

KENNETH M. LOYER

*A Review Essay: "Coming to Terms with Perfection"*

**Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human**

**Michael J. Hyde**

2010. Waco: Baylor University Press

**Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection: An Ecumenical Dialogue**

**Edgardo A. Colln-Emeric**

2009. Waco: Baylor University Press

Upon becoming a full member of an annual conference, every Methodist preacher from the beginning has been required to answer a list of questions formulated by John Wesley. Those questions include the following:

1. Have you faith in Christ?
2. Are you going on to perfection?
3. Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?
4. Are you earnestly striving after it?
5. Are you resolved to devote yourself wholly to God and his work?<sup>1</sup>

During a recent conversation about these questions, a professor at a United Methodist seminary (someone, it should be noted, who is not United Methodist) responded with a query of her own. Is any such notion of going on to perfection even “a serious question for the twenty-first century, when the world is burning left and right?” she asked.

The professor’s response deserves careful consideration. Is Christian perfection in fact “a serious question” for us today? Does the doctrine even matter any more? Should it? In other words, rather than concern ourselves with the pursuit of perfection, should we not just get directly to the critical task of aiding a world that is, so to speak, up in flames?

Two recent books, *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection: An Ecumenical Dialogue* by Edgardo A. Colln-Emeric and *Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human* by Michael J. Hyde, demonstrate that perfection remains very much a relevant topic for consideration, both within Wesley and Methodist studies and in a broader context. Beginning with the latter, Hyde’s survey of the history of the idea of human perfection covers in considerable detail an impressively wide-ranging scope.

Hyde moves easily across various disciplines to account for how the human understanding of the phenomenon of perfection has developed, as he says, “with the help of Western religion, philosophy, science, and art and how this development entails an appreciation of rhetorical theory” (xv). Along the way he provides lucid and penetrating accounts of such notions as otherness, divine and otherwise; the workings of daily existence; the relationship between reason and perfection; and the nature of beauty. He concludes by exploring the implications of the ever-deepening drive for perfection in medical science and technology, including the recent rhetoric of “our posthuman future,” and thus illustrates the continuing influence of the human quest for fulfillment in which perfection consists.

Religion plays a key role in Hyde’s study. Although Hyde does not mention Wesley, his work has certain resonances with Wesley’s thought. One point of contact has to do with the idea of “coming to terms with perfection.” In the words of Hyde,

Coming to terms with perfection defines a rhetorical process that calls on our ability to find the right and fitting words and other symbolic devices for communicating to others in the most enlightening, truthful, and effective ways possible whatever it is that we understand and hold to be “right,” “good,” and “true” something that is especially worthy of consideration and respect and inspires us to better our lives and the lives of others, to achieve our full potential. (11-12)

Although Wesley did not use this exact language of “rhetorical process,” it is not too much of a stretch to say that this explanation reflects Wesley’s basic intention in developing and promulgating his doctrine of Christian perfection, namely, to convey to others in the most compelling fashion nothing less than the full potential of human beings under grace. As Wesley tirelessly taught, holiness in love—leading up to and including entire sanctification—is a genuine possibility for us here and now. From Wesley’s perspective, this is a truth with which it is crucial to come to terms.

Hyde also sounds a note familiar to Wesley in the way in which Hyde comments on Christ’s command that we be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48):

Following Christ, we must engage in paradoxical behavior; that is, we must go beyond (*para*) the received opinion (*doxa*) of the common folk (publicans [cf. Matt. 5:47]) and expand our understanding of the limits of love by employing the emotion to bind ourselves with our enemies. Perfection entails love, no matter the cost. It also entails things like mercy: “Be you therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Mercy draws on our capacity to be as charitable as possible.

Perfection requires a lot; it is beauty in the making—so much so, in fact, that acts of compassion can sometimes bring us to shed tears of joy as we witness their results. (116)

Given its clear ethic of love, along with its scriptural basis, this description mirrors Wesley's understanding of perfection.

Despite these resonances, however, some of the theological claims that Hyde makes and questions that he raises about traditional doctrines, both Jewish and Christian, are themselves questionable from the perspective of Wesley's theology and that of classical Christian theology as a whole. For example, figuring prominently in Hyde's account is the work of the sixteenth-century rabbi Isaac Luria, who devised a cosmological myth as an attempt to make sense of the Jewish experience of exile. While this myth might have had the positive effect, in Hyde's words, of "granting hope and guidance to a suffering people" by bringing "God to these souls and these souls to God" (61), the means to this end should also be duly evaluated. Redefining the traditional understanding of God's perfection, Luria's thought calls into question the longstanding belief (in traditional rabbinic theology as well as Christian theology) that God's own well-being is not contingent on human action.

Acknowledging his indebtedness to Luria, Hyde expresses the point in this way: "We have a responsibility to hear and answer the call, 'Where art thou?' 'Here I am!' This exchange defines an ongoing process. We need God and God needs us, creatures who can perform necessary hermeneutical and rhetorical tasks, raise holy sparks, spread the truth to and for One and all" (52). Certainly, the themes of God's call and human responsibility occupy an important place in Wesley's theology and in both Jewish and Christian thought broadly conceived. More specifically, Hyde's reference to God "needing" us parallels the work of Methodist theologians who are sympathetic to process philosophy and theology. What tends to be overlooked, though, in the association (however implicit) between Wesley and process thought is the deep problem posed by Wesley's consistent adherence to standard orthodoxy about the attributes of God, including omnipotence, as reflected, for example, in his late sermon "The Unity of the Divine Being" and in his interpretation of Acts 17:25: "Neither is [God] served as though he needed any thing – or person" since "[t]he Greek word equally takes in both" (*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*). Wesley's own writings provide ample evidence that the themes of call and responsibility can be constructively addressed without radically altering classical understandings of God.

Yet even those who have reservations about certain theological statements that Hyde makes will not fail to be impressed by the depth and integrative vision of his work. Indeed, the great value of the book lies in Hyde's ability to narrate in clear and compelling fashion a dauntingly complex topic—the human quest for perfection. As Hyde deftly shows, this never-ending quest

has helped shape the entire scope of intellectual history, particularly in the West, by inspiring some of the most influential philosophers, scientists, theologians, rhetoricians, artists, mathematicians, and musicians that the world has ever known; and it exerts a profound influence upon human life still today.

While Hyde's study illustrates the remarkable breadth and consistency of interest in perfection throughout history and including the present era, Colln-Emeric employs a fresh reading of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection and places it in conversation with the understanding set forth by Thomas Aquinas. Colln-Emeric's work is significant for at least two reasons. First of all, he provides a careful, expository account of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. Focusing on the theological and anthropological aspects of the doctrine, Colln-Emeric first considers what perfection does not mean for Wesley—divine, angelic, or Adamic perfection—and then explains what it does mean for him—freedom from sin, perfection in love of God and neighbor, and the renewal of the divine image, and especially its moral aspect, in faithful Christians. In a discussion of the soteriological dimension of the doctrine, Colln-Emeric addresses, in turn, the way to perfection, which is by grace mediated through means of grace; the purpose of perfection as a sign of fitness for heaven, a sign of God's presence and power for the church, and a sign for the world; and the recognition of perfection in the context of communally accountable discipleship. A particular strength of Colln-Emeric's elucidation of the doctrine of Christian perfection in Wesley is his attention to the foundational themes of the image of God and the way of salvation. Colln-Emeric's project would be worth reading even if he stopped there, but he does not.

A second outstanding feature involves his creative juxtaposition of Wesley and Aquinas. After identifying the centrality of perfection in each theologian's work, Colln-Emeric puts Wesley and Aquinas in dialogue with one another through an honest and constructive assessment of points of convergence as well as divergence. The result is far more than a facile comparison, however. From the start, Colln-Emeric readily acknowledges the differences between Aquinas and Wesley, both stylistic and conceptual, and then offers a wonderfully insightful metaphor to guide the conversation that he facilitates between the two: Wesley's theology is like a "house" that fits within Aquinas' "cathedral." Wesley uses the metaphor of a house to describe his understanding of the three essential Methodist doctrines: repentance, faith, and holiness. In Wesley's own words, "The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself" (*The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained*, VI.4).

Through an examination of the nature and role of perfection in the theologies of these two figures, Colln-Emeric finds them to be largely

complementary. For example, both Wesley and Aquinas spoke of the importance of beatitude, the centrality of love, the universality of the call to perfection, the significance of the life of the virtues, and the social character of holiness. In keeping with the guiding metaphor of the Methodist preaching house and the Thomist cathedral, respectively, Colln-Emeric calls these elements "common building blocks." He also examines, however, elements that were in one doctrine but were absent from or even rejected by the other, such as the topics of assurance and merit. Refusing to gloss over differences, Colln-Emeric finds that these elements "are not merely decorative" but actually "play a significant structural role in their respective places." In fact, as he points out, one reason that the Methodist house and Thomist cathedral complement one another is precisely because they are different. "By Methodist theology being house-like and Thomist theology cathedral-like the church as a whole is built up and renewed." Each has distinctive features that can serve to enhance the life and witness of the church catholic (179).

More specific to Catholic-Methodist dialogue, Colln-Emeric sees the potential for mutual enrichment among the respective theological heirs of Aquinas and Wesley. With his speculative theology, which can never be disconnected from practice, Aquinas offers Methodists "the speculative theological principles that Wesley considered to fall outside 'practical divinity' and therefore never developed" (8). In Aquinas, Colln-Emeric example of what it means for someone "whose intellect strengthened by faith seeks to bring greater conceptual clarity to the truths of revelation." Indeed, there is room in the Methodist meeting house for this sort of a "Thomistic Wesleyanism" as represented by someone like John Fletcher, whose introduction of scholastic distinctions into Wesley's theology, "far from being a departure from the spirit of Methodism, clarified Methodism's catholic spirit" (180).

Meanwhile, given his practical orientation Wesley offers Catholics an example of the pursuit of perfection, a practitioner "next to St. John of the Cross, who applies the speculatively practical theology of Thomas Aquinas in a practically practical way, a way leading not up Mount Carmel to a life of contemplation but down the plain to a life of action" (8-9). Colln-Emeric sees room in the scholastic cathedral for such a "Wesleyan Thomism," whose audience is not just theologians-in-training but the common people, and whose message is conveyed by "a simplifier, a practitioner who does not only define perfection but leads others to perfection, someone like John Paul II who took the cathedral into the world and reiterated the call to holiness not just with words but with exemplars" (180-81). It is on the basis of this expansive theological and ecumenical vision that Colln-Emeric convincingly argues that Catholics can benefit from knowledge of Wesley and Methodists can benefit from knowledge of Aquinas.

In his constructive closing argument, Colln-Emeric utilizes another image as part of a practical account of how ecumenical dialogue can move forward. What he calls “kneeling ecumenism” represents a way of shifting the focus “from holy doctrine to holy ones” (198). Interestingly, to illustrate this call for a renewed appreciation of the ecumenical significance of sanctity, he considers the Catholic Gregorio López’s holy life from the vantage point of John Wesley and the Methodist Jane Cooper’s claim to perfection from the perspective of Thomas Aquinas. He singles out these two people for ecumenical recognition not because they are the only saints but because their lives display in striking fashion an ecclesially based pattern of sanctity that manifests for the world the presence and power of God. Colln-Emeric’s concluding claim about Wesley and Aquinas contributing to a communal grammar of holiness for the church as a whole logically follows: “through their teaching of perfection Aquinas and Wesley offer us a grammar of holiness that can form the basis for writing ecumenical hagiographies, recognizing perfection outside our church and going on to perfection in communion with our ‘separated’ brethren” (204). In all, Colln-Emeric’s first book—based on his Duke University dissertation—represents a noteworthy contribution to Wesley and Methodist studies and to ecumenism.

So what about those opening questions pertaining to Christian perfection? How important, if at all, is this doctrine given our contemporary context? Do that particular seminary professor’s concerns about, and possible underlying charges of, theological and social irrelevance themselves hold any water for a world that is “burning left and right”?

These two fine studies suggest that the topic of perfection is well worth serious scrutiny today, and that, while central to historic Methodism, this subject continues to carry an even broader cultural, philosophical, and social appeal. More precisely, from the perspective of John Wesley, as restated by Colln-Emeric in particular, it would seem that for any who wish to work for the genuine transformation of the world in Christ, there can be no better starting point than a joyful acknowledgment of perfection as the overarching goal of life—the grace-enabled journey toward which is both the privilege and duty of every earnest Christian. Of that much we would all do well to take note.

**Kenneth M. Loyer** completed his PhD in Systematic Theology at SMU and currently serves as Pastor of Otterbein United Methodist Church of Spry in York, PA.

<sup>1</sup> As printed in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church: 2008* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 246.