

Our Wesleyan Heritage

Christian Perfection

Stanley Banks

Now we come to consider the second major part of our Wesleyan heritage--Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection.

Wesley never quarrelled about terms; in his writing and preaching he uses a variety of them to express the same experience; chief among them are holiness, entire sanctification, perfect love, etc. We have chosen to discuss the subject under the title of "Christian Perfection" because Wesley has fully revealed his views on the subject in his writings and especially in his book *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, a book which is little known and read today. Also, an American Methodist of a previous generation, J. A. Wood, has extracted for us from the journals, works, sermons and letters of Wesley all he had to say on the subject, and has classified it for his readers in a book entitled *Wesley on Perfection*; unfortunately this is now unobtainable. From these two sources we are able to get Wesley's own view untrammelled by anyone else's interpretation of that view.

In commencing this final lecture, we can do no better than quote from Bishop Mallalieu's introduction to Wood's book, in which he says:

No one will study Wesley without discovering that he makes a distinction between regeneration and Christian perfection. He teaches that the work is wrought instantaneously, though it may be approached by slow and gradual steps; he denies the possibility of remaining in a justified state while guilty of known sin; he teaches that this experience of perfect love pre-eminently favours the growth of all the Christian graces; he avoids most carefully, and condemns most emphatically, all fanaticism and spiritual pride and foolishness, and shows how easily the experience may be lost; he studies the heart, and watches with the most critical attention the professions and lives of those who assumed to have the experience, and

compares all with the Word of God: so that we have in Wesley's 'Plain Account of Christian Perfection,' and in his frequent allusions to the subject in his Journals and Sermons, the summation of all that is essential to the fullest and clearest understanding of this whole subject.¹

We now turn to discover whether or not this is so, and in doing so we shall follow the same plan as in the previous lecture. First of all we shall consider the matter

I. HISTORICALLY

There are three distinctive phases in Wesley's life in respect of his experience and teaching of Christian perfection.

A. His search and discovery.

We can do no better than give the account of this in Wesley's own words which we find in his *Journal* for the month of May, 1765, which he also includes in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Speaking of his teaching on the subject, he writes:

But how came this opinion into my mind? I will tell you with all simplicity. In 1725 I met with Bishop Taylor's 'Rules for Holy Living.' I was struck particularly with the chapter on intention, and felt a fixed intention to give myself up to God. In this I was confirmed soon after by the 'Christian Pattern' (now known as *The Imitation of Christ*) by Thomas a Kempis, and longed to give God all my heart. This is just what I mean by perfection now: I sought after it from that hour.

Wesley was then in his twenty-third year and was still at Oxford.

Of the following year, he records in his *Journal* that "the nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in stronger light than it had ever done before."

In 1727 he read two books by William Law, one entitled *Christian Perfection*, and the other *The Serious Call*. He declares after reading these: "I am more explicitly resolved to be all

¹Quoted by Bishop W. F. Mallalieu in his "Introduction" in the book, *Christian Perfection as Taught by John Wesley*, compiled by J. A. Wood, p. 7.

devoted to God in body, soul and spirit."

1730 was another important year in his search; he writes:

In 1730 I began to be a man of one book; to study (comparatively speaking) no book but the Bible. I then saw, in stronger light than ever before, that only one thing is needful, even faith that worketh by love of God and man, all inward and outward holiness; and I groaned to love God with all my heart and to serve Him with all my strength.

On January 1, 1733, he preached a remarkable sermon on the circumcision of heart. Over thirty years later he said of this sermon, "It contains all that I now teach concerning salvation from all sin, and loving God with an undivided heart."

Five years later he is still searching and he expresses his longing in poetry which breathes out his yearning:

O grant that nothing in my soul
May dwell but Thy pure love alone!
O may Thy love possess me whole,
My joy, my treasure, and my crown!
Strange flames far from my heart remove,
My every act, word, thought be love.

In May of the same year he passed through the great spiritual crisis, which has been described as his "evangelical conversion." This was a very distinctive step towards the goal of Christian perfection.

In 1771, as he looked back in retrospect, he wrote,

Many years since, I saw that without holiness no man shall see the Lord. I began by following after it, and inciting all with whom I had intercourse to do the same. Ten years after, God gave me clearer light than I had before on the way to attain it, namely, by faith in the Son of God. And immediately I declared to all, 'We are saved from sin, we are made holy by faith.' This I testified in private, in public, in print, and God confirmed it by a thousand witnesses.

The question has been raised many times down the past two centuries as to whether or not Wesley had a definite experience of what he preached. Some Methodists, like Dr. Sangster, have sought to persuade people that he did not claim such an experience. Such a conclusion seems rather remarkable in the light of all the evidence.

Three observations seem to be relevant in this matter.

First, surely it is not unreasonable to infer that he had such an experience when one considers that during a ministry of almost fifty years he made this doctrine one of his leading themes. He declared that its exposition and exemplification was the chief reason for the raising up of the Methodists. He clearly taught the possibility of such an experience in this life, and urged Christians everywhere to seek it, and rejoiced with those who had a testimony to it. He preached sermons, wrote pamphlets and composed hymns on the subject, and strongly insisted that his preachers should preach it. In some places he definitely related the spiritual decline to the neglect of preaching on this subject. In the light of this we might well ask in the words of Dr. Jessop: "Who could have any respect for or confidence in such a man as a spiritual leader if, after all this, he did not know the experience for himself?"²

In the second place there is at least one indication in his *Journal* that he did enjoy such an experience. It is to be found in the record for December, 1744.

In the evening, while I was reading prayers at Snowsfield, I found such light and strength as I never remember to have had before. I saw every thought as well as action and word, just as it was rising in my heart, and whether it was right before God, or tainted with pride or selfishness. I waked next morning, by the grace of God, in the same spirit; and about eight, being with two or three that believed in Jesus, I felt such an awe, and tender sense of the presence of God, as greatly confirmed me therein: so that God was before me all day long; and I could truly say when I lay down at night, 'now I have lived a day.'

One further observation is needed, and it has been well expressed for us by J. A. Wood, who observes that

Wesley seldom recorded his personal religious experiences in his Journals, and yet we have as much about his experience of sanctification as of justification. The most he says about his justification is, that he felt his heart 'strangely warmed.' This is often quoted regarding his justification, while the foregoing statement is as clear and definite regarding

²Harry E. Jessop, *Heritage of Holiness*, p. 85.

his sanctification. There is just as much propriety, in the light of his Journals, in asserting that he did not claim to be justified, as that he did not claim to be sanctified.³

We have no hesitation in saying that Wesley's personal search after perfect love led him to a personal discovery and enjoyment of this experience which gave cogency to his preaching of the truth.

We turn now to consider the second phase of this historical survey of Wesley's teaching and experience of Christian perfection.

B. His teaching and definition.

Because of the limitation of time we must confine ourselves to three quotations from Wesley that set forth quite fairly his teaching and form the basis of his definition of Christian perfection.

The first is taken from his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, in which he writes: "In the year 1764, upon the review of the whole subject, I wrote down the sum of what I had observed in the following short propositions:

There is such a thing as perfection, for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.

It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to 'go on to perfection' (Heb. 6:1).

It is not so late as death; for St. Paul speaks of living men that were perfect (Phil. 3:15).

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

It does not make a man infallible; none is infallible while he remains in the body.

It is salvation from sin.

It is 'perfect love' (I John 4:18). This is the essence of it; its properties, or inseparable fruits are rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks (I Thess. 5:16).

It is improvable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.

It is amissable, capable of being lost and of this we

³J. A. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this till five or six years ago.

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

But is it in itself instantaneous or not? In examining this let us go step by step. An instantaneous change is wrought in some believers. None can deny this. Since that change they enjoy perfect love; they feel this, and this alone, they 'rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks'. Now this is all that I mean by perfection; therefore these are witnesses of the perfection I preach. But in some this change was not instantaneous. They did not perceive the instant when it was wrought. It is often difficult to perceive the instant when a man dies; yet there is an instant when life ceases. And if sin ceases there must be a last moment of its existence, and a first moment of our deliverance from it... Therefore all our preachers should make a point of preaching perfection to believers constantly, strongly, and explicitly; and all believers should mind this one thing, and continually agonize for it.⁴

This brief summary contains all that is basic in Wesley's teaching. Let us add to it a statement from the minutes of the first Methodist Conference held in 1744. Those present sought to include in the minutes a brief definition of what they meant by Christian perfection. Here is the minute as they recorded it:

A renewal in the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness. To be a perfect Christian is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, implying the destruction of all inward sin; and faith is the instrument by which such a state of grace is obtained.⁵

The third quotation is from a letter written by Wesley to a Mrs. Maitland who had obviously written to him inquiring about the subject. He replied as follows:

As to the word 'perfection,' it is Scriptural; there-

⁴John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, pp. 283-285.

⁵Luke Tyerman, *Life of Wesley*, Vol. 1, p. 444.

fore neither you nor I can in conscience object to it, unless we would send the Holy Ghost to school, and teach Him to speak who made the tongue. By perfection, I mean the so loving God and your neighbour as to 'rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks.' He that experiences this is Scripturally perfect. And if you do not, yet you may experience it; you surely will, if you follow hard after it, for the Scriptures cannot be broken. What does their arguing prove who object against Christian perfection? Absolute or infallible perfection I never contend for. Sinless perfection I never contend for, seeing it is not Scriptural. A perfection such as enables a person to fulfil the whole law, and so needs not the merits of Christ--I acknowledge no such perfection; I do now, and always did protest against it. But is there no sin in those who are perfect in love? I believe not; but be that as it may, they feel none--no temper contrary to love, while they rejoice, pray and give thanks continually. And whether sin is suspended or extinguished, I will not dispute; it is enough that they feel nothing but love. This, you allow, we should daily press after, and this is all I contend for.⁶

In all fairness to Wesley, we ought to add a further observation. He always related his teaching to the practical details of every-day life. He did not make the mistake of divorcing creed from conduct or holiness from ethics. As Dr. Workman has suggested: "His evangelical experience did not diminish his moral enthusiasm. . . . There are no more practical treatises in the English language on the science of living according to Christianity than are found amongst Wesley's sermons."⁷ His sermon on "Riches" is a classical example of this. Christian perfection as Wesley defined, guarded and preached it included the whole doctrine of right conduct, duty and virtue.

Almost at the end of his earthly pilgrimage we still find him saying that "loving God with all our hearts, and our neighbours as ourselves, is the perfection I have taught these forty years.

⁶Wesley's *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 752.

⁷*A New History of Methodism*, edited by W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman, George Eayrs, Vol. 1, pp. 212, 213.

I pin down all its opposers to this definition of it. No evasion! No shifting the question! Where is the delusion of this?"⁸ Yes, we too ask, where is the delusion of this?

And now we consider the third phase of this survey of Wesley's teaching, namely:

C. Its proclamation and defense:

In the Conference of 1765 the question was raised as to the purpose of God in raising up the Methodists. To this Wesley replied:

In 1729 my brother and I read the Bible; we saw inward and outward holiness therein, followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737 we saw that holiness comes by faith. In 1738 we saw that we must be justified before we can be sanctified. But still holiness was our goal, inward and outward holiness. God then thrust us out, utterly against our will, to raise up a holy people. When Satan could not otherwise prevent this, he threw Calvinism in our way, and then Antinomianism, which struck at the root of both inward and outward holiness.⁹

In the process of fulfilling this purpose of raising up a holy people they encountered a great deal of opposition which necessitated a defence of the truths for which they stood.

Between the years 1759 and 1765 there was a holiness revival among the believers. In London a great number professed to have found "full redemption." Wesley and one of his helpers, John Walsh, gathered these together at The Foundery, where they usually met, in order to examine and question them closely as to the genuineness of their testimony. At the conclusion of the examination, Wesley records in his *Journal*: "In London alone I found 652 members of our Society who were exceeding clear in their experience, and whose testimony I could see no reason to doubt."¹⁰ Similar things could be written of many other centres throughout the land during the same period.

In a visit to Cornwall at this time Wesley is grieved by the lukewarmness of the Christians there. In his own characteristic way he seeks to assess the reasons for this, and once again he records them for us.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁹*History of Wesleyan Methodism*, Vol. 1, pp. 322-325.

¹⁰Wesley's *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 464.

The more I converse with the believers in Cornwall the more I am convinced that they have sustained great loss for want of having the doctrine of Christian perfection clearly and strongly enforced. I see, wherever this is not done, the believers grow dead and cold. Nor can this be prevented but by keeping in them an hourly expectation of being perfected in love.¹¹

Invariably Wesley traces the spiritual decline in other societies to this same cause, the neglect of insisting upon and pressing after the experience of perfect love.

There is no doubt that there was some extravagance and a little fanaticism associated with the holiness revival, and this was the thing which the opposition fastened on to, and criticised. This brought forth from Wesley his two most classical statements on the subject, and both were produced in the same year, 1765. One, we have already acknowledged-- *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. The other was a sermon he preached during that year, entitled, "The Scripture Way of Salvation." These contain his defence of the truth against the charges of his opponents both Calvinistic and Antinomian.

Wesley's great friend and designated successor, John Fletcher, vicar of Madeley, also came to the defence of Wesley's teaching in a series of pamphlets, later produced in book form, and entitled, *Checks to Antinomianism*. This is a monumental work, exhaustive in its treatment of the objections of the opponents, and conclusive in its arguments.

The period from 1762 to 1781 was the one in which the Wesleys and their associates vigorously pressed the instantaneous blessing, and of this period, Dr. Leslie Church wrote:

In spite of extravagances and misrepresentations, in spite even of impostures, the experience was too widespread to be denied, and too fundamental to be destroyed by ridicule and contempt. He would be a strange critic who could read the intimate confessions of so many sincere people, and conclude they were empty vapourings. It would be more reasonable to say that in them are the movements of the Spirit, too great to be confined within the limits of a theory, and too varied to be brought down to a common de-

¹¹ Leslie F. Church, *The Early Methodist People*, p. 129.

nominator. In attempting to reduce such an experience to a formula there is always the danger of imprisoning the soul. . . . However carefully conceived the theological definition, it cannot contain the heart-throbs of the spirit set free! Whatever the dangers Wesley had to face, who shall say that he was not wise in accepting the risks rather than in rejecting or ignoring the living realities?¹²

Wesley certainly took the risks, but history and experience have vindicated him.

Having considered the historical aspect of the subject, we now turn to consider it

II. SCRIPTURALLY

Let us note, first of all, that the Scriptures do hold out the possibility of an experience of perfection in this life. Whatever the meaning of the word 'perfect,' there is no room to doubt that it is set forth as a goal to be reached by man here and now. Before considering the meaning of the word as used in Scripture, we must establish that this is so.

A. It is commanded by God:

Take the following passages of Scripture as examples of this. First of all, God in speaking to Abraham, says, "I am the Almighty God; walk before Me and be thou perfect" (Gen. 17:1). Our Lord, speaking to His disciples, commands them: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). The apostle Paul in writing to the Corinthians says: "Finally brethren, farewell. Be perfect. . ." (II Cor. 13:11). And lastly, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts his readers: "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection. . ." (Heb. 6:1). It is also fairly clear from Scripture that:

B. Prayers are offered for its accomplishment:

You may recall the prayer that David prayed for his son, Solomon: "And give unto Solomon my son a perfect heart. . ." (I Chron. 29:19).

And what about the well-known prayer which we often use as a benediction at the end of our services?

Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to Whom be glory for ever and ever, Amen" (Heb. 13:20-21).

It is also fairly obvious from the New Testament that

C. It is set forth as one of the chief purposes of the ministry.

Call to mind the words of the apostle Paul written to the Ephesians: "And He gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints...till we all come unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13). And further words of his, written to the Colossians: "Christ in you, the hope of glory: whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom: that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:27-28). One further point is worthy of mention, namely, that

D. There are records of people having such an experience whilst still on earth.

Do you remember what God said about Job? "The Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like unto him in the earth, a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil" (Job 1:8). What about the arresting words of the Psalmist? "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace" (Ps. 37:37).

We also have the testimony of one of the sacred historians of the Old Testament concerning one of Judah's great kings: "Asa's heart was perfect with the Lord all his days" (I Kings 15:14) despite the fact that there were some very imperfect things about his administration of the affairs of the kingdom. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, declares: "Howbeit, we speak wisdom among them that are perfect" (I Cor. 2:6). And again in his letter to the Philippians: "Let as many as be perfect be thus minded" (Phil. 3:15).

Here then were people living at different times and in varying circumstances who have an experience which is described by the Scriptural writers by the term "perfect." We must now examine the use of the term in Scripture in order to discover what they meant by it.

In the New Testament there are two important words which express the idea of "perfection"; one is the Greek word "teleios",

and its relative words, and the other is "kartartizo". They are frequently used in the New Testament, and convey the basic meaning and ideas associated with the experience of perfection. If we can grasp the meaning of these two words as used in their New Testament setting, bearing in mind that the context in which they are found is often a most reliable commentary on their meaning, we shall be able in some measure to decide whether or not Wesley was right in teaching Christian perfection as attainable in this life.

The word 'teleio' occurs twenty-five times in the New Testament. In six typical instances it means to fulfil, to bring to an end, or complete an appointed task. In at least two instances (Luke 13:22; Heb. 13:23) it means perfection following death, and in three (Phil. 3:12; Heb. 2:10; 5:9) this meaning is possible. Completion rather than moral excellence is also indicated elsewhere. In most cases, however, both meanings are included.¹³

Dr. Jessop writes concerning the word:

It indicates something completed, accomplished, consummated, finished. This word is not used of the believer as a completed possession in this life, but as a process of development and an end not yet attained. It is that long drawn out process leading to perfection in Christian character and experience, and knows no finality here.¹⁴

Let us consider a few examples of its use in the New Testament. In I Corinthians 15:24 it is translated "end" in the Authorized Version, and implies the consummation of a thing. "Then cometh the END, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father." In Philippians 3:19 it is translated "end," in the sense of ultimate destiny.

For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ, whose END is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things" (See also I Pet. 4:17).

James also uses the word in his epistle (1:4), where it bears

¹³George A. Turner, *The More Excellent Way*, pp. 84-95.

¹⁴Harry E. Jessop, *Foundations of Doctrine*, p. 166.

the meaning of being brought to completion. "But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." In I Corinthians 14:20 it is translated "men," implying maturity. "Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children; but in understanding be MEN."

Here is one other passage, Philippians 3:12, where the word as here used implies reaching a goal. It is set forth as an objective for which a man must strive. It is like the winning post at the end of the race; every runner runs to reach this goal; he may be perfectly fit as a runner, but he knows not the perfection of the winner until he reaches the winning-post. In the following verse the perfection of the winner is in view. "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

These then are a few examples of the use of the word "teleios" and its relative words; in the light of these and similar instances it is clear that there is a kind of perfection we cannot fully attain in this life; it is something for the life hereafter. It is a perfection we anticipate and follow after, but which we shall not obtain until we stand in the presence of our Lord.

The second word "kartartizo" conveys a totally different idea of perfection, one which indicates adjustment and fitness resulting from some immediate crisis. Dr. George A. Turner states that "the pre-Christian usage of the word conveyed the idea of preparing or perfecting a thing for its full destination or use."¹⁵ This pre-Christian usage, as found in the Septuagint, has coloured the meaning and use of the word in the New Testament, as will be seen from the following Scriptures in which it occurs. In Matthew 4:21, it is translated "mending." "And going from thence he saw other two brethren, James, the son of Zebedee, and John his brother in a ship with Zebedee their father, MENDING their nets." It is clear from this verse that "to perfect" means to repair that which has been damaged, and to make it fit for use. A net is perfect if it adequately fulfils the purpose for which it was made. The word occurs again in Matthew 21:16, where its meaning is "to harmonize." "And Jesus saith unto them, Yea, have ye never read, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise."

Perfecting music is (or should be) so to arrange it that all

¹⁵Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

the discords are lost in a perfection of harmony. In Galatians 6:1, the word is translated "restore," and is used in the sense or adjusting something which has been dislocated. "Brethren, if any man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual RESTORE such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself lest thou also be tempted." Paul uses the word again in I Thessalonians 3:10, where it conveys the idea of completing something which is lacking. "Night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face, and might PERFECT that which is lacking in your faith." And finally we turn to Hebrews 11:3, where the word is translated "framed." Here it is a mechanical term; as when various parts of a machine are fitted together and the whole thing works according to the plan and purpose of the designer. "Through faith we understand that the worlds were FRAMED by the Word of God; so that the things which are seen were not made of things which do appear."

In all these, and similar other instances in which the word is used, it conveys the idea of preparing something or other for the fulfilment of the purpose for which it had been made; the emphasis here is not upon finality but upon fitness. This word is not concerned with the perfection which the runner will obtain when he ends the race, but rather with his witness to run the race. It is the perfection of the runner and not of the winner that is in view.

As Dr. Jessop has observed:

In workmanship a thing is regarded as perfect if it answers the purpose for which it was designed whether it be a watch, a fountain-pen, or a steam engine. Watches do not write letters, neither do fountain pens give us the time. There is a limit and a sphere for each, but if within that limit the purpose is realized that is indicative of its perfection.¹⁶

Here then are two ideas of perfection; one is perfection after which we must continually aspire, and the other is a perfection we can now enjoy. One is that final and complete perfection for which we must wait until this mortal has put on immortality; but the other is one which consists here and now in deliverance from everything that makes the soul unfit for, and unequal to, the will and purpose of God for our lives.

¹⁶Jessop, *Foundations of Doctrine*, p. 167.

We can do no better than conclude this section of our lecture by quoting Dr. Turner's synthesis of the New Testament teaching on this subject:

The total New Testament teaching, if a synthesis is attempted, may be condensed thus: the goal of the Christian in this present life is the fulfilling of law by love to God and one's neighbour (Matt. 5:45, I John 3:14). This necessitates the cleansing of the heart from selfish traits (II Cor. 7:1), or works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19), so that the sinful element is vanquished. This is a gift of grace rather than a reward of self-effort, received by faith (Acts 15:8-9, 26:18) in Jesus as Sin-bearer (I John 2:2), and is effected by the Holy Spirit, resulting in a complete integration of the personality in Christ and unity within the church (Gal. 2:21, Eph. 4:1-16). It is expressed in effective service (Rom. 12), and culminates in perfect love (I Cor. 13), and union with the divine (John 17).¹⁷

On the basis of his careful examination of the texts used by Wesley as a foundation for his teaching on Christian perfection, Dr. Turner concludes:

When Wesley told his generation that a holy life was the chief end of man; that perfect love was a present possibility, and that entire sanctification of life was, like justification, based upon faith, he had a precedent for it in the New Testament.¹⁸

We can conclude this section of our study with no better statement than this on the Scriptural nature of Wesley's teaching.

The final section of our study takes us into the realm of the practical. For we must consider the subject

III. EXPERIENTIALLY

Many sincere Christians are fearful of the term "perfection"; it is undoubtedly the fear of presumption and fanaticism. Wesley said that the term was thrust upon him by his opponents, and to distinguish it from other ideas of perfection he prefixed the word "Christian." For this reason also he more often than not used the term "perfect love," in order to qualify what he meant.

¹⁷ Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 113, 114.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In order to remove any such fears, and also to show the practical and vital nature of such an experience, we shall briefly consider three things in this final part of our lecture: What is excluded? What is included? What are the distinctive outworkings?

A. What is excluded?

There is only time to summarise this point in the manner in which Wesleyan writers of various denominations have been doing for the past two centuries, following the example of Wesley himself which we quoted earlier in this lecture.

1. It is not the perfection of God in His infinite majesty. This would imply freedom from all faults, mistakes, errors and ignorance of any kind. No sane person claims any such perfection.

2. It is not the perfection of angels in their heavenly abode. Of them we know very little; but we do know that they are unfallen spirits, and we are fallen creatures, so that we can never be what they are.

3. It is not the perfection of our first parents in their garden home. In their pre-fallen state they had sinless souls and deathless bodies. They had no memory of committed sin. Every power they possessed, be it spiritual, mental, moral or physical, was fresh from the hand of God--perfect and without sin. No such perfection is possible to us.

4. It is not the perfection of Christ while He was here on earth. His humanity was free from any personal memories of committed sin. He had a unique, divine relationship with the Father; but we can only approach the Father through Him. We do not claim that kind of perfection.

5. It is not the perfection of redeemed souls in glory. They have vacated this mortal body with its physical limitations, temptations, and the possibilities of falling into sin, and have "put on immortality." They are beyond the reach of these things; but we are not while still on earth; therefore we cannot know in this life the perfection they enjoy.

6. It is not the perfection of one who has matured in grace. Maturity takes time; it is not something which happens in a moment, but rather, is the result of growth, development, discipline, and long experience.

These are some of the things which are excluded from the present attainment of Christian perfection. What then is included?

B. What is included?

What does God require of man while here below? The answer is found in Matthew 12:30-31.

Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is One Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

God's demands in both the Old Testament and the New Testament are similar. He expects man to love Him supremely, and to love his fellowman relatively--"as himself." This, the Old Testament Jew and the New Testament Christian finds equally impossible apart from divine intervention.

In the book of Deuteronomy, from which these words of our Lord were taken, God tells us how He proposes to make this possible. In Deuteronomy 30:6, we read: "And the Lord God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live."

Here is something more than physical circumcision--it is heart circumcision. The New Testament takes up this idea and shows that "heart circumcision" supplants "physical circumcision" in the economy of God (See Rom. 2:29). This use of the term "circumcision" is surely not without significance. Circumcision is a rite which is only performed on the living. It is also an act of cutting away something which is superfluous. Here then God is promising to perform a spiritual operation in the lives of His children which will remove from them all that is contrary to pure love; in order that their hearts might be fully possessed by divine love.

This love is part of the new life imparted in the new birth, and its action within is fourfold.

1. It is expulsive: By it we become aware of the sin that remains even though we are regenerate. It will brook no rival; nor allow flirtations with sin, Satan or the world. It grieves over the things that grieve the Lord in our lives, and longs for deliverance from them. It constrains us to Christ for inward deliverance--or heart circumcision. Thus it is expulsive in its action. This is what Thomas Chalmers, that great Scotch divine, discovered, and of which he spoke in his now famous

sermon on divine love. In it he said: "The heart is so constituted, that the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one."

2. It is persuasive: "The love of Christ constraineth us" says Paul. It had taken hold of him like a fever. It held him in a vice-like grip. He is possessed by it, and it becomes the dynamic of his life, motivating him to service, sacrifice and worship.

3. It is pervasive: It permeates every area and avenue of our lives, --heart, mind, soul and strength. It reaches upward to God and outward to men.

4. It is expansive: There is no end to its increase: we can go on loving and growing in love; and can always be yearning for what Charles Wesley describes as "more and more of love's supply."

The theology of it all, as well as the heart prayer for its accomplishment, is expressed in one of Wesley's hymns:

O for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free,
A heart that always feels Thy blood
So freely shed for me.

A heart in every thought renewed,
And full of love divine;
Perfect, and right, and pure and good,
A copy, Lord, of Thine.

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;
Come quickly from above
Write Thy new name upon my heart,
Thy new, best name of love.

C. What are the distinctive outworkings?

For an answer to this question we could turn to a number of New Testament passages, but there is an outstanding one which deals fully with the question: it is our Lord's own answer, given in what has been called *The Sermon on the Mount*. This is found in Matthew, chapters five to seven.

The pivot around which our Lord's answer revolves is chapter 5:48, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." This might be described as the text of the sermon. On the basis of this we have unfolded the distinctive marks of the perfect life. We have only time merely to outline what is clearly revealed of this life; it really

needs a study all on its own.

The people are described as "blessed." Whilst living on earth they are really happy, and are showing forth the qualities of a divine, distinctive, and developing life.

Our Lord reveals what they are in themselves--renounced in spirit, merciful, meek, pure in heart, peacemakers, righteous, etc. He then goes on to describe what they are to the world--they are salt and light. Their influence is hidden and pervasive like salt, and is seen and illuminating as light. Following this He discusses their relationship to the past, and suggests that they fulfil rather than destroy that which belongs to the past (5:17-20). The next part deals with our relationship with others (5:21-47). In chapter five there are twenty-seven marks of the perfect life. In chapter six and part of chapter seven, our Lord reveals why men do not reach this goal; the reason being inward division--the divided heart.

The range then of these chapters is broad; it covers our intentions, our thoughts, our speech, our domestic relationships, our demeanor, our attitude to those who are socially superior to us, and to those who are socially inferior, and to our enemies as well as our friends. It is a life, as our Lord indicated, which is known by its fruits, and which has survival value in it, as is clear from the concluding illustration of the sermon--the house built upon the rock stands the storm.

One of our contemporary writers has said that "the greatest need of modern Christianity is the re-discovery of the Sermon on the Mount as the only practical way to live." If we are going to see this accomplished, then we must discover for ourselves the kind of Christian experience of which this is the distinctive out-working, and provides the soil in which such a life can develop. We shall never win the world by being like it; but by living a life like this we shall create a longing in others for a similar kind of life.

We recall the words of Gandhi spoken to a missionary in India who was interviewing him. "Practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down" he said; and that is exactly what the experience of Christian perfection enables us to do.

We have now completed our study on this aspect of our heritage. It is something more than a tradition we have received from others. It is a three-fold legacy--an experience to be enjoyed, a doctrine to be preached, and a life to be lived.