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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOHN WESLEY'S DOCTRINE
OF
CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

Thesis for the B.D. Degree

by

Ward M. Shantz .

1951

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOHN WESLEY'S DOCTRINE
OF
CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOHN WESLEY'S DOCTRINE
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From early childhood, John Wesley was being inclined toward a serious concern for living a holy life. His parents, particularly his mother, were interested, not simply in theology though both of them revealed considerable ability in handling theological themes, but in devout worship of Almighty God. In 1789, Wesley wrote, "From a child I was taught to love and reverence the Scripture....to esteem the primitive Fathers....and next after the primitive church to esteem our own, the Church of England, as the most scriptural national Church in the world".¹ During his college days he deviated somewhat from the strict discipline of his early training.² Although he states that he did neglect his outward duties and did commit outward sin, yet he still read his Bible, said his prayers morning and evening and hoped for salvation. There seems never to have been any real cessation of the quest for salvation which characterized his whole life. The well-ordered, methodical discipline and religious instruction of the Epworth rectory left its impress upon Wesley and started him on his way toward a great concern for holy living which culminated in his formulation of the doctrine of perfect love.

Four books that fell into Wesley's hands between the years 1725 and 1729 had a profound influence on the thinking of Wesley. The first was Bishop Taylor's "Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Holy Dying". The reading of this book, particularly the portion relating to purity of intention, deeply affected him. "Instantly I resolved", he wrote, "to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced there was no medium; but that every part of my life (not only some) must either be

1 Wesley, John; Works, XIII, 272

2 For a description of this discipline see Brailsford, Susanna Wesley, ch. 5, p. 53 ff

a sacrifice to God, or myself, that is, in effect, to the devil." ³

The same year⁴ he read Thomas à Kempis's "Christian Pattern" and from this work he came to be impressed more strongly than ever before with the nature of inward religion. Of his inner thoughts at this time he wrote, "I saw, that giving even all my life to God (supposing it were possible to do this, and to go no farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart to Him. I saw that 'simplicity of intention and purity of affection,' one design in all we speak and do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed 'the wings of the soul' without which she can never ascend to the mount of God."⁵

William Law was the third profound influence on Wesley through his two books, "Christian Perfection" and "Serious Call". In these books the right performance of the necessary duties of the Christian are emphasized. Every part of our lives must be under the control of the Spirit of God, "for when the Kingdom of God is within us, then the Spirit of religion is the Spirit of our lives. This spirit is seated in our hearts and diffuses itself into all our motions....There seems, therefore, to be the greatest necessity that we observe constantly all our daily actions lest by negligence we fail to live up to the high calling of the Christian life and load ourselves down with unrepented sins."⁶ This emphasis on the necessity of gravity in religion and the performance of every Christian duty strengthened Wesley in the views which he already held in this respect. Wesley states that "These convinced me, more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian: and I determined, through His grace, (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of) to be all devoted to God, to give Him all my soul, my body, and my substance."⁷

³ Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 3

⁴ see Cannon, The Theology of John Wesley, p.54 ³⁴

⁵ Wesley, op cit., p. 4

⁶ Wm. Law, Works, as quoted by Cannon, op. cit., p. 58

⁷ Wesley, op. cit., p. 4

In the year 1729, Wesley turned his attention to the Bible as the sole standard of truth and the only model of pure religion. Throughout his life, he was not much concerned with the intellectual discussions of the day; his concern was to preach the Word of God. It alone held for him all that was essential to man's salvation and to his duty to his Maker. Through this intensified study of the Bible, Wesley came to see more clearly his obligation to live a holy life. "I saw in a clearer and clearer light," said he, "the indispensable necessity of having 'the mind which was in Christ,' and of 'walking as Christ also walked;' even of having, not some part only, but all the mind which was in Him; and of walking as he walked, not only in many, or in most respects, but in all things. And this was the light, wherein at this time I generally considered religion as a uniform following of Christ, an entire inward and outward conformity to our Master. Nor was I afraid of anything more, than of bending this rule to the experience of myself or of other men; of allowing myself in any the least disconformity to our grand Exemplar."⁸

The sermon which he preached before the University at Oxford on January 1, 1733, on "The Circumcision of the Heart", revealed the extent to which his views on perfection were being systematized. He begins in this sermon by equating the term "circumcision of the heart" with "holiness"; and goes on to explain that this "directly implies the being cleansed from sin, 'from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit', the being so 'renew ed in the spirit of our mind' as to be 'perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect'".⁹ This circumcision of the heart implies humility, faith, hope and charity. After considering the first three, he states, "If thou wilt be perfect, add to all the charity; add love, and thou hast the circumcision of the heart....In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness. The royal law of heaven and earth is this, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy

⁸ *ibid.* , p. 4

⁹ Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, Thos. Jackson ed., 1825, Vol I, p. 148

soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.'¹⁰

While Wesley further elaborated his doctrine after this date, he in no way changed it in any of its essential aspects. He states, "It may be observed this sermon was composed the first of all my writings which have been published. This was the view of religion I then had, which even then I scrupled not to term perfection. This is the view I have of it now, without any material addition or diminution."¹¹

The first account he had from any living man confirming the views which he had come to embrace through the study of the Scriptures, came from a German by the name of Arvid Gradin who gave as his definition of "the full assurance of faith", "repose in the blood of Christ; a firm confidence in God, and persuasion of His favour; the highest tranquility, serenity, and peace of mind, with a deliverance from every fleshly desire, and a cessation of all, even inward sins."¹²

(May 24, 1738)

With this account, the famous Aldersgate experience^A was passed for it was in August of that year that Wesley had his contact with Gradin. Since Wesley, himself, makes no mention of Aldersgate in his "Plain Account", we can hardly ascribe to this experience any significance so far as his views on perfection are concerned. That it did revolutionize his thinking relative to justification is undeniable, but it seems not to have influenced his views on this point of perfection.

By the year 1740, Wesley was firmly convinced of the Scripturalness of his doctrine and began to advocate it in sermon and through the printed page. A tract under the title, "The Character of a Methodist" was the first printed treatise on this subject to be issued by him, though the first volume of "Hymns and Sacred Poems" by John and Charles Wesley, and issued earlier in the same year had many expressions of their views on perfection. In the next few

10 *ibid.*, p. 148

11 Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 7

12 *ibid.*, p. 8

years two more volumes of hymns were published and to each of these was appended a preface in defence of their position on Christian Perfection. Of the preface to the second volume Wesley says, "This is the strongest account we ever gave of Christian perfection, -- indeed, too strong in more than one particular, as is observed in the notes annexed."¹³ In the next few years at the Conferences of ministers, the doctrine was re-examined but nothing was found to cause them to alter their views. In 1759, following one of these conferences, Wesley published another treatise on the subject. The doctrine continued to be opposed, much to the astonishment of Mr. Wesley, and near the close of his life, he issued the "Plain Account of Christian Perfection", a statement of his views and a defence of his position.

We have outlined the development of the doctrine in a chronological manner; we shall now consider the Scriptural background for the position.

Wesley's first line of argument to support his views was drawn from the promises of God. The fact that God had promised to deliver his people from all sin was an indication to Wesley that such a deliverance is possible in this life. A few of these promises are, "He shall redeem Israel from all his sins", Ps. 103:8; "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols I will cleanse you; I will also save you from all your uncleannesses," Ezek. 36:25,29; "The Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul," Deut. 33:6. From the New Testament he drew in support of his position such passages as, "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil," I John 3:8 (to which he appended the comment, "The work of the devil, without any limitation or restriction; but all sin is the work of the devil,"¹⁴) and "Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkles, or any such thing, but that it

¹³ Ibid., p. 24. In his "Plain Account", Wesley quotes in full the preface to

might be holy and without blemish," Eph. 5:25-27.

His next line of argument was drawn from the prayers of the New Testament. In this connection he wrote, "Prayers for entire sanctification; which, were there no such thing, would be mere mockery of God. Such in particular are, (1) 'Deliver us from evil'. Now when this is done, when we are delivered from all evil, there can be no sin remaining. (2) 'Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also who shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us; I in them, and Thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one,' John 17:20-23. (3) 'I bow my knee unto the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He would grant you, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and depth and length and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge,' Eph. 3:14f. (4) 'The very God of peace sanctify you wholly. And I pray God, your whole spirit, soul, and body, may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,' I Thess. 5:23."¹⁵

To these, he added the commands to the same effect. "Be ye perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect," Matt. 5:8; "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," Matt. 22:37. He pointed out further that John speaks of those whose love is made perfect and Paul says, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded." Here are scriptural testimonies to the possibility of attaining perfection in this life. In the face of the tremendous opposition which came against this teaching, Wesley constantly affirmed that he was teaching nothing but what the Word of God

the second volume of hymns to which he appends seven foot-notes in which he modifies his statements. One example is here given: In the preface he states, "They are free from wanderings in prayer. Whosoever they pour out their hearts in a more immediate manner before God, they have no thought of anything past, or absent, or to come, but of God alone. In time past, they had wandering thoughts darting in, which yet fled away like smoke; but now that smoke does not rise at all." This he modifies by the notation, "This is far too strong. See the sermon on 'Wandering Thoughts'".

14 Ibid., p. 34

15 Ibid., p. 35

contained. To the charge that perfection was Mr. Wesley's doctrine he replied, "This is not his doctrine any more than it is yours, or any one's else, that is a minister of Christ. For it is His doctrine, peculiarly, emphatically His, it is the doctrine of Jesus Christ....It is the doctrine of St. Paul, the doctrine of St. James and St. John; and no otherwise Mr. Wesley's than as it is the doctrine of everyone who preaches the pure and whole Gospel. I tell you, as plain as I can speak, when and where I found this. I found it in the oracles of God, in the Old and New Testament; when I read them with no other view or desire, but to save my own soul."¹⁶

We shall now enquire into the content of Wesley's doctrine of perfection. It should first of all be noted that the perfection of which Wesley spoke was qualified by the word "Christian". By this Wesley meant that it was a perfection within a certain sphere only, and was adapted to the factors within that sphere. He pointed out that it is not an absolute perfection which belongs to God alone; it is not the perfection of angels who are not clothed with humanity; it is not the perfection of Adam before the curse of sin impar~~x~~ed man's faculties; but it is "Christian" perfection, a perfection commanded, promised and attainable by the Christian in this life and suited to his limited possibilities. It does not, therefore, exclude the possibility of mistakes in knowledge, judgment and even tempers. To show this qualification of his use of the term, we shall quote: "The highest perfection which man can attain, while the soul dwells in the body, does not exclude ignorance, and error, and a thousand other infirmities. Now from wrong judgments, wrong words and actions will follow, and in some cases wrong affections also may spring from the same source. I may judge wrong of you; I may think more or less highly of you than I ought to think; and this mistake in my judgment, may not only occasion something wrong in my behaviour, but it may have a still deeper effect; it may occasion something wrong in my affection. From a wrong apprehension, I may love and esteem you

16 Ibid., p. 106

either more or less than I ought. Nor can I be freed from a liability to such a mistake, while I remain in a corruptible body. A thousand infirmities, in consequence of this, will attend my spirit, till it returns to God who gave it. And in numberless instances, it comes short of doing the will of God, as Adam did in paradise. Hence the best of men may say from the heart:

"Every moment, Lord, I need
The merit of thy death,"

for innumerable violations of the Adamic as well as the angelic law. It is well, therefore, for us, that we are not now under these, but under the law of love. 'Love is (now) the fulfilling of the law', which is given to fallen man. This is now, with respect to us, 'the perfect law'. But even against this, through the present weakness of our understanding, we are continually liable to transgress. Therefore, every man living needs the blood of atonement, or he could not stand before God.¹⁷

Some may be inclined to say, "How can this be perfection?" Wesley would say that it can still be called Christian perfection, because God has commanded that Christians should be perfect, the great Apostle has prayed that the believer might be perfected and also speaks of "as many as are perfect".

The essential characteristic of Christian perfection is love. The heart must be undivided in its affection to God. There can be no divided allegiance, no half-heartedness, but the soul must be wholly yielded to God. All service is prompted by the singleness of desire to please God, and though through human frailty it may come short of absolute perfection, it nevertheless is acceptable to God because of the purity of intention; it springs from a heart of pure love. "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. The first branch of it is the love of God: and as he that loves God loves his brother also, it is inseparably connected

¹⁷ Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, Thos. Jackson ed. 1825, Vol. II, p. 168

with the second: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself': thou shalt love every man as thy own soul, as Christ loved us. 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets': these contain the whole of Christian perfection."¹⁸ "All men are liable to mistake, and that in practice as well as in judgment.... this is not sin, if love is the sole principle of action."¹⁹

The emphasis on love was Wesley's predominating emphasis. Christian perfection was something positive that manifested itself in a "putting on the new man, which is created after God in righteousness and true holiness;"²⁰ but there was also a negative side to the experience: the cleansing of the nature from inbred sin. This he called entire sanctification and by this cleansing the heart was purified and set free from all carnal traits. In this respect Wesley declares that "even babes in Christ are in such a sense perfect or born of God....as first, not to commit sin."²¹ A long justification of this point is given by appealing to many New Testament scriptures to show that it is God's intent, and the believer's privilege to be delivered from the committing of sin. [It should be remembered here, that Wesley's definition of sin made a distinction between "sin, properly so called (that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law) and sin, improperly so called (that is, an involuntary transgression of a Divine law, known or unknown)]."²² When Wesley spoke of being perfect so as not to commit sin, he used the term in what he designated its proper sense. As to the second sense he wrote, "I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions which I apprehend to be naturally consequent upon the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality. Therefore, sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself."²³ This degree of perfection

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 169

¹⁹ Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 42

²⁰ Eph. 4:24

²¹ Wesley, Sermon XL, On Christian Perfection, II, 2

²² Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 43

²³ Ibid., p. 43

is expected in all believers. Beyond this experience, there is a further perfection which marks, not the babes, but those who are strong in the Lord. They are in such a sense perfect as to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers. "Everyone that is perfect is as his master", Lk vi, 40, and hence can have no evil thoughts, since he had none. Wesley further argued that evil thoughts proceed out of the heart of man,²⁴ but the servant who is as his master has a pure heart. From whence then, could evil thoughts arise in him who is perfect? The argument in support of the deliverance from evil tempers runs along the same line: "For everyone that is perfect shall be as his Master",. But his Master was free from all evil tempers, so, therefore, is his disciple, even every real Christian."²⁵ For an elaboration of the implications of this aspect of perfection, the reader is referred to the tract "The Character of a Methodist" and the preface to the second volume of hymns.²⁶

This perfection is an attainment which comes subsequent to the justification of the believer. Wesley very definitely rejects the position of Count Zinzendorf in which it is declared that "all true believers are not only saved from the dominion of sin, but from the being of inward as well as outward sin, so that it no longer remains in them." This Wesley described as a strange, new doctrine. He took his place in the tradition of the church pointing out that from early times the church has believed that sin remains in the believer. His sermons/entitled, "Sin in Believers" and "The Repentance of Believers", nos. XIII & XIV, clearly show that according to scripture and experience sin still remains in the believer. He concludes this discussion by saying, "The sum of all is this: 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, although even babes in Christ are sanctified, yet it is only in part.

24 Mark VII, 21

25 Wesley, Sermon XL, On Christian Perfection

26 Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, pp. 9, 19

In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are spiritual, yet in a degree they are carnal."²⁷

This condition of duality of nature does not necessarily continue while life lasts. Through the grace offered in Christ, it is possible to be delivered from this indwelling sin. When the believer becomes aware of the sin that yet remains in him, through repentance he longs for cleansing that nothing may remain that is unlike God. He desires that his whole being may be devoted to God alone. It is to such an one that the promises of the Word come offering cleansing from all sin. Faith lays hold upon these promises and what has been promised, now, through faith, becomes the experience of him who believes. This interworking of repentance and faith in the believer is expressed by Wesley thus, "By repentance, we feel the sin remaining in our hearts, and cleaving to our words and actions: by faith we receive the power of God in Christ purifying our hearts and cleansing our hands. By repentance we are still sensible that we deserve punishment for all our tempers and words and actions; by faith we are conscious, that our Advocate with the Father, ^{is} continually pleading for us, and thereby continually turning aside all condemnation and punishment from us. By repentance we have an abiding conviction that there is no help in us: by faith we receive not only mercy, 'but grace to help in' every 'time of need'. Repentance disclaims the very possibility of any other help: faith accepts all the help we stand in need of, from him that hath all power in heaven and earth. Repentance says, 'Without Him I can do nothing': faith says, 'I can do all things through Christ strengthening me.' Through Him, I can not only overcome, but expel, all the enemies of my soul. Through Him I can 'love the Lord my God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength;' yea, and 'walk in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of my life.'"²⁸

27 Wesley, Sermon XIII, On Sin In Believers, V, 1

28 Wesley, Sermon XIV, On Repentance of Believers, II, 6

Such victory over indwelling sin is the fruit of faith, even as justification becomes the experience of him who believes, and as he who has been justified continues in that state so long as he believes, so also he who is entirely sanctified remains free from indwelling sin as he continues to believe. "When we go on 'from faith to faith', when we have faith to be cleansed from indwelling sin, to be saved from all our uncleannesses, we are likewise saved from all that guilt, that desert of punishment, which we feel before. So that then we may say, not only,

'Every moment Lord, I want
The merit of thy death;'

but, likewise, in the full assurance of faith,

'Every moment Lord, I have
The merit of thy death.'

For by that faith in his life, death, and intercession for us, renewed from moment to moment, we are every whit clean, and there is not only now no condemnation for us, but no such desert of punishment as was before, the Lord cleansing both our hearts and lives."²⁹

One point in Wesley's teaching that has been largely obscured, or overlooked is the emphasis that he gave to the moment by moment aspect of the perfection. Through the use of the term "eradicate" which by some is felt to be an essential of Wesleyan teaching, but which I have not found in Wesley's writings the idea is suggested that a condition of heart purity is brought about which can remain in a static state of purity like the garden from which every weed has been plucked out and no more weed seeds remain. But this was not Wesley's conception. He realized that apart from the presence of the Spirit in the life, there could be no purity. Man left to himself is nothing but sin. Unless there is sanctifying faith every moment, the cleansing would be gone. "The holiest of men still need Christ, as their Prophet, as 'the Light of the world'. 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

²⁹ Ibid., II, 4

them a stock of holiness. But unless they receive a supply every moment, nothing but unholiness would remain."³⁰ "By the same faith we feel the power of Christ every moment resting upon us, whereby alone we are what we are; whereby we are enabled to continue in spiritual life, and without which, notwithstanding all our present holiness, we should be devils the next moment."³¹

It is evident from the foregoing, that the perfection Wesley preached is an attainment in grace. In no sense is it man's accomplishment through his native abilities. It is the work of the Spirit of God, received by the believer through faith and made possible by the ^ameditorial work of Christ. Every barrier to serving God with the whole heart is removed through faith which appropriates the promises of God's Word to this effect. Hodge correctly states the Wesleyan position when he says, "This perfection is not due to the native ability, or free will of man, but to the grace of God, or supernatural influences of the Spirit. Perfection is a matter of grace (1) because it is solely on account of the work of Christ that God lowers the demands of the law and accepts as perfect the obedience which the milder law of the Gospel demands; (2) because the ability to render this obedience is due to the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit; (3) because believers constantly need the intercession of Christ as our High Priest to secure them from condemnation for involuntary transgressions, which, judged by the law, would incur its penalty."³²

One further aspect of Wesley's conception of perfection should be noted. This perfection does not preclude further development. Rather, it removes the hindrances so that growth is more rapid. "All experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as 'a grain of mustard seed, which, at first, is the least of all seeds,' but afterwards puts forth large branches and becomes a great tree, till, in another instant, the heart is cleansed from

³⁰ Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 71

³¹ Wesley, Sermon XIV, On Repentance of Believers, II, 5

³² Hodge, Charles, Systematic Theology, Vol. III, p. 255

all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more till we 'grow up in all things into Him that is our head;' till we 'attain the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.'³³ "There is no perfection of degrees, as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase. So that how much soever any man has attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to 'grow in grace' and daily advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour."³⁴

This then, is the measure of Wesley's doctrine of perfection: this experience is subsequent to justification; it is attainable in this life; it is the gift of God's grace through faith; it makes possible the loving of God with all the heart, mind, soul, and strength, and one's neighbour as oneself; it is the cleansing of the heart from those qualities that are not Christ-like such as evil thoughts and unholy tempers; it does not preclude the possibility of mistake and involuntary violations of the absolute law of God through the infirmities attendant upon the human body; it demands that spiritual growth shall follow the attainment of this state of grace.

We come now to compare these teachings of Wesley with those of the Reformers. That there are differences, is quite evident from the controversy that has continued on these points from Wesley's day to the present. A few statements will reveal the nature of the differences.

Hodge states, "The doctrine of Lutherans and Reformed, the two great branches of the Protestant Church, is that sanctification is never perfected in this life; that sin is not in any case entirely subdued; so that the most advanced believer has need as long as he continues in the flesh, daily to pray for the forgiveness of sins."³⁵ The Apology substantiates this view in declaring that "Even those who are regenerated through faith and the Holy Spirit are nevertheless not entirely pure, and do not keep the law perfectly, while this life continues. For, although the new, yea eternal life has made a beginning in them, some portion of sin and evil desires still remain in them, and the law

³³ Wesley, Sermon XC, On Working Out Our Own Salvation, II, 1

³⁴ Wesley, Sermon XL, On Christian Perfection, I, 9

³⁵ Hodge, op, cit., Vol. III, p. 245

finds much whereof to accuse them."³⁶ When such statements of Wesley's as "The Christian is so far perfect that he does not commit sin," or "in another instant, the heart is cleansed from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man", are placed alongside the above, the differences are very apparent. That Wesley, himself, felt there were differences is revealed in the statement he made concerning Luther: "Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conception of it. In order to be thoroughly convinced of this, of his total ignorance with regard to sanctification, there needs no more than to read over, without prejudice, his celebrated comment on the epistle to the Galations."³⁷

Cannon points out that Wesley's usage of the term "Righteousness" was quite different from the usage of the term by the Reformers and that herein lies the crux of the problem. "The religious conviction which prompted Calvin to say, that 'man cannot without sacrilige arrogate to himself the least particle of righteousness, because it is so much detracted and diminished from the glory and the righteousness of God', prompts Wesley on the other hand, to say that man can do all things through Christ strengthening him^s and that Christians are so far righteous as to be 'lively portraitures of Him' whom they are appointed to serve. Therefore, the religious idea in Luther and Calvin that in the ethics of salvation God is everything and man is nothing is not maintained by Wesley; and the difference between them is a difference not merely of degree, but also of kind. What might appear as a superficial distinction, manifesting itself in the Reformers' refusal to say that man is inherently righteous in this world, as against Wesley's insistence that he is righteous, is really of ultimate significance. That man is not righteous, and cannot be righteous means that his

36 The Christian Book of Concord, Henkel and Bros., 1854, p. 186

37, Wesley, Sermon CXII, On God's Vineyard, I, 5

final salvation depends on something totally different from moral attainment and personal purity. On the other hand, that man can be righteous and, indeed, must be righteous, if he is to be Christian means that his final salvation includes moral attainment and personal purity as essential elements. Without inherent personal holiness, Wesley says, no man can see God."³⁸

But are these differences real, or only apparent? To Wesley's statement that "A person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please, I do not," Hodge replies, "The question is not what Wesley or any other man chooses to call sin; but what does the law of God condemn."³⁹ While there is some truth to this statement, it must not be overlooked that if we are to understand Wesley's meaning, we must give heed to his definitions. One of the rules of semantics states that a man must be allowed absolute freedom in stipulating the meaning which he desires to attach to a given term, and another rule states that in interpreting a writer or speaker we must discover the meaning which he attaches to his symbols. That on the face, Wesley and the Reformers disagree is evident for their statements are directly contradictory, that is, if they are using the terms with identical meanings. But they are not using the terms with identical meanings and hence the matter resolves itself largely into a verbal dispute. If we allow this, and endeavour to understand the authentic meanings of all concerned, much of the disagreement is resolved. (I do not here mean to ^Wminify the differences, but lack of understanding has magnified them.)

Before we go further, let us observe two of the main differences of definition: that of sin, and of sanctification. It has already been pointed out that Wesley's definition of sin was restricted to "voluntary transgressions of a known law of God". The Reformers held all failure to conform in every

38 Cannon, W. R., The Theology of John Wesley, p 224

39 Hodge, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 255

detail to the perfect law of God in act and spirit, to be sin. Wesley's conception of entire sanctification designated an experience in the development of the Christian where the Holy Spirit gives to the believer in response to faith such victory over outward and inward sin that he feels all love to God and is enabled to love God with his whole heart. It is not inconsistent with his conception of this experience, that there may be much in the life of the believer that is not conformed in every point to God's absolute will, and that development will continue to death. The Reformers could not conceive of sanctification being complete if any further development was possible.

In proceeding, we shall endeavour to disassociate the deeply entrenched meanings of the various terms in order that we may discover how nearly similar the two schools of thought are in essential meaning.

Cannon stated, as quoted above, that the difference between the Reformers and Wesley was one not of degree, but of kind. Is this really true? Wesley believed as much as the Reformers did that man is wholly dependent upon the grace of God for his final salvation. The necessity of "inherent personal holiness" was not thought of by Wesley as a meritorious achievement on the part of man. Wesley would have taken his stand with Luther on this point against any anti-nomian exclusion of personal righteousness, and also against any Pelagian emphasis that man could earn salvation. Hear his plea to the sinner. "Plead thou no works, no righteousness of thine own! no humility, no contrition, sincerity! In no wise. That were in very deed to deny the Lord that bought thee. No: plead thou, singly, the blood of the covenant, the ransom paid for thy proud, stubborn, sinful soul....Thou who feelest thou art just fit for hell, art just fit to advance his glory; the glory of his free grace, justifying the ungodly and him that worketh not....Believe in the Lord Jesus; and thou, even thou art reconciled to God."⁴⁰ When Wesley considers a life of obedience and

⁴⁰ Wesley, Sermon V, Justification by Faith, IV, 9

personal holiness essential to salvation, it is only in the sense that by disobedience and lack of personal holiness salvation can be forfeited. He would substantiate fully Aulen's discerning observation, "We cannot acquire salvation through obedience, but on the other hand, we cannot live the life of salvation without obedience, we lose it through disobedience."⁴¹

The burden of the fore part of Koberle's "Quest for Holiness" is to show that sanctification is not the work of man, but rather solely the work of God. With this Wesley is in perfect agreement as the aforementioned quotation from Hodge clearly shows. (see foot- note 32). Nor was Wesley synergistic in this matter, though he might easily be charged with such a position. It is true that in emphasizing man's responsibility Wesley used language that on the face of it might imply native ability on the part of man enabling him to take steps to bring about his initial salvation, as well as his sanctification, language that would not be acceptable to the Reformers, yet he did not mean to imply that man was capable either apart from the enabling grace of God, or with it, of doing anything to which merit could be attached. Is not Koberle's criticism of the Formula too strong when he says, "The Formula was mistaken when it called this liberated activity, that is after all no part of us, but proceeds from God, a 'cooperation'. When neither the incentive to action nor the power of accomplishment, nor the perseverance that leads to completion comes from ourselves, then every expression must be scrupulously avoided that might awaken even the appearance of any creative participation on our part in the process of renewal."⁴²

The Biblical writers seem not to have ^{felt} ~~felt~~ this compulsion to "scrupulously avoid" such terms when they press upon man his responsibility in the matter of salvation. All the commands, both negative and positive, imply an ability on man's part. Nor did the writers stop to explain whether it is a gracious or a native ability which man is called upon to exert. Wesley did no more than

41 Aulen, Gustaf, Church, Law and Society, p. 71

42 Koberle, Adolf, The Quest for Holiness, p. 149

follow the usage of Scripture. His writings give abundant evidence that he attributed all to the grace of God. To those who had experienced entire sanctification he gave the instruction that when they spoke of it, they should do so "with the deepest humility and reverence, giving all the glory to God."⁴³

In comparing the evangelical and the Roman Catholic morality, Koberle shows that when good works spring from thankfulness they seek no reward. "The good works of Christians are no 'accomplishments' that deserve meritorious distinction, but they are 'fruits' that have grown out of the creative power of the Word, out of a living union with Christ. This fact of the sole activity of God in effecting good receives its fullest expression in the impulse of thankfulness. The one sanctifying himself because of thankfulness does not claim for himself any honour for the renewals of his life. His opportunity is his reward. He who gives thanks remains humble for he gives the glory to God alone. For this reason Luther has called thankfulness the Christian's 'most excellent virtue and the highest form of serving God,' 'a virtue that no one else can display' except a Christian. Whoever would thank God 'must acknowledge and confess in his heart that all he gives thanks for comes as God's gift and from God's grace.' Whenever anyone can say from the heart, Deo gratias, 'you need not fear that he is proud, obdurate, unfruitful and wild, or that he will use his possessions against God.'"⁴⁴ Koberle further enlarges on the freeness of Christian service; it is in no way the compulsory service of an unwilling slave, but the glad service of a grateful son. This exactly was Wesley's conception of perfect love. It brought the believer into a life of yieldedness to the divine will that caused his service to flow out as a great expression of gratitude to God for his marvellous grace and love. Coupled with this was the expulsion of such alien affections as pride, stubbornness and self-will.

⁴³ Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 45

⁴⁴ Koberle, op. cit., p. 155

It may be further observed that Wesley did not reject the condition which the Reformers described as the sinfulness of the Christian, though he chose not to use their terminology. Said the Reformers: "The most advanced believer has need as long as he continues in the flesh to daily pray for the forgiveness of sins". Said Wesley: "The best of men still need Christ in His priestly office, to atone for their omissions, their short-comings, their mistakes in judgment and practice and their defects of various kinds. For these are all deviations from the perfect law and consequently need an atonement."⁴⁵ The similarity of these two statements speaks for itself as to the essential oneness on this point, despite the antagonism of expression.

To combat any tendencies toward antimomianism, Wesley took a firm stand with the Apostle John that "Whoever is born of God, doth not commit sin," I John 3:9. It is interesting to note that the Reformers took a similar position in a similar circumstance. There were those who professed to be able to perpetrate outward sin, and still remain in a state of grace. Against these it was written, "If holy people, who still have and feel hereditary sin, and daily repent and strive against it, at some time fall into open sins....faith and the Holy Spirit were not present at the time. For in the presence of the Holy Spirit sin cannot rule, prevail, or be perpetrated, but is repressed and restrained from accomplishing its purpose. If it, however, accomplishes these purposes, faith and the Holy Spirit are not present at the time for it is as St. John, I Jn 3:9 says, 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, and he cannot sin.'⁴⁶

If Koberle had Wesley in mind when he made the statement, "Whoever holds fast in confident desparation to the promises of the complete removal of the guilt of sin will await more eagerly the beginning of the new era, which will bring with it the complete overcoming of the power of sin, than the one who dreams of a present life of victory and of complete sanctification,"⁴⁷ he failed to realize the quickening of hope that comes to one who experiences that

45 Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 43

46 The Christian Book of Concord, Henkel & Bros. 1854, p. 383

47. Koberle, op. cit., p. 262

victory and cleansing that brings him to love the Lord with all his heart. The entirely sanctified according to Wesley, know that the battle is not over; that there is always the possibility that evil may overcome them, and this causes them to cleave to the Lord in faith. They are not exempt from temptation, nor do they find their present state so enticing that it dulls their eagerness to be in the presence of the Lord without the darkening veil of the flesh dimming in any degree the brightness of his glory.

This brings us to consider the matter of the continual strife between the flesh and the Spirit. We have seen that Wesley clearly describes this conflict in the believer when speaking of "sin in the believer". But it was his view that this conflict came to an end when the believer experienced through faith the cleansing of his nature. Just what did he mean by this? He meant to say that the Christian could experience a fellowship with God that excluded conscious antagonism to the will and purposes of God; that he could feel a love within his heart for his fellow man that was not marred by ill-will and hatred; that in all respects release could come from all unholy tempers. But granting all this, Wesley was keenly aware that the Christian was always susceptible to a lapse into the old life and so he gives such admonitions to the wholly sanctified as the following: "Watch and pray continually against pride....You may slide back into it unawares; especially if you think there is no danger of it."⁴⁸ It is a fine point of distinction to try to differentiate between the sources of temptation whether they are from within the nature or from without. Wesley decided in favour of the latter for the wholly sanctified; the Reformers stand with the former. But we see that both recognize the need of an unceasing vigilance in faith and prayer so long as life lasts.

One final point. It has previously been shown that Wesley's teaching on perfect love did not obscure his insight into the necessity for a continual ethical development as long as one is in the body. While the heart may be filled

48 Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, P. 85

with love and the intention pure, human infirmities hinder the working out into the life of the highest expressions of Christian ethics. This is a process that continues in the sanctified. That Wesley could conceive of a sanctification that is complete and yet leaves room for this kind of a development is revealed in Aulen's observation: "He (the Christian) is 'holy', 'righteous', 'pure', he has got the gift of the Holy Spirit, he has received the filiation of sons, he is 'a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new.' (II Cor. 5:17) But on the other side we find everywhere in the epistles as well as in the gospels, exhortations and admonitions that often have reference to very elementary things. Nothing is more obvious than the fact that the Christians, addressed by St. Paul, are far from faultless. The explanation of this seeming contradiction is the truth that the 'holiness' and 'sanctification' of the Christians, according to the New Testament, is a religious reality, given as a gift of God's grace, and not an ethical perfection. Human infirmity cannot destroy this religious reality."⁴⁹ This exactly was Wesley's insight that enabled him so confidently to speak of a perfection as being attained, of a sanctification as being fully realized, and yet the Christian being ethically imperfect.

To conclude this section of our paper it might be observed that the peculiarities of the situation in which one comes to embrace the insights which God gives to him, very frequently influences him strongly in the particular facet of truth which he displays to the world. The Reformers had just broken away from Catholicism with its emphasis on the justifying character of good works and its Pelagian view of man's ability to do good. As a reaction to this, the doctrine of justification by faith alone, became the focal point of their teachings. This was necessarily built upon a conception of the sinfulness of man. To insure the truth that man can never merit salvation through his own works, it was strongly postulated that man remains a sinner to his dying day and that

49 Aulen, op, cit., p. 53

even his best works are tainted with sin. His only hope of salvation is the grace of God.

While Wesley accepted this teaching and made it foundational to his whole system of truth,⁵⁰ it was not his focal point. In contrast to the shallowness of much of the religious life of his day and the low standards of morality practiced and tolerated by the bulk of the Church, Wesley championed the cause of holy living. These factors, coupled with the influences that surrounded his early training and religious quest, spurred him on to declare that the grace of God could save a man from the guilt, the dominion, and the pollution of sin.

The Keswickian school of holiness teaching has taken something of a middle ground between Wesley's views and those of the Reformers. In all essentials, here, too, there is an agreement as to the nature of salvation by grace alone through faith, and the necessity for the new life to be manifested in holy living; but the language used by this school to express these ideas reflects more of a middle ground between the Reformers and Wesley.

In the first place, this position maintains the Reformation usage of the term sanctification as an ongoing process which is never complete in this life. For this reason, the Keswickian position does not use the term "entire sanctification" as did Wesley, to describe the life of victory into which the believer can come. Instead, a variety of terms such as "the victorious life", "the deeper life," "the rest of faith", "the Spirit-filled life", etc., have been used to indicate that spiritual experience which is in the New Testament depicted as the normal life of the Christian, but which is actually possessed by so few believers. On the other hand, the Keswickian position takes its place along side Wesley in urging that there is a crisis beyond conversion which brings the believer into a life of victory and release that produces fruit unto holiness.

It is recognized among all teachers of holiness, no matter to which school

50 See p. 21

of thought they belong, that there is a crisis that comes to the believer subsequent to his justification in which the point of crisis is the matter of surrender of one's self wholly to God. It is recognized too, that the victory over outward sin is more easily gained than the victory over evil passions and tempers of the heart. This second crisis is concerned with these two matters; In some cases the greater stress is laid on the surrender aspect of the experience and in other cases on the cleansing aspect; but in all cases, both of these phases of the life of victory are recognized.

Canon Warner expressed this crisis in his experience in the figure of Christ entering his life at conversion in a manner similar to that in which guests are welcomed into the home. There is a "full" welcome, but it has its limitations. The guest is granted access to the living room, the dining room, and the guest chamber. But after some time had passed, Canon Warner stated, Christ said to him, that He must have access to the whole house if He were to stay. All rooms were readily turned over except one. Here was the struggle, but it too, had to be surrendered. F. B. Meyer expressed the same idea but he spoke of it as turning over the keys of his life to the Lord.

L. E. Maxwell has spoken of the identification of the believer with the cross of Christ. This means, not simply the death to a life of sin, but a crucifixion of the self-life. "Such a denial of self is no mere severing of this or that indulgence, but putting the axe of the Cross to the very root of the tree of self. God says, "Cut the tree down, not merely trim it back. All such self-righteousness, self-esteem, self-vindication, self-glory, and fatal self-pity -- these, and ten thousand other manifestations are but the fleshly foliage, the myriad branchings of that deeply rooted tree of self. To trim it back only means that the very life of self is thrown back into other more rugged roots, to develop the Pharisee into a more vigorous tree."⁵¹ The Keswickian movement joins with the Wesleyan position in emphasizing this second

⁵¹ Maxwell, L. E., Born Crucified, p. 60

crisis in which the surrender of the citadel of the heart to God is the supreme issue.

These two movements are similar too, in that both associate this experience with the special activity of the Holy Spirit. Here again there is a variation of terminology, but being "filled with the Spirit" is recognized as an experience subsequent to justification. Scofield distinguishes between being baptized with the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit; holding that the first is concomitant with justification, but the second is subsequent; whereas Wesley considered the two to be identical and made the experience a second crisis. This experience of being filled, comes, according to Scofield, through consecration, faith and prayer.⁵² These are the same conditions which Wesley held to be the onward response to the divine working calling the believer to the sanctified life. This interworking of the Spirit and the believer is revealed by McConkey in the following words: "Not that surrender is a meritorious act that wins the fullness of the Spirit, but simply the act needed to give the Spirit a chance to fill us. God does not flood our being with great tides of spiritual life, all independent of our own free will. On the contrary, the Spirit's method seems to be first, conviction of God's fullness and the soul's need; then a step of obedience or faith which will give a waiting, willing God the desired chance to fulfill that need; and then life and blessing to him who obeys God in taking that step."⁵³

While the Keswickian movement is more reserved than Wesley in speaking of entire sanctification and of the cleansing from all sin, yet the idea is not wholly absent from the movement. Certainly victory over the manifestations of the carnal nature is proclaimed, though there may be an unwillingness to say with the Wesleys that sin no longer remains in the wholly sanctified. Several methods of expression are employed at this point. Some claim that the carnal mind is suppressed by the presence of the Spirit so that while sin is still present, it is not allowed to exert itself because of the power of the Spirit in the life. One adhering to this theory explained the word "crucified" in

⁵² Scofield, C. I., Plain Papers on the Holy Spirit, ph. IV

⁵³ McConkey, James H., The Surrendered Life, p . 53

Rom. 6:6, as meaning "inoperative". Another group expresses this victory by a theory of counteraction. The tendency in man to sin is overcome, not by producing in man, by a single act, a state of purity, but by maintaining a state of purity by the continued presence of Christ in the life. "How can the tendency to sin exist in the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God? By the law of counteraction. 'The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.' The very fact that the 'law of the Spirit of life' is in force, and is ever a continual necessity, is proof that the law of sin and death is not extinct, but is simply counteracted; in other words, that the tendency to sin is still there."⁵⁴ That the Keswickian school endeavours to maintain the Reformation position on this point of the inherent sinfulness of human nature is further revealed by Hopkins. "Never in this life are we absolutely free from the presence of evil; the tendency to sin and death is ever with us."⁵⁵ Another group make much of the idea of identification with Christ in his death, and through this "dying with Christ" victory comes. "The cross contradicts all fleshly doing and reveals a divine dying, Christ came....not to put new cloth to an old garment, but to put off in toto the old man with his 'duds'. Hence the real meaning of Christ's command, 'let him deny himself and take up his cross,' can be nothing short of an ignominious termination and undoing of the whole of our moral and spiritual heritage from Adam."⁵⁶

The emphasis on the instantaneous character of the experience is given because it is viewed as a position taken through faith, a gift of God's grace. The progressive character of the ethical development is not lost sight of. It is this that causes the reluctance to say that the carnal mind is no longer present. While Maxwell declares self to be delivered over to crucifixion, he nevertheless hastens on to say that "the death position once taken, must

54 Hopkins, Evan H., The Law of Liberty in the Spiritual Life, p. 23

55 Ibid., p. 24

56 Maxwell, op. cit., p. 63. Born Crucified is an exposition of the identification theory.

then be learned. The life of the crucified must be received moment by moment. There is the cross once and for all, and there is the 'cross daily'.⁵⁷ The Keswickian position, probably more than the Wesleyan position, emphasizes the progressive aspect of the life as a continued victory through a continued abiding; while the Wesleyan position has made more of the initial experience connected with the sanctified life. The idea of continued abiding is found in Wesley,⁵⁸ but it has been more overlooked than other aspects of his doctrine.

Another point of difference in these two approaches to the question of holiness is in respect to the conflict in the life of the believer. Wesley definitely rejects the idea of conflict within the wholly sanctified. For him, Rom. 7 is a thing of the past with the sanctified. The Christian must still fight against temptation, but temptation now is from without. The Keswickian gives more place to the conflict in the life of the believer, but his position here too, is something of a modification of both Wesley and the Reformers. He is with Wesley in saying that all rebellion within the heart is dispelled; he is with the Reformers in recognizing that temptation comes through the fleshly desires. "Even though the believer has emerged from the muddle and mixedness of Romans 7 through Paul's command, 'reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin,' the fact remains that he will discover many ways in which self seeks satisfaction through the as-yet-unredeemed spheres of his being. The flesh, the body, all 'our mortal coil' is evidently still present in Romans 8. That chapter presents many ways in which mortification must set in. The victorious believer will become aware of many forms of self which must yet be dealt with."⁵⁹ Yet even here, the flesh is not wholly free to wage its battle. "If the preparation for the battle has really been carried out, if the preliminary conditions have been complied with, then the flesh is no longer free to hinder us. That tendency to evil which continues with us to the last

57 Ibid., p. 142

58 See footnote 30

59 Maxwell, op. cit., p. 86

is no longer in power, but held in subjection by the supremacy of Christ. The fight does not consist of an internal conflict. This would be mutiny....We must very jealously distinguish between rebellion and true Christian conflict. If we are not willing that God should have His way with us, if we are setting up our will in opposition to His will, this certainly is conflict; but it is not Christian conflict."⁶⁰ The Christian surrenders to Christ, who then counteracts the fleshly lusts. "By the power of the Holy Ghost we may stand in a position of freedom from the harassing influences of the 'lust of the flesh' - a freedom which is essential in order that we may engage in the conflict, run in the race, labour in the work, and abide in the fellowship to which by God's grace we have been called."⁶¹

Thus far in this study we have endeavoured to show that Wesley had a keen understanding of the nature of true Biblical Christianity and that he was in essential agreement with those who preceded him and those who have followed, who have had a concern for a right relationship with God. That the expression of his views differs from the language in which the Reformers and others have couched their doctrines is recognized, but it is our contention that the real positions are not as far apart as is commonly held. I do not mean to oversimplify the differences nor am I unaware of the discussions which might arise as to whose mode of expression is most useful and most Biblical. Important as this may be, it is secondary to the fact that Wesley helped thousands to find joy and peace in full surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ. We shall conclude the discussion with something of an evaluation of this doctrine to which he gave such prominence.

Wesley and the early Methodist attached great importance to this particular tenet of their faith, feeling that it was for the purpose of disseminating this doctrine that God had raised them up. The claim has been made by Wesley that

⁶⁰ Hopkins, op. cit., p. 106

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 112

he "had almost the same epochal relationship to the doctrinal emphasis upon holiness that Luther had to the doctrinal emphasis upon justification by faith, or that Athanasius had to the doctrinal emphasis upon the deity of our Lord."⁶² To be sure, the influence of his doctrine of perfection has been far reaching and we can account for this fact in that fundamentally his doctrine was sound. It dealt with a problem of religious experience that has been keenly felt by spiritual men and women of every age and brought to the problem a Biblical solution that set many a struggling Christian free, in the appropriation, by faith, of the deliverance that had been made potentially possible through Christ's redemptive work. His doctrine brought out in the open a real issue that must be settled before progress in the Christian life can be registered - - the issue of full surrender. Some have^{been} brought to grips with this issue without Wesley's doctrine, but the doctrine has brought many into the fullness of the Christian life who otherwise would have continued to stumble along not realizing the power of Christ available to them for real victorious living.

A second value of his doctrine lies in the emphasis which it has given to the love of God, a love that is active and positive. It gave the Son to be the Saviour of men and it gives good gifts to His Children. The Christian life is a love service to the God of love who sheds his love abroad in the hearts of His children. The Christian life must then be something positive, something active. We must "love the Lord our God with all our hearts and our neighbour as ourselves." Rattenbury claims that Wesley "restored to love its Pauline place in Protestant theology. 'The greatest of these is love'."⁶³ Through this emphasis he began a softening influence in Protestantism that has greatly modified the stern determinism of Calvinism. Religion, under the impact of Wesley became a matter primarily of the heart and herein lay much of its strength.

⁶² Olin A. Curtis, The Christian Faith, p. 373. Quoted by Knudsen in The Principles of Christian Ethics, p. 151

⁶³ Rattenbury, Wesley's Legacy to the World, p. 169

Another very decided contribution that Wesley's doctrine has made to the life of Christendom is the emphasis that it has given to the importance of the ethical life. Holiness must be the pursuit of every child of God. There is no possibility of one remaining a Christian if he is indifferent to the manner of life which God has set out in the Scriptures for His children. Nor can one be content with leaving off the grosser sins only, the thoughts and intents of the heart must be purged of their evil designs. One must "love....with a pure heart fervently".⁶⁴ This has been a much needed emphasis, for the life of the church so readily falls to a deadening complacency on a low plain of ethical achievement and needs constantly to be challenged by the trumpet call: "Be ye holy, for I am holy."⁶⁵ A. J. Gordon indicated the value of this emphasis when he said, "We gravely fear that many Christians make the apostle's words, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,' the unconscious justification for a low standard of Christian living. It were almost better for one to overstate the possibilities of sanctification in his eager grasp after holiness, than to understate them in his complacent satisfaction with a traditional unholiness."⁶⁶

There are also some aspects of weakness in Wesley's doctrine. Perhaps the most marked is the difficulty of reconciling the idea of entire sanctification as a work that is complete, with the idea of further development. Theoretically Wesley worked this out so that the possibility of growth after sanctification seemed quite logical and natural. Just as the good plants in the garden can grow more rapidly when the garden is cleared of weeds, so the Christian graces can mature when the heart is cleansed from evil distempers. But practically, there is a complication here. The possibility of growth in love implies a lack of love, which is a degree of hatred; I should love more than I do. A growth in patience means that at times patience gives way to impatience. A growth in humility implies that there are lurkings of pride. Growth in unselfishness implies that at times I am somewhat selfish. It is not a case of two kinds of plants which grow side by side; it is a case of either, or --

⁶⁴ I Pet. 1:22

⁶⁵ I Pet. 1:16

⁶⁶ Quoted in Maxwell, op. cit., p. 22

either I am humble, or I am proud; either I am patient, or I am impatient. To be sure, I may be humble most of the time, but if I am not humble all of the time, then I must be proud some of the time.

Wesley's inconsistency at this point is seen in his writings. He makes allowances for short-comings, even to the point of violation of the law of love, if such violation is not intentional; but when he comes to describing the character of the Christian, as he does in the tract, "The Character of a Methodist", the allowances are not mentioned. The standard which he sets forth is not one of aspiration, but one of unqualified attainment, so it would seem. In evaluating the validity of the testimony of those who claimed to have attained perfection, Wesley again seems not to make the allowances which elsewhere he allows. Concerning those in London who professed to be "fully renewed", Wesley was satisfied that some had what he called perfection; others had not, and for these reasons: "Some are undeniably wanting in long-suffering, Christian resignation....they are not happy, at least, not always happy; for sometimes they complain....Some are wanting in gentleness....they are not able to bear contradiction, without the appearance, at least, of resentment....They speak sharply, or roughly, when they reprove others; and behave roughly to their inferiors. Some are wanting in goodness. They are not kind, mild, sweet, amiable, soft, and loving at all times, in their spirit, in their words, and in their looks and air, in the whole tenor of their behaviour....Some are wanting in temperance. They do not steadily use that kind and degree of food, which they know, or might know, would most conduce to the health, strength, and vigour of the body; or they are not temperate in sleep, they do not rigorously adhere to what is best both for body and mind; otherwise they would constantly go to bed and rise early and at a fixed hour: or they sup late, which is neither good for body or soul: or they use neither fasting nor abstinence: or they prefer that preaching, reading, or conversation, which gives them transient joy and comfort, before that which brings godly sorrow, or instruction

in righteousness." "Such," said Wesley, "have not what I call perfection." 67

The Wesleyan position finds a tension between its endeavour to maintain a high standard of attainment for the sanctified experience and its preaching of growth. The one tends to contradict the other when it comes to practical application. It is this tension that has caused many earnest Christians to find themselves in a state of confusion. They feel they have attained, but find aspects in which they seem to fail to meet the standards set and are thus thrown into doubt as to their experience. This continues until they learn to qualify the sermons they hear by other considerations which are not mentioned at the time.

Another weakness of the Wesleyan position is the tendency which it encourages to introspection and judging. With the ethical life playing such a prominent place, as the evidence of attainment, the individual is constantly being incited to self-examination. He is also unconsciously encouraged to try to evaluate his brother's testimony by observing his life. Too frequently the fact is obscured that God counts faith for righteousness, and that God looks upon the heart while man looks on the outward behaviour and sees not the intent of the heart. The emphasis on the place of emotions has tended to encourage some to fanaticism and others to Pharisaism. But these things are marginal in Wesley; they are dangers which need to be guarded against. Knudson points out that "In addition to pride and one-sided subjectivity, there are other evils into which the perfectionist movement has at times lapsed, such as shallow optimism, an excessive individualism, a morbid introspection, and a narrow, fanatical provincialism. Of all these evils, however, it may be said that they have been incidental to the movement as a whole, excrescences, not essential elements in it. True perfectionism is simply a challenge to high morals and spiritual endeavour, and endeavour that persists throughout life, free from enslaving bondage to deterministic theories both theological and naturalistic." 68

67 Wesley, Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 81-83

68 Knudson, op. cit., p. 156