

CONCLUSION

In this book, we have argued that the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification / Christian perfection is well-grounded in Scripture (parts one and two), well-represented in the Christian tradition (part three), and consistent with classic Christian teaching (part four). We ended part four by outlining what we believe to be the most biblically faithful and theologically coherent version of the doctrine: a neo-holiness “middle way.”

Our goal in this concluding chapter is to summarize and clarify our overarching argument and to reflect on its implications for the Christian life. We begin by offering a brief catechism on holiness that provides short, memorable answers to five of the most important questions about entire sanctification / Christian perfection. We then address a series of frequently asked questions that require more extended answers. Finally, we discuss how to experience entire sanctification.

HOLINESS: A BRIEF CATECHISM

What is entire sanctification / Christian perfection? It is loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself ([Deut 6:5](#); [Lev 19:8](#)).¹ Entire sanctification is something that God does in our lives after we believe in Jesus. It frees us *from* the power and condition of sin and frees us *to* live like Jesus by the power of the Spirit.

In what sense can Christians be perfect? Christians can be perfected in love so that they love God and neighbor with a whole heart.

In what sense can Christians not be perfect? Christians are not free from ignorance, error, infirmities, or temptation.² God will perfect us in these ways at the final resurrection.

Can an entirely sanctified person sin? Yes. Entirely sanctified people are able not to sin, but they are also able to sin and even to fall away from the faith.

How can I be entirely sanctified? By giving everything to God and seeking him expectantly until he sanctifies you entirely.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The doctrine of entire sanctification / Christian perfection often raises many questions, especially for those who are hearing about it for the first time. Below we provide answers to some of the most common questions about entire sanctification that we have encountered in our preaching, teaching, and conversations.

Can all Christians be entirely sanctified? Yes, broadly speaking. However, there are a few caveats. On the human side, Christians must consecrate themselves to God and seek him expectantly as they await his work of entire sanctification. If a Christian refuses to do this, then they will likely not be entirely sanctified. On the divine side, entire sanctification is an act of God, so it ultimately depends on God’s will and timing. [First Thessalonians 4:3](#) and [5:23–24](#), however, give us confidence that entire sanctification *is* something that God desires to do in the life of

¹This answer is inspired by Wesley, “Minutes of Some Late Conversations,” [WJW 8:279](#).

²Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” [WJW 6:2–5](#).

every believer.

If an entirely sanctified person sins, do they “lose” their entire sanctification? It depends on the nature and extent of the sin. If an entirely sanctified person commits an isolated sin, is convicted by the Spirit, repents, and renews their relationship with God, we do not think it necessary to say that they have “lost” their entire sanctification (a brief “lapse” might be a better way of describing this). As an analogy, when a believer (entirely sanctified or not) sins and responds in the way indicated above, we do not usually say that they have “lost” their status as a Christian and require them to receive Jesus as Lord again or be rebaptized. Rather, we tell them, “Be who you are.” We suggest that the same is true for those who are entirely sanctified. If, however, an entirely sanctified person engages in a pattern of unrepentant sin, then it is certainly possible for them to lose their entire sanctification and to need to consecrate themselves and seek God for entire sanctification once again.

Do you have to believe in entire sanctification to be entirely sanctified? Not necessarily. We believe that many Christians who do not believe in entire sanctification have nonetheless experienced it, and that others can. Yet we would also suggest that a Christian is far less likely to experience entire sanctification if they reject that it is a possibility. If, for example, a Christian believes that they will sin daily in word, thought, and deed, it is less likely that they will open themselves to the full extent of the sanctification that God wants to accomplish in them.

Do you have to be entirely sanctified to be saved? We first need to clarify the question. In Wesleyan theology, entire sanctification follows justification and regeneration, so we take “saved” above to refer to ultimate salvation—that is, whether a Christian must be entirely sanctified to receive eternal life. God is the one who judges, and we do not presume to know precisely how much one must be sanctified to receive eternal life. What we do know is that “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14), so we would encourage brothers and sisters in Christ to withhold nothing from God but to give him everything and to seek him expectantly in hope of entire sanctification.

Does being entirely sanctified mean you’ve “arrived” or have hit a “glass ceiling” where no more growth is possible? No. Entire sanctification is a state of dynamic perfection in which believers can grow and be perfected further as the Spirit empowers them to live like Jesus. For example, a believer who is entirely sanctified at age twenty-five is freed from the power and state of sin, but she will still have many ways in which she can become more like Jesus as she walks with him through the joys and trials of life. Work, marriage, singleness, parenting, health challenges, deaths of loved ones, and so on, may all provide her with opportunities to walk by the Spirit in ways that she has not had to before. As she submits to the Spirit’s leading in this uncharted territory, she will become more of what she already is—entirely sanctified.

If entire sanctification is a biblical concept, why don’t more Christians believe in it? We would first like to note that a significant number of Christians *do* believe in the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification (or something close to it). The Wesleyan tradition constitutes a significant movement within global Christianity, and while not all Christians in Wesleyan-Arminian churches affirm entire sanctification, many do. In addition, some churches outside the Wesleyan tradition affirm or are open to the doctrine of entire sanctification, even if they do not emphasize it. The charismatic movement, for example, emphasizes the gifts of the Spirit rather than his sanctifying work, but some charismatics would affirm entire sanctification or

something very close to it. And whatever the situation may be in modern Christianity, part three of this book has shown that numerous theologians throughout Christian history have taught Christian perfection in ways that resonate with the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification.

But the question stands: Why don't more Christians believe in entire sanctification if it is biblical? We would note at least three factors. First, entire sanctification is inconvenient to our sin. We are all born corrupted by sin, and since this is the only existence that we have ever known, it is hard to believe that God could deliver us from the power and condition of sin. Indeed, to believe this would mean that we could no longer sin comfortably, using the excuse that "I'm just human." Entire sanctification thus comes at a high existential cost. It means that we must give our all to God (even our favorite sins), and this is not an easy thing to do.

Second, many fail to see evidence for entire sanctification in Scripture because of doctrinal biases. We all read Scripture with presuppositions, and sometimes those presuppositions cause us to filter out or tone down certain elements of what the Bible says. As noted in chapter four, when Jesus says, "Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48), many people assume that he is laying down an impossible ideal or a command for some special class of Christians, even though according to our reading this is not the case. In some cases, our Bible translations tame the text for us. The muting of perfection language in numerous translations is a prime example of this.³ We do not say this to cast doubt on Bible translations but simply to emphasize that translations are produced by people, and people (even well-intentioned ones) have doctrinal biases. We would advise readers to use multiple Bible translations to help overcome this difficulty.

Third, Wesleyans have not always been good witnesses for entire sanctification—the doctrine that John Wesley believed God had raised up his movement to proclaim.⁴ At times, we have failed to communicate entire sanctification well, neglecting its biblical foundations or promoting unbiblical expectations for when or how it should occur. But most of all, we have failed to live out the reality of entire sanctification. Too often we have substituted mental assent to entire sanctification for fervently seeking God. Too often we have treated entire sanctification as a badge earned or a box checked rather than a grace-given reality to grow in. Too often we have received entire sanctification, sinned, and refused to repent to others because of a desire to save face. Such shortcomings have understandably led believers both inside and outside the Wesleyan movement to question whether entire sanctification is really possible. We have written this book to show the biblical and theological basis for entire sanctification, but it is important to remember that many people will evaluate the doctrine based not on our words but on our lives.

Have you been entirely sanctified? If so, what is your testimony? Yes, by God's grace. Below are our individual testimonies.

Matt. I lived and served in Haiti as a career missionary with my family for thirteen years. Haiti is a hard place to live for most non-Haitians. It is a beautiful place in many ways, and is filled with beautiful people, but it takes a lot of effort just to carry out day-to-day tasks due to the lack of infrastructure that most Americans are accustomed to. Adding language and cultural

³ See chapter five on [Philippians 3:12, 15](#) and chapter six on perfection language in Hebrews.

⁴ Wesley, "Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury (September 15, 1790)," *WJW* 13:9.

barriers to the sometimes insurmountable challenges of carrying out daily life will humble anyone attempting to do effective ministry in Haiti. For me, the depth of the sin condition *quickly* surfaced when serving in this sort of ministry context. I thought I was patient until I was faced with sitting through lengthy worship services at over 100 degrees with no water. I thought I was equipped and trained for ministry until I sat on the edge of an emaciated man's bed who was suffering and dying from a treatable disease. I thought I had compassion and lived sacrificially until I witnessed people living on \$700 a year sharing their resources with one another to survive. These sorts of conditions forced me to face my sinful condition *daily*. One of the greatest challenges for me was not being resentful toward the people I was serving. I was guilty of giving in to the temptation to blame my own struggles on the people and culture I was serving. This manifested itself through thoughts like, *This all wouldn't be so hard if Haitians could just get their act together!* I carried resentment in my heart for many years for the people I was called to serve. I saw in my wife, however, a pure, holy *love* for the people she too was called to serve. She genuinely loved (and loves) *them, the other*, more than herself. She had endless patience, grace, charity, compassion, and strived—with success—to demonstrate the unconditional love of God to the Haitian people without faltering. She had pure, Jesus love. Her witness further revealed my own inadequacies and selfishness. I prayed, waited, and strived for a love that was perfect like hers. It took many years, but eventually God *completely purified my heart of all resentment and bitterness toward the people I was called to serve, even my enemies*. To this day, I have a love for my Haitian brothers and sisters that is so pure, holy, and inexplicably unwavering that I would stop at nothing for the redemption of that nation.

Chris. I had not been a Christian for very long when I began to recognize the disparity between my internal motivations, outward actions, and the holiest desires of my heart. While I wanted to love God with all my heart and give myself in loving service to others, I knew the frustration of not being able to walk fully in that love. Because of my sinful condition, the natural bent or proclivity of my heart was to love myself more than God and neighbor. While I had the desire to love and serve God, the desire to please myself was stronger. Even when I tried to be unselfish and walk in obedience to Christ in difficult circumstances, I failed more than I succeeded. Holy love did not come easily to me.

In those early years of Christian life, I found myself in a frustrating predicament. Part of me longed to give myself completely to God and to others in love, while another sought my own selfish end. I discovered that I did not have the internal power to follow Christ. I had the desire to be a Christian but did not have the power to live the life to which I had been called. The question arose from my heart: Can Christ liberate the holiest longings of my heart? As a student in a Wesleyan-holiness college, I learned that he could.

I began earnestly to seek the Lord for this work. After pursuing for four years, unexpectedly, I experienced a breakthrough. As a former professor prayed over me, the Spirit came and liberated the holiest desires of my heart, setting me free from the power and state of sin. While this experience was not like my conversion experience, it has been far more transformative. I have walked in an abiding victory, experiencing greater depths of divine love, and grown to Christian maturity. While I cannot testify to always loving God and others to the fullest extent in every moment of my life, I can say that my heart has been established in the love of God, with the Spirit's fruit reigning in my life. Thanks be to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Caleb. I initially received Christ as Lord at age five. I grew up in a strongly Wesleyan home, so I was exposed to the idea of entire sanctification at an early age. However, while I believed that God could make people holy in this life, I tended toward a “longer way” view of entire sanctification. I was committed to following Christ faithfully and growing in sanctification, but I did not expect to receive entire sanctification soon.

In 2011, I began graduate studies at Wesley Biblical Seminary and accepted a pastoral position at my home church—a Nazarene congregation. I soon started to pursue ordination in the Church of the Nazarene. This created a tension for me because on my minister’s license application every year I had to answer the question, “Are you entirely sanctified?” For years I answered, “No.” In my application for 2016, I explained that while I had no persistent sin in my life, “God has not yet brought me to a point where I can say that my every thought and action are animated by perfect love.” In essence, I held the doctrine of entire sanctification in high regard and did not want to be a poor witness for it by claiming to have experienced it before I was living it.

The following spring, however, the Lord began to challenge me on my “No.” I felt him leading me to ask myself, “Am I living the entirely sanctified life? If not, why not?” As I prayed, the Lord revealed that in order to experience the entirely sanctified life, I would have to depend on the Holy Spirit daily in a new and deeper way. I began to walk in this dependence, and after a season the Lord gave me an assurance that he had entirely sanctified me. God has filled me with his Spirit and his love so that Spirit-empowered obedience to him is the overarching and consistent pattern of my life.

What are the most important biblical passages for understanding entire sanctification? Some of the clearest and most explicit passages are [Deuteronomy 6:4–9](#); [Leviticus 19:18](#); [Isaiah 6](#); [Jeremiah 31:31–34](#); [Ezekiel 36:25–29](#); [Matthew 5:43–48](#); [Romans 6–8](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:3](#) and [5:23–24](#); [Philippians 3:12–15](#); [1 Peter 1:14–16](#), and [1 John 2:28–3:10](#). However, it is important to note that the doctrine of entire sanctification rests not on these texts alone but on the entire witness and metanarrative of Scripture (see parts one and two of this book).

HOW TO EXPERIENCE ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

The doctrine of entire sanctification, like all theology, must be lived out to be truly meaningful. All the biblical and theological thought in the preceding chapters means little if we do not live the holy life ourselves. We therefore conclude this book with some reflections on how to experience entire sanctification. As noted in the preceding chapter, entire sanctification is a gift that God gives us. All we can do is receive it. How do we enter this normative Christian life, intended for every believer? It is not like “three easy steps” as portrayed in the “shorter way,” nor is it as difficult and “near impossible” as implied by the “longer way.” What follows is biblically and theologically informed advice. It should not be taken as law, but only used as a guide. We frame this counsel around the two points offered in the final question of the brief catechism above.

Give everything to God. If we desire to experience entire sanctification, we must fully surrender our lives to God, holding nothing back. We need to give everything to God—our time, talents, treasure, dreams, fears, emotional wounds, strongholds of sin, divided heart, pride, and so on. We must be willing to go anywhere and do anything for God. We must consecrate to God all areas of our lives over which we have control, as well as those over which we have no control. Christ must have it all. If we are unwilling or unable to do this, the possibility of entire sanctifi-

cation is impeded, and we must seek Christ for the power to make a total consecration.

John Wesley captures this attitude of full surrender well in his Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.⁵

Seek God expectantly until he sanctifies you entirely. If we desire to experience entire sanctification, we must seek God expectantly until he accomplishes this work. It is important that we seek *God*, not just an experience. People can sometimes become more focused on experiencing entire sanctification than on knowing God, which ironically hinders them from receiving entire sanctification. But if we are seeking God, we must also do so expectantly, asking him in faith to sanctify us entirely and eagerly anticipating his response. Three elements are key to this expectant seeking.

First, we must *believe* that God makes people holy in decisive moments and that he wants to do this *in our lives*. To believe this is no easy thing, for there is a deep and pervasive skepticism about the possibility of entire sanctification in the American church. Even in Wesleyan-holiness denominations, one can find cynical attitudes about the possibility of entire sanctification. If we find ourselves skeptical of the idea that God can sanctify entirely, we must ask the Spirit to open our hearts to this possibility.

Second, we must *ask* Christ in faith to sanctify us now. Because entire sanctification is an act of God, we cannot do it for ourselves but must receive it in faith. John Wesley describes sanctifying faith as a divine evidence and conviction, “First, that God hath promised it in the Holy Scripture.... Secondly, that what God hath promised he is able to perform.... Thirdly, ... that he is able and willing to do it now.... To this confidence, ... there needs to be added one thing more ... a divine evidence and conviction that he doeth it.”⁶

Third, if entire sanctification does not occur when we initially ask for it, we must *wait* actively and persistently in the means of grace. What does this look like? Here are some examples of how Christians can seek God for entire sanctification in the means of grace:

- Study and memorize the Scriptures, especially key passages about holiness.
- Pray and fast regularly, asking God for entire sanctification.
- Invite other believers to hold you accountable in areas where you are vulnerable to temptation.
- Listen to the testimonies of believers who have experienced entire sanctification and ask them (and others) to intercede for you.
- Ask God to sanctify you entirely at appropriate moments during corporate worship (e.g., Holy Communion, altar calls).

⁵ Wesley, “A Service for Such as Would Make or Renew Their Covenant with God [A Modern Adaptation],” in *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters, and Treatises*, ed. Frank Whaling, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1981), 387.

⁶ Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” *WJW* 6:52–53.

- Serve the needy and ask God to perfect your heart in love as you serve.

By actively seeking God for entire sanctification through these and other means of grace, we can position ourselves to receive his sanctifying work when he brings it.

CONCLUSION

We hope that every person who reads this book comes to experience entire sanctification. But as noted above, receiving entire sanctification does not mean that we have “arrived” or hit a “glass ceiling” where no more growth is possible (or necessary). Entire sanctification, while it is a decisive point of in our walk with Christ, is more the beginning of a journey than the end of one. Entirely sanctified believers must persevere in the grace that they have received, loving God and neighbor with a whole heart. Indeed, love of God and neighbor is the heartbeat of holiness. We should not seek entire sanctification merely because it benefits us (though it certainly does). We should seek entire sanctification because it enables us to love God completely and to bring maximum glory to him, as we bear his image in the world in the fullest way possible this side of the new creation. And when we do this, the world encounters the holy One who alone can satisfy the deepest desires of their hearts. The world is hungry for God. May they find him when they meet us. *Soli Deo gloria.*