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*Understanding Christian Perfection and its Struggle with Antinomianism*

*Every so often, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary will notice a current student with exceptional promise. The Asbury Journal wants to help highlight the work of rising academics by publishing works from such students. This paper is an example of such a work, brought to the attention of the editor by Dr. Larry Wood.*

**Abstract**

Much of the confusion regarding John Wesley's phrase, *Christian perfection*, comes from the western tendency to define "perfection" as a state of infallibility (from the Latin *perfectio*) rather than a process of spiritual maturing based upon the Greek word for perfection, *teleios* (Matthew 5:48). Misunderstandings are further perpetuated when the *moral* law of God is conflated with the *ceremonial* and *civil* laws of the Old Testament. This error has led to a revival of *antinomianism*, justification without sanctification, which was the very issue that John Wesley and John Fletcher strove against in their own day.

**Key Words:** John Wesley, Christian perfection, antinomianism, Gregory of Nyssa, John Fletcher, moral law

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Jesus said: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48, NIV). Christian perfection is one of the most distinctive doctrines of John Wesley, and yet it remains often misunderstood, even amongst members of the United Methodist Church.

Much of the confusion begins with the use of the word “perfect”. Among English-speaking peoples, the word “perfection” comes from the Latin word *perfectio*, meaning “perfection of the gods”. This understanding of the word is dominant in the west because of the great historical influence of Latin on its lexicon. As expected from a Latin-educated Roman Catholic priest, for example, this is how Martin Luther had interpreted the meaning of the word (Watson 1963:301). It implies perfection in all regards, including every thought, word, and deed. Understandably, this form of perfection is impossible for human beings, but this was not what John Wesley meant by Christian perfection.

Wesley, who was well-read when it came to the Ante-Nicene Fathers, took the meaning of “perfection” from the Greek words *teleios* and *teleiosis*, meaning “whole, complete, mature, grown-up, perfect” (Manskar 2003:6). The root of these words is *telos*, meaning “goal” or “end”. Therefore, within the context of Christian perfection, the Greek meaning of the word suggests a process or a spiritual journey which takes the person through the necessary stages to reach the end-goal of Christian character: Christlikeness. In fact, much of the confusion amongst Western Christians regarding Christian perfection stems from the western tendency to interpret “perfection” as a *state*, whereas the Eastern Church understood “perfection” to be a *process* (Merritt 1987:93). This was the understanding that Wesley adopted and sought to propagate.

Dr. Albert C. Outler essentially agreed with Werner Jaeger, a prominent Hellenist scholar, that Wesley had been influenced by writings attributed to Gregory of Nyssa, especially regarding Christian perfection. Outler states, “Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection is an amalgam of many sources, but its fountainhead (outside the New Testament, of course) is Gregory of Nyssa” (Merritt 1987:94). He goes on to further explain that Wesley thus absorbed ancient Byzantine spiritual traditions, including the concept of “devotion” as the *way* of the Christian life, and “perfection” as its *goal*.

Like Gregory of Nyssa, Wesley understood Christian perfection to be dynamic process which required active holiness. Gregory defined perfection as “life lived in accordance with virtue”, entailing love of God and love of neighbor (Merritt 1987:98, 100). In his *De Professione Christiana*, Gregory explained that a Christian is one who “participates” with Christ, and in this way imitates the divine nature. This is only possible because Christ restores believers to the original condition of their human nature, the *imago dei*. So while Christians cannot be like God in their “being”, they *can* be like God in

their actions. Gregory explained that this is made possible through the believer's "relationship with the immanence of the transcendent Father" (Merritt 1987:99).

Wesley agreed with Gregory, although he understood and explained this regenerating relationship as the action of the Holy Spirit tabernacling within the restored believer (Wesley, "On Sin in Believers", II.4):

The state of a justified person is inexpressibly great and glorious. He is born again, 'not of blood, nor of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.' [...] His very body is a 'temple of the Holy Ghost,' and an 'habitation of God through the Spirit.' He is 'created anew in Christ Jesus....'

Gregory of Nyssa proceeded to explain that Christian perfection should be expressed ethically, showing "through our life that we ourselves are what the power of this great name [Christ] requires us to be" (Merritt 1987:100). A life lived according to the ethics of God was the proper expression of gratitude for "the greatness of this gift" given to the Christian by Christ. Still, Gregory recognized that this was only possible in partnership with Christ in a relationship of grace. He pointed out that we share the name of Christ [Christian] "through His life" rather than share His life through participation in His name (Merritt 1987:101). In other words, we are recognized as Christians by how we live through the power of God's grace, not by what we are called.

Gregory makes it plain that Christian perfection requires abandonment of sin and evil (Merritt 1987:101):

Perfection in the Christian life in my judgment (is) the participation of one's soul and speech and activities in all of the names by which Christ is signified, so that the perfect holiness, according to the eulogy of Paul, is taken upon oneself in 'the whole body and soul and spirit,' continuously safeguarded against being mixed with evil.

In many ways, Wesley subscribed to the theological understandings of Gregory of Nyssa. They both believed that perfection was a dynamic process, not a state. They also agreed that perfection required a synergistic relationship between God the Holy Spirit and the will of the believer. And until his Aldersgate experience in 1738, John Wesley, like Gregory of Nyssa, tended to make holiness a means of preparation for justification (Merritt 1987:95, 108-109).

However, the influence of the Moravian Brethren changed Wesley's understanding of faith into "a personal embracing of the provisions of Christ for justification" rather than simple mental assent to the creedal understanding of redemption (Merritt 1987:96). As a consequence of Wesley's Aldersgate experience, Outler states that "justification always stands first, without any antecedent 'holiness' or merit of any kind as a *necessary* precondition to human salvation" (Merritt 1987:95).

Outler further elaborates (Merritt 1987:97, emphasis in original):

The unique mixture of the theological notions thus far accumulated was now to be smelted and forged into an integral and dynamic theology in which Eastern notions of *synthesis* (dynamic interaction between God's will and man's) were fused with the classical Protestant *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*, and with the Moravian stress upon "inner feeling".

After his Aldersgate experience, Wesley departed from Gregory, realizing that works do not make persons worthy to receive the grace of God (Merritt 1987:108). Rather, Wesley began to recognize that it is prevenient grace, or the grace that precedes our justification, which prompts the faith relationship between God and the sinner. This holy relationship filled with God's *agape* love then enables Christian perfection through the justifying, sanctifying grace of God.

To better understand the purpose of Christian perfection, one must first remember the scriptural account of humanity's state. Although humanity was created in the image of God, since the Fall, God's image within human beings has been marred. Whereas humanity originally had the attributes of God, purity, love, justice, mercy and truth, now the fallenness of human nature fails to reflect the holiness of God's character. The "moral" image of God in humanity was lost (Benefiel 2006:127).

Yet, ever since the Fall, God has been on a mission to redeem fallen humanity: the *Missio Dei*. This was the purpose of the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ: atonement for human sin and restoration of humanity. "By the power of transforming and sustaining grace, the people of God are restored in the image of God with the result that the holiness of God becomes characteristic of the people of God" (Benefiel 2006:125).

Wesley believed that Christian life could begin once persons yielded to God's prevenient grace, which taught them the truth about their sinful nature and produced the desire for repentance (Watson 1963:292). Forgiveness of their sins and reconciliation with God were made possible through the blood of Jesus Christ sacrificed upon their behalf (Benefiel 2006:127).

The person that truly believes that their sins were atoned for by Jesus' death on the cross becomes both *justified* by their faith and *regenerated* in their nature. Justification means pardon from sin and adoption into the family of God: "He is a child of God, a member of Christ, an heir of the kingdom of heaven" (Wesley, "On Sin in Believers, II.4). Regeneration, or "new birth", is a renewal of our very being which changes us from our fallen nature and restores us to the image of God, work which is accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wesley based his concept of regeneration upon 2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV) - "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." In his sermon, "On

Sin in Believers”, Wesley explained (II.1):

I use indifferently the words, regenerate, justified, or believers; since, though they have not precisely the same meaning, (the First implying an inward, actual change, the Second a relative one, and the Third the means whereby both the one and the other are wrought,) yet they come to one and the same thing; as everyone that believes, is both justified and born of God.

While Wesley clearly distinguished “justification” from “the new birth”, he also emphasized that they were never separated from one another; they belong together and occur simultaneously (Watson 1963:292).

Yet Wesley, unlike the Calvinists and Quietists of his day, recognized that this was not the fulfillment of the Christian life. The newly justified and regenerate person needed to move on toward the previously described *teleios/teleiosis*: Christian perfection. The babe in Christ needed to move through childhood to adulthood, having the maturity of a son or daughter of God. “Christian perfection is nothing more, or less, than growing up in love and becoming a whole, complete human being made in the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ” (Maskar 2003:6). It is letting “the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5, NRS). Wesley described this growth in Christ-like holiness as *sanctification*.

This, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit and a gift of grace. The sanctifying work of God is a gradual process, but its goal is to perfect God’s love within us. Wesley concisely explained these two different workings of grace, justifying and sanctifying, in his sermon, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” (II.1):

- **By Justification:** we are saved from the *guilt* of sin, and restored to the *favour* of God.
- **By Sanctification:** we are saved from the *power* of sin, and restored to the *image* of God.

Wesley went on to describe salvation as the gradual sanctification of the believer (“On Working Out Our Own Salvation”, II.1):

All experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as ‘a grain of mustard-seed, which, at first, is the least of all seeds,’ but afterwards puts forth large branches, and becomes a great tree; till, in another instant, the heart is cleansed, from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we ‘grow up in all things into him that is our Head;’ till we attain ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’

It is important to emphasize that this is not accomplished by the vigorous efforts of the believer. Instead, it is the synergistic relationship developed between God and the believer when he or she yields their own will to the will of God. It is the transforming grace of God that is fully capable of remaking us into the moral image of God. When God breathes the Holy Spirit into our lives, he breathes into us the very life of God. In this way, God not only declares the believer to be holy, but enables the believer to be holy. This work of God not only imputes holiness, but imparts holiness (Benefiel 2006:128).

Wesley explained that the Christian is able to grow in perfection not only because of Christ's imputed righteousness, but brings forth the fruit of righteousness (good works) because of Christ's imparted righteousness (Oden 1994:207-208):

That Christ's righteousness is imputed means that 'all believers are forgiven and accepted, not for the sake of anything in them, or of anything that ever was, that is, or ever can be done by them, or ever can be done by them, but wholly and solely for the sake of what Christ hath done and suffered for them.'

I believe that God implants righteousness in everyone to whom He has imputed it. Implanting [imparting] is a lively horticultural metaphor, as distinguished from a declarative, juridical metaphor. It requires daily nurturing, not a simple bang of a gavel. It is the fruit of our acceptance with God, not the ground of it.

In this manner, Wesley could truly state that salvation is based upon grace through faith, not works. Yet, he also recognized that God's purpose was to recreate the believer in the image of Christ, and this required human responsiveness to God's ongoing grace. It was insufficient to give intellectual assent to orthodox teachings on salvation; following Christ meant personally embracing the provisions of Christ (Merritt 1987:96).

This meant addressing the issue of sin, both *outward* and *inward*. Wesley adamantly affirmed that persons who are justified by Christ, focused upon the will of God, and resting upon the guidance of the Spirit would have the ability to avoid *outward* sin. This would include the moral law of the Old Testament as well as those commandments Jesus discussed in the New Testament. He addressed this in his sermon, "On Sin in Believers" (II.3, emphasis in original):

The question is not concerning *outward sin*; whether a child of God *commits sin* or no. We all agree and earnestly maintain, 'He that committeth sin is of the devil.' We agree, 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.'

The reason for his firmness on this matter is because God's grace is sufficient for us, and his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). God's grace would also be sufficient to help the believer overcome the power of inward sin, which Wesley described as "any sinful temper, passion, or affection; such as pride, self-will, love of the world, in any kind or degree; such as lust, anger, peevishness; any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ" ("On Sin in Believers," II.2). He further summarized this power to overcome sin as follows (II.4, emphasis added):

[The justified person] . . . is 'created anew in Christ Jesus.' He is washed, he is sanctified. His heart is purified by faith; he is cleansed 'from the corruption that is in the world;' 'the love of God is shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him.' And so long as he 'walketh in love,' (which he may always do,) he worships God in spirit and in truth. *He keepeth the commandments of God, and doeth those things that are pleasing in his sight; so exercising himself as to 'have a conscience void of offence, toward God and toward man.'* And he has power both over outward and inward sin, even from the moment he is justified.

It is understandable that Wesley would say of the person who has been renewed in the image of God that they would desire to do the will of God "on earth as it is in heaven" (Benefiel 2006:129). Therefore, the Christian moving towards perfection desires to adopt God's morality for themselves. Yet this obedience is not caused by any coercion or external command, but rather it is a natural expression of who they are in Christ. The commandments to love God and love others as themselves are written upon their very hearts (Benefiel 2006:130-131). These Christians recognize God's love in their lives and return it to him in obedience and joy (Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist", 9):

And while he [the Methodist] thus always exercises his love to God, by praying without ceasing, rejoicing evermore, and in everything giving thanks, this commandment is written in his heart, "That he who loveth God, love his brother also." And he accordingly, 'loves his neighbor as himself'; he loves every man as his own soul. His heart is full of love to all mankind. . .

Unlike some religious leaders of his day, Wesley recognized that the law and the gospel were in agreement with one another. Whereas the moral law of the Old Testament identified *outward sin*, the Gospel articulated by Jesus in the New Testament went further and exposed *inward sin*. This is particularly notable in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus took the Old Testament moral law which addressed *outward sin*, and rather than rescinding it, he added to it the element of love, addressing *inward sin*. While the Decalogue commanded, "Thou shalt not murder", Jesus went

further and said that to call one's brother a fool is equally condemned. And where the Old Testament moral law forbade adultery, Jesus told his listeners that to even look upon a woman with lust is just as sinful. What principle did Jesus add to God's moral law? The law of love. If you're insulting your brother, you aren't loving him. If you're lusting after a woman, you are seeing her as an object of self-gratification, not a person made in the image of God. So, rather than abolishing the moral law of God, Jesus made it complete by adding the principle of love (Dillman 1977:64).

Wesley recognized that while Jesus did come to abolish the *ceremonial* law of the Old Testament, the *moral* law would not only remain intact, but be perfected by obedience through love (Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, 5", I.2, emphasis added):

*But the moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments, and enforced by the prophets, He did not take away. It was not the design of His coming to revoke any part of this. This is a law which never can be broken, which stands fast as the faithful witness in heaven. The moral stands on an entirely different foundation from the ceremonial or ritual law, which was only designed for a temporary restraint upon a disobedient and stiff-necked people; whereas this was from the beginning of the world, being "written not on tables of stone," but on the hearts of all the children of men, when they came out of the hands of the Creator. And, however the letters once wrote by the finger of God are now in a great measure defaced by sin, yet can they not wholly be blotted out, while we have any consciousness of good and evil. Every part of this law must remain in force, upon all mankind, and in all ages; as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstances liable to change, but on the nature of God and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other.*

Understanding that the moral law of the Old Testament reveals God's ethics, which are timeless and can never be broken while believers are conscious of good and evil. Wesley took steps to ensure that "no one commandment contained in the moral law, nor the least part of any one, however inconsiderable it might seem, should ever be disannulled" in the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church in America (Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, 5", II.1). He accomplished this by including "Article VI – Of the Old Testament" in the 1784 *Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church* (Alexander 2012:104, emphasis added), which states:

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard



who feign that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises. *Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites doth not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.*

In other words, Methodist Christians are *not* bound by the ceremonial or civil laws of the Old Testament, like the laws for ritual cleanliness, or civil penalties like stoning for adultery, respectively, but they *are* bound by the moral law revealed therein. This is a very important distinction to make, because it is often when these three types of law, *ceremonial*, *civil*, and *moral*, are conflated together that confusion arises.

For example, even though Wesley clearly stated that “no one commandment contained in the moral law, nor the least part of any one, however inconsiderable it might seem, should ever be disannulled” (Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, 5”, II.1), scholars and dissenters will often appeal to scriptures annulling either the *ceremonial* law (circumcision, and/or cleanliness laws) or the *civil* law (punishments such as stoning for law-breaking) to declare the unreasonableness of Wesley’s stance on sustaining the *moral* law.

A case in point is Charles Dillman’s article discussing “Wesley’s Approach to the Law in Discourse XXV, on the Sermon on the Mount” already cited above. Even though he suggests in his conclusion that his purpose is not “to contradict the position of John Wesley on the place of the law in Christian doctrine”, that is precisely what he attempts to do. While Wesley makes it quite clear in his Sermon on the Mount Discourse XXV (cited above) that he is referring to the *moral* law, Dillman tries to defeat his argument using Paul’s rejection of imposing *ceremonial* law on believers in the letter to the Galatians (Dillman 1977:63).

In his letter, Paul was arguing against the Judaizers whom were Jewish Christians trying to require Gentiles to become Jewish first by imposing the Old Testament rites upon them, such as circumcision, before they could become followers of Christ. Consequently, when Paul argued against works of the law prior to justification, he was referring to the *ceremonial* laws of the Old Testament: something that Wesley would profoundly agree with. To assert that Paul is arguing against adhering to the *moral* law, as Dillman suggests, is absurd.

Furthermore, this issue was also addressed when Paul went to Jerusalem to speak to the apostles and elders and decide under what conditions Gentiles should be admitted to the body of Christ. It was their conclusion that they would not impose the *ceremonial* laws of the Jewish people upon Gentiles, not wishing to burden those who were turning to God. Instead, it was the

decision of the council that Gentile believers were to “abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20, 24-29, NIV).

All of these restraints are *moral* in nature. The first (eating food sacrificed to idols) represents a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3, NIV). Idolatry is a moral issue. The morality involved in the second constraint upon believers, to abstain from sexual immorality, is self-evident, even as it has fallen out of fashion in recent years in the Western church. Even the third constraint concerning the consumption of blood, whether still within a creature or extracted from it, is a moral issue because blood represents the life of the individual for both humans and animals (Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:11,14). To drink the blood of another creature was forbidden because it was an act of taking the other creature’s life and strength for oneself, whereas the proper use of blood had solely been to atone for sin on the altar of God (Leviticus 17:11-12). Consequently, while it might superficially appear to be a ceremonial law, it was actually based upon moral foundations. This is why Wesley clearly documented in Article VI of the Articles of Religion that Methodists were only bound to obey the moral law of the Old Testament, not the ceremonial or civil law found therein.

Yet knowing that *antinomianism*, the belief that grace frees believers from obedience to any law, is a threat to sound Christian doctrine in every generation, the drafters of the Methodist Constitution in 1808 made sure that the religious doctrines of the church could not be corrupted by future leaders or laity. This was accomplished in “Division Two – Organization, Section III – Restrictive Rules, Article I” (Alexander 2012:65) which states:

The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion or establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine.

It was recognized that this constraint would likely be necessary because John Wesley had had to deal with issues of *antinomianism* from both the Quietists and the Calvinists of his day and its effects on Christian doctrine.

On the one hand, the Quietists led by Philip Henry Molther believed that if a person did not “feel” absolute assurance that they were a child of God, “they did not have true religion and, therefore, should discontinue all the means of grace and all works of piety and, instead, remain ‘still’ before the Lord” until grace came to them (Heitzenrater 1995:106). In contrast, John Wesley taught that God’s grace is unearned and yet persons were not to be idle waiting to *experience* grace, but were to actively engage in the *means of grace* whether they had feelings of assurance or not.

The *means of grace* included:

- **Works of Piety:** Bible study, prayer, fasting, regular worship and sacraments
- **Works of Mercy:** Visiting the sick and imprisoned, helping the poor and hungry

To ignore these works was to ignore the very heart of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Dillman 1977:62-63).

On the other hand, Wesley felt compelled to address the *antinomianism* of the Calvinists as well. Calvinists such as George Whitefield were preaching "the predestination of the Elect": the doctrine that before they were born, God has chosen a select group of people for eternal salvation and all others for eternal damnation. The natural consequence of such a doctrine would be the pointlessness of the moral law of God and the decline of holiness.

For example, the idea that God was glorified by the damnation of the wicked quenched Jesus' command to love and pray for one's enemies. Wesley explained this in his sermon, "Free Grace" (II.1, emphasis added):

This doctrine tend[s] to destroy several particular branches of holiness. Such are meekness and love, — love, I mean, of our enemies, — of the evil and unthankful. I say not, that none who hold it have meekness and love (for as is the power of God, so is his mercy;) but that it naturally tends to inspire, or increase, a sharpness or eagerness of temper, which is quite contrary to the meekness of Christ; as then especially appears, when they are opposed on this head. *And it as naturally inspires contempt or coldness towards those whom we suppose outcast from God.*

In other words, those that believe they are among the Elect are less likely to love the enemies of God or sinful outcasts because this doctrine suggests that they are predestined to be damned and therefore God must hate them as well.

Furthermore, Wesley described how the doctrine of the Calvinists tended to "destroy that holiness which is the end of all the ordinances of God" (Wesley, "Free Grace", II):

'If I am ordained to life, I shall live; if to death, I shall live; so I need not trouble myself about it.' So directly does this doctrine tend to shut the very gate of holiness in general, — to hinder unholy men from ever approaching thereto, or striving to enter in thereat.

The people listening to the "once saved, always saved" teachings of the Calvinists would wonder, "Why make any effort at all? Either way, my fate is already decided, so I may as well live as I choose. If I live a life of ease, it may be because I am one of God's blessed elect. Or if I am not, then there is nothing I can do about it anyway, so I ought to get as much pleasure out of

this life as possible while I can....” In either case, there is no longer any motivation to try and follow the moral law revealed by either the Old Testament prophets or Christ himself.

In a related way, Wesley had to contend with Luther’s *sola fide* (faith alone) doctrine being taken to the extreme. In the sixteenth century when Luther was understandably reacting against the “works righteousness” of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther emphasized “faith” being the sole requirement for salvation. Unfortunately, he did not perceive the theological distinctions of Paul and James when they wrote their letters about salvation (Mattke 1968:41).

Paul’s writing to the Romans pertained to *justification*, which *is* merited by faith alone in Jesus’ atoning death on the cross, which replaced the sacrificial system of the Temple and the ceremonial laws that went with it. Consequently, Paul’s letter was addressing how one could come into a righteous relationship with God.

However, James’ letter was written to baptized Christians that *already knew* they had become the adopted children of God, but were not living like His holy family. To these James wrote about the “good works” that should be the natural fruit of those that live in the Spirit. He understood that holy living with regard to God and neighbor should be the inevitable outcome of God’s *sanctifying* grace. Unfortunately, this distinction between the justifying work and the sanctifying work of God’s grace was lost upon Luther, so that his followers not only preached salvation by faith alone, but implied that efforts at good works were in effect scorning the generous grace of God.

John Fletcher, a theologian who was a contemporary and friend to the Wesleys, appraised the Antinomian problem by saying, “Once we were in immediate danger of splitting upon ‘works without faith’: Now we are threatened with destruction from ‘faith without works’” (Mattke 1968:44).

Fletcher famously addressed the Antinomian controversy in his “Checks to Antinomianism”. He lamented (Wiseman 1953:114):

The evangelical law should appear to us ‘sweeter than the honeycomb, and more precious than fine gold.’ We should continually spread the tables of our hearts before our heavenly Lawgiver, beseeching him to write it there with his own finger, the powerful Spirit of life and love. But alas! God’s commandments are disregarded; they are represented as the needless or impracticable sanctions of that superannuated legalist, Moses; and if we express our veneration for them, we are looked upon as people who are always strangers to the Gospel, or are fallen into the Galatian state.

Yet, in fact, Paul spoke out against those in the Galatian Church who used the very freedom they gained by grace to *avoid* living with God in faith and obedience (Marquardt 1998:101-102). While denying the need to obey the

*ceremonial* laws, which included circumcision, he scolded those who denied the power of the Spirit by still living in their sinful nature and embracing moral laxity (Galatians 5:16-25, NIV, emphasis added):

<sup>16</sup>So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the [ceremonial] law.

<sup>19</sup>The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup>idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup>and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup>But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup>Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

<sup>25</sup>Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Here Paul is advocating the same kind of Christian perfection through the power of the Spirit that John Wesley preached. Paul continued on by showing that there is a place for good works amongst those who live by the Spirit (Galatians 6:7-10, NIV):

<sup>7</sup>Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. <sup>8</sup>Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. <sup>9</sup>Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

John Fletcher understood that Paul's letter to the Galatians was addressing efforts to impose the Jewish *ceremonial* law upon the Gentiles as a prerequisite to acceptance into that Christian community as has been discussed above (Galatians 5:2-6, 6:12-15): "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the *new creation*" (Galatians 6:15, NIV, emphasis added). Fletcher therefore addressed objections based upon Galatians and countered them by citing Paul's letter to the Hebrews where the Apostle declares "that under the new covenant, believers, far from being 'without God's laws, have them written in their hearts; God *himself* placing them in their minds'" (Wiseman 1953:115).

Fletcher continued by asserting that the Lord Jesus Christ disagreed with the Antinomians' central premise in Matthew 22:36-40 (NIV) when he said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Jesus revealed and affirmed that the whole moral law of the Old Testament can be summarized by the two greatest commandments of God: Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself. The unspoken question that follows is this: "Is it possible to love God, yet hate His moral law?"

Fletcher continues in this vein by observing "what is it to love Jesus, but to fulfill the whole law at once", loving God and man, the Creator and the creation (Wiseman 1953:116-117, emphasis in original):

Did the Son of God 'magnify the law,' that we might vify it? Did he 'make it honourable,' that we might make it contemptible? Did he 'come to fulfill it,' that we might be discharged from fulfilling it according to our capacity? That is, discharged from loving God and our neighbor? Discharged from the employment and joys of heaven? No: the 'Word was *never* made flesh' for this dreadful end. [...] Standing, therefore, upon the rock of evangelical truth, we ask, with St. Paul, 'Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid! Nay, we establish the law.' We point sinners to that Saviour in and from whom they may continually have the law-fulfilling power; 'that the righteousness of the law may be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.'

It is all too tempting for Christians to accept the *justifying* grace of God, but shun the *sanctifying* influence of His Holy Spirit. Even John Wesley acknowledged his own temptation to "distort the message of the Bible to suit my own goals or desires". Christians are "to seek not just a part of but all the mind of Christ. We are to strive to walk as he walked not just in some respects but in all things" (Manskar 2003:8).

This was the very issue that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had to confront in the Lutheran Church in the days of Nazi Germany: *justification* without "walking with Christ". Bonhoeffer lamented the prevalence of "cheap grace" - grace without price, grace without cost (Bonhoeffer 1995:43-45, emphasis added):

The essence of grace, we suppose is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing.... Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolations [good feelings] of his grace! *That is what we mean by cheap grace, the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs.*

In contrast, “costly grace” calls us to follow Jesus Christ (Bonhoeffer 1995:45, emphasis in original and added):

It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. *It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.* Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘ye were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.

Costly grace requires the believer to submit to the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, shunning sin instead of sanctioning it. Cheap grace is that grace which we bestow on ourselves (Bonhoeffer 1995:44).

John Fletcher recognized this “self-anointed righteous” within the antinomian doctrines of his own generation:

People, it seems, may now be ‘in Christ,’ without being ‘new creatures,’ and ‘new creatures’ without casting ‘old things’ away. They may be God’s children without God’s image; and ‘borne of the Spirit’ without the fruits of the Spirit. [...] But alas! This self adoption into the family of Christ will no more pass in heaven than self imputation of Christ’s righteousness. The work of the Spirit will stand there, and that alone. (Wiseman 1953:123-124)

Sadly, instead of lessening with the passage of time, antinomianism seems to have become fiercer in the twenty-first century, even within the United Methodist Church (UMC). For example, on July 18-21, 2012, delegates to the Western Jurisdiction’s meeting of the United Methodist Church adopted a “Statement of Gospel Obedience” which states that the denomination’s stance that the practice of homosexuality “is incompatible with Christian teaching”, is in error. The statement further urged United Methodists to behave as though Paragraph 161F of the *Book of Discipline* (the law book of the United Methodist Church) did not exist (Hahn 2012).

Now, while Fletcher would undoubtedly be shocked at the blatant antinomianism displayed in this action, he would not have any question as to its source (Wiseman 1953:122):

But whence springs this almost general Antinomianism of our congregations? [...] Is not the Antinomianism of hearers fomented by that of preachers? Does it not become us to take the greatest part of the blame upon ourselves, according to the old adage, ‘Like priest, like people’?

Preferring “popularity to plain-dealing”, preachers and leaders of the church

drift into antinomianism, and take their people with them (Wiseman 1953:122).

To make matters worse, UMC Bishop Robert Hoshibata of the Oregon-Idaho Conference stated that not only is the church's position that the practice of homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching" wrong, but Christians who think so are homophobic and demonstrate "their inability to incorporate the value of 'reason' in their thinking" (Renfroe 2012). To add insult to injury, UMC Bishop Minerva Carcano of the Desert Southwest Annual Conference wrote: "Delegates from Africa once again proclaimed that their anti-homosexual stand was what U.S. missionaries taught them. I sat there wondering when our African delegates will grow up. It has been 200 years since U.S. Methodist missionaries began their work of evangelization on the continent of Africa; long enough for African Methodists to do their own thinking about this concern and others" (Renfroe 2012).

Fletcher recognized and called out these Antinomians by their own beliefs (Wiseman 1953:118-119, emphasis in original):

They will have *what* they please of Christ, and that too *as* they please. [...] They admire him in one chapter, and know not what to make of him in another. Some of his words they extol to the sky, and others they seem to be ashamed of. If he asserts his authority as lawgiver, they are ready to treat him with as little ceremony as they do Moses. If he say, "Keep my commandments: I am a king"; like the Jews of old, they rise against the awful declaration....

Like the Lutherans of Bonhoeffer's era, these bishops are proclaiming "cheap grace": *justification* without *new creation*. Believers cannot be restored to the *imago dei* when they refuse to cast off their old idols. Instead, "they will have nothing but the atonement", *justification* without *sanctification* (Wiseman 1953:119). Fletcher described such antinomians as "self-conceited, unhumbled men, rising against the truths and ministers of God; men who 'are not *meek* doers of the law,' but *insolent* judges, preposterously trying that law by which they shall soon be tried" (Wiseman 1953:121, emphasis in original). These religious leaders rise against the revealed truths of God to judge the moral law rather than allowing themselves to be judged by it. In doing so, they make themselves the measure of all things.

John Wesley understood that "there are two contrary principles in believers, — nature and grace, the flesh and the Spirit", and that these competing influences are addressed throughout all the Epistles of St. Paul. Yet, believers "are continually exhorted to fight with and conquer these, by the power of the faith which was in them" (Wesley, "On Sin in Believers", III.3). This is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus promised, to those who put their faith in him (John 14:15-26, NIV, emphasis added):



<sup>15</sup> “If you love me, keep my commands. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— <sup>17</sup> the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. <sup>18</sup> I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. <sup>19</sup> Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. <sup>21</sup> Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

<sup>22</sup> Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?”

<sup>23</sup> Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. <sup>24</sup> Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

<sup>25</sup> “All this I have spoken while still with you. <sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

These passages are important, because Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit that will help the believer keep the commandments of the Father and the Son. The Trinitarian work of God enables the believer to become a new creation in Christ, empowered through the in-dwelling Spirit to live as a holy son or daughter of God. To deny that it is possible to live the holy life of God’s children is to deny the Power of God, the Promises of God, and the Presence of God in the believer’s life.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reiterates the commandments of the Old Testament, but motivates them with love; love of both God and neighbor. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop stated this beautifully in her book, *A Theology of Love* (1972:13):

- LOVE takes the Harshness out of Holiness.
- LOVE takes the Incredibility out of Perfection.
- LOVE takes the Antinomianism out of Faith.
- LOVE takes the Moralism out of Obedience.
- LOVE puts the Ethical into Holiness.

- LOVE puts Seriousness into Sin.
- LOVE puts Fellowship into Perfection.

Love of God and love of His will informs our proper love of neighbor. No person's understanding of love can be greater than that of the Son of God who came to die for us, or the Father who sent him. The *moral* law of the Bible reveals how believers are to love God and neighbor.

It is therefore appropriate that at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns his followers that they will be known by their fruit (Matthew 7:15-20, NKJV):

<sup>15</sup> Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

He also cautions them that they will not gain entrance to heaven simply because they know his name. Instead, only those who do "the will of My Father in heaven" will gain admittance (Matthew 7:21-23, NKJV):

<sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" <sup>23</sup> And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"

Rather than being discouraged by these words, believers should be comforted in knowing that God is able to fulfill all that he has promised. The blood of Christ sets us free from the guilt of sin, and the power of the Spirit sets us free from the power of sin. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, believers are enabled to lovingly obey the *moral* law revealed in both the Old Testament and the New. This is why John Wesley was able to teach Christian perfection: the embodiment of both "faith" and "works". And this, too, is why the Christian can hear Jesus say, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" and understand it not as a difficult command, but as a loving promise (Matthew 5:48, NIV).

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