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*The Journey to God: Union, Purgation and Transformation
within The Ascent of Mount Carmel and A Plain Account
of Christian Perfection*

Abstract

This article is both a call to Christian maturity and an appreciative recounting of how a Roman Catholic mystic, John of the Cross, helped me reclaim and love my own Wesleyan tradition of entire sanctification. In this article I hold up the theological doctrine of Union with God as the goal of the Christian life and review and contrast how Wesley and John of the Cross approached the issue. While these two spiritual masters outline differing views of the path to perfection in love, they both, nevertheless, continue to inspire and offer the light of Christ to Christians seeking full renewal in the Image of God, cleansing from sin, and filling with the pure love of God.

Key Words: John Wesley, John of the Cross, Christian perfection, union with god, restoration of the image of God, sanctification, cleansing from sin

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Introduction

The goal of John Wesley's life and teachings—Christian perfection—was presented to me for the first time while I was a student in seminary. The men presenting the concept were all good persons with pure hearts. Yet their doctrine seemed strangely cold and uninviting to me. I thought at the time that their methodical Wesleyan theology was too well ordered, too “captured” to be of use to me. Moreover, there was great argument and debate at the time over the proper interpretation of the strange and mysterious doctrine of Mr. Wesley.

The highly unfortunate result for me was to reject the doctrine as unworkable. I merely ignored it. “How could anyone be without sin or have pure intentions?” I concluded. Therefore the thought of Christian perfection was laid aside for the duration of my seminary training as well as for the first few years of my pastoral ministry.

I am not sure what all winds of grace began bringing the doctrine back into my world. It could be that failure had as much to do with it as anything for in times of brokenness there came the pressing agenda of “what is Christian living all about anyway?” It could be that transcendent desires for consonance opened a small crack in the door for Mr. Wesley to peek through. I know that a large part of the process of rediscovery must be accredited to Wesleyan scholars such as Albert Outler, Richard Heitzenrater, and Steve Harper who all greatly helped me grasp the life and theology of Wesley.¹

Slowly the “reasonableness” of the doctrine started slipping through the back door of my life and ministry. In my first six years out of seminary, I increasingly sensed that there had to be an end in view, a goal to be attained, and a lifestyle to be reached in the Christian life. I definitely had not attained such a lifestyle but I intuited that it must be a possibility. The words of St. Paul repeatedly presented themselves to me: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Philippians 3:12 RSV). St. Paul was always moving in his life to attain the knowledge of Christ that would enable him to be engulfed both in the power of Christ's resurrection and in a full share of Christ's sufferings and death. He had a goal and I rather believe he attained it: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).²

Oddly enough, however, I did not totally claim Wesley's great doctrine for myself until entering graduate school in 1983 at Duquesne University, a Roman Catholic institution. In the back of my mind was the idea that Wesley's grand doctrine was something unique to Methodism. I wrongly thought that it was a doctrine that suddenly appeared in church history (a statement which obviously reveals the fact that I had not read the classics of Christian spirituality). I think that even further in the back of my mind

was a negative judgment on doctrines of any kind that suddenly “popped up” in the life of the church. But after studying St. John of the Cross, the mystics of the medieval period, and the early church fathers, the reality dawned upon me that Christian perfection was “no new doctrine” at all for Wesley. Indeed he tried to tell us that very thing himself, but like a stubborn child I had to discover it for myself.

St. John of the Cross especially opened wide for me the front door of acceptance of the Christian doctrine of union with God and maturity (*telios*) in everyday living. He helped me realize that Christian perfection was no strange and peculiar doctrine that suddenly appeared in Methodism. It is the way of a disciple seeking to fulfill his or her calling in Christ. Many compelling examples of saints seeking to live out this Biblical call are found in both the undivided and divided church.

I wish to approach these two men, therefore, in order to highlight and compare their writings in the area of union, love, purgation, and a life of Christian perfection. My references to Wesley will largely come from his tract *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, which was a summary statement made in his old age concerning what he termed the “grand depositum” of Methodism. References to John of the Cross will come from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

In all fairness to John Wesley, it is important to acknowledge at the front end of this article that the spiritual theology of John of the Cross gave Wesley serious consternation. In fact, as we shall see, he vehemently opposed and refuted the Spaniard’s thoughts, particularly the construct of spiritual darkness. Nevertheless, as vastly different as these two spiritual masters were, they actually shared much in common and make for highly fruitful comparative study. Both of these leaders set their lives toward accomplishing the same goal and in so doing became bright and shining stars for those today that wish to follow after the same objective.

Union With God

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment (Matthew 22: 37-38).

The great text of Matthew 22 was for Wesley “the royal law of heaven and earth.”³ This scripture was Wesley’s theme throughout his life, for therein was found the goal of Christian living. Even before he was able to realize and experience all of the means of grace leading to this goal, early on he possessed a clear vision of the goal ahead and preached:

The one perfect good shall be your one ultimate end. One thing shall ye desire for its own sake – the fruition of Him

who is all in all. One happiness shall ye propose to your souls, even a union with Him that made them, the having “fellowship with the Father and the Son;” the being “joined to the Lord in one Spirit.” One design ye are to pursue to the end of time, — the enjoyment of God in time and eternity. Desire other things, so far as they tend to this; love the creature, as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought, and word, and action, be subordinate to this. Whatever ye desire or fear, whatever ye seek or shun, whatever ye think, speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole end, as well as source, of your being.⁴

Over and over throughout Wesley’s life this theme of union with God can be seen permeating his sermons, letters, tracts, journal entries, and conversations. It was the thread that held together the whole and the fuel that flamed the fires of holy zeal in a remarkable life. Wesley had various names for this goal, the most common being “Christian perfection.” But he also used interchangeable terms such as “entire sanctification,” “Scriptural perfection,” “pure love,” “perfect love,” and “holiness.” Perhaps the most apt summary of all for Wesley’s doctrine was the single term “love.” If you boiled Wesley’s entire life and teaching down to one phrase, it would this: *It’s all about love!*⁵

“What is it to be sanctified?” Wesley asked his first conference in June of 1744. It is “To be renewed in the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.”⁶ Always for Wesley, the major implication of sanctification was nothing higher and nothing lower than this:

... the pure love of God and man; the loving God with all our heart and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves. It is love governing the heart and life, running through all our tempors, words, and actions.⁷

As the doctrine became increasingly misunderstood and often maligned, Wesley resisted the temptation to buttress his thoughts with further words and lengthy definitions. Instead, he developed short, concise statements to allow the simplicity of sanctification to stand on its own. As many were taking offense to the doctrine, Wesley wrote:

The more care should we take to keep the simple, Scriptural account continually in our eye. Pure love reigning alone in the heart and life, —this is the whole of Scriptural perfection.⁸

To be filled with pure love and restored in the image of God had a clear secondary implication for Wesley: one had to be saved and delivered from “the very image of the devil.”⁹ In other words, the goal of union with God of necessity implied “the being cleansed from sin, from all filthiness

both of flesh and spirit.”¹⁰ Wesley felt that in union with God there was simply no reason for sin to have dominance in a Christian’s life. He wrote, “we fix this conclusion: A Christian is so far perfect, as not to commit sin.”¹¹

To be delivered “from inward as well as from outward sin”¹² was the negative expression of the positive affirmation of life in the fullness of Christ. For Wesley, it was simply impossible to have the one without the other. Never did this mean that the Christian could live in a state of absolute perfection such as the angels. And never did this mean that the Christian could not fall from perfection because of willful sin. Even in this high state of union with God, the Christian would not have:

... a freedom from ignorance, mistake, temptation, and a thousand infirmities necessarily connected with flesh and blood.¹³

Thus the “grand depositum” of Wesley and the early Methodists was the advancement of the spiritual reality of union with God. The soul can be “all love” and in a word, the Christian can do “the will of God on earth, as it is done in heaven.”¹⁴

Wesley primarily charted the path to sanctification through the outward disciplines or “means” of grace. By no means did he neglect the interior life. His thirteen sermons “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon On The Mount” indicate a balanced and healthy approach to Christian discipleship where “rules touching that right intention which we are to preserve in all our outward actions” were well explicated.¹⁵ Yet Wesley’s clear emphasis was upon the spiritual exercises that were instituted by the Lord and the practices that build up a Christian person. As such, Wesley remains today the great doctor of the exterior path of the soul to union with God.

On the other hand, St. John of the Cross, who lived two centuries before Wesley, was and is the great mystical doctor of the interior path of the soul in its journey to God. His entire roadmap for the individual intent on ascending Mount Carmel focused upon the interior union of the soul with the Lord and the processes necessary for completion of that journey. As such, these men offer two different perspectives regarding the path for the person intent on finding the end of his or her desires. Their two separate approaches are not always complementary and are even vastly diverging at points. Yet their common goal brings them together as two of the more universal figures in all of Christian history. These spiritual masters, who, interestingly, were very much alike in physical stature, were both reformers offering what I believe are complimentary routes to the ascent of Mount Carmel.

Union and Transformation of the Soul in God

St. John held the Thomistic thought that the love of God acted as a sustaining presence holding together all created souls. He called this

“substantial union” and explained, “this union between God and creatures always exists.”¹⁶ If this union were to end, the soul would subsequently be annihilated. The universal love that God exhibited through substantial union was not the goal, for it was already attained. Rather, the goal for St. John was what he termed “union of likeness” or transformation of the soul in God. He wrote:

The supernatural union exists when God’s will and the soul’s are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul completely rids itself of what is repugnant and unconfirmed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love.¹⁷

After this definition given in Book II, Chapter Five of his treatise *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John says precious little about the goal of union. The goal, however, is always there, underpinning every word and sentence and directing the whole towards its end. While the bulk of the work concerns the road of purgation, the inspiration of the work emanates from the goal of the journey. The very title “Ascent of Mount Carmel” suggests climbing the great mountain of God. Only on top is the *presence* of the holy to be found. Therefore, for St. John, the task was to reach the goal of the summit. It is the goal of divine union that draws and pulls the aspiring soul toward love, just as it is the summit that beckons the climber to ever climb higher.

St. John set the tone and main goal of his work in the opening paragraph:

This treatise explains how to reach divine union quickly. It presents instruction and doctrine valuable for beginners and proficient alike that they may learn how to unburden themselves of all earthly things, avoid spiritual obstacles, and live in that complete nakedness and freedom of spirit necessary for divine union.¹⁸

He then proceeded to expand the goal through his beautiful poem “One Dark Night.”¹⁹ The poem speaks of the soul’s happiness in union with its beloved. It is not a road map or guide within union, for once the summit is gained, St. John lets that happiness and joy speak for itself. The poem is a brief glimpse at the dazzling peak of God and serves to give longing climbers the courage of faith, hope, and love needed to begin and complete the ascent. After his snapshot, St. John applied all of his energies to the ascent; the climb which will be as a “dark night.”

The Call of the Heights

All of this writing concerning mountains, climbing, and summits draws from deep within me a well of joy and appreciation for the actual mountains which are such an important part of my own life. Within the Weminuche

Wilderness area of southwestern Colorado rise some of the tallest and most glorious peaks in all of the United States—the Needles Mountains. I have ascended and stood on the summit of one of those peaks—North Eolus. Never in all of my life shall I forget the several days of hiking and preparation in getting to the base of the mountain, and then the final assault which took me to the narrow, windswept, pointed peak positioned over 14,000 feet in elevation. The danger and the beauty of the mountain was intense and beyond adequate description.

From reading his works, I believe that St. John was also inspired by the mountains of his native Spain. He compared many spiritual realities to the peaks and mountains that he beheld. Perhaps on a retreat the man climbed one of the Spanish Pyrenees. The way he presented the goal of union with God gives me the intuition that he at least once climbed a great mountain.

As is the case with many magnificent and terrible mountains, the summit can only be viewed at a distance. The closer you get to the base of the mountain, the more hidden the summit becomes. The journey to the top is often one of incredible endurance and a fair amount of pain. At the beginning of the climb, the way usually leads through thick forest and undergrowth. Then, as the timberline is left behind, the path often becomes rigorously steep, even dangerous. There are beautiful sights along the ascent, but still the summit normally cannot be seen even though you might be close. In the high windswept slopes, it is all too easy to go in the wrong direction and miss the summit altogether. Several times, when I have been high above timberline attempting to climb a 14,000-foot mountain, there have been no paths to follow. The fierce forces of nature leave no evidence of a way. Even within a few hundred feet or less of the summit, the steep angle of approach conceals the top. To proceed further, you need either an actual guide or the testimony of another who has been before. As I trusted the directions of written guides and detailed maps, and gained the summit, the glory of creation unfolded before me in breath taking 360-degree circles of valleys, forests, and lesser mountain ranges below. At the summit of a towering mountain you can see for miles and miles in every direction! There are no words at this point, only awe and adoration.

I can't help but wonder if the goal of perfection in love, which both St. John and John Wesley sang throughout their lives, was analogous to climbing of the great mount of God for them? We know that as early as 1725 when Wesley graduated from Oxford, he stood at a distance from the holy mount and desired the beauty and the glory of God. I am also assured that as a young man St. John also beheld the glory of the goal and bent his entire life toward the ascent.

Was it not the early glimpse of wholeness in Christ that carried Wesley through thirteen years of frustration, fruitlessness, failure, and depression

to the divine moment of May 24, 1738 when his heart was “strangely warmed?” And was it not the reality of union with God that carried St. John through the hell of rejection, imprisonment, and beatings by his own community? The goal moved and drew both of these men towards the glory of the heights. It was their motivating life force.

Fr. Adrian van Kaam touched upon this drawing “force” of the goal of union with God in the following definition concerning the longing for transcendence and the full restoration of the *Imago Dei*:

The central dynamic of Christian formation is the infused pneumatic inspiration of and subsequent enlightened and graced aspiration after one’s final, ideal life form in Christ. This elevated aspiration after the ideal Christ-form of life *moves the Christian life*—by transconscious appeal and direction of the Holy Spirit—to the progressive disclosure and realization of the ideal and final form of Christ’s life in the Christian.²⁰

Van Kaam’s “graced aspiration after” for union with God is the relentless pursuit of the saints of all ages. Accordingly, he and Dr. Susan Muto wrote:

This gift of union is not reserved for canonized saints only, it dwells as a graced potency in the heart of every baptized man, woman, and child for whom the love of Christ becomes the center of their lives.²¹

David eloquently pictured such pursuit when he composed Psalm 42:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you,
O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. (Verses 1-2)

We know also the testimony of those such as Jacopone da Todi, the 13th Century Italian friar and poet, who have been drawn up the mount and have possessed the Lover, “That ancient Beauty forever new!”²² From the summit they cry out to us:

At the sight of such beauty I am swept up
Out of myself to who knows where;
My heart melts, like wax near fire.
Christ puts His mark on me, and stripped of myself
(O wondrous exchange!) I put on Christ,
Robed in this precious garment,
Crying out its love,
The soul drowns in ecstasy!²³

We ponder, how is the soul “Raised to this summit, possessing such riches” where “The soul is queen of Christ and all His realm?”²⁴ And the answer comes ringing through the patriarchs and prophets, the apostles, fathers and mothers, the martyrs and the disciples, the mystics and the saints, the reformers and the preachers:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
 And who shall stand in his holy place?
 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts...
 (Psalm 24:3-6)

Love—The Wings of the Soul

While arduously making the final ascent on North Eolus, the group of men I was with carefully and precisely followed detailed instructions from a Colorado mountaineering book. Though it seemed somewhat strange to stop occasionally on the steep upper face of a bare Rocky Mountain peak just to read a book, all of us knew the importance of taking the time to do so. On the final assault the grade was so steep that I could only see a few feet above. For safety's sake, it was crucial that we took the least steep grade, which the manual highlighted for us. We did not want the deep frustration of going through the toil of the journey without the joy of arrival.

In our functionalistic post-modern age which values “new as better” and “most recent” as authoritative, I am saddened at our estrangement from history, an estrangement that carries over into our religious communities as well. Many leaders in the worldwide Methodist family, for example, have little or no familiarity with John Wesley's great goal and process of Christian perfection. In like manner, Catholic communities around the world tend to be separated from their spiritual roots as well. We end up taking harder paths and ascending lesser mountains because we have divorced ourselves from our own heritages.

Thank God for those who, in sensitivity to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have pioneered the way before us. They surround us with a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). In reformers such as Wesley and John of the Cross, we not only have inspiring examples of persons living out lives of maturity, but also persons who have left us with clearly marked paths to that goal. Along this way, the Spirit gives wings to the soul on its journey to God. Flight takes place on the path of love. It is clear for both of these men that being filled with the love of God is the necessary condition for cleansing and driving out all that is not a fulfillment of love in believer's lives.

Renewal in the Love and Image of God

Christian perfection for Wesley was both process and instantaneous deliverance coupled with continued growth in love. It began when God first allowed the believer to see “the ground of their heart:”

And now first do they see the ground of their heart, which God before would not disclose unto them, lest the soul should fail before Him, and the spirit which He had made. Now they see all the hidden abominations there, the depths of pride,

self-will, and hell; yet having the witness in themselves, “Thou art an heir of God, a joint heir with Christ, even in the midst of this fiery trial;” which continually heightens both the strong sense they then have of their inability to help themselves, and the inexpressible hunger they feel after a full renewal in His image, in “righteousness and true holiness.”²⁵

Wesley spelled out the road to Christian perfection in several of his 52 Standard Sermons including Sermon XLIII, “The Scripture Way of Salvation.” In this sermon he preached that the end of Christianity rests in one word: “salvation.”²⁶ Always for Wesley salvation was a present and continuous process. It began in earnest with the new birth and was not completed until the believer was ushered into the very presence of God. “This great gift of God,” wrote Wesley, “the salvation of our souls, is no other than the image of God fresh stamped on our hearts.”²⁷ In other words full salvation of the believer was a renewal “in the spirit of their minds, after the likeness of Him that created them.”²⁸

The process of complete renewal began at conversion in what Wesley called the work of initial sanctification. This gradual initial work of sanctification is the process of inward renewal by the love and power of God. The goal in mind for the believer (the goal which could be attained during this lifetime) was to “purify themselves even as He is pure.”²⁹ This purification is to take place until “sin is separated from his soul; and in that instant, he lives the full life of love.”³⁰ This was Christian perfection, “a deliverance from inward as well as from outward sin.”³¹

The deliverance that was “wrought in this world,”³² had both a foundation and an end in view. The foundation was faith (which implied obedience) that moved the soul into the position of allowing God to purify the heart. The process that allowed the soul to reach perfection was love, “love filling the heart, expelling pride, anger, desire, self-will.”³³ The end in view was a complete predominance of love that allowed:

The loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and the loving our neighbor, every man as ourselves, as our own souls.³⁴

There were “means” in the whole process of sanctification for Wesley. These “means of grace” or “the ordinances of God” were the distinguishing characteristics of early Methodist piety. The believer was to await entire sanctification:

Not in careless indifference, or indolent inactivity, but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God. And if any man dream of attaining it any other way

(yea, or of keeping it when it is attained, when he has received it even in the largest measure), he deceiveth his own soul. It is true, we receive it by simple faith; but God does not, will not, give that faith, unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which He hath ordained.³⁵

The basic means of grace for Wesley were private prayer and devotion, the study of Scripture and quality Christian literature, fasting and the keeping of a journal. The corporate means of grace were attendance at public worship, the hearing of the Word, the partaking of the sacraments and participation in small groups. All of these “means” were integrated into a life filled with good works and service to others. A life of inward devotion, corporate worship and accountability, and outward service helped lead the soul through “gradual mortification” to the point where the believer “experiences a total death to sin, and an entire renewal in the love and image of God.”³⁶

The Dark Night of the Soul

Whereas John Wesley primarily wrote and preached to laity in 18th Century England, St. John of the Cross addressed a highly committed and specialized Roman Catholic Carmelite community in 16th Century Spain. Their vastly different audiences necessitated dissimilar approaches.

It has to be acknowledged that Wesley’s references to St. John’s “Nada”³⁷ are without exception extremely negative. He emphatically insisted that any kind of spiritual darkness or purging process that cast one *away* from sensing and knowing the presence of God was not of God. In striking language Wesley wrote:

Men imagine (because so they have been taught, particularly by writers of the Romish communion, whose plausible assertions too many Protestants have received without due examination) that they are not always to walk in ‘luminous faith’; that this is only a ‘lower dispensation’; that as they rise higher they are to leave those ‘sensible comforts’, and to live by ‘naked faith’ (*naked* indeed, if it be stripped both of love and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost!); that a state of light and joy is good but a state of ‘darkness’ and ‘dryness’ is better, that it is by these alone we can be ‘purified’ from pride, love of the world, and inordinate self-love; and that therefore we ought neither to expect nor desire to ‘walk in the light’ always. Hence it is... that the main body of pious men in the Romish church generally walk in a dark uncomfortable way, and if ever they receive, soon lose the light of God.³⁸

The ever-vigilant Wesley was seeking to guard the people called Methodist from the spiritual excesses and heresies of his day. He held that the path to

Divine Union was an action of God's love cleansing the soul from sin—not the purgative way that John of the Cross described. While respecting and learning from Wesley's critique, I do, nevertheless, believe that John of the Cross offers profound insight into the way of union with God.

The "Nada" of purgation in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is vast and comprises the main body of the text. Under the sweeping heading of "The Active Night," St. John covers three areas in which the soul needs to purge its inordinate desires.

Book I discusses the purgation, or the active night, of the senses. For St. John, the road or ascent to God necessarily demanded "a habitual effort to renounce and mortify the appetites."³⁹ This does not mean that the senses are evil in and of themselves. It does mean that the fullness of God is what fills the longing soul, not the physical senses. The person ruled by his or her physical senses is like someone who is always hungry. St. John counsels that the uncreated fullness of God cannot enter a soul:

...until this other hunger caused by the desires is expelled. Since hunger and fullness are contraries they cannot coexist in the same person.⁴⁰

Lack of single-mindedness in this area can be deadly, for "unmortified appetites" can "result in killing a man in his relationship with God."⁴¹ And even in the more advanced Christian "some little satisfaction, attachment, or affection" can result in that person "never reaching the port of perfection."⁴² The object of this night, therefore, is to purge the soul of all objects living therein. This purging is done through death of all sensual appetites on the one hand, and on the other, through the imitation of Christ. In death the soul remains empty and renounces "any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God."⁴³

Book II, concerning the active night of the spirit, is a vast compendium on faith. Within its 32 chapters John draws an important distinction between meditation and contemplation. He describes discursive meditation as a type of prayer that works through images, forms, and figures. There is, no doubt, a place for this type of meditation in the Christian's life. He does not deny that. What he suggests, however, is that such discursive meditations can eventually hinder the soul's progress toward union and will eventually need to be abandoned.

The crux of the matter for St. John was that as God moved the Christian toward union he or she would need to pass beyond meditation that fixed upon the imagination, sense faculties, or any particular object. It would be fine, for instance, to meditate upon the sea and allow it to point beyond itself to the Lord as Wesley suggests.⁴⁴ At some point, however, one must come to realize that God in his infinite fullness is much more than the sea

(as, of course, Wesley did). The sea reflects some general knowledge about God and can be useful in forming the soul in God. But the sea is not God. And what object of any kind is there which can usher the soul into the Presence?

Therefore, with some “general knowledge and awareness of God”⁴⁵ the soul is led through a dark night where the intellect is dispossessed “of its customary lights, forms, and phantasies.”⁴⁶ St. John likens these objects of discursive meditation to the particles of dust that allow us to see a ray of sunlight streaming through a window. The more dust that is present, the more we are able to see the sunray, yet the more polluted the ray is. The purer the ray becomes, the less we are able to distinguish it:

If the ray of sunlight should be entirely cleansed and purified of all dust particles, even the most minute, it would appear totally obscure and incomprehensible. . . . Thus the eye would find no images on which to rest, because light is not the proper object of sight, but only the means through which visible things are seen.⁴⁷

God in his pure love is not visible to the soul. He is separate from all forms and images. Thus the soul must eventually approach God in emptiness (*nada*). In such idleness before the Lord:

. . . little by little and very soon the divine calm and peace with a wondrous, sublime knowledge of God, enveloped in divine love, will be infused into [the] soul.⁴⁸

Such “calm and peaceful, inactive and desireless”⁴⁹ contemplation is the grace of the dark night.

Book III speaks of the active night of purgation in regard to the memory and will. To continue the task of purgation and advancement toward God, St. John contends that first, the memory must forget all forms if it is to be united with God. Objects of memory, he contends, should not be stored up but rather forgotten for such things are only an obstacle to those desiring union. Moreover, memory and the knowledge which comes from reflection will be subject to many falsehoods for often that which is true “will appear false, and the certain doubtful, and vice versa.”⁵⁰

All of the forms, images or impressions that the memory can hold about God are *not* God. Therefore the soul must empty itself of memory if it is to reach its goal. The purgation of the memory is in the renunciation of all its possessions. To reach the sweet possession of union, St. John wrote:

In the measure that the memory becomes dispossessed of things, in that measure it will have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be its union with God; for in relation to God, the more a soul hopes the more it attains. And when,

precisely, it is more dispossessed of things, it hopes more; and when it has reached perfect dispossession, it will remain with the perfect possession of God in divine union.⁵¹

Fix the memory on God, St. John counsels; and as any distinct ideas or forms or images occur, turn them over immediately to God without resting in them, and live “in emptiness of everything rememberable.”⁵²

The will or strength of the soul must also be purged. In the will’s journey toward God, all inordinate feelings of joy, hope, sorrow, and fear must be transformed and directed solely toward God. “There is nothing worthy of a man’s joy save the service of God and the procurement of His honor and glory in all things,”⁵³ insists St. John.

The will should not rejoice in temporal goods, such as riches, status or position. Nor should the will rejoice in natural goods such as beauty. The will should take no joy in the natural senses or in the moral virtues and practices. Even supernatural goods such as gifts of the Spirit and miracles should never be rejoiced in just for themselves.

The fundamental principle of St. John in all things regarding the will is that amid all these goods, every joy should be directed toward God. He states the principle:

The will should rejoice only in what is for the honor and glory of God, and the greatest honor we can give Him is to serve Him according to evangelical perfection.⁵⁴

Allowing Love to Remove the Dust

In my reading of church history and of the exemplary persons of faith therein, it appears that the process of Divine Love purging out sin and bringing purity of heart takes up the bulk of most Christian’s earthly existence. There are a few exemplary persons of the faith, such as Wesley and John of the Cross, that move into the light of union during this lifetime. Adrian van Kaam was certainly such a person as well. We know this not just from their writings, but from the testimonies of those they impacted. These are no doubt joined by perhaps thousands of unknown Christians who also fulfilled their purpose in divine love. Yet the evidence is substantial that many believers never progress beyond the elementary doctrines of Christ. I wonder how such souls can attain union with the blessed Trinity without being filled with love and without moving through the fires of purgation? The thief on the cross, the parable of the workers, and the ever-present reminder of “grace alone” become my only answer. Nevertheless, the call to Christian maturity presses upon the Lord’s church now more than ever.

How, when, and where purgation is completed I know not. I think there is an element of it that must continue throughout our earthly lives. That it will be completed I am assured, for how can that which has blemish enter

into the Glory of God? Only through the Blood of Christ is the purging accomplished; and only when every stain is removed is the process complete. For those who are responsive to the call of the love of Christ, the narrow path ahead will lead to purity, single-mindedness, freedom, and a complete orientation toward love, which only purgation and an immersion in Divine love can bring.

For Wesley and St. John alike, following the path meant removing all of the large and little specks of dust alike. Toward the end of his *Plain Account* Wesley wrote:

As a very little dust will disorder a clock, and the least sand will obscure our sight, so the least grain of sin which is upon the heart will hinder its right motion towards God. . . . The best means of resisting the devil is, to destroy whatever of the world remains in us, in order to raise for God, upon its ruins, a building all of love. Then shall we begin, in this fleeting life, to love God as we shall love Him in eternity.⁵⁵

St. John reflects the same truth in the beginning of his *Ascent*. He wrote:

It makes little difference whether a bird is tied by a thin thread or by a cord. For even if tied by thread, the bird will be prevented from taking off just as surely as if it were tied by cord.⁵⁶

Jacopone da Todi, in *Laud 42*, reflects the struggle of purgation and captures the ultimate pain that all who follow Christ must come to: crucifixion with their Lord. The highest hill of purgation is none other than Calvary. Only at the cross is the door of union opened. Jacopone sang the central theme of Galatians 2:20 when he wrote:

Soul, since you have come to Me,
Gladly will I answer you. Come,
See, this is My bed—the cross.
Here we will be one. Come to Me
And I will quench your thirst.⁵⁷

In Wesley's words, none of these persons were content to "offend in one point"⁵⁸ the law of God. They joyously and willingly allowed the sweet grace of purgation to cut all of the strings of their attachments to this world and remove all of the dust of sin from their hearts. They willingly followed Christ to the crucifixion of the false self in order that who they most deeply were in him might shine forth in their glorious liberty as children of God.

Transformation of Heart

Through the long journey of gaining the summit, a slow and sometimes imperceptible phenomenon evolves. The believer becomes more real. The

heart is increasingly transformed into the image of Christ that it reflects. Transformation becomes the fruit of the upward journey.

For Wesley, this fruit was ultimately defined in the freedom to love and serve both God and neighbor. The freedom to love God was centrally focused in the purified Christian's ability to pray without ceasing:

His heart is lifted up to God at all times, and in all places. In this he is never hindered, much less interrupted, by any person or thing. In retirement or company, in leisure, business or conversation, his heart is ever with the Lord. Whether he lie down, or rise up, "God is in all his thoughts:" he walks with God continually; having the loving eye of his soul fixed on Him, and everywhere "seeing Him that is invisible."⁵⁹

Such freedom for Wesley allowed him to love every person as his own soul—even his enemies. Whatever he would be about, he would do it all "to advance the glory of God" and to spread "peace and good will among men."⁶⁰

This same "freedom of the heart for God"⁶¹ allowed St. John the detachment of the dark night wherein he acquired "liberty of spirit, clarity of reason, rest, tranquility, peaceful confidence in God, and, in his will, the true cult and homage of God."⁶² Such detachment gave him a clearer knowledge of all the sensory, physical, supernatural, and spiritual goods of life whereby he enjoyed a "better understanding of both natural and supernatural truths concerning them."⁶³

Through the "nada" of his memory, intellect and will, God was able to possess the faculties:

... consequently it is He Who divinely moves and commands them according to His spirit and will. As a result the operations are not different from those of God; but those the soul performs are of God and are divine operations.⁶⁴

As with John Wesley, St. John allowed the fruit of a clear and centered heart (which had been wrought through the fires of purgation and outright persecution) to enable him to bring the salt and light of the gospel into his own community and into the lives of those he directed like St. Teresa of Avila. His life was sanctified, not for personal indulgence, but to be poured out as "the aroma of Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:15) to the brothers and sisters of his community then as well as to those of us in the greater body that follow the Lord today.

How fitting that the *Ascent* abruptly ends on the note of preaching. After leading the soul through a long personal journey of faith, he arrived at the "spiritual practice" of preaching as if to say here is the primary fruit of union with God. In truly preaching the Gospel, all the benefits of purgation and love act as a channel through which the Word and the power of God travel through the preacher to the church and world.

Conclusion

Evelyn Underhill offers a succinct summary statement of the transformation brought about by union of likeness:

The prayer of the growing spirit should be free, humble, simple; full of initiative too. The mystics constantly tell us, that the goal of this prayer and of the hidden life which shall itself become more and more of a prayer, is union with God. We meet this phrase often: far too often, for we lose the wholesome sense of its awfulness. What does union with God mean? Not a nice feeling which we enjoy in devout moments. This may or may not be a by-product of union with God; probably not. It can never be its substance. Union with God means such an entire self-giving to the Divine Charity, such identification with its interests, that the whole of our human nature is transformed in God, irradiated by His absolute light, His sanctifying grace. Thus it is woven up into the organ of His creative activity, His redeeming purpose; conformed to the pattern of Christ, heart, soul, mind and strength. Each time this happens, it means that one more creature has achieved its destiny; and each soul in whom the life of the Spirit is born, sets out towards that goal.⁶⁵

Therefore: to the task! For the call is always as C. S. Lewis imagined it “further up and further in.”⁶⁶ We are ever beckoned to come higher in the kingdom of light and further up into the mountains of God’s love, for, as Wesley wrote, we shall always and forevermore be about the business of growing:

... in grace, in the knowledge of Christ, in the love and image of God; and will do so, not only till death, but to all eternity.⁶⁷

And as for me, a humbling thought rattles my heart: now I am the old man teaching Christian perfection to seminarians. Lord have mercy.

Endnotes

¹ Steve Harper’s early works represent an excellent treatment of both Wesley’s theology and dynamic spiritual life. See *John Wesley’s Message for Today*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983; and *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983. Both of these texts remain in print. *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* is now in a Workbook form.

² This and all remaining scriptural citations will be taken from the NRSV bible.

³ *John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1971, 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁵ I am deeply indebted to my colleague, Dr. Joseph Dongell, Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary for this summary insight and for his gracious and insightful critique of my thoughts on Christian perfection.

⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹ Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979, Sermon XLU “The New Birth,” Vol. VI, 67-68.

¹⁰ Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 12.

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

¹² Ibid., 26.

¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

¹⁵ See Albert Outler’s introductory comments to Wesley’s thirteen sermons on The Sermon on the Mount in *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons I Volume I*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, pages 466-469. This particular quote from Wesley is found on page 467.

¹⁶ St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Washington D. C.: ICS Publications, 1979, 115.

¹⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹⁸ Ibid., 68.

¹⁹ Ibid., 68-69.

²⁰ Adrian van Kaam, “Studies in Formative Spirituality” V.I, No. 2. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University, 1980, 293.

²¹ Adrian van Kaam & Susan Muto, *Formation Theology Volume One: Foundations Of Christian Formation*. Pittsburgh: Epiphany Association, 2004, 134.

²² Jacopone da Todi, *The Lauds*. New York: Paulist Press, 1982, 259.

²³ Ibid., 259.

²⁴ Ibid., 260.

²⁵ Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 32.

²⁶ N. Burwash (ed.) *Wesley’s 52 Standard Sermons*. Salem, Ohio: H. E. Schmul, 1967, 428.

²⁷ Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 28.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 62.

³¹ Ibid., 26.

³² Ibid., 27.

³³ Ibid., 84.

³⁴ Ibid., 81.

³⁵ Ibid., 62.

³⁶ Ibid., 61.

³⁷ John of the Cross used the Spanish term “nada” extensively in his spiritual writings. The literal meaning of the word is “nothing.” Often times in his use of

the expression he meant that the life of union with God “is not this,” meaning that union was more than consolations of the Spirit, gifts of the Spirit, or even knowledge about God.

³⁸ Taken from Sermon 46, “The Wilderness State,” (II) paragraph 2. It is most interesting to read Albert Outler’s notes in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2* “Sermons II 34-70” page 212 where he notes Wesley’s “lifelong anti-Roman prejudices.”

³⁹ St. John, *Collected Works*, 83.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁴ Wesley wrote, “The sea is an excellent figure of the fulness of God, and that of the blessed Spirit. For as the rivers all return into the sea; so the bodies, the souls, and the good works of the righteous, return into God, to live there in His eternal repose.” *A Plain Account*, 105.

⁴⁵ St. John, *Collected Works*, 144.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 236.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁵⁵ Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 110.

⁵⁶ St. John, *Collected Works*, 97.

⁵⁷ Jacopone, *The Lays*, 145.

⁵⁸ Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶¹ St. John, *Collected Works*, 248.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 247.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁶⁵ Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1954, 49.

⁶⁶ See *The Last Battle*. The Macmillan Company, 1956, chapter 15 and following.

⁶⁷ Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 62.