

# John Wesley On Aspects Of Christian Experience After Justification

Owen H. Alderfer

## Introduction

That which is regarded as unique in the thought of John Wesley is often termed "The Doctrine of Christian Perfection." To consider this element in Wesley's thought as one idea among many ideas is to confuse the thought of this man. Wesley was obsessed with the idea of Christian perfection and its attainability in this life. The various steps in Christian experience, as Wesley saw them, were related to perfection. An understanding of various aspects of Christian experience subsequent to justification and related to Christian perfection will be helpful in understanding the whole thought of this leader.

It is an assumption of this paper that Wesley may be understood largely in terms of his consideration and treatment of Christian experience. In Wesley's thinking there was an ideal pattern of experience for believers, though possibly not everyone discovers the ideal. To understand this ideal pattern of experience which he saw is to understand Wesley.

The basic problem of this study is the determination of the ideal pattern of Christian experience after justification as set forth by John Wesley. This involves an effort to discover points of Christian experience which should be attained by every believer. Implied here are means necessary for attainment of such ends; further are implied alternatives which follow failure to achieve ideal ends. These are elements related to the problem at hand. Beyond the problem itself, but related to it, is a consideration of the difficulties which Wesley encountered in the presentation of his views.

Behind the problem as stated above--which will occupy the attention of most of the paper--is the question of what Wesley was seeking to do in his presentation of aspects of Christian experience after justification. "What was Wesley's ultimate purpose and how does it relate to historic Christian faith?" is a question which must be considered in the scope of this paper.

A final question for which an answer should be sought is one dealing with the success of his effort: Did the pattern of Christian experience which Wesley proposed succeed in achieving in individuals the underlying goal which was before him in the presentation of his system?

## I

### FROM JUSTIFICATION TO ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

#### The Spiritual State of the Justified

Christian experience after justification is most logically divided into two periods: (1) From justification to entire sanctification; and (2) Entire sanctification and beyond. This division does not imply uniformity among people in either a time sense or a personal experience sequence sense. Time and personal experience may vary from person to person, but anyone who reaches the ideal which Wesley presented must move from justification to entire sanctification. Entire sanctification is a new crisis which opens the door to life on a new level. As there is a marked contrast between the sinner and the justified, so there is a contrast between the justified and the entirely sanctified.<sup>1</sup>

1. The results of justification. What happens to a man in justification? What does he experience from this? What changes take place in the life of the justified? These are questions to which Wesley speaks; this paper deals with them primarily from the standpoint of personal experience.

To Wesley the experience of justification and the new birth accomplish a fundamental and objective change in human life. It is the direct working of God in the human heart. Of this Wesley declares:

---

1. This paper does not treat justification, its involvements and implications. Assuming justification, it moves from that point.

If any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed 'fundamental,' they are doubtless these two,—the doctrine of justification and that of the new birth; the former relating to that great work which God does *for us*, in forgiving our sins; the latter, to the great work which God does *in us*, in renewing our fallen nature. In order of time, neither of these is before the other; in the moment we are justified by the grace of God, through the redemption that is in Jesus, we are also 'born of the Spirit'; but in order of *thinking*, as it is termed, justification precedes the new birth. We first conceive His wrath turned away, and then His spirit to work in our hearts.<sup>2</sup>

Wesley points out that man cannot love God or know His pardon, "... till His Spirit witnesses it to our spirit."<sup>3</sup> The witness of the Spirit precedes all other Christian experiences, but it continues as part of the experience of the justified man:

We know that we love God, and keep His commandments, . . . This is the testimony of our own Spirit, which, so long as we continue to love God and keep His commandments, continues joined with the testimony of God's Spirit, 'that we are the children of God!'<sup>4</sup>

The justified man has full assurance that he is a child of God through a continuing and deepening witness of the Spirit.

In justification the believer experiences release, victory over sin, and spiritual blessing. He is inwardly renewed by the power of God. Wesley notes:

We feel 'the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given us,' . . . expelling the love of the world, the love of pleasure, of ease, of honor, of money; together with pride, anger, self-will and every other evil temper.<sup>5</sup>

- 
2. John Wesley, "The New Birth," *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1952) I, 514.
  3. *Ibid.*, "The Witness of the Spirit," 115, 116.
  4. *Ibid.*
  5. John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Wesley's Sermons, Five Selected Sermons* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1950), p. 9.

Clearly, spiritual conditions are changed in justification. There is expression in life from the experience, for God demands repentance and fruits meet for repentance. These are the results of justification, not the conditions of it.<sup>6</sup> In justification the believer is saved from its power so that he does not sin. He is freed from habitual sins, wilful sins and sinful desires. He

doth (not) sin by infirmities, . . . for his infirmities have no concurrence of his will; and without this they are not properly sins. Thus, 'he that is born of God doth not commit sin': . . .<sup>7</sup>

The justified man has a completely new perspective on life. His judgments about life and its relations are renewed. This affects his views of himself, happiness and holiness. Wesley states this:

He judges himself to be altogether fallen short of the glorious image of God. . . . In a word, to be wholly earthly, sensual, and devilish--motley mixture of beast and devil.

Again: his judgement concerning *happiness* is new. . . . He no longer judges it to be an outward thing--to consist either in doing no harm, in doing good, or in using the ordinances of God. He sees it is the life of God in the soul: . . .<sup>8</sup>

2. The "normal life" of the justified. Justification results in a new quality of living. The justified man lives life on a new and higher level. He experiences what Wesley feels must approximate as nearly as possible in this life the heavenly life to come. He says:

. . . it is nothing short of, or different from, 'the mind that was in Christ;' the image of God stamped upon the heart; inward righteousness, attended with the peace of God; and 'joy in the Holy Ghost,' . . . 'Being justified by faith,' we taste of the heaven to which we are going; we are holy and happy; we tread down

---

6. *Ibid.*, p. 12 f.

7. Wesley, *op. cit.*, "Salvation by Faith," I, 4-6.

8. John Wesley, *Journal*, 4 vols., (Ernest Rhys, ed., *Everyman's Library*), (London: J. M. Dent & Co., n.d.), I, 159.

sin and fear, and 'sit in heavenly places with Christ Jesus.'<sup>9</sup>

Joy, through deliverance from a sense of guilt and through a personal assurance of justification before God, was a basic characteristic of the life of the believer. No doubt John Wesley's own experience, compared with those of other believers, became a powerful example here. The Aldersgate experience of Wesley with its release and assurance brought Wesley a sense of joy which never left him. This is not to say that Wesley did not have times of questioning, doubt and uncertainty after Aldersgate; indeed, in some of his late letters to his brother Charles he expresses troublesome doubts. The characteristic emotional expression of his life after Aldersgate, however, is that of an abiding joy. Sidney Dimond, who has written the results of a psychological study of Wesley and his movement, notes this fact:

An instructive contrast may be observed between the pages of the private Oxford diaries, and the manuscript hymn-book which was Wesley's constant companion on his evangelistic tours. The diary is a dreary account of the hopeless pursuit of a mechanical morality. There is little of rejoicing in any of the records before 1738. After Wesley's conversion, a new feature appears in the collections of hymns that he published from time to time. . . . Fear and anxiety are replaced by love and joy. The master sentiment is that of love to God, and all the fundamental emotions are co-ordinated and included within its system.<sup>10</sup>

- 
9. John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," Cf. Herbert Welch, ed., *Selections from the Writings of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* (Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, 1918), pp. 172, 173.
  10. Sydney G. Dimond, *The Psychology of the Methodist Revival* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 101, 102.

Dimond uses the term "conversion" in the quotation above to designate Wesley's Aldersgate experience. His perspective is psychological but he is speaking of religious conversion. This he makes clear on page ninety-nine of his work. Though Wesley immediately after Aldersgate indicated that it was here that he had become a Christian,

Wesley's picture of the "normal life" of the justified inclines one to ask what higher level there is for man to attain. It must be realized, however, that this is not the whole picture. There are many pitfalls and traps to which the justified man is exposed. Furthermore, the justified man is far from perfection. Indeed, he has only begun on his pilgrimage to the heavenly city. He will shortly learn that within him is a nature which will cause him to experience all manner of difficulties.

### The Dual Nature in the Justified

1. Two principles within the justified. John Wesley, with his emphasis upon the possibility of a crisis experience beyond justification, certainly would not minimize the significance or depth of the experience of justification. This experience is valid and its blessings are real; in fact, the greatness of this work may mislead one into thinking that he "has arrived"--that he is completely freed from temptation and sin. The younger John Wesley had been victim of this mistake immediately after Aldersgate when he wrote: "But then (before Aldersgate) I was sometimes, if not often conquered; now I was always conqueror."<sup>11</sup> Three years later he wrote differently in the preface of the second volume of his hymns. After this his view remained fairly constant, for he repeats this statement regarding the newly justified person more than twenty-five years later:

In this peace they remain for days, or weeks, or months, and commonly suppose that they shall not know war any more; till some of their old enemies,

---

later writings show a modification of this view. It seems that in light of the evidence, the appropriate terminology to apply to the Aldersgate experience will imply the realization of personal assurance rather than conversion. Aldersgate was certainly not the point of entire sanctification for Wesley, for he never claimed that experience; in fact, late in life he confesses that this has never been his experience. He says, "I tell you flat I have not attained the character I draw." *Letters*, I, 43.

11. Wesley, *Journal*, I, 102

their bosom sins, or the sin which did most easily beset them. . . assault them again, and thrust sore at them that they may fall. <sup>12</sup>

It becomes apparent in the experience of the justified that there are two natures at work within:

There are in every person, even after he is justified, two contrary principles, nature and grace, termed by St. Paul, the *flesh* and the *Spirit*. Hence, though even babes in Christ are sanctified, yet it is only in part. In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are spiritual; yet, in a degree, they are carnal. . . . <sup>13</sup>

Clearly, there is sin remaining in the justified. The New Testament church at Corinth was an illustration of this truth. The Christians there were a witness to the fact that a believer may be partly renewed, for

They were doubtless 'renewed in the spirit of their mind,' . . . yet they had not the whole mind which was in Christ, for they *envied* one another. . . .

And so, the partially renewed man even now:

. . . feels, to his sorrow and shame, remains of the 'old man,' too manifest taints of his former tempers and affections, though they cannot gain any advantage over him as long as he watches unto prayer. <sup>14</sup>

Wesley makes clear his awareness that all churches accept this fact of sin within the life of the believer; however, different bodies treat the problem in different ways. The Greek and Roman churches describe it in such a way that the believer scarcely has any dominion over it. Zinzendorf, to avoid this conclusion, goes to the opposite extreme and affirms, "All true believers are not only saved from the *dominion* of sin, but from the *being* of inward as well as outward sins, so that it no longer remains in them." Others give other answers, but Wesley feels that there is a sin factor present until an entire

12. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), p. 25.

13. Wesley, "Sin in Believers," *Wesley's Sermons, Five Selected Sermons*, p. 36.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 31.

sanctification takes place--and that this is possible in this life. <sup>15</sup>

What is this sin which Wesley maintains believers continue to experience? He cannot be speaking of committed sins, for he points out that the justified man no longer commits sins. He is explicit that he is not speaking of outward sins in this regard:

By sin, I here understand inward sin; any sinful temper, passion, or affection;...any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ.

The question is not concerning *outward* sin;...We all agree and earnestly maintain, 'He that committeth sin is of the devil.'<sup>16</sup>

The sin in believers is the remnant of that original sin which plagues all men. Wesley appeals to the doctrine of the Anglican Church, the ninth article of the Thirty-Nine Articles, to clarify and substantiate his view:

'Original sin is the corruption of the nature of every man, whereby every man is in his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth contrary to the Spirit. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated.'<sup>17</sup>

Two natures are at work in the life of the justified man: First, there is a spiritual nature which has been quickened by the Holy Spirit to walk in love and to participate in the mind of Christ. Secondly, there is a fleshly or carnal nature which is present as a result of original sin inhering in the humanity.

2. Living with "two natures." The fact of the two natures in the justified man leads to an experience of a life of tension. Though one newly justified may not realize the tension at first, in due time he will come to realize the presence of this "other nature." Because of the remaining sin nature, the believer is likely to experience feelings of pride and self-will. The desire of the eye--the urge to gratify the imagination--exerts itself. "And do we not feel...tempers, which are as contrary

---

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

17. *Ibid.*



to the love of our neighbor as these are to the love of God?"<sup>18</sup> This sin clinging to the flesh may find expression in actions as well as in feelings.

It is this experience of tension and struggle after justification which,

Has inclined so many serious persons, to understand the latter part of the seventh chapter to the Romans, not of them that *are under the law*, that are convinced of sin, which is undoubtedly the meaning of the Apostle, but of them that are *under grace*, that are *justified freely thro' the redemption that is in Christ*.<sup>19</sup>

Wesley feels that this is not inappropriate as a figure in light of the mind which is carnal, the heart bent to backsliding, and the propensity to an evil disposition which clings to the believer. To the sensitive soul this becomes a distressing experience, for

The conviction we feel of inbred sin is deeper and deeper every day. The more we grow in grace, the more do we see the desperate wickedness of our heart. The more we advance in the knowledge and love of God, . . . the more do we discern of our alienation from God, of the enmity that is in our carnal mind, and the necessity of our being entirely renewed in righteousness and true holiness.<sup>20</sup>

It is only through a new act of divine grace in the heart, when "it shall please our Lord, to speak to our hearts again, to 'speak the second time *Be clean*,'" that our hearts and hands can find full cleansing. "Then only is the leprosy cleansed. Then only the evil root, the carnal mind is destroyed, . . ." <sup>21</sup> Then only is the struggle ended.

This dual nature in the believer is the cause of spiritual sluggishness and spiritual shipwreck in the experiences of justified persons. Believers who are not convinced of their sinfulness and corruption have generally little interest in going

18. Wesley, "Repentance of Believers," *A Sermon on Mark 1:15* (London: n. p. , 1768), p. 3 f.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: I," *Sermons*, I, 527.

21. Wesley, "Repentance of Believers," p. 13.

on to entire sanctification. They do not hunger and thirst after righteousness, and "until God unveils the inbred monster's face, and shows them the real state of their souls..." they will not "groan for deliverance from it."<sup>22</sup> This is a cause for "wilderness living" on the part of many Christians. Wesley bemoans the fact that for many,

after God has delivered them that fear Him from the bondage of sin and Satan, after they are 'justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus,' yet not many of them immediately enter into 'the rest which remaineth for the people of God.' The greater part of them wander... into a 'waste and howling desert,' where they are variously tempted and tormented: and this, some, in allusion to the case of the Israelites, have termed 'a wilderness state.'<sup>23</sup>

This dual nature in the life of the believer, these conditions in the justified urgently point to the deep need of a further work of grace in the heart. As the justified one experiences the reality of his nature and observes these conditions in himself he is led to repent anew and to call upon God. This is a profound repentance of the believer. Wesley declares, "...We are to repent after we are justified. And till we do we can go no farther..."<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere he notes:

The repentance consequent upon justification is widely different from that which is antecedent to it. This implies no guilt, no sense of condemnation, no consciousness of the wrath of God. It does not suppose any doubt of the favour of God.... It is properly a conviction, wrought by the Holy Ghost, of the *sin* which still *remains* in our heart; of the *φρόνημα σαρκός* *carnal mind*, which 'does still *remain*';... It is a conviction of our proneness to evil, of an heart bent to backsliding, of the still continuing tendency of the flesh to lust against the spirit....<sup>25</sup>

---

22. *Ibid.*

23. Wesley, "The Wilderness State," *Sermons*, I, 527.

24. Wesley, "The Repentance of Believers," pp. 13-16.

25. Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865), II, 55, 56.

Realization of need in the sense of sinfulness and utter helplessness leads to the repentance which delivers from the tension which is the experience of those in whom a dual nature resides.

The Christian life from justification to entire sanctification is one of marked contrast: Justification by faith and its accompanying personal assurance is an experience of rich impact and high significance in Wesley's view. It relates a man to God objectively and subjectively. It is accompanied by the witness of the Spirit. It finds personal fulfillment in the experiencing of love, joy, and peace. It expresses itself in victory over sin and in fruit of the Spirit. However, the glory of justification is "a tarnished glory," for the justified man is yet in the grip of a sinful nature. In due time he will "come down to earth" in the experimental realization that something is wrong, that he has a propensity to sin. If he is to press on, in Wesley's view, he must respond to this conviction of the Holy Spirit in a new and somewhat different repentance.

## II

### ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION AND BEYOND

The believer who has experienced justification and who is living in the blessing of that experience--responsive to the Word of God in Scripture and in the conscience by the Holy Spirit--becomes a candidate for the further working of God in entire sanctification. Wesley pointed out the way to this experience. His teachings included a consideration of the steps necessary to attaining it, to the life one will discover and express within this state, and to the possibilities of falling from this state.

#### Attaining the Experience

1. The approach to the experience. For Wesley, contrary to what may appear at first glance, sanctification is not completely divorced from justification. It is directly related to it and begins with it. "At the same time that we are justified,

yea, in that very moment, sanctification begins, . . ." Wesley noted.

From the time of our being born again, the gradual work of sanctification takes place. We are enabled, 'by the Spirit, to mortify the deeds of the body,' or our evil nature; and as we are more and more dead to sin, we are more and more alive to God. . . . It is thus we wait for entire sanctification; . . .<sup>26</sup>

Sanctification, then, must be seen as a process taking place in the proper development of the justified believer. Furthermore, Wesley is well aware that he is not unique in his presentation of the view that sanctification is a necessary element in the total Christian life. Christians generally agree that all men must be sanctified at one time or another "in order to see God." The uniqueness in Wesley's view is in relation to the nature of the experience of entire sanctification and in how and when it takes place.

As noted above, Wesley saw sanctification beginning at the time of justification; however, in due time the justified person is certain to experience the presence of an evil nature. An attitude of repentance is needed even after this justification. Wesley writes,

There is also a repentance and a faith (taking the words in another sense not quite the same, nor yet entirely different), which are requisite after we have *believed the Gospel*. Yea, and in every subsequent stage of our Christian course, or we cannot run the race which is set before us.<sup>27</sup>

This repentance is necessary as the Holy Spirit convicts of the presence of a sinful nature.

This repentance is not to take the form of a morbid and doleful expression of continual sorrow and grief stemming from guilt-feelings in which the person struggles over his condition. While fully aware of his need, the believer who is "pressing on" is to engage in Christian activity and to use the means of grace with all earnestness. Wesley's counsel is explicit that "according to . . . holy writ, all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which He hath ordained; in using, not

---

26. Wesley, "Scripture Way of Salvation," pp. 8, 9.

27. Wesley, "Repentance in Believers," p. 3.

in laying them aside." This will include exercising in prayer, in searching the Scriptures and in partaking of the Lord's supper.<sup>28</sup> The Scripture is clear that the "Father in Heaven gives the Holy Spirit to them that ask." Other Scriptures also support the use of the means of grace by those who seek entire sanctification or any other work of divine grace.

In the approach to the experience of entire sanctification the attitude of repentance is to be accompanied by faith. Wesley is definite as to the nature of faith required here:

...That faith whereby we are sanctified, saved from sin, perfected in love... is a divine evidence and conviction, first, that God hath promised it in the Holy Scripture... Secondly, that what God hath promised He is able to perform... Thirdly, a divine evidence and conviction that He is able and willing to do it now...<sup>29</sup>

The person desiring this experience seeks to exercise such faith. While this is a gift of God, man can do something to bring it about. One does not attain this goal in an attitude of careless indifference,

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. ...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.<sup>30</sup>

Let man, then, do what he can in approaching the experience. Faithful seeking will be rewarded by the grace of God.

2. Process and instantaneous work. It has already been implied that a process of sanctification begins at the time of justification, according to Wesley's thought. There is nothing new about such a view; Wesley himself notes, "That there is a gradual work none denies."<sup>31</sup> Process is certainly related to the experience of sanctification, but what more than this did Wesley see? He had come to believe that after justification,

28. Wesley, "The Means of Grace," *Sermons*, I, 139-144.

29. Wesley, "Scripture Way of Salvation," p. 18.

30. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, pp. 53, 54.

31. Wesley, "Repentance in Believers," p. 13.

there may be a gradual sanctification, a growing in grace, a daily advance in the knowledge and love of God. And if sin cease before death, there must, in the nature of the thing, be an instantaneous change; there must be a last moment wherein it does exist, and a first moment wherein it does not.<sup>32</sup>

There is, then, the gradual and the instantaneous. It is valuable to teach the instantaneous as well as the gradual to encourage the hope of the believers, for, "The more earnestly they expect this, the more swiftly and steadily does the gradual work of God go on in their soul; the more watchful they are against all sin, . . ." <sup>33</sup>

It seems clear that the early Wesley, in the manner of Taylor, Law and others, held to a view of gradual sanctification related to works. How, then, and with what significance for his system, did Wesley incorporate the idea of entire sanctification as an instantaneous work? John L. Peters in his book *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* traces the line of development. "As early as 1729 Wesley had concluded that holiness was necessary to salvation." In this view the method was process. By 1735, in his first published sermon, he has shifted to a view that, "Death will set those free in a moment who 'were all their life-time subject to bondage.'" Death would be the moment of entire sanctification, perfection, holiness. Here enters the idea of the instantaneous! After Aldersgate a gradual shift was evident. In 1745 Wesley was still of the opinion that entire sanctification is rarely given until shortly before death, but that the believer should use every means through which this grace comes. Within ten years of this he was saying,

There may be some rare cases wherein God has determined not to bestow His perfect love till a little before death; but this I believe is uncommon: He does not usually put off the fulfilling of His

---

32. Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations," in Burtner and Chiles, *A Compend of Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), pp. 182, 183.

33. *Ibid.*

promises. Seek, and you shall find; seek earnestly, and you shall find speedily.<sup>34</sup>

It is certain that Wesley's mature views included both process and instantaneous experience. The previous quotation would suggest that his observation of believers' experiences had been his teacher. In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* he reproduces a statement written in 1764 regarding entire sanctification:

(10) It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.

(11) But is it in itself instantaneous or not? . . .

An instantaneous change has been wrought in some believers; none can deny this.

Since that change they enjoy perfect love; they feel this, and this alone; . . .<sup>35</sup>

"But," he adds here, "in some, this change was not instantaneous. They did not perceive the instant when it was wrought." Though Wesley does not insist on a specific and unalterable pattern as to how and when this is to happen, it seems clear in his teaching that he had come to believe and that he taught that a person may attain an experience in this life in which he has assurance that the work of entire sanctification has been accomplished in his life.

3. The experience and its evidences. The fact of entire sanctification possible in this life was of more importance to Wesley than the questions of exactly when and how. That this was possible, he was sure; because it was possible, men ought to seek and find it. Wesley would instruct his people that it is not enough to believe that this perfection is promised, and that God is "able and willing to do it now; . . ."

To this confidence, . . . there needs to be added one thing more--a divine evidence and conviction that he doeth it. In that hour it is done; God says to the inmost soul, 'According to thy faith be it unto thee!' Thus the soul is pure from every spot of sin; it is clean from all unrighteousness. . . . Thou, therefore, look for it every moment.<sup>36</sup>

34. John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 47-51.

35. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, pp. 106, 107.

36. Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," pp. 18, 19.

Out of the experience of such a crisis moment would come the assurance of a witness. This witness is not unlike that at the time of justification:

As when we were justified, the Spirit bore witness with our spirit that our sins were forgiven; so, when we were sanctified, He bore witness that they were taken away. <sup>37</sup>

But it signifies a work that goes beyond that of justification, for now

...you experience that He whose name is called Jesus, does not bear that name in vain; that He does in fact, 'save his people from their sins'; the root as well as the branches. And this salvation from sin, from all sin, is another description of perfection, ... <sup>38</sup>

In this experience of grace the righteousness of Christ is made applicable to the inner life of the individual. The righteousness of Christ touches man to produce personal holiness, realized here and now. In a late sermon (1790) Wesley declares:

The righteousness of Christ is doubtless necessary for any soul that enters into glory: but so is personal holiness too, for every child of man. . . . The former is necessary to *entitle* us to heaven; the latter is to *qualify* us for it. Without the righteousness of Christ we could have no *claim* to glory; without holiness we could have no *fitness* for it. <sup>39</sup>

It is, then, man's responsibility to live out that holiness implanted by the Holy Spirit. Man does not work for perfection, according to Wesley; rather, the works follow because he is perfected. <sup>40</sup>

---

37. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 76.

38. Wesley, "On Perfection," *Wesley's Sermons, Five Selected Sermons*, p. 64.

39. Wesley, "On the Wedding Garment," *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865), III, 352, 353.

40. It is at this point that Wesley parts with the Anglican Church in views on sanctification. The Church had held that one must believe and work in a process of sanctification.



Though he holds that both justification and sanctification are by grace through faith alone, Wesley finds no place for a "do nothing" Christianity. Works are so interrelated with justification and sanctification that it is easy for one to assume that works are necessary to the experiences of grace. The doctrinal discussion, however, clarifies the issue that "man is to work out what God has worked in." Wesley, in a sermon called, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," elaborates upon this view. He emphasizes the view that "It is God that of his good pleasure worketh in you both to will and to do"--that without divine motivation and empowerment we could do nothing at all. God works both inward and outward holiness. But, since God works in us to accomplish His good pleasure, we are enabled now to proceed to work out our salvation by engaging in the means of grace; in fact, the Christian *must* work. He has work to do because of what God has done and is doing in him.<sup>41</sup>

For John Wesley entire sanctification is a fact to be experienced. The justified person who is convicted of the presence of his sinful nature approaches entire sanctification with assurance of faith, utilizing the means of grace in order that his faith may rise yet higher. From justification forward, sanctification is functioning in the believer as a process. At the crisis moment faith leads to fact and the believer knows the joy of entire sanctification. He then is a "vessel fit for the Master's use." Such is the pattern for attainment of this experience according to Wesley.

### The "Normal Life" of the Sanctified

What is to be expected in the life of one who has experienced entire sanctification? In a system of thought which holds for the attainability of a state of grace as high as this, certainly some attention had to be given to the ideal experience-pattern which should be expected to follow from this attainment. Wesley was aware of the radical nature of his teaching of

---

41. Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," *Sermons*, II, 574-583.

perfection,<sup>42</sup> but he felt that he had Scriptural justification for it, and so he proclaimed it in the face of any objection. Wesley realized that because of the nature of this teaching he must be altogether clear as to what is included in and what is excluded from the life of the sanctified. His writings are extensive on this phase of Christian experience for that reason. His own method was to consider this matter in terms of the negative--"In what sense Christians are not," and positive--"in what sense they are, perfect." This study follows Wesley's method in this section.

1. Negative considerations. Wesley is explicit that the perfection he teaches is not a return to that which Adam knew before the Fall. Believing in a literal Adam, Wesley feels that this first man was "undoubtedly as pure, as free from sin, as even the holy angels... His understanding was as clear as theirs, and his affections as regular."<sup>43</sup> Adam's act of rebellion destroyed the possibility of restoration of all that was lost. This also rules out the possibility of an angelic perfection, one which Wesley sees as higher than Adamic perfection.

In a review of his teaching on negative considerations in 1764, Wesley presented several pertinent propositions:

(1) There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.

.....

(4) It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone.

(5) It does not make a man infallible; none is infallible; while he remains in the body.<sup>44</sup>

The perfection Wesley taught is, then, a limited perfection--if it can be called perfection at all. The perfected man, he teaches, is "not perfect in knowledge:... not so perfect in this life as to be free from ignorance," and Wesley elaborates upon this with a list of areas in which perfected men are limited.

---

42. The terms "entire sanctification," "perfection," "Christian perfection," and "holiness" seem to be used interchangeably by Wesley.

43. Wesley, "On Perfection," *Wesley's Sermons, Five Selected Sermons*, pp. 59-61.

44. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 106.

Further, "No one, . . . is so perfect in this life, . . . as to be free from mistake." This is true even "with regard to the holy Scriptures themselves." He adds that Christians are not so perfect as to be free from infirmities such as illness, dullness, defects and the like. "Nor," Wesley writes, "can we expect . . . to be wholly free from temptation," for the servant can expect the same experience of temptation as that of his Master.<sup>45</sup>

As long as man is in the body he must expect to experience human frailties, regardless of his state of grace, Wesley taught. These "limitations of perfection" will, then, certainly find their way into the outward expression of living. Wesley was aware of this and wrote in his *Journal* some thoughts from a sermon on the text, "In many things we offend all."

. . . as long as these organs are imperfect we are liable to mistakes, both speculative and practical; yea, and a mistake may occasion my loving a good man less than I ought; which is a defective, that is, a wrong temper.<sup>46</sup>

Clearly, Wesley is admitting that the Christian who has experienced entire sanctification may be involved in mistakes which affect God and man. In light of this a question which confronts us is this: how can these be regarded as other than sin, thus breaking down the idea of freedom from sin or sinless perfection?

For Wesley this becomes a matter of the definition of sin. He writes:

Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God. Therefore every voluntary breach of the law of love is sin; and nothing else, if we speak properly. To strain the matter farther is only to make way for Calvinism. . . . Let love fill your heart and it is enough!<sup>47</sup>

Further:

Now, mistakes and whatever infirmities necessarily flow from the corruptible state of the body are no

---

45. Wesley, "Christian Perfection," *Sermons*, I, 358-361.

46. Wesley, *Journal*, III, 69.

47. John Wesley, "To Mrs. Bennis," *Letters*, 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), V, 322.

way contrary to love; nor therefore, in the Scripture sense, sin.<sup>48</sup>

Sin, in this sense, is tied to motivation. If love is the sole motivation in living, no sin can result. This definition does not take into account all the facts that the Calvinist definition included. What Wesley called the "Calvinist" view was that one which held that any failure to measure up to the Divine perfection is sin. Wesley realized that he needed to say more in his statement on sin in order to cover that mass of imperfections in human experience which he terms "mistakes" or "infirmities."

Sensing this need, Wesley carries his statement on sin as related to Christian perfection a bit further. He writes:

To explain myself a little farther on this head--  
(1) Not only sin, properly so called (that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law), but sin, improperly so called (that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown), needs the atoning blood. (2) I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions, . . . (5) Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: . . .<sup>49</sup>

Wesley himself did not call such actions and attitudes sin; however, he taught that they must be "owned" even by the one who has been perfected. He stated,

For all these we need the atoning blood, as indeed for every defect or omission. Therefore all may have need to say daily, 'Forgive us our trespasses.'<sup>50</sup>

In light of these insights, Wesley wrote: "Therefore, *sinless perfection* is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself."<sup>51</sup> He approaches a self-contradiction later in the same work and illustrates the nature of his problem with terminology when he writes: "And I do not contend for the term *sinless*, though I do not object against it."<sup>52</sup> In his discussion on sins Wesley is concerned to indicate the points of difference

---

48. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 45.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

50. Wesley, *Journal*, III, 69.

51. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 45.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

between himself and current Calvinistic views; one wonders, however, whether the two views were not actually rather close together when considered from the viewpoint of their practical outworking.

It is quite clear that the perfection Wesley taught was a perfection which needed considerable qualification.

2. Positive considerations. What is the expression of the life of the person who has experienced entire sanctification? Wesley's teaching is that this is an experience of grace which touches the whole man--his inner life and his outward life--and that there is expression in both these aspects which is characteristic of Christian perfection.

According to Wesley the central characteristic of the inner life of the entirely sanctified is perfected love. "It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul."<sup>53</sup> The term is used frequently by Wesley as signifying a new direction in the motive area, a shift from self-love to a total love of God and His will. "The *pure in heart*--the sanctified," of Matthew 5:8 are, "They who love God with all their hearts. They *shall see* God."<sup>54</sup> This love within--which will, of course, work itself out is the fulfillment of God's will in our time. Wesley writes:

Faith working or animated by love is all that God now requires of man. He has substituted (not sincerity, but) love, in the room of angelic perfection.<sup>55</sup>

It is the loving the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind. This is the sum of Christian perfection; it is all comprised in that one word, love.<sup>56</sup>

The reign of love in the heart and life of the sanctified is the ground for the activity of the mind of Christ in the life of the individual. With entire sanctification comes a renewing of the mind so that the Scriptural injunction, "Let this mind be in you,

53. Wesley, "Scripture Way of Salvation," *Wesley's Sermons, Five Selected Sermons*, p. 9.

54. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: William Bowyer, 1760), p. 14.

55. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 71.

56. Wesley, "On Perfection," *Wesley's Sermons, Five Selected Sermons*, p. 62.

which was also in Christ Jesus," finds fulfillment. Wesley holds that it is Christ's mind so as to

include the whole disposition of his mind, all his affections, all his tempers, both toward God and man. Now it is certain that as there was no evil affection in Him, so no good affection or temper was wanting.<sup>57</sup>

To Wesley, this is indeed a new mind within the life of the perfected.

The perfection of love in the believer is accompanied by attendant blessings. Peace and joy which constitute happiness are resultant from the establishment of the Kingdom of God within the individual heart. He notes:

It is termed, 'the kingdom of God,' because it is the immediate fruit of God's reigning in the soul. So soon as ever He takes unto Himself His mighty power, and sets up His throne in our hearts, they are instantly filled with this. . . 'peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. ' . . . Whosoever they are that experience this, they can aver before angels and men,

Everlasting life is won,

Glory is on earth begun: . . .<sup>58</sup>

With the perfecting of love and the presence of joy and peace, fear loses its hold upon one. "'There is no fear in love'--No slavish fear can be where love reigns; *but perfect, adult love casteth out slavish fear; because such fear bath torment*, and so is inconsistent with the happiness of love."<sup>59</sup>

As the inner life is renewed, so the outer life expresses this renewal in a life full of the fruit of the Spirit. This is no Antinomian position. Wesley feared that some misguided followers might come to such a view and made attempts to avoid this.<sup>60</sup> Faith was directly related to life; in fact, fruitage is an evidence of sanctification. "We know it by the witness and by the fruit of the Spirit."<sup>61</sup> There will be love, joy, peace,

---

57. *Ibid.*

58. Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," *Sermons*, I, 78.

59. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1856), p. 638.

60. See *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 91.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

gentleness, etc.; however, one should not confuse "fruit of the Spirit" with mere activity. To the question, "What does the perfect one do more than others?" Wesley answers:

Perhaps nothing; so may the providence of God have hedged him in by outward circumstances. Perhaps not so much; though he desires and longs to spend and be spent for God.... Grace and gifts do not always go together. <sup>62</sup>

With his emphasis upon fruitage in the life of the sanctified, Wesley saw a need to emphasize the danger of enthusiasm, the tendency on the part of an individual to claim immediate divine revelation.<sup>63</sup> He saw little reason for extensive consideration of charismatic gifts. Of them he said:

Whether these gifts of the Holy Ghost were designed to remain in the church throughout all ages, and whether or not they will be restored at the nearer approach of the 'restitution of all things,' are questions which it is not needful to decide.... Even in the infancy of the church, God divided them with a sparing hand. <sup>64</sup>

In Wesley's view it was more important that the sanctified demonstrate perfect love in living terms than that they exhibit special gifts of the Spirit.

According to Wesley, leading up to perfection is growth; likewise, following perfection there is a growth process. Wesley believed, in fact, that growth in grace is normal in the "healthy" believer at every stage in his experience. Growth is continuous, "and that not only while they are in the body, but to all eternity."<sup>65</sup> This growth is by grace, as is every aspect of spiritual development, but the sanctified believer must put forth effort in the achievement of that growth. The sanctified must exercise all caution against the peculiar snares of the sanctified. Wesley gives a list of "Cautions and Directions..." especially for these. These include:

Watch and pray continually against pride....

Beware of that daughter of pride, enthusiasm....

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 51.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 88 f.

64. Wesley, "Scriptural Christianity," *Sermons*, I, 33.

65. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 85.

Beware of Antinomianism; 'making void the law,' or any part of it, 'through faith.' . . .

Beware of sins of omission; lose no opportunity of doing good in any kind. . . .

Beware of desiring anything but God. . . .

Beware of schism, of making a rent in the Church of Christ. . . .<sup>66</sup>

With the cautions, Wesley points out things the sanctified should do in order to experience continuous growth. It is important to observe the ordinances of God.<sup>67</sup> The means of grace are valuable and necessary, so long as they are given proper use in the Spirit.<sup>68</sup>

The life of holiness is a moment by moment life, Wesley specifies. The sanctified must experience the constant outpouring of divine grace; it is only thus that he maintains his state of grace.

For He does not give them light but from moment to moment; the instant He withdraws, all is darkness. They still need Christ as their King; for God does not give them a stock of holiness. But unless they receive a supply every moment, nothing but unholiness would remain.<sup>69</sup>

Moment-by-moment grace from God meets moment-by-moment faith and faithfulness in the believer, and the sanctified person continues his growth in grace, expressing the life of perfect love.

3. Amissibility of perfection. In light of the elevation of the state of grace which Wesley teaches in Christian perfection one may be inclined to assume that such a state once attained would be permanent. Some had come to this conclusion; in fact, Wesley notes that "It is a common thing for those who are thus sanctified, to believe they cannot fall; to suppose themselves 'pillars in the temple of God, that shall go out no more.'"<sup>70</sup> Wesley himself admits that, "Formerly we thought,

---

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 86-97.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

68. Wesley, "Means of Grace," *Sermons*, I, 136-139.

69. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 73.

70. Wesley, "A Call to Backsliders," *Sermons*, II, 597.



one saved from sin could not fall."<sup>71</sup> As late as March of 1757 he wrote:

One fruit (of Christian perfection) given at the same instant (at least usually) is a direct, positive testimony of the Spirit that the work is done, that they cannot fall away.<sup>72</sup>

Within several years his position had changed. He now writes:

Formerly we thought, one saved from sin could not fall; now we know the contrary. We are surrounded with instances of those who lately experienced all that I mean by perfection. They had both the fruit of the Spirit, and the witness; but they have now lost both.<sup>73</sup>

The reason for his change of opinion was the test of experience; he saw people in whom this happened. He writes:

We have seen some of the strongest of them, after a time, moved from their steadfastness. Sometimes suddenly, but oftener by slow degrees, they have yielded to temptation; and pride, or anger, or foolish desires have again sprung up in their hearts. Nay sometimes, they have utterly lost the life of God, and sin hath regained dominion over them.<sup>74</sup>

Wesley established the reason behind that which experience now forced him to believe. His statement was:

Neither does any one stand by virtue of anything that is implied in the nature of the state. There is no such height or strength of holiness as it is impossible to fall from.<sup>75</sup>

If one fails to draw moment by moment upon the available grace by faith, he comes to stand on his own righteousness. Such a person, though entirely sanctified, is vulnerable to temptations and in danger of falling from this state of grace.

The next concern follows logically: "Can those who fall from this state recover it?"<sup>76</sup> For answer Wesley again appealed

71. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 85.

72. Wesley, "To Thomas Olivers," *Letters*, III, 213.

73. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 85.

74. Wesley, "A Call to Backsliders," *Sermons*, II, 597.

75. Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 85.

76. *Ibid.*

to experience:

Why not? We have many instances of this also. Nay, it is an exceeding common thing for persons to lose it more than once, before they are established therein.<sup>77</sup>

Those who have been renewed in the experience have indeed found a full restoration of all that was lost as they came to terms with their state. Wesley preaches:

Several of these, after being thoroughly sensible of their fall, and deeply ashamed before God, have been again filled with his love, and not only perfected therein, but stablished, strengthened, and settled. . . . Many who had fallen . . . have, at once, recovered both a consciousness of His favour, and the experience of the pure love of God. In one moment they received anew both remission of sins, and lot among them that were sanctified.<sup>78</sup>

This is not the ideal for Christian experience, but Wesley would not have his people in despair: there is hope even for the one who has fallen from the high state of Christian perfection.

This, then, is the pattern of Christian experience which Wesley urged in entire sanctification and beyond: One must know the reality of the work within by his own experience. Usually the assurance comes in a crisis moment, but it need not. When the state is attained it will be accompanied by the appropriate witness and evidenced by spiritual fruitage. This is not a perfection in the usual absolute sense of the word; rather, it is "qualified perfection," a perfection of motivation which expresses in love. It is continued by grace, but the sanctified must be diligent in "working out what God has worked in." Perfection may be lost; however, the person fallen from this state may be restored once more. Such is the pattern for the "normal life" of the sanctified.

\* \* \* \*

Let it be noted in conclusion that John Wesley built his system of thought around authority, reason and faith. Authority for him was primarily the Scripture. Reason was important to this

---

77. *Ibid.*

78. Wesley, "A Call to Backsliders," *Sermons*, II, 597, 598.

Oxford scholar. Impatient with illogical systems, Wesley attempted to support his system at every point with reason and logic. To him, faith was closely related to experience, being a "new sense" given of God which worked itself out in living terms.

For Wesley God was the sovereign Being who operated actively above and within his world. Anything of good in man was of God. Prevenient grace made it possible for man to accept or reject the offered grace of God.

To Wesley, justification was a crucial experience of grace, resulting in personal assurance and spiritual fruitage. The justified man lives above sin; however, sooner or later experience teaches him that there are within him two principles fighting for dominion. One is the spiritual life which he came to possess through justification; the other is the result of original sin abiding in the flesh. The result is a life of tension--tension which may be resolved only by means of a second repentance which leads to entire sanctification.

To the believer who responds to the Spirit's conviction of this sinful nature, and who through the "believer's repentance" comes to trust God actively for a full renewal of his mind, a new experience, a new grade of Christian experience is available. This is entire sanctification, Christian perfection or perfect love. Sanctification, which has begun in justification (or more technically, in the regeneration which is a concomitant of justification) is hereby completed in a perfection, by which the life is now motivated by complete love. The perfection here attained is qualified: it is not a complete guarantee against human frailties and mistakes. It is a renewal of the mind. The perfected individual must exert effort toward continuing growth. Failing this, it is possible that he may experience the loss of the state of perfection which he has attained. Should that tragedy occur, however, let the believer not despair, for renewal is possible. In brief, these are the chief aspects of Christian experience which Wesley saw as following justification.