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AN EXAMINATION OF THE PREMISES OF WESLEY'S
DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Concordia Seminary
Department of Systematic Theology

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Divinity

by
Anthony S. Gedwillo
May 12, 1947

Approved by: _____

A. E. Meyer

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE PREMISES OF WESLEY'S
DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE PREMISES OF WESLEY'S
DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

For the past two centuries theologians have discussed the pros and cons of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. Many have voiced their opinions in favor of it, maintaining that this high ethical ideal is certainly to be supported because there is the possibility of attainment; others have discredited it most severely by contending that such a Christian goal was not possible in this world, in this life, so long as the flesh of man was united with the soul of man.

"Christian perfection" has become a technical term, and if the term is to be understood, it must be studied from the Wesleyan point of view. What he meant by the term shall be presented later, but in which will be seen any number of contradictions as progression is made from one point to another. Suffice it to say, many have tried to honestly understand Wesley and present his cause fairly, among them being a modern writer, W.E. Sangster, who has undertaken a study of the matter, and then makes the following statement:

There is an experience of God the Holy Spirit, available for all who will seek it with importunity, which imparts spiritual power far above the level enjoyed by the average Christian: which inspires a caring God-like love different in kind and degree from the affections of normal nature: which communicates to the eager soul the penetrating power of holiness. No book can give this experience. It belongs to the secret intercourse of the soul with God. It lies at the very heart of personal religion. Its wide reception would

transform the Church and shake the world.¹

Sangster quotes the opinion of Dr. R.W. Dale (1879) who states:

"There was one doctrine of John Wesley's--the doctrine of perfect sanctification--which ought to have led to a great and original ethical development; but the doctrine has not grown; it seems to remain just where John Wesley left it. There has been a want of the genius or the courage to attempt the solution of the immense practical questions which the doctrine suggests. The questions have not been raised--much less solved. To have them raised effectively, indeed, would have been to originate an ethical revolution which would have had a far deeper effect on the thought and life--first of England, and then of the rest of Christendom--than was produced by the Reformation of the sixteenth century."²

Again, Sangster quotes the statement of Professor George Croft Cell (1934) as follows:

"Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection has been inadvertently stigmatized as a theological provincialism of Methodism. ...'It is the innermost kernel of the Christian ethic of life and is thoroughly rooted and grounded in New Testament teaching and in the teaching of historic Christianity.'...It is an original and unique synthesis of the Protestant ethic of Grace with the Catholic ethic of holiness."³

Thus, we see, in the opinion of many scholars, that the Wesleyan doctrine of "perfection" is not simply a Wesleyan provincialism coined to satisfy a whim of a certain man, but that in their opinion there is evidence for it from Scripture, and cannot be lightly brushed aside as non-existent, unfounded, or impossible.

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1. W.E. Sangster, The Path To Perfection, p. 8.
 2. ibid., p. 2.
 3. ibid., p. 2.

An important fact to be taken into consideration is the background of the man who contended for this particular doctrine, and how it affected the method which he proposed for achieving it.

I. Wesley's Background

To correctly understand any individual in the way in which he thinks, acts, or feels, it is necessary to know and examine his background, that is, family life, home training, and religious instruction; for all men are the products and results of heredity, environment, and religion--each influencing the other, and each commingling with the other and bearing upon the total make-up of the individual.

To gain a better understanding of Wesley, it is necessary to look into the circumstances of his parental influence. Born on June 17th, 1703, John was the fifteenth of the nineteen children. His birthplace, and the scene of most of his boyhood, was Epworth, a Lincolnshire town in England. His brother Charles, destined to play a prominent role with John, was born four years later.

Samuel Wesley, the father, was of a good family, the son of a minister, and a minister himself in the Church of England. He was a High Churchman of the Established Church to which he had previously been converted, and as is many times the case with converts, was a very zealous and sincere to the principles of the religion to which he had turned.

His stern and determined practice of religion was also carried over into the life of his family. When it came to the enforcing of discipline, whether it was needed in the church or in his home, he was of the strictest sect. He aroused the opposition of his parishioners through his rigid discipline, for "he was strict...according to the standards of the day, in keeping the fasts and ceremonies of the Church...advised reading prayers on every holiday and on Wednesdays and Fridays, and he would like to have read prayers also on the eves of holidays. It was his custom to administer the Lord's Supper once a month, which was the practice of pious clergymen in that period." ¹

Samuel Wesley could not always devote the time that was needed for his family because it was necessary for him to travel a good deal in fulfillment of his other church capacities. Though he tried to give "life and ambition to his household," he did not always inspire love from his children; and "if he did not inspire love in his children, from his sons, at least, he called forth the deepest respect."²

Wherein the father of this family may have failed, the mother, Susannah Wesley, apparently succeeded. She is reputed to be one of the most praised women of Christendom, born of a good family, the daughter of a minister (a nonconformist), and credited by her contemporaries as a woman of great

1. Umphrey Lee, John Wesley and Modern Religion, p. 40ff.

2. ibid., p. 43.

charm and an equal amount of beauty. She was evidently a girl and a woman with a strong will, for at an early age she was already reading the Fathers and coming to her own conclusions over those matters of dispute in religion, about which her elders were, as yet, undecided--even to the point of disagreeing with her father ! She possessed a strong will, a learning beyond the average of the day, and a patience and "...ability for discipline which has remained a marvel to all students of Methodism."¹

The influence of this mother upon her children was so great that it can be readily seen in the Wesley boys for years to come. They were trained in habit with methodical procedure. John Wesley in his "Journal" wrote concerning the principles which his mother employed in educating her children.

"When turned year old (and some before), they were taught to fear the rod, and to cry softly; by which means they escaped abundance of correction they might otherwise have had, and that most odious noise of the crying of children was rarely heard in the house, but the family usually lived in as much quietness as if there had not been a child among them."²

With nineteen children, though some died at infancy, it was necessary that some system or method be employed in caring for them, and though her method may seem harsh to the "moderns," yet the effect of this discipline and training in the formative years of a child's life can readily be seen in the characters of John and Charles Wesley when they undertook

1. Quoted by Lee, op. cit., p. 44.

2. Quoted by Lee, op. cit., p. 46.

their great work. The following excerpt gives additional insight, Wesley's mother speaking:

"They were so constantly used to eat and drink what was given them, that, when any of them was ill, there was no difficulty in making them take the most unpleasant medicine; for they durst not refuse it, though some of them would presently throw it up. This I mention to show that a person may be taught to take anything, though it never so much against his stomach. In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will, and bring them to an obedient temper...In the esteem of the world they pass for kind and indulgent whom I call cruel parents, who permit their children to get habits which they know must be afterwards broken."¹

It is readily seen that Mrs. Wesley's household was governed by the strictest rules of "do" and "don't." Again, she used the same method in the religious training and education of the children.

"The children of this family were taught, as soon as they could speak, the Lord's Prayer, which they were made to say at rising and bed-time constantly; to which, as they grew bigger, were added a short prayer for their parents, and some collects; a short catechism, and some portions of Scripture, as their memories could bear."²

That Susannah Wesley was determined in raising her children properly, is seen in the account of her efforts to "reform her children" when they had to live with the neighbors and others after the rectory had burned during one night.³

"When the house was rebuilt, and the children all brought home, we entered upon a strict reform; and then was begun the custom of singing psalms at beginning and leaving school, morning and evening. Then also that of a general retirement at five o'clock was entered upon, when the oldest took the youngest that could speak, and the second the next, to whom they read the Psalms for

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1. Quoted in Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
 2. Quoted in Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
 3. Cf. J. Telford, The Life of John Wesley, pp. 16ff.

the day, and a chapter in the New Testament; as, in the morning, they were directed to read the Psalms and a chapter in the Old; after which they went to their private prayers, before they got their breakfast or came into the family."¹

This was the type of home in which John Wesley spent the first eleven years of his life, and it is, therefore, not unusual when one reads the books on Wesley that his mother is given the tribute as being the "founder of Methodism" through her son. She lived by a method, taught by a method, and disciplined by a method. It is no small wonder that in later life, John and Charles Wesley also lived by a method. The habit of methodical procedure was carried over into their religious life and the system which they used in disseminating the Gospel in dealing with the sins of lost men to bring them to a knowledge and assurance of forgiveness.

The next eleven years of Wesley's life proved to be eventful, shaping his future course of thinking and action. Having left from under the direct care and influence of his mother, he was nominated by the Duke of Buckingham, on January 28, 1714, on the foundation of Charterhouse. This meant that the young man's first years of formal education were to be sponsored by this institution of learning. Life here taught Wesley some lessons of enduring hardship which he would later face in the world, when quite alone. From the age of eleven to fourteen he subsisted mainly on bread and water be-

1. Quoted in Lee, op. cit., p. 46.

cause the older boys would eat the food of the younger. However, he claimed that this put him in good health for the rest of his life, not having the chance to indulge in the appetites of his body. Here he managed to become somewhat lax in his religion by omitting regularity in prayer and Bible reading, but never to the extent that he completely failed to work and act by a "method."¹

The next step in his education came when he was elected to Christ Church, Oxford, on June 24, 1720.² The institution was at a low spiritual and educational level. The outward piety was not to be found, and any strict observance of religious requirements was lacking. What he studied here is hard to determine.

However, when he was elected to a fellowship at Lincoln College in 1726, he became Greek lecturer and moderator of the classes in logic. It seems, that before one could graduate, it was necessary for one to have taken some specified courses in logic. Logic had an appeal for Wesley because he had an affinity for method, so much so, that he would refute his opponents, confuse them, then laugh as he walked away. In these years he read Locke and through this reading formulated some conclusions among which were the following:

"...the true use of it (logic) is the noblest means

1. Telford, op. cit., pp. 23ff.
 2. Christ Church was Cardinal Wolsey's famous college at Oxford University. Wesley was allowed forty pounds a year as a Charterhouse scholar.

under heaven to prevent or cure the obscurity of language. To divide simple terms according to the logical rules of division, and then to define each member of the division according to the three rules of definition, does all that human art can do, in order to our having a clear and distinct idea of every word we use."¹

"Clear and distinct" ideas play a prominent part in the theological and philosophical writings of Wesley. But he was not always true to form in later life, or even in his earlier student years. One cannot help but conclude, when reading Wesley in the effort of gaining a clear conception of his theological ideas and beliefs, that everywhere one is met by inconsistencies and contradictions and apparently confused and clouded concepts of his doctrinal contentions. Therefore, it is well for us to bear his own statement in mind concerning "clear and distinct ideas"--that he could not follow this in doctrine, for apparently he himself did not always have the ability to formulate "clear and distinct ideas," since later in formulating the doctrine of "Christian Perfection," he had much difficulty in harmonizing his method of logic, or reason, with faith.

It must not be thought that Wesley's obsession was logic, or that he was so devoted with intellectual curiosity to learn everything he could, that he finished as a thoroughgoing rationalist, or as a scholar who absorbed everything that came his way. But he did come to some conclusions about knowledge itself, namely, that knowledge is common and useful. To acquire esoteric and abstruse learning was to sub-

1. Lee, op. cit., pp. 53,55.

ject one's self to the pride of the eighteenth-century sense, that is, lifting one-self above the level of the common man. Wesley would have none of this. It is generally agreed, among the students of Wesley, that he is not to be thought of as a great scholar or systematic theologian. This will be evident in the formal examination of his doctrine of Christian perfection.

At the age of twenty-two, he was urged by his father to enter into holy orders. Possibly it was here that he commenced to sense the serious defectiveness of his religion. But the men and the ideas which were to influence the rest of Wesley's life, thought, theology, action, were yet to come.

Before his graduation he came across some books which made such a lasting impression, that he contended until his dying day for the thoughts which he found there and around which he built his doctrines, though somewhat modified in form from that of the authors whom he read. It was the impact of this reading which made him realize the necessity of finding that part in religion which would satisfy him that his sins were forgiven. It did not come to him until some time later at Aldersgate, but his work and contacts spurred him on to this seeking with the climax coming at Aldersgate.

The first book which influenced him was Holy Living and Dying by Jeremy Taylor. Taylor was a distinguished Anglican divine, born in 1613, and the author of many books, discourses, and devotional material. He was termed the "Chrysostom

of England," surpassing in brilliancy of imagination his Greek antetype.¹ Without a doubt, Taylor commanded a great deal of respect, and being the mystical type of personality, he held an appeal for Wesley, especially at this particular time when the young man was seeking to find an assurance of his sins forgiven. He had a head knowledge of salvation and could imitate and speak the words which he had learned from his training, but he had no assurance in his heart that this was true.

The following is Wesley's testimony concerning his reading of Taylor's book.

"In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly affected with that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God: all my thoughts, and words, and actions."²

In passing, mention is made of the fact that he also read a 'Kempis' Imitation of Christ, which also served to stir up his zeal in serving God, but always with the intention of doing something toward or for the attainment of this knowledge and assurance that his sins really were forgiven.³

Hastings quotes from The Journal of John Wesley that the reading of the Imitation taught him that "true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions."⁴

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1. The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Enc., XI, 284.
 2. Hastings, ERE, XII, 724.
 3. Cf. Telford, op. cit., p. 36.
 4. Hastings, ERE, XII, 724.

The man who most vitally influenced Wesley in developing the doctrine of Christian perfection, the examination of which is the object of this thesis, was William Law, an English controversial and devotional writer, born in 1686. Law was a genuine mystic, although he lived in a worldly and rationalistic age, and is best known by his Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life. With the exception of The Pilgrim's Progress, no book on practical religion in the language has, perhaps, been so highly praised. Gibbon, Dr. Johnson, Doddridge, and Wesley vie with each other in commending it as a masterpiece. At one time, Law was a kind of oracle with Wesley, and his influence upon early Methodism was of an almost formative character. Another work which Wesley followed most closely was Law's work A Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection, which was abridged in part by Wesley in 1740.¹

James Mudge gives to us Wesley's own opinions, from whose Works he quotes, concerning the value of William Law's two books, which Wesley used later as the model for his thinking on the doctrine of Christian perfection.

A year or two after, Mr. Law's "Christian Perfection" and "Serious Call" were put into my hands. These convinced me more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian, and I determined through His grace (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of) to be all devoted to God--to give Him all my soul, my body, and my substance. Will any considerate man say that this is carrying matters too far, or that anything less is due to Him who has given Himself for us than to give Him all we have and all we are?²

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1. The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Enc., VI, 431ff.
 2. James Mudge, Heart Religion, p. 89.

Again, a statement concerning his regard for the Bible, Wesley states:

In the year 1729 I began not only to read, but to study the Bible as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw in a clearer and clearer light the indispensable necessity of having "the mind which was in Christ" and of "walking as Christ also walked;" even of having not some part only, but all the mind which was in Him, and of walking as He walked, not only in many or in most respects, but in all things. And this was the light wherein at this time I generally considered religion--as a uniform following of Christ, an entire inward and an outward conformity to our Master. Nor was I afraid of anything more than of bending this rule to the experience of myself or of other men, of allowing myself in any the least disconformity to our Grand Exemplar.¹

From these excerpts it is seen that this leader of the future Methodists made firm resolves in the attempt to "work" for his salvation. He was on the right road when he began to study the Bible as the only standard of truth. Heretofore, he had been relying on the faith of his parents, upon the fact that he lived a methodically pious life; his was a religion, primarily, of the intellect, and not of the heart. He cannot be blamed then when he realized the existence of unforgiven sins in his heart and then sought to do something towards removing them. He sought to find the way by the practice of asceticism, that is, living a rigid existence by denying himself physical indulgences. While to those about him Wesley appeared and seemed to be a deeply religious and pious person, yet, to himself he had to admit that he was deeply dissatisfied and not sure of his salvation, but rather, that

1. Mudge, op. cit., p. 90.

he was most miserable and wretched.

From 1727, after the reading of the books by Taylor, a Kempis, and Law, to Aldersgate in 1738, Wesley is seen as a seeker for the "assurance" of sins forgiven. His dissatisfaction is seen while he was still at Oxford, that he refused to succeed his father at Epworth, because he "could best look for the nurture of his own soul at Oxford...."¹ He preferred Oxford because "of his religious friends, of retirement, of freedom from trifling acquaintance, of freedom from worldly cares, of opportunity for public prayer twice a day, and of weekly communion...which is worth a thousand reasons."²

These, and many more reasons which he stated to his father, betray his anxious and restless spirit.

As will be seen later, this anxiety of spirit undoubtedly motivated his sailing to America as a missionary to the Indians; this same spirit which would not rest until it was satisfied at Aldersgate.

There is something stirring about Wesley's striving to find the "assurance" that he was one of God's children. One sympathizes with him as his spiritual and mental turmoil is demonstrated by the various methods he employed, but his religion was still one of the head, lacking the testimony of the heart. No doubt many have gone through the same trying experiences for the same reasons.

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1. F.J. McConnell, John Wesley, p. 192.
 2. Lee, op. cit., p. 68.

It is usually true of those who have a thorough knowledge of Christian truths, that there is a failure to make this knowledge a reality, because there is no experience of that knowledge in practice. This, indeed, is a discouraging procedure. By 1733, this young man was still seeking, but he had already formulated his beliefs concerning Christian perfection, clothing his thoughts in philosophical and semi-theological terminology. This is evident in the sermon which he preached at St. Mary's, Oxford; a sermon in which he could preach, what he considered to be, the correct words in proper order, but evidently the words of someone else, for as yet the true meaning of these words had not been verified by his experience.

In this sermon Wesley states that the condition of one who is "in a state of acceptance with God" is not verified by "baptism, or any other outward form, but a right state of soul, a mind and spirit renewed after the image of Him that created it." More directly, he spoke of seeking "that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin...and by consequence, the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus; the being so 'renewed in the spirit of our mind,' as to be 'perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.'"¹

1. Quoted by Lee, op. cit., pp. 63ff.

Here is seen his desire--as if he would preach himself into this experience which he is seeking. Lee, in an attempt to justify Wesley's inconsistencies and to ameliorate the evidence accumulating against him that he was preaching to others and yet, seemingly, was not a Christian himself, gives a quotation from Wesley to support the idea that he did not think of this holiness as something which might be achieved by human effort alone; that is:

"Our gospel, as it knows no other foundation of good works than faith, or of faith than Christ, so it clearly informs us, we are not His disciples while we either deny Him to be the Author, or His Spirit to be the Inspirer and Perfecter, both of our faith and works ...He alone can quicken those who are dead unto God, can breathe into them the breath of Christian life, and so prevent, accompany, and follow them with His grace, as to bring their good desires to good effect...From what has been said, we may, thirdly, learn, that none is truly 'led by the Spirit,' unless that 'Spirit bear witness with his spirit, that he is a child of God;' unless he see the prize and the crown before him, and 'rejoice in hope of the glory of God.'¹

That Wesley went through such spiritual travail may, in itself, be evidence that he was not as yet a Christian. But this is a point which is difficult to determine, and will be taken up a bit later.

To gain insight into his doctrine of Christian perfection, it becomes imperative to look into the conversion of Wesley, the nature of it, and the circumstances of the event. In doing this, a clearer understanding will be gained when his doctrine of conversion and justification are considered.

1. Lee, op. cit., pp. 61ff.

That he felt his place was in the ministry is obvious in his pursuit of preaching and missionary work. There was to be a series of contacts and conversations with various people before the night at Aldersgate, where he could say with certainty, that now he had the assurance of his sins forgiven and that he was a son of God.

The first event leading to his conversion was the mission with Oglethorpe to Georgia in 1735. Whether his going to Georgia to minister to the Indians was a subconscious mechanism of escape from his spiritual frustration, or whether his motives were entirely that of Christian service is yet debatable. Before many months were to pass, however, he was to learn that all important lesson that all who have found God have had to learn, namely, that religion is not merely a matter of the "intellect and will," that is, that salvation lies not within the individual, because God is not apprehensible by these means. This is entirely subjective. If one is to gain something which is outside of himself, it must be approached objectively. This fact was soon to be realized by Wesley. What a struggle it was !

The motives which prompted Wesley have been stated by Lee. The first and most important reason why he went to America, as he wrote to Dr. Burton, a Georgia trustee, was to save his own soul ;¹ Yet, this is not too astounding. We have studied his background with its methodical training and

1. Lee, op. cit., p. 70.

have seen that his secular home training in matters of discipline were a series of "do's" and "don't's" carried over into religion. Being the logician that he was, he had to reconcile this cold, practical, formal experience of the intellect with that of the heart. It was this that he was seeking, with Christian perfection as the ultimate achievement of religious experience.

While at Oxford, John and Charles did organize the "Holy Club"¹ whose prime objective was to seek honestly a holiness of heart and life. It was from this small group of seekers that Methodism was born.² Perhaps Wesley was not too satisfied with the progress he was making, and he may even have felt guilty when he spoke of and gave advice concerning this holiness, because he himself did not possess it.

It is no surprise that he tried to lose himself in some sort of Christian service. The American Indians were romanticized by the eighteenth century adventurers as something that they in reality were not. Wesley thought this to be the opportunity which he had been seeking, to bring others to an experience of conversion. In these Indians he imagined to find a pure race which was not defiled by eighteenth century English Deism and would, consequently, have a chance to work with a different category of human nature than that which he

1. Cf. Richard Green, John Wesley, p. 29. The prescribed "method" of life and study in this group caused much comment. A student said, "Here is a new set of Methodists sprung up." The name stuck with them.

2. Cf. Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church, pp. 3ff.

encountered in his own age in England.

By preaching to the Indians, who were thought to have retained religion in a pure state, Wesley hoped to examine and to learn the "sense of the gospel of Christ," for they were as little children who would "know of every doctrine whether it be of God."¹

This was his second motive for going to America, but he felt that he could not preach successfully to the heathen until he himself had reached perfection. Here is the inconsistency in his life; one cannot tell whether he was already a Christian and was seeking perfection, or whether he was just an intellectual religionist seeking conversion. The evidence favors the latter, though some dissent on this point. The pros and cons shall be discussed shortly.²

It was during the ocean voyage that Wesley commenced to realize that his soul was still in bondage to sin. Among the members aboard ship were some Moravians, whom he had opportunity to observe, especially, during a terrific storm at sea. No one knew whether a survival of the storm was possible. English men, women, and children screamed from fright. Wesley admitted later that he too was afraid to die, because he was uncertain that he belonged to God. However, the Moravians did not carry on in this spirit, but remained calm, even the children. They were not afraid to die. He wondered what

1. Lee, op. cit., pp. 70ff.

2. ibid., p. 71.

it was they possessed.

They survived the storm and landed on the shores of Georgia. Spangenberg, one of the leaders of the Moravians, met Wesley the following day, and they engaged in conversation. Wesley sought advice from Spangenberg as to how he should proceed with his work among the Indians. Spangenberg answered him by asking some questions. His first question was followed by more; thus: "Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" Wesley was dumbfounded and completely surprised. The German was keen in observing the reaction and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" He paused, then said, "I know He is the Saviour of the world." "True," was the reply; "But do you know He has saved you?" He answered, "I hope he has died to save me." Spangenberg added, "Do you know yourself?" Wesley replied, "I do." His later comment on this conversation was, "...I fear they were vain words."¹

The trip to America was disappointing, for he had neither converted the Indians, who he discovered were savages and that human nature was the same everywhere only conditioned by environment, nor had he found salvation. He returned to England in 1738.

In the Charleston Hymnbook, which he published in 1737, (Lee states that it is a study of Wesley's spiritual condition), are the following verses, the last deserving special

1. Telford, op. cit., p. 79.

attention:

God's Image which our Sins destroy
 Thy Grace restores below,
 And Truth and Holiness and Joy
 From thee, their Fountain, flow.

We would no longer lie
 Like Slaves beneath thy Throne:
 O let us "Abba," Father, cry
 And thou the Kindred own.

Ten Thousand Thousand precious Gifts
 My daily Thanks employ;
 Nor is the least a chearful Heart
 That tasts (sic) those Gifts with Joy.

Alas, O Lord, we cannot love
 Unless thou draw our Heart !

But there's a Voice of sovereign Grace
 Sounds from thy sacred Word,
 Here ye despairing Sinners come
 And trust upon the Lord.

'Tis not by Works of Righteousness
 Which our own Hands have done,
 But we are saved by sovereign Grace
 Abounding thro' thy Son.¹

Bishop Lee contends from these verses that "Wesley had always believed in faith, faith joined with works...he had always believed that love is the gift of God and that men are saved by the grace of God..." but, "he was still fighting for Christian humility and looking for a converted heart...he had made some gains."² And gains he did make, for he began to realize that the Grace of God is appropriated by faith alone, and not by a combination of works and faith, as he had previ-

1. Quoted in Lee, op. cit., p. 77f.

2. ibid., p. 78.

ously supposed.

Back in England, Wesley's life was one quick succession of events after another, all leading to one grand event—his conversion. He was now seeking salvation by faith alone. Peter Bohler, a Moravian, again was an influence to Wesley, teaching him that justification is by faith alone. The results of his conversations with Bohler are summed up by Wesley as follows: "I was now thoroughly convinced; and, by the grace of God, I resolved to seek it unto the end: (1) By absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon my own works or righteousness; on which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it now, from my youth up. (2) By adding to the constant use of all the other means of grace continual prayer for this very thing, justifying, saving faith, a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for me; a trust in him as my Christ, as my sole justification, sanctification, and redemption;...."¹

The climax of this seeking of "justification by faith alone" came on Wednesday, May 24, 1738. From Wesley's Journal we read:

"I think...it was about five this morning, that I opened my Testament on those words, 'There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises.'" (He writes that, just as he went out, he opened the New Testament again on those words, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." He tells of his afternoon visit to St. Paul's and notes that the anthem was "Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord." We now come to the "locus classicus" of the life of Wesley.) "In the even-

1. No author, John Wesley the Methodist, p. 99f.

ing I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the "Epistle to the Romans." About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away 'my' sins, even 'mine', and saved 'me' from the law of sin and death. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart."¹

It may be of value, in passing, to note that there is some dissension among students of Wesley, as to the full significance and import of the Aldersgate experience. Lecky, the historian, credits this event as being an "epoch in English history...the source of English Methodism."²

Bishop Umphrey Lee is quite emphatic in his denial of the importance of this date, contending that something had happened--but it was not a truly evangelical conversion; for if it had been, Wesley certainly would have made more of it in his writings. The main argument by Lee, against thinking that this was conversion, is the fact that Wesley failed to mention that day of "heart-warming" on such important occasions as the opening of City Road Chapel, when he was reviewing the growth of Methodism, and in his Short History of the People Called Methodists written in 1781. He concludes, "There can be no doubt that Wesley changed his mind about the Aldersgate experience."³

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1. Quoted in Hastings, ERE, XII, 275.
 2. No author, John Wesley the Methodist, p. 104.
 3. Lee, op. cit., pp. 89, 100, 102.

On the other hand, Sangster quotes Henry Bett, The Spirit of Methodism, as sustaining the traditional view of Wesley's conversion, strongly urging that Lecky's description of it as "an epoch in English history" is fully substantiated by the facts. Again, "this same interpretation is made with force, and great fullness of quotation from Wesley's own writings, by Dr. G.C. Cell." Cell, Sangster states, "shows that Wesley's immense effectiveness as a preacher, his 'offensiveness' to the formal and official religion of the day and even his double system of chronology (Anno Domini--and--anno meae conversionis) all point to the paramount importance of May 24, 1738, and of Wesley's own awareness of its importance."¹ The latter is the traditional and more preferable contention. Note, also, that the fruits of faith became manifest at once, as seen in his prayer for his enemies and his public testimony that his sins were forgiven.

One point that all students of Wesley are agreed upon, regardless what the opinions may be concerning Aldersgate, is that his doctrine of Christian perfection received its initial impetus from his reading of the aforementioned books by Taylor and Law. Whatever it was that happened at Aldersgate, we may agree that this was the result: conversion, or justification, was to be attained by faith alone, and not by works and faith; intellect and will were not sufficient, but faith was necessary; by believing, he was saved; he was not saved

1. Sangster, op. cit., p. 94.

"in" his sins, but "from" his sins; he was sanctified as well as justified. He could not make himself holy, it must be the work of God by faith. He was "convinced." However, Aldersgate was the first step in the right direction.

He conceived the Christian experience of salvation as being in two stages: the first consisting of justification and partial sanctification, and the second of "entire" sanctification. Our concern is now the latter. However, it must be remembered that the founder of Methodism was always open-minded to anything which would assist the realization of Christian perfection. He never hesitated to accept anything new. To him, the testimony of others was valid, even though it might be beyond the range of his own experience.

Was he then a syncretist? Sangster thinks not, but that rather he was a synthesist who gathered and collated all the available material and evidence in which there was any possibility of reaching his goal.¹

1. Sangster, op. cit., p. 99.

II. Wesley's Idea of Perfection

To begin with, no small part of the controversial difficulties with this doctrine hinged upon its name. We have seen that the nature of the doctrine in construction is synthetic, and consequently, it took a lot of different words and names to give an exact description or definition of what was meant by Christian perfection. As to the meaning of the term, we get information from Wesley's Journal:

Tues. June 27, 1769--(From a letter "to a pious and sensible woman") "By Christian perfection, I mean, 1. Loving God with all our heart. Do you object to this? I mean, 2. A heart and life all devoted to God. Do you desire less? I mean, 3. Regaining the whole image of God. What objection to this? I mean, 4. Having all the mind that was in Christ. Is this going too far? I mean, 5. Walking uniformly as Christ walked. And this surely no Christian will object to. If any one means anything more or anything else by perfection, I have no concern with it. But if this is wrong, yet what need of this heat about it, this violence, I had almost said, fury of opposition, carried so far as even not to lay out anything with this man, or that woman, who professes it?"¹

Wesley never had the distinction of being a great or a systematic theologian, but he was a thinker who was constantly attempting to reconcile Scripture, reason, and experience in his distinctive doctrine. For that reason he had to use many different terms to describe what he meant, if he was to be sufficiently understood; and for that reason it requires us to use many words and terms to say what he meant to say, if we, even then, are successful.

1. Edited by P.L. Parker, John Wesley's Journal, p. 347.

He contends that there is such a thing as Christian perfection, because of the many uses of the word and the many references of it in Scripture. Since he did acknowledge the Bible as the only standard of truth, on what portions of Scripture, or where in Scripture, did he find the doctrine of perfection, that is, what was the Scriptural basis? This shall be discussed in the final section.

In 1764, Wesley wrote a review of the whole subject, in the form of short propositions.¹ However, these propositions will be expanded for a better understanding, since it is not difficult to misunderstand the words and statements of others if one has not been accustomed to using the words in their connotations.

Christian perfection is a second work of grace in the heart of the believer. It is not prior to justification, but subsequent to justification. "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection...."² The writer of Hebrews exhorts the Christians not to fall away from faith; plainly addressed to believers, that they should go on to perfection.

When is this perfection to take place? It must happen before death, for "without holiness, no man shall see God." St. Paul speaks of living men who were perfect.³

Among the various terms which he uses to give name to

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1. Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.
 2. Hebrews 6:1.
 3. Phil. 3:15.

this experience is--perfect love, for which he showed preference. He also uses these as interchangeable descriptions: entire sanctification, and holiness.¹

The essence of perfection is perfect love, for "...perfect love casteth out fear...."² "Its properties or inseparable fruits are rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks."³ The latter expressions are employed by Wesley time and again, for in these he apparently found the best expression for what he meant.

Again, "Love is the sum of Christian sanctification; it is the one kind of holiness which is found only in various 'degrees' in the believers who are distinguished by Saint John into 'little children, young men, and fathers.' The difference between one and the other lies in the degree of love. And herein there is as great a difference in the spiritual as in the natural sense between fathers, young men, and babes. Everyone that is born of God, though he be as yet only a 'babe in Christ,' has the love of God in his heart--the love of his neighbor, together with lowliness, meekness, and resignation. But all of these are then in a low degree, in proportion to the degree of his faith. The faith of a babe in Christ is weak, generally mingled with doubts or fears."⁴

The sum total of Christian perfection is: to give the

1. Today, among the holiness groups, the same thing is meant by words or phrases such as, "the second blessing," or "the baptism of the Holy Spirit," "the higher life," "the fulness of the blessing," "the second work of grace," "the

the heart to God, and to love the Lord with all that is within the individual--heart, soul, and mind. It is comprised in one word--love.⁵

Wesley's letters mention innumerable ranks, which defy definition, in the state of justification and sanctification, and which may range from the higher to the lower rank. The Christians of the lower rank "avoid all known sin, do much good, use all the means of grace, but have little of the life of God in their souls and are much conformed to the world." The higher rank of Christians are described as those who "... make the Bible their whole rule, and their sole aim is the will and image of God. This they steadily and uniformly pursue through honor and dishonor, denying themselves and taking up their cross daily; considering one point only, 'How may I attain most of the mind that was in Christ, and how I may please Him most.'⁶ He then states that he is inclined to think that those who have chosen "the more excellent way" will have a higher place in heaven, than the Christian who is of the lower rank. These also, he exhorts to strive for higher ground, denying that this low ranking Christian is on the road to hell.⁷

circumcision of the heart," "perfection," "full salvation," and "heart purity." Cf. H.E. Jessop, Foundations of Doctrine, p. 3f.

2. 1 John 4:18.
3. Plain Account, p. 62.
4. Mudge, op. cit., p. 78.
5. ibid., p. 78.
6. ibid., pp. 78, 81.
7. ibid., p. 81f.

From the very beginning of the formulation of the doctrine of Christian perfection, the watch-word has been--"Rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks." This is "Christian perfection." He states that it is not possible to go farther than this, and that it is not necessary to stop short of it.

What did Wesley mean by these phrases? "Rejoice evermore," because Christ has purchased joy as well as righteousness for the Christian, for it is the very purpose of the gospel that, when one is saved from the guilt of sin, that he should consequently be happy in the love of Christ. "Pray without ceasing," because prayer is the breath of spiritual life. One who is alive must breathe. As the proportion in which the presence of God is enjoyed, in like proportion is prayer and praise offered up without ceasing; otherwise, rejoicing becomes only delusion. "In everything give thanks," because thanksgiving cannot be separated from true prayer and is essentially connected with it. Thus, a man who prays is giving praise, whether in joy or pain, prosperity or adversity; and he receives all things for His sake as coming from God, neither choosing or refusing, nor liking or disliking, but only as it is "agreeable or disagreeable to His perfect will." This is "perfect love."¹

Wesley was very vehement in his outbursts against those who would misinterpret his teaching and misconstrue, what he

1. Mudge, op. cit., p. 79.

held to be, the plain Scripture truths which had bearing upon "Full Salvation," just as he opposed those who departed from Scripture in other doctrines. For instance, he parted company with the Calvinistic doctrine of "double election," because he thought it unscriptural. He saw some of the pitfalls of terminology which attempted to describe doctrine, and so in addition to stating the positive about "Christian perfection," he also, stated the negative, in the effort to thwart misrepresentation and misunderstanding. In this he was not successful--he himself being to blame.

He did not teach an absolute perfection, for that can only be possible with God; thus, in a "perfect" Christian there still remains "imperfection."¹ Let us consider the other negative aspects of his teaching.

1. Christians are not perfect in knowledge; that is, they do not reach a stage of perfection in which they will be free from ignorance. Man may come to know much about many subjects, but who can explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity; the incarnation of the Son of God; or when the number of God's elect will be brought to completion and hasten his kingdom?

2. Since no one is free from ignorance, it follows that none are free from mistake, for the latter is the unavoidable consequence of the former. Yet, it is true that Christians do not mistake as to "the things essential to salvation: they do not 'put darkness for light, or light for darkness;' nor

1. From Wesley's Sermons, p. 488ff., unless indicated.

'seek death in the error of their life.' For they are 'taught of God;' and the way which He teaches them the way of holiness is so plain, that 'the wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err therein.' But in things unessential to salvation they do err, and that frequently...Hence, even the children of God are not agreed as to the interpretation of many places in holy writ; nor is their difference of opinion any proof that they are not the children of God, on either side; but it is proof that we are no more to expect any living man to be infallible, than to be omniscient."

3. Again, Christians are not perfect in the sense that they are free from infirmities. "Only let us take care to understand this word aright; only let us not give that soft title to known sins, as the manner of some is." Wesley was unwilling to condone the idea that "every man has his infirmity, and mine is drunkenness" or "uncleanness" or "taking of God's holy name in vain." To such, "it is plain that all you who thus speak, if ye repent not, shall, with your infirmities, go quick into hell !" Bodily infirmities mean all those "outward or inward imperfections which are not of a moral nature...weakness or slowness of understanding, dullness or confusedness of apprehension, incoherency of thought, ...lack of retentive memory...slowness of speech, inpropriety of language...or defects in conversation or behaviour."

4. Until the spirit returns to God who gave it, the Christian cannot hope to be free from the aforementioned or

also, from temptation. This type of perfection is in the other world. Some do not realize the great extent of their temptation which they do not resist, because they are given to "uncleanness with greediness." On the other hand, "I know there are also children of God who, being now justified freely, having found redemption in the blood of Christ, for the present feel no temptation." To the enemies of God's children was given the command not to touch them or to do them any harm. "And for this season, it may be for weeks or months, He causeth them to ride on high places, He beareth them as on eagles' wings, above all the fiery darts of the wicked one. But this state will not last always; as we may learn...the Son of God...was tempted in...His flesh."

5. Wesley would remind us that "holiness" and "perfection" are one and the same thing in Scripture. But this does not mean that there is not "perfection of degrees, as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase... so that how much soever any man has attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to 'grow in grace,' and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour."

6. "Entire Sanctification"¹ or perfection "is not so late as death;" that is, it is to be attained, or rather to be received (for it is a gift) in this life; in this world. The

L. Sangster, op. cit., p. 27.

time element is not important as to when a Christian receives the "gift of the Spirit" after justification and when the partial sanctification had begun. The important fact which remains is this: "Entire Sanctification" is a "gift" which is received before death, either instantaneously, or gradually; but it must be fully before death in which the Christian meets that specific moment when all that God has in "holiness" is his.¹

7. It is not incapable of being lost. Fortunately, Wesley did not err here with Calvin. Through his observation and experience with many people he was forced to this conclusion, "but we were not thoroughly convinced of this for several years."² This is made more evident and explicit by the following question and answer:

Q. Can they fall from it?

A. I am well assured they can. Matter of fact puts this beyond dispute. Formerly we thought one saved from sin could not fall; now we know the contrary. Neither does any one stand by virtue of any thing that is implied in the nature of the state. There is no such height or strength of holiness as it is impossible to fall from. If there be any that cannot fall, this wholly depends on the promise and faithfulness of God.³

Wesley also taught the converse; that if a Christian fell from grace, God would forgive and restore him.

We have set down a number of propositions which have stated what "Christian perfection" is, and what it is not. By way of recapitulation, what are the observations that now

1. Plain Account, p. 41.

2. ibid., p. 62.

3. ibid., p. 45.

can be made which are characteristic of this doctrine and those which are entailed therein?

1. The experience of "conversion" must necessarily precede the experience of "perfection." This event is not for the unregenerate, because they are not even interested in the things which are spiritual, let alone to seek perfection in it.

The word "experience" is used much by Wesley and the Methodists of today, but does not bear the odious connotation which other denominations have attached to it. Experience to some, outside of Methodism, generally means emotional, scriptural, and intellectual perversion of the objective realities of God in favor of those which are subjective. To be just to a person who may use a certain word, one must understand his meaning, and because a term has a set definition for a certain group, that definition cannot be used as applicable to that word every time it is used.

This is the difficulty with the word "experience." Wesley and his followers mean by experience not just an elated, lofty moment of the soul's past, but rather it is a communion with God; an experience of God. Even that person who has no experience with God, has an experience with God, namely, that his experience is one of not having experienced God in his life.

This experience is a consciousness, and "consciousness can only be real in individuals, and the appeal to experience

means, of course, an appeal to a consciousness of God which the individual enjoys."¹ This experience is not only subjective, but it is based on the objective realities of an historical revelation; namely, the historical Jesus--His life and death; the continuation of that religious consciousness which the New Testament calls the Spirit; the appropriation of this Perfect Revelation made real in the heart, mind, and consciousness of the person.²

This thing which is called experience means then, for the Methodist, that those things of which the Word of God speaks are true and are verified by experience; that what God has said he would do, He has done, for he has done it within me; therefore, I believe it and put my seal to it. It must be borne in mind that this verification is never independent of Jesus.

2. Perfection is a gift, just as is justification, the the experience of which is appropriated by faith, either instantaneously or gradually. The former is generally advocated, because one does not appreciate receiving a gift a little at a time. It will be seen that Wesley had to maintain both contentions, since he misunderstood Scripture.

3. The experience may be communicated by those who already are in possession of it, assisting the other person to receive it. Sometimes one gets the experience in a group,

1. R.N. Flew, The Idea of Perfection, p. 316.

2. ibid., p. 316.

at other times, alone; but generally, the "possessor" leads the // "non-possessor," the "seeker," to get the "gift."

4. Flew states that "conversion is preceded by a preliminary period of acute distress; of earnest seeking and prolonged prayer; sometimes of blackness and desperate struggles of soul."¹ If he means that this is a conviction of the individual's sin, then it is acceptable; but if he means that a sinner seeks after God, then it is to be rejected. He may cite the case of Wesley to bear his point, but the case in point is one in which there was a possession of knowledge of the way of salvation, or rather the requisites of salvation, and the reason for the deep distress of soul was due to seeking perfection in that which was not yet possessed.

The experience and observation of the present writer and that of contemporaneous testimony supports the contention that none were converted by specifically and intentionally seeking after God, for there is "none that seeketh God, there is none that doeth good."

5. A fifth characteristic to be noted, which is true of both conversion and "perfect sanctification," is that in the deliverance from sin and the reception of the Holy Ghost there is not just a mere "feeling" or temporary "sensation of elation," but there is a consciousness of "Someone," and has an intellectual content in which the mind is vitally con-

1. Flew, op. cit., p. 318.

cerned and active throughout. It is not to be thought of as a perverted stimulation of the senses and the emotions, but as an experience in which the total man takes part. Those who accuse Methodism as a religion of "justification by feeling" are borne with the burden of proof, this proof falling to the ground. Too many speak objectively of that which has not become a part of them subjectively, and find it easy to look askance at the experiences of others simply because it happens not to be a part of their own.

Wesley does not deny that there is "feeling" and emotion connected with these experiences, but we are also impressed by the fact that the content of these experiences is something more--the emotional content being more or less a by-product or result of that which has taken place between God and the person whose sins have been forgiven.

Can emotion be separated from anything in life? True, but the emotions are to be maintained with equilibrium and always under control. No, Methodism cannot be accused of a pure emotionalism simply because there is the insistence upon experience. Wesley insisted upon the experience because in this he saw the quickest possible results which would infallibly uncover the hypocrite in his profession.

A man who is under conviction of sin, the law working its wrath, and thundering condemnations into his soul, certainly experiences some emotion with the realization that through the Gospel he now has release from his sins and that

he is acceptable to God. It is the experience of the heart, soul, and mind which is tossed on the ocean of despair and agony, and then sails into the calm harbor of God's forgiveness and peace, realizing that he has avoided spiritual disaster and is now saved. What a testimony of joy and gratitude is then found on the lips of such ! With this, there is the consciousness that God has done something which I myself could never do and never realized it possible for such a thing to happen. Though the dealings of God with sinners may be different in each case, yet the results are always the same: the deliverance from and the forgiveness of sins.

Perfect sanctification in the individual bears these marks, plus an equanimity and constant peace of the soul. Immediately, these experiences bring forth ethical results. There is a consciousness of a deliverance and a liberty beyond anything in previous experience; but, it does not eliminate the consciousness of the need for growth and progress in love in the things of the "spirit" upon receiving "entire sanctification." Such were Wesley's contentions.

6. To guard against the pride of achievement, the recipients are usually most careful not to claim sinless perfection, or even its enjoyment at the time of which they write.

It cannot be questioned that here is an ethical ideal which is desirable, but what is the possibility for its attainment? Is it possible in this world? In this flesh? Wesley maintains it must be received before death, for "without

holiness--no man shall see God." True, but what are the indices of attainment?

Q. When may a person judge himself to have attained this?

A. When after having been fully convinced of inbred sin by a far deeper and clearer conviction than which he experienced before justification, and after having experienced a gradual mortification of it, he experiences a total death to sin and an entire renewal in the love of the image of God, so as to "rejoice evermore," to "pray without ceasing," and "in everything giving thanks." Not that "to feel all love and no sin" is a sufficient proof. Several have experienced this for a time before their souls were fully renewed. None, therefore, ought to believe that the work is done till there is added the testimony of the Spirit, witnessing his entire sanctification as clearly as his justification.¹

Has any individual ever complied with these requirements so as to receive the witness of the Spirit that he has "entire sanctification? We cite some testimonies of those who have claimed this state.

The first testimony, with the love element present, is that of John Oliver, who was converted and joined the Methodists in 1748. The testimony is dated as 1762.

"I was convinced more deeply than ever of inbred sin, and of the promise of God to save me from it. And never did man at a bar plead harder for live, than I pleaded with God for this salvation."

His prayer was answered. At the invitation of a friend, he went to Lincoln's Inn and they joined in prayer with some others for this specific thing.

"The Lord was conquered by our instant prayer, and we had the petition we asked of Him. I was baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire, and felt that perfect love casteth out fear. Great was our fellowship

1. Plain Account, p. 23.

withe (sic) the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.... If ever I had access to the throne of grace, it was on this memorable day. Our Lord was inexpressibly near: it seemed we might ask and have whatever we wanted...

"From this time I went forth in the power and spirit of Love. I felt nothing but Love, and desired nothing but more Love...

"From that day to this...I have not lost my sight of, nor my affection for, Christian Perfection...."¹

Another testimony, which emphasizes love, is that of one Alexander M'Nab. He writes:

"I could, therefore, now believe I was in the favor of God, and found the peace of God in my conscience; the love of God in my heart; and my spirit ardently breathing for the whole image of Jesus. I could daily call Jesus, Lord, by the Holy Ghost; and the frequent application of the promises to my mind greatly strengthened my faith. All the work of nature now bespoke the presence and goodness of God to me. The ordinances of His house were my delight; His Law, as well as His Gospel, I esteemed inestimably precious; and my heart was filled with pity towards my fellow-creatures, who knew not Jesus."²

To illustrate the point that this experience begins at some definite moment, we cite the following testimonies.

William Hunter hoped that conversion and entire sanctification would be simultaneous, but he discovered after conversion that

"my nature was not so much changed as I thought: I found many things in me which opposed the grace of God; so that without continual watching and prayer, I was capable of committing the very same sins which I had been guilty of before."

Upon seeking perfection, he found it eighteen years later and tells this experience:

1. Quoted by Sangster, op. cit., p. 124f.

2. ibid., p. 125.

"I found unbelief taken away out of my heart; my soul was filled with such faith as I never felt before: my love to Christ was like fire, and I had such views of Him, as my life, my portion, my all, as swallowed me up; and oh ! how I longed to be with Him ! A change passed upon all the powers of my soul, and I felt a great increase of holy and heavenly tempers. I may say, with humility, it was as though I was emptied of all evil, and filled with heaven and God."¹

Alexander Mather testifies in this same category. He writes:

"What I had experienced in my own soul, was an instantaneous deliverance from all those wrong tempers and affections, which I had long and sensibly groaned under. An entire disengagement from every creature, with an entire devotedness to God: and from that moment, I found an unspeakable pleasure, in doing the will of God in all things. I had also a power to do it, and the constant approbation both of my own conscience and of God."²

Thomas Rankin speaks in a similar vein.

"I was meeting with a few Christian friends who were all athirst for entire holiness, and after several had prayed, I also called on the name of the Deliverer.... While these words were pronounced with many hearts and lips, 'Are we not, O Lord, the purchase of thy blood? Let us then be redeemed from all iniquity,' in a moment the power of God so descended upon my soul, that I could pray no more....The language of my heart every moment was 'Oh what has Jesus done for me !'"³

We also include some testimonies in which is seen the fact that the recipients of this "Blessing" come to the realization that all conscious sin has been removed.

John Pawson seems to have a unique experience to relate,

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1. Quoted by Sangster, op. cit., p. 126f.
 2. ibid., p. 127.
 3. ibid., p. 128.

especially so, because prior to his conversion and then joining the Methodists, he seems to have had definite prejudices and hatred for them. Concerning his gift of the Spirit, he writes:

"I continually walked in the light of God's countenance: no creature shared my affections with God; but I served Him with an undivided heart. I had no distressing temptations, but had constant power over all sin; so that I lived as upon the borders of heaven."¹

"M.G." speaks of receiving the spirit who "breaks the power of canceled sin." She writes:

"It was all faith and peace and love. I called upon all in heaven to praise God with me. Since then I have been established in the Lord. My heart is like a piece of solid gold. And I daily grow in the knowledge of God. And His ways are ways of pleasantness to me, and all His ordinances my delight; nothing stirs me now. Whatever comes is right. God is always with me. He lives in me and walks in me; He has cleansed my heart and sits as King there."²

Again, William Green received this second work of grace at the age of thirty-five; four years after conversion, and then he could describe his feeling of freedom from sin.

"The promises flowed into my heart without obstruction. I easily perceived the change was universal, and felt that I was cleansed from all my idols, and from all my filthiness, and I seemed to have light equal to my love; so that in one week I had a clearer insight into the life of faith, than I had for several years. Thus Jesus saves His people from their sins."³

The testimonies given under this category of being freed from sin are in line with the hymn, "Oh For a Thousand Tong-

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1. Sangster, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
 2. *ibid.*, p. 126.
 3. *ibid.*, p. 126.

ues to Sing," which all Methodism sings today, whether much attention is paid to the words or not.

Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing
 My great Redeemer's praise,
 The glories of my God and King,
 The triumphs of His grace !

My gracious Master and my God,
 Assist me to proclaim,
 To spread thro' all the earth abroad,
 The honors of Thy name.

Jesus!--the name that charms our fears,
 That bids our sorrows cease;
 'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
 'Tis life and health and peace.

He breaks the power of canceled sin,
 He sets the prisoner free;
 His blood can make the foulest clean;
 His blood avails for me.¹

The characteristics of ascetism are generally present when the followers of Wesley receive the "witness." There are several testimonies which can be cited here to illustrate the meaning.

Thomas Clark was a married man of twenty-five, and felt that the cares of the world had deadened him to the things spiritual. He met the Methodist, was converted and happy, but had a sense of "inbred sin." He tells of his release.

"I was then at my work, when I was filled with such love and power, that I could work no longer. My soul was melted with love, the tears ran down my cheeks, and soon after, these words came, 'I have cleansed thee from all filthiness of flesh and spirit' which followed me for a fortnight wherever I went. I thought, however, would tell nobody of it: but I could not refrain. I nev-

L. The Lutheran Hymnal, hymn number 360.

er found any doubt since, having the witness in myself continually. I feel no will but the Will of God. Even my body seemed renewed as well as my soul. I have a wife and five small children; but I have no care about them. I work every day among the wicked; but I am not hurt or hindered by them. I am always happy in God, full of love and peace, and feel no deadness or heaviness, but a continual increase of loving faith, springing up into everlasting life."¹

The next testimony is in a class of its own. John Furz was one of Wesley's full-time workers, who suffered much for his faith. His hair was singed by a bullet fired at him, and later he was at the point of death with a serious illness, when, as he testified, he experienced entire sanctification; but he recovered.

"The good women that sat round my bed said, 'We never had a Preacher die here before. We shall have a great company of people to hear the Funeral Sermon.' I heard one of them say, 'Now he is going.' Meantime, the cry of my heart was: 'Lord, sanctify me now or never.' In that instant I felt the mighty power of His sanctifying Spirit. It came down into my soul as a refining fire, purifying and cleansing from all unrighteousness. And from that instant I began to recover."²

It has been seen before what importance has been attached as to the need of a personal witness from God in the heart of the individual, if he was to have the assurance of justification and full salvation. This assurance is definitely and specifically sought for in the works of grace, so much so, that if it is not forthcoming, the seeker has good reason to doubt that he has come through to God. This same princi-

1. Sangster, op. cit., p. 129.
2. ibid., p. 129ff.

ple is present in many of the revival meetings of Methodism and other holiness groups.

Thus, the gift of the Spirit conveys its own assurance, as we may see from the next two incidents which are characteristic of all. John Manners mowed grass; had the gift; but was it real, or self-deception? Illusion? He says:

"I desired the Lord, not to let me deceive myself, but give me a witness if I was saved from sin? And about a week he gave me my desire, the full, clear witness of His Spirit. It has not left me one moment since. I am now always happy in God. I always felt His love, and all my tempers, and desires, and words, and actions flow from it."¹

Wesley believed and taught universal grace, namely, that salvation was for all, even this great experience of the soul which hung no curtain of denial to any who sought it, regardless of race, color, social status, occupation, or position. The only requisite was that the individual be a Christian and desire to possess all that God would give.

Thomas Joyce was only a sail-maker with a disreputable past in his youth, but found forgiveness for his sins and sought perfection. He got it--and the assurance came at the moment, as he describes:

"I broke out into prayer, pleading the promises, till I was all over in a sweat. But I could not leave off, till I felt that word applied, 'Thou are sealed unto the day of redemption.' I immediately felt a far greater change, than I did when I was justified. I felt my soul was all renewed, and a witness that sin was all

1. Quoted by Sangster, op. cit., p. 128.

destroyed. And from that time I have found a continual increase of light, and love, and holiness.¹

He, who has been in a testimony meeting where people who have been converted and blessed of God and have the courage of their convictions to stand before that group in a service to declare what God has done for them, will note a familiar ring in the preceding statements. There is something about witnessing in a public way, which gives strength to the faith of the new-born of the Spirit. Some of these who confess their faith orally, hesitate to do it, for once they have done so, then this is a public and open committal of spiritual alliance declaring the choice to whom, henceforth, service shall be rendered by them. Those, who had at one time sneered and openly ridiculed the "confessors," were themselves subject to similar experiences when converted and sanctified.

What of these testimonies? Surely, these would not deceive; but could they themselves be deceived? Likely not, at least not to put it in those words. Could it be that these experiences were real, but that the sense of feeling and emotion with the experience are the results of the various temperaments and dispositions, or even a "keyed-up," vivid imagination within the person? How is this possible? How much is God? How much the person? Is the sense of "feeling" a reliable criterion to be taken as an index of God's grace in

1. Quoted by Sangster, op. cit., p. 128f.

the individual?

There is objection that these testimonies are merely peculiar to the eighteenth century; a Wesleyan reactionary movement over against the Deistic, rationalistic, stilted orthodoxy of high-churchmanship in England. Wesley taught these people, they were expected to receive the experience and to testify concerning it, and so they did. It was a custom, a part of the religious mores, a Wesleyan provincialism. But arguments like these may be both true and false. Yet, one may admit there is something to this doctrine for which Wesley contended. His teaching has survived, essentially, to this modern day, and about us are those who bear witness that these experiences are real. This "moment-by-moment" living with God is attested to by two moderns whose sobriety and judgment is respected. They testify to its reality.

The first is George S. Ingram, who relates the receiving of the Spirit, and then the battle which he had to maintain it.

Never had the Devil so tempted me to doubt God, as when He gave me grace to trust Him to sanctify me wholly according to His promise in 1 Thessalonians, V.xxiii-xxiv. Before I had risen from my knees he attacked me, and day after day as I waited for God's assurance that He had cleansed my heart from all sin, the Devil again and again attacked me with doubts that nothing had happened because I felt nothing. And every time, God enabled me to hurl that promise that He had given me at the Devil; and every time, he left me, defeated by the Word. And then in God's own time came His deep inward assurance that He had cleansed my heart from all sin, and filled me with His Holy Spirit, and that inward assurance has remained with me through the years as a very precious possession.¹

1. G.S. Ingram, The Fulness of the Holy Spirit, p. 23.

One more statement to this effect will be considered-- that of E. Stanley Jones. He is a graduate of Asbury College, one of the foremost holiness schools in the country which teaches eradication of original sin in the courses offered in doctrine, and in whose halls is seen a special bronze plaque giving honor to the work which he has done. Whether they are of the same opinion still, in view of his present social ideas, is not known; but his present ideas have become a heart-ache to a goodly number of conservative Methodists. Nevertheless, he has this to relate.

"I was a Christian for a year or more when one day I looked at a library shelf (presumably at Asbury College--whose shelves are filled with similar books, and are part of the required collateral readings) and was struck with the title of a book, The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life.

"As I read it my heart was set on fire to find this life of freedom and fulness. I reached the forty-second page when the Inner Voice said very distinctly, 'Now is the time to find.' I pleaded that I did not know what I wanted, that when I finished it I would seek. (This is generally the case; seeking something one doesn't understand; usually high-pressured into seeking by an evangelist who first expounds the doctrine. This may be seen every year at this school during the revival meetings which it sponsors.) But the Inner Voice was imperious, 'Now is the time to seek.' I tried to read on, but the words seemed blurred. I was up against a Divine insistence, so closed the book, dropped on my knees and asked, 'What shall I do?' The Voice replied, 'Will you give Me your all--your very all?' After a moment's hesitation, I replied, 'I will.' 'Then take my all, you are cleansed,' the Voice said with a strange inviting firmness. 'I believe it,' I said, and arose from my knees. I walked around the room affirming it over and over, and pushing my hands away from me as if to push away my doubts. This I did for ten minutes, when suddenly I was filled with a strange refining fire that seemed to course through every portion of my being in cleansing waves. It was all very quiet and I had hold of myself--and yet the Divine waves could be felt from the inmost

centre of my being to my finger-tips. My whole being was being fused into one, and through the whole there was a sense of sacredness and awe--and the most exquisite joy....

"My will was just as much involved as my emotion. The fact is the whole of life was on a permanently higher level."¹

Here is a vivid description of what happened. What can we say? What of this? That something happened cannot be questioned. But the key is in the words of the testimony. When Jones was asked if he would give his all, he stated that he would. The result was this great sense of cleansing, peace, and assurance. But this can be true in the life of an Christian who consecrates himself wholly and completely to God. Jones' experience was a total consecration of himself to the will of God, which is to serve Him with all that one possesses: heart, mind, and soul. It was not necessary for him to wait for this assurance if he would have placed his trust in Christ objectively--in the promises of God's Word. He experiences the cleansing from all sin; but is this cleansing beyond what any Christian experiences when he comes to faith in Christ and believes the Gospel promise that his sins too, are washed away? Definitely not--this cleansing from all sin is for every Christian who believes and accepts the Gospel promise !

1. E. Stanley Jones, Victorious Living, p. 120.

III. An Evaluation.

Wesley taught that sin is not eradicated, but that it is overcome; that the sanctified is freed or emancipated from the power of sin, so that he is no longer in subjection or in bondage to sin. This is essentially in agreement with Scripture. Here we can find no discrepancies. However, let us in this final section examine the sources of Wesley's errors which caused the misunderstanding in his doctrine of Christian perfection.

To begin with, he used the word "perfect," which, when he tried to explain, caught him on the horns of a dilemma. He then tried to explain that it was not a "sinless perfection." Here, again, the dilemma. He should never have used the word. Wesley realized the contradiction in the word as being incompatible with the idea which he was trying to teach, and so employed terms as "perfect love," and "holiness;" but the former is the term he then preferred, for it more nearly expressed the central thought of his teaching. He cannot be criticized too severely for using a paradoxical word, for words are merely vehicles for expression of thought, and at times they become poor means for conveying ideas. Furthermore, he was too busy being a preacher to become a theologian, yet he coined a few descriptive words, but not systematically, for his doctrine is scattered here and there; first expressed in one way, then another.

The second source of Wesley's error was in his exegesis of the scriptural proof-texts which he selected to prove his contention of being freed from sin, and those texts which command perfection. He continuously spoke of freedom from sin, but what was his doctrine concerning sin?

He made two classifications of sin: original and actual. He parts company with the Arminians by regarding original sin as not simply a disease or a weakness, but as a total depravity that makes man unfit for cooperation with the grace of God towards conversion. He could paint a picture of man's corruption and the consequence of Adam's fall as dark as could Luther or Calvin, but he denied that there was any personal responsibility involved for this original sin on the part of man.¹ With this in mind, it is understandable how he arrives at his definition of sin, which is, "a voluntary transgression of a known law...."²

Concerning the actual sin which a Christian commits, the distinction is made between "voluntary" and "involuntary" transgression. "Not only sin properly so called--that is, voluntary transgression of a known law, but sin improperly so called, that is, an involuntary transgression of divine law, known or unknown, needs the atoning blood. I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excluded or now excludes these involuntary transgressions, which I apprehend to be naturally, consequent on the ignorance and mistakes in-

1. Schaff, Creeds of Christendom, I, 897.

2. Plain Account, p. 17.

separable from mortality. Therefore, 'sinless perfection' is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself. I believe a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please--I do not....¹

Here is contradiction and inconsistency within the same paragraph--with inconsistency appearing to be his main difficulty, and consequently, it is even more difficult to follow him. Involuntary sins need atonement; they prevent a sinless perfection; yet, they are not sins!²

Here is the failure to make an adequate analysis of sin.³ Involuntary sins are usually the most treacherous of sins. Others can see them lurking in us in the form of pride, selfishness, hatred, greed, or avarice long before we may suspect their presence and be conscious of their existence. These cause world chaos and calamity, but are not to be counted as sins, since one is unaware of their presence, consequently, they are involuntary transgressions for which we are not to be held responsible. Yet, Wesley contended for complete cleansing from all sins! This leads us to the Scripture upon which he built and his exegesis which led to many difficulties.

He posits that the command to be perfect is in Scripture.⁴

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1. Plain Account, p. 17.
 2. For further discussion compare Flew, op. cit., p. 332f.
 3. Cf. Dr. Orchard as quoted by Sangster, op. cit., p. 72.
 4. Based on texts such as Phil. 3:15; Matt. 5:48; Heb. 6:1; 10:14; 1 John 3:6; 5:18; 4:12.

The chief and favorite text used by Wesley was "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."¹ This is the key text, but note that he is not critical in exegesis.

Apparently Matthew is the only Gospel-writer who uses *τέλειος* for "perfect." But modern scholars object to Wesley's use of *τέλειος*, even though there are no variant readings;² whereas, Moffatt retains the word as meaning "perfect," holding that in the Aramaic original it can mean "perfect." Dr. Torrey is more emphatic in denying this meaning to *τέλειος*, asserting that nothing in the context leads to this conclusion of equalling the perfection of God himself; but that in this paragraph, vv. 43-47, the disciples are taught to show love and kindness toward their enemies, and not as the publicans.³ They were to be different, *τέλειος*, wholly devoted to the will of God revealed to every sincere Israelite in the Word of the divine law and in the model of the divine conduct."⁴

Lenski expresses his regret that this passage has been taken up by the perfectionists as proof that "sinless perfection" is demanded of Christians, and that the English language is inadequate to express *τέλειος* other than "perfect."⁵ This type of perfection cannot be realized in this world. Even if Wesley were correct in his exegesis, he still failed to

1. Matt. 5:48.

2. Cf. Nestle, Greek New Testament.

3. Cf. Sangster, op. cit., p. 38.

4. Quoted by R.C.H. Lenski, St. Matthew's Gospel, p. 252.

5. Lenski, op. cit., p. 255.

see that we are acceptable and "perfect" before God, only as He sees Jesus, our righteousness and merit, intervening between Himself and all men making complete satisfaction and atonement for sins.

Because he was in error in the major premise of his perfectionistic syllogism, Wesley could not help but fall into error in his minor premise. Since he thought he had found Scriptural warrant for perfection, the next step was to prove that the way of attainment was also there.

The passages which he used for this minor premise are in the First Epistle of John. His chief exposition of these texts in John is found in his sermon on "Christian Perfection," in which he attempts to relate in what sense Christians are perfect.

He makes a three-fold classification of Christians basing it upon St. John's classification of those to whom he is writing in 1 John 2:12ff. First are the "little children," because their sins were forgiven; they were justified and now have peace with God through Jesus Christ. The second are the "young men," because they have overcome the devil and God's word indwells them. They have put out the fiery darts of the wicked one, that is, those doubts and fears wherewith he had disturbed their peace--now having the witness in their hearts that their sins are forgiven. And lastly, "the fathers," because they have known God from the beginning. They have known the Father, the Son, and the Spirit of Christ, in their in-

most soul. "Ye are 'perfect men,' being grown up to 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.'"¹

✓ It is this third group whom he considers as the perfect Christians. To show that these are freed from all sin, he then proceeds to expound how this is possible. The Christian cannot sin for he belongs to God; "He that committeth sin is of the devil, for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 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."² To Wesley, this proves that the children of God are free from sin and thus cannot sin. But does he fail to get the paradox which is present in the epistle? True, a Christian is not supposed to sin, but!—he does sin, and he cannot be without sin. Wesley saw it.

He had great difficulty in solving the problem of sin in the lives of the saints of the Bible, yet, he still clings to St. John, "He that is born of God sinneth not."

The difficulty commences every time the word "we" is encountered in the passages of First John 1:8-10. Does this include John who is perfect, Wesley asks, or is he speaking of others? He admits the problem, but it is removed if we observe, "first, that the tenth verse fixes the sense of the

1. John Wesley, Sermons, p. 492f.

2. I John 1:8-10, 18.

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." The second point in this reasoning is not whether "we have or have not sinned heretofore;" neither do they assert that we "do sin," or "commit sin now." Third: "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.'¹

From this he draws the conclusion that John, and the whole tenor of the New Testament states that--a "Christian is so far perfect, as not to commit sin."² That this is accomplished in this world, and not after death, is proved by St. John: "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgement: because as He is, so are we in this world." Again: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." "Now," he continues, "it is evident that this is wrought in this world...and...that if any sin remain, we are not cleansed from all sin."³

The difficulty with this reasoning lies in the fact that he continually failed to take cognizance of the word "all" with regard to sins. He took it to mean that God would for-

1. Frankly, these verses and Matthew 5:48 have given me a great deal of concern, usually proving to me that Wesley was correct. I did not know how to get around them, but I am pleased to have discovered the answer from the study connected with the writing of this paper.

2. Sermons, pp. 502ff.

3. ibid., p. 506.

give all sins of the past, that is, as one single action; whereas, a better translation would be: "If we keep confessing our sins...." Wesley limits this to those sins which were committed before one became a Christian, but this is not the meaning, for it includes Christians!;¹ whereas, "...from all sin" indicates that constant justification is referred to, including the fact that daily and richly our sins are pardoned."²

As was already mentioned, Wesley had difficulty with the "WE" sections in these passages. He went to great lengths in his arguments to show that John and James³ were Christians and that when they employed the word "we" they were merely using a figure of speech or a type of journalistic style. A minister many times preaches with the "we" but does not mean himself. He continues, that if John meant "we" as including himself, how could he be perfect and yet speak of himself as having sin? However, the "we" does include James and John.⁴ This error concerning the "we" section has its foundation in his fallacious interpretation of "all sin."

In conclusion, Wesley built this doctrine on a misconceived premise, namely, that the type of perfection for which he contended is commanded in Scripture. The minor premise could not help but be erroneous also, because he did not dis-

1. Cf. Sangster, op. cit., p. 50, who states Brooke's opinion.

2. Lenski, op. cit., p. 398.

3. Cf. James 3:1.

4. Lenski, op. cit., p. 400.

cern the nature or the means by which Christians are "holy" or perfect; namely, only through the merits of Jesus who intercedes for us. Thus, his conclusion was wrong likewise, because he sought to find a perfection in this world which was based on misconceived and misunderstood premises.

This was a great ideal which he attempted to realize, and one sympathizes with his efforts. Yet, perhaps, we should be indebted to him, for it has caused us to search for the truth.

But we ask the question: why did he swing the pendulum to this extreme? We answer: it was the result of his reaction to the eighteenth century religious formality, which amounted to a dead orthodoxy of justification and sanctification by faith alone. Wesley wanted to see results. He wanted people to know. But he should have based this knowledge upon the objective promises of God's Word, rather than upon the subjective feeling of the "inner witness" and "assurance."

It is recalled how horrified he was in reading Luther's exposition of Galatians, because it seemed to emphasize faith at the expense of good works. Evidently, he failed to get the true meaning of Ephesians 2:10. We remember how he finally had to abandon works for his own justification. No, if Wesley had followed Luther's "sola fide" from Aldersgate street, who knows what the outcome would have been. Wesley should have stood by that glorious hymn which he translated from Zinzendorf. In those words he would have found the way,

the means, and the truth for which he was seeking.

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
 My beauty are, my glorious dress;
 Midst flaming world, in these arrayed,
 With joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in that great Day,
 For who aught to my charge shall lay?
 Fully thro' these absolved I am
 From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

Lord, I believe Thy precious blood,
 Which at the mercy-seat of God
 Forever doth for sinners plead,
 For me--e'en for my soul was shed.

When from the dust of death I rise
 To claim my mansion in the skies,
 E'en then this shall be all my plea:
 Jesus hath lived and died for me.¹

1. The Lutheran Hymnal, #371.

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