growth and obedience, not sinless perfection. Friesen, in his concluding remarks stated, "The *teleioi* are not portrayed as those who have attained absolute perfection. They always strive toward perfection and are not content to settle for less."[49] Perhaps

this is the greatest risk of following Wesley's doctrine, that one may cease growing in knowledge and maturity to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Relevance to Life and Ministry

It is very important in ministry to have a clear understanding of the nature and process of sanctification, as well as how the various Christian churches understand the doctrine. First, it is crucial to be able to explain the various sects and denominations of the Christian faith to new believers such that they are not put off by the appearance of divisions in the body of Christ. Even if groups of believers believe in the doctrine of Christian perfection, for the purposes of unity in the body of Christ a certain measure of tolerance must be expressed. It is extremely important to recognize John Wesley's huge contributions to the Christian church in America. This is not to say that we should tolerate false teachings, which Scripture warns about extensively, but Christians must come as a united force against the powers of darkness. In the case of Christian perfection, the belief of this doctrine is nicely balanced by the same denomination's belief in Arminianism. This keeps them continually resisting temptations and striving towards their salvation anyway. Albeit that this comes at the risk of becoming prideful – something which many Christians struggle with regardless of their denomination. Second, as the Wesleyan churches well know, eternal security is a closely related concept. This related doctrine should be preached to proclaim the truth of 1 John 5:13, but along with the warning verses. This will help believers maintain a healthy humility and respect for the power, sovereignty, and grace of God. Believers need to be given an assurance of their salvation in a world filled without almost no certainty in many other areas of their lives. They should be shown that God expects them to persevere under His power, not their own. Believers need assurance that God has gifted them with every resource that they need to accomplish His purposes in their lives. This striving includes a continuous growth towards perfection, but this is not something that will be accomplished until after they die.

END NOTES

---

[1] Bruce A. Demarest and Gordon R. Lewis, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), Vol. III, 173.

[2] Ibid., 177.

[3] Ibid., 175, 184.

[4] Ibid., 184.

[5] Ibid.

[6] All verse quotations are KJV unless otherwise indicated. This is necessary to facilitate comparisons to John Wesley's writings.

[7] Demarest, 185.

[8] Ibid., 186.

[9] Robert Friesen, "Christian Perfection," *Direction* 13 (July 1984): 25-32.

[10] James Orr and others, eds., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), s.v. "Sanctification."

[11] Ibid.

[12] William M. Greathouse, *From the Apostles to Wesley: Christian Perfection in Historical Perspective* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 15.

[13] Ibid., 12-13.

[14] Charles W. Carter, *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 521.

[15] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, London: [1777], n.p.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Carter, 270-271.

[19] Ibid.

[20] John C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001, orig. 1879), xxii.

[21] Orr.

[22] Orr.

[23] Wesley.

[24] N.B. A Prize will be awarded for any student that can follow this quotation!

[25] Wesley.

[26] Orr.

[27] Wesley.

[28] Demarest and Lewis, 185.

[29] Greathouse, 9.

[30] Demarest and Lewis, 185.

[31] Friesen, 25.

[32] Greathouse, 23.

[33] *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), #8552.

[34] Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973,

1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of International Bible Society. "NIV" and "NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark office by International Bible Society.

[35] Friesen, 26.

[36] Ibid., 27.

[37] Ibid., 28.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*, abridged [CD-ROM], 1 John 1:8.

[40] Ibid., 1 John 1:1.

[41] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible,* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 1962.

[42] Albert Barnes, *Albert Barnes' NT Commentary* [CD-ROM].

[43] *Spurgeon Devotional Commentary*, on 1 John 3:1-6.

[44] Barnes, 1 John 3:9.

[45] Orr.

[46] Harold Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification.* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Asbury Publishing, 1981), 2.

[47] Ibid., 3.

[48] Ibid., 5.

[49] Friesen, 30.

Bibliography

Barnes, Albert. *Albert Barnes' NT Commentary* [CD-ROM].

Clarke, Adam. *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*, abridged [CD-ROM].

Carter, Charles W. *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983.

Demarest, Bruce A. and Gordon R. Lewis. *Integrative Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.

Friesen, Robert. "Christian Perfection," *Direction* 13 (July 1984): 25-32.

Greathouse, William M. *From the Apostles to Wesley: Christian Perfection in Historical Perspective*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979.

Lindstrom, Harold. *Wesley and Sanctification*. Wilmore, Kentucky: Asbury Publishing, 1981.

MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Study Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997.

Metz, Donald S. *Studies in Biblical Holiness*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1971.

Northwest Nazarene University. *Wesley Center Online*. Home page online. Available from http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/index.htm; Internet, accessed 5 Nov. 2005.

Orr, James, John Nuelsen, Edgar Mullins, Morris Evans, and Melvin Kyle, eds. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (ISBE). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956.

Ryle, John. C. *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*. Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001 (orig. 1879).

Spurgeon Devotional Commentary.

Strong's Greek Dictionary.

Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980.

Wesley, John. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. London: [1777].

Christian Perfection.pdfDownload