

Chapter 1

THE WESLEYAN PERSPECTIVE

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Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee, and worthily magnify Thy Holy Name; Through Christ, Our Lord. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1695)

THE WESLEYAN WAY

A prayer for holiness and the perfect love of God has been a persistent petition of the church of Christ throughout its history. John Wesley, father of the Methodist family in the Christian world, regularly included this widely used collect of the Anglican church's *Book of Common Prayer* in his personal devotions and public ministry. For over two hundred years now, he and his followers have been known for their concern for an ethical faith. The Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, expresses that concern most definitively. ❖

Renewed and continuing interest in Wesley studies has helped to broaden some of the long-standing characterizations of John Wesley as a person and as a theologian within the larger Christian tradition. His distinctive contribution was his conviction that true biblical Christianity finds its highest expression and ultimate test of authenticity in the practical and ethical experience of the individual Christian and the church and only secondarily in doctrinal and propositional definition. ❖ His persistence in pursuing that conviction throughout his ministry has often led historians to relegate his role in Christian history to that of the systematic practitioner rather than the informed theologian ❖. Wesley's exceptional success in winning men and women to Christ and discipling them for service to God through his class meetings and other small groups has strongly shaped this popular and scholarly image of him—and justifiably so.¹

It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that behind all his evangelistic passion and ministry of discipling lay a full-orbed theological understanding. Most of that understanding was built squarely upon the central doctrines of the Reformation and earlier Christian tradition as outlined in the *Articles* and prayer book of his Anglican faith. One emphasis, however, distinguished his interpretation of God's ways with men and women from that of the religion of his day, namely, the conviction that biblical Christianity must ultimately demonstrate its reality in "a faith that works by divine love" in the crucible of everyday life. ❖ This passion for seeing God's truth expressed in the experience and witness of faithful Christians was strongly fortified by his conviction that every person could respond positively or negatively to God's offer of salvation as they would. This freedom was of grace and not of nature. ❖ The realization that spiritual experience represented interaction between the sovereign grace of God and the freedom of humankind's response made Wesley a persistent observer of the spiritual experience of his fol-

¹ See, for example, Maxim Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1937), and Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, 2 vols. (New York: Abingdon, 1962, 1973).

lowers. He believed that the knowledge of *how* God's truth translates itself into the experience of God's people by the Holy Spirit through the Word and the means of grace was critical for our proper understanding of the truth itself. Consequently not only the experience of Christians he knew but the whole experience of the church in the past engaged his attention.²

He was particularly interested in the life and witness of the early church fathers because he believed that their experiences of grace demonstrated best how men and women in the past had responded in wholehearted commitment and love to the will of God in their lives.³ The new English translations of the Fathers that were appearing during his studies at Oxford University constituted one of the main sources of his understanding of Christian perfection and the nature of salvation. Such influences sometimes subtly, sometimes openly, distinguished his views from the prevailing mainline Reformed tradition and, together with the insights into relationships between holiness and love that he gleaned from writers like [Thomas à Kempis](#), [William Law](#), and [Jeremy Taylor](#), became the heartbeat and life of his ministry and of the teaching that he adopted. The concept "faith working by love," as the ultimate hermeneutic for understanding God's entire plan of salvation, strongly shaped his teachings on sanctification. The "royal law of love" defined God's expectations for the life and witness of those who receive that salvation. When the implications of such emphases are incorporated into a theology of salvation, we can see why Wesley's theology differed at certain critical points from the accepted tradition of his time and today still stands as an alternative to the prevailing Reformed, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox teachings. It grounds itself mainly in the Reformed position but deviates from it by taking seriously certain key elements in each of the other two.⁴

Although Wesley used his observations of contemporary experience and his reflections on the lives of past Christians to shape his understanding of God's will, he nevertheless held God's Word as ultimate and authoritative. He refused to consider seriously any teaching unless it could stand its ground under the pure light of revelation. No Christian leader has ever been more faithful in bringing all observation, experience, and rational conclusions to the Scriptures for final judgment. "If by catholic principles," he said on one occasion, "you mean anything other than scriptural, they weigh nothing with me. I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures."⁵ At the same time he insisted that God's truth was given to us to be translated into life and could be if it were received and believed. Therefore, to understand salvation fully, one must take into account the knowledge of God given to those who were

² Among other studies, see Albert C. Outler, "John Wesley as Theologian—Then and Now," *Methodist History* 12 (July 1974): 63–82; Kenneth E. Rowe, ed., *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1976); Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon, 1960); and Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972).

³ "Address to the Clergy," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London: Wesley Conference Office, 1872; reprint, Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1978), 10:484 (hereafter cited as *Works*); R. S. Brightman, "Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley in Theological Dialogue" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1969); Ted A. Campbell, "John Wesley's Conceptions and Uses of Christian Antiquity" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 1984).

⁴ George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Holt, 1935).

⁵ John Wesley to John Clayton(?), March 24, 1739, in *Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker, 26 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Nashville: Abingdon, 1974–82), 25:616.

honestly seeking His will and experiencing His grace; any valid test of true Christianity had to consider this evidence. Experience, he believed, could *confirm* a doctrine of Scripture, but it could not *establish* a doctrine of Scripture. Only the Bible itself could do that.⁶

Wesley's lifelong passion for Christian holiness was fired by his conviction that the Word of God teaches, by precept and by promise, that Christians should not be "content with any religion which does not imply the destruction of all the works of the devil, that is of all sin."⁷ He never allowed that entirely sanctified Christians could become sinless in the sense that they could not fall again into sin through disobedience. He did teach that so long as men and women were the creatures of free will, they were able to respond obediently or disobediently to the grace of God. They would never be free from the *possibility* of deliberate, willful sinning in this life. They could, however, be delivered from the *necessity* of voluntary transgressions by living in moment-by-moment obedience to God's will.⁸ Whatever difficulty might arise in defining the theology, content, or means of attaining such a loving relationship with God, it could mean no less than freedom from the dominion of sin in this life. It did not, however, mean freedom from all the effects of sin in the deranged worldly order in which we experience even the most perfect of our present relationships under grace. Total freedom from the effects as well as the presence of all sin had to await the glory to come.⁸

Wesley believed that the promised present victory over sin was possible only through the Christ life implanted in believers by the Holy Spirit.⁹ Even those who enjoyed the closest walk with God, however, still had many imperfections in them as part and parcel of the fallen created order and had to depend daily on the atoning merits of Christ's blood and sincerely pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." "For," he noted, "neither love nor 'the unction of the Holy One' makes us infallible: therefore ... we cannot but mistake in many things."⁹ In his well-known tract on Christian perfection, he maintained that "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.¹⁰ In Wesleyan thought a person's full commitment to the relationship with God and neighbor in love is not a fixed superior state; it is, rather, a new stage, a new arena of ethical response to the divine will already inherent in the regeneration of new birth in Christ.

The Reformers' principles of *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia* were fixed stars in his constellation of theological principles as well. He also had their emphasis on personal faith. He departed from the Reformed tradition, however, in his teaching about the freedom from sin that believers could experience in this life.¹¹ "The doctrines of justification and sanctification are fused in a

⁶ Sermon, "The Witness of the Spirit," *Works* 5:129, 133.

⁷ Sermon, "The End of Christ's Coming," *Works* 6:277.

⁸ "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as Believed and Taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley from the Year 1725–1777," *Works* 11:395, 417.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 415.

¹⁰ Sermon, "Christian Perfection," *Works* 6:5–6.

¹¹ See Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation*. (London: Epworth, 1950; reprint. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Francis Asbury Press, 1984), p. 12.

synthesis peculiar to Wesley, an amalgam of both Protestant and Catholic devotion.” He “has transcended the principles of the Reformers, at any rate, has corrected a recognized limitation.”¹² Wesley’s synthesis combined the Reformed view of God’s sovereign grace with the idea of saving faith as an active principle of holiness in the heart and life of a person. He joined the Reformed doctrine of an individual’s total sinfulness and entire dependence on grace with the Arminian doctrine of human freedom, which made a person an acting subject with moral obligations.¹³

The abiding attention that Wesley paid to justification and sanctification is natural, therefore, and arose out of the practical and theological concerns that engaged him as he sought to understand the biblical view of salvation. His preaching and thinking were dominated by these and a few related doctrines that are reflected in Christian experience. He gave his major attention, however, to sanctification, a theme that weaves its way through the entire fabric of his preaching and theology.

SANCTIFICATION ACCORDING TO WESLEY

Wesley declared that the supreme and overruling purpose of God’s plan of salvation is to renew men’s and women’s hearts in His own image. It is a teleological theme,¹⁴ for he believed that all the grand currents of biblical salvation history moved toward this one end and had, in a restricted but definite manner, a fulfillment and perfection in this life. Wesley held that God had promised salvation from all willful sin, and he saw this promise in passages such as the following: Deuteronomy 30:6; Psalm 130:8; Ezekiel 36:25, 29; Matthew 5:48; 6:13; 22:37; John 3:8; 17:20–21, 23; Romans 8:3–4; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 3:14–19; 5:25, 27; and 1 Thessalonians 5:23. He believed that such passages as Luke 1:69–75, Titus 2:11–14, and 1 John 4:17 indicated that this sanctification took place before death. By grace God would restore to us the holiness that had been lost in the Fall by our first parents.¹⁵

In a sermon representative of his lifelong beliefs on this doctrine, he declared,

Ye know that all religion which does not answer this end, all that stops short of this, the renewal of our soul in the image of God, after the likeness of Him that created it, is no other than a poor farce, and a mere mockery of God, to the destruction of our own soul.... By nature ye are wholly corrupted. By grace ye shall be wholly renewed.¹⁶

The gracious element resides in God’s good will to all, in that He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to a saving knowledge of Himself. Only the merits of Christ’s life and death bring us salvation, and His grace alone gives us the freedom to respond to His offer of

¹² Cell, *Rediscovery of John Wesley*, p. 341.

¹³ Lindström lists other writers who support these views; see *Wesley and Sanctification*, pp. 12–13.

¹⁴ See Albert C. Outler, “Holiness of Heart and Life,” in *Wesleyan Theology: A Sourcebook*, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1984), p. 243.

¹⁵ *Works* 8:294–96; 11:389–91

¹⁶ *Works* 6:64–65.

forgiveness, cleansing, and a new relationship with Him in love. The grace of response is available to all persons; whosoever will may come. A subjective view of sanctification is firmly conjoined with the more prevalent objective view. Two apparently contradictory views come together; “freedom and dependence are joined.”¹⁷

God first expressed this good will to humankind through His prevenient grace when He called Adam and Eve back to Himself after they had been corrupted in every part of their nature through their disobedience in Eden. And He has continued through all the ages since to call all their descendants—each one blighted by original sin and burdened by personal rebellion—back to Himself. His persistent purpose is to restore the divine moral image of love and purity of relationship with Him that had been lost because of their kinship with fallen Adam. “Real religion,” he preached in 1758 from the text [1 John 3:8](#), is the restoration of human beings “by Him that bruises the serpent’s head” to “all that the old serpent” deprived them of—not only to the favor of God, but to “likeness to the image of God”; not simply deliverance from sin but being filled with all the “fulness of God.” Nothing short of this is true religion, he declared. The truth runs all through the Bible, he claimed, and he asked his readers not to “be ... content with any religion which does not imply the destruction of the works of the devil, that is all sin.” It is “faith that works by love.”¹⁸

The agent of this call to justification and sanctification is the Holy Spirit, who gives us the faith by which both the objective and subjective elements of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ become ours. The gracious work of the Spirit enables the sinful heart to respond in obedience to God’s call to salvation. By this process we are gradually brought to the point of repentance and faith, by which we are born of God by the Spirit to new life in Jesus Christ. This new life in Christ not only brings us freedom from the objective guilt of sin through justification but through sanctification regenerates us and through the Spirit creates the subjective life of God and Christ in us.¹⁹

The Spirit’s work of regeneration of the heart marks the beginning point of sanctification. It means that we have been given that power over sin which is the birthright of every child of God as we seek to be conformed to His image. In regeneration the formation of the Christ life in us has begun; the call to holiness and divine love becomes the compelling motive of the new life under the power and inspiration of the Spirit, who has brought about our adoption as children of God. Every person who is born of God, from the moment of regeneration, has the promise of victory over sin and the devil and has the power of the Holy Spirit to realize that victory in everyday living.²⁰

But Wesley, in conformity with all the Reformed traditions of his day as well as out of his own spiritual experience and understanding of Scripture, recognized that Christian believers, and especially those who were most serious in their desire to please God and forsake sin, experienced a continuing element of rebellion, a systemic illness, which weakened the will to holiness and love and divided their intention to love God and neighbor without reserve. “Indeed

¹⁷ Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *Works* 6:276–77.

¹⁹ See “[Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, I](#),” *Works* 5:247–61.

²⁰ “[On Sin in Believers](#),” *Works* 5:146–47.

this grand point, that there are two contrary principles in believers—nature and grace, the flesh and the Spirit —runs through all the Epistles of St. Paul, yea through all the holy Scriptures,” he taught.²¹ Although other theological traditions of his day believed that this struggle against an innate, inward rebellion was a normal and even a necessary element of the Christian’s quest for the holy life, Wesley believed that the whole gospel, in promise and command, indicated otherwise. He believed that there was freedom from the dominion of sin for every Christian, even under these unhappy inner struggles, and that God’s grace was always moving the believer to a life of greater peace, happiness, and love. There was a remedy for the sickness of systemic sinfulness, namely, *entire sanctification*—a personal, definitive work of God’s sanctifying grace by which the war within oneself might cease and the heart be fully released from rebellion into wholehearted love for God and others. This relationship of perfect love could be accomplished, not by excellence of any moral achievements, but by the same faith in the merits of Christ’s sacrifice for sin that initially had brought justification and the new life in Christ. It was a “total death to sin and an entire renewal in the image of God.”²²

The theology of the Wesleyan revival movement is frequently expressed more clearly in its hymns than in its sermons and tracts. A hymn of Charles Wesley’s expresses the faith of the Wesleyans at this point:

From all remaining filth within
Let me in Thee salvation have;
From actual and from inbred sin
My ransomed soul persist to save.

Wash out my deep original stain—
Tell me no more it cannot be,
Demons or men! The Lamb was slain,
His blood was all poured out for me.²³

The critical point of this purifying experience need not be chronologically distinct from justification and the new birth, but logically it is distinct from them in the continuum of salvation . However, the scriptural exhortation to believers to pursue perfection in love , as well as the struggles they commonly have with a divided heart, indicates that believers typically appropriate purity of love in a distinct crisis of faith sometime subsequent to justification . The new relationship of perfect love to God and others that results from this faith is not of a kind of love different from that which was experienced in justification but is, rather, the fulfillment of it. Negatively, entire sanctification is a cleansing of the heart, which brings healing of the remaining systemic hurts and bruises from Adam’s sin. Positively, it is a freedom, a turning of the whole person toward God in love to seek and to know His will, which becomes the soul’s delight . In his sermon “On Perfection,” Wesley enumerated several features of this sanctification:

1. To love God with all one’s heart and one’s neighbour as oneself;
2. To have the mind that is in

²¹ Ibid., 5:147, 151–56.

²² “Plain Account,” *Works* 11:401.

²³ John and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works*, Collected and arranged by G. Osborn, 13 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1868–1872), 2:321.

Christ; 3. To bear the fruit of the Spirit (in accordance with [Gal. 5](#)); 4. The restoration of the image of God in the soul, a recovery of man to the moral image of God, which consists of “righteousness and true holiness”; 5. Inward and outward righteousness, “holiness of life issuing from holiness of heart”; 6. God’s sanctifying of the person in spirit, soul, and body; 7. The person’s own perfect consecration to God; 8. A continuous presentation through [Jesus](#) of the individual’s thoughts, words and actions as a sacrifice to God of praise and thanksgiving; 9. Salvation from all sin ²⁴.

These terse, biblically derived concepts constitute the critical mass of the concept of entire sanctification as it is understood in Wesleyan theology.

Such restoration of the image of God in love in the heart, although a crisis point in the quest for holiness, does not represent the final step in God’s saving and sanctifying grace or the establishment of a fixed state of grace. Wesley allowed no stopping point in the Christian’s quest for holiness—“no holiness of *degree*, no point of conclusion ²⁵.” Quite to the contrary, every point of progress in grace renews one’s zeal to realize more fully the immeasurable resources of God’s grace and love toward those who trust and obey Him. To stop short of the crisis of faith by which we are restored through the Spirit to the love that we lost in the Fall was to ignore not only the privileges but the expectations of the finished work of Christ and the end point of the plan of salvation. To take that point of initial freedom in any way as a state of grace or a terminal victory was equally to ignore the promises and expectations of the salvation brought to us by Christ’s work. Wesley believed that there are *degrees of faith and of assurance* ²⁶ of justifying faith as well as an infinite number of degrees in a person’s experience of God ²⁷. The idea of a gradual progression in sanctification is extended beyond the boundaries of this life, even though the basic relationship that nourishes such development is established in the crisis moment of entire sanctification.²⁶

Wesley understood entire sanctification, or perfection in love, then, as a continuum of grace and response that leads persons from the guilt and despair of their sin to the knowledge of God and, by faith in His grace in [Jesus Christ](#), to the crisis moment of the justification and the new birth ²⁷. The life of sanctification springs from the regenerated life created by the new birth and continues as the [Holy Spirit](#) through His gracious ministry calls them to moment-by-moment obedience to the will of God, which ²⁸ is the expression of His holiness and love. In this part of the Christian’s progress in obeying the will of God and conforming to the mind of Christ, the remains of the rebellion and fallenness create conflict and often depression. The nature is still corrupted by a systemic illness that makes a free and ready response to the love of God a source of contention in the inner volitional being. The volitional powers have to be cleansed from the effects of the Fall, which remain even after justification ²⁹, before persons can be wholly free to enjoy and express the pure love of God in all their relationships. **His emphasis upon the importance of what God does “in us” through Christ, as well as upon what God does “for us” through Christ, constitutes Wesley’s greatest contribution to the Christian church.**

Wesley believed that the Bible clearly and persistently taught that God had wedded holy liv-

²⁴ “[On Perfection](#),” *Works* 6:413–15.

²⁵ “[Christian Perfection](#),” *Works* 6:5–6.

²⁶ “Minutes of Several Conversations,” *Works* 8:328–29.

²⁷ “Plain Account,” *Works* 11:426.

ing and salvation by faith alone into one inseparable whole.²⁸ “If we believe the Bible, Who can deny it? Who can doubt of it?” he asked. “It runs through the Bible from the beginning to the end in one connected chain.”²⁹ The proclamation of God’s “great salvation,” he contended, had been part of the tradition and experience of the primitive church³⁰ and had been experienced by earnest Christians in the subsequent history of the church whenever there was a genuine revival of biblical preaching and obedient discipleship. It had been largely neglected by the Protestant Reformers because of their abhorrence of the doctrines clustering around merit by works³¹, which they saw as causing the failure of Evangelical doctrine in the medieval Catholic church. God had now entrusted to the Methodists the special responsibility to proclaim it again as the birthright of all Christians. In doing so they brought the Reformation principle of salvation by faith alone to its legitimate and logical conclusion.³¹

Wesley became convinced, even before his contacts with the Moravians, that this relationship of living before God in the perfection of love was the supreme end of Christianity³². Not unlike Luther, his first efforts to know the truth for himself ended in frustration and despair. The disciplines and works of charity of his “Holy Club” were not enough.³² Only after his own experience of personal faith in Christ, in what is now known as his “Aldersgate experience,” did he see that one’s relationship with God was established by the merit of Christ rather than the merit of personal good works.³³ Out of this new understanding of faith and grace, he saw that a clear call for Christian perfection by faith was the logical consequence of the Reformer’s bold call for justification by faith. His formulation of sanctification as “faith working by love” began to define a concept of sanctification³⁴ that Wesley felt was more biblical and closer to the tradition of the early Christian church than that which the Catholicism or Protestantism of his day were proclaiming. His view of faith as the means to love became his hermeneutic of grace and salvation³⁴; it places him, in the minds of some scholars, into the arena of Catholic devotion³⁴. But his refusal to forsake the Reformed principle of justification by faith, in the opinion of others, places him squarely in the camps of Calvin and Luther.³⁴

For Wesley, God’s sovereign grace through³⁴ saving faith becomes an active principle of holiness within the hearts of believing men and women. Out of his reflection of this mix of faith, life, reason, and the experience of the church, all judged and authenticated by the Word of God, Wesley’s understanding of sanctification was fleshed out and placed at the center of his theological system. Thereafter, he stood by his conviction on the doctrine, in spite of the resistance he encountered from the lackluster deism so prevalent in his own Church of England and the rampant antinomianism in many of the nonestablished country churches. He and his followers set before their hearers the promise of a heart perfected in love, a personal restoration to the moral image of God, and the responsibility and power to express that love in relationship with

²⁸ Outler, “Holiness of Heart and Life,” p. 243.

²⁹ “The End of Christ’s Coming,” *Works* 6:276.

³⁰ See references cited above in n. 3.

³¹ Cell, *Rediscovery of John Wesley*, pp. 265ff.

³² This small club was a spiritual growth group that the Wesleys, Whitefield, and a few other friends formed while they were students at Oxford University.

³³ See “The End of Christ’s Coming,” *Works* 6:276–77.

³⁴ See Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, pp. 11–14.

God and neighbor. Through Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit, the “bent to sinning” could be cleansed from the repentant, believing heart, and a “bent to loving obedience” could become the mainspring of one’s life.

The belief that one can attain in this life a relationship with God and others that is characterized from moment to moment by divine love marks the dividing line of commitment for those who seek to be Wesleyan. This doctrine is so central to whole Wesleyan understanding of the plan of salvation that to leave Wesley at this point is to detour completely from the path he followed.³⁵

THE THEOLOGICAL MILIEU

We are now ready to outline, in a more detailed but still necessarily limited scope, the particular biblical and theological themes that most directly inform the Wesleyan understanding of justification and sanctification summarized above.

Original Sin and Preventive Grace

A central point in any theology is its accepted position on the nature of the human situation. One’s doctrine of original sin is arguably as determinative a concept as any other for one’s view of sanctification, and both in turn, depend on one’s doctrine of grace. As we have noted, Wesleyans affirm the total corruption of the first man and woman through disobedience, in full agreement with the tradition of the Reformers and especially that of Calvin. They also affirm that fallen men and women can be restored to God’s favor by the merits of Christ only and no other. In the *Minutes* of his 1745 conference, Wesley replied to the question as to where he came to the very edge of Calvinism by saying, “(1.) In ascribing all good to the free grace of God. (2.) In denying all natural free-will, and all power antecedent to grace. And, (3.) In excluding all merit from man; even for what he has or does by the grace of God.”³⁶ Any understanding of the Wesleyan doctrine of salvation must take into account Wesleyans’ full agreement with these three critical Evangelical teachings: beings are by nature totally corrupt; this corruption is the result of original sin; they can be justified only through God’s grace in Christ. The Fall and its consequences are fundamental in the Wesleyan doctrines of justification and sanctification.³⁷

Wesley’s *Doctrine of Original Sin*, published in 1757, demonstrates how strongly his concepts of sin are rooted in that doctrine. Written in response to Dr. John Taylor’s unitarianism, Wesley described the utter depravity created by the Fall in his most telling words on the subject.³⁸ In stark contrast with Taylor’s idealistic view of the human condition, he maintained that this very doctrine of human corruption distinguishes Christianity from all false religion. “Is man by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen?... Allow this and you are so far a Christian. Deny it and you are but a Heathen still.”³⁹ This corruption is the

³⁵ Outler, “Holiness of Heart and Life,” p. 242.

³⁶ *Works* 8:285.

³⁷ In the sermon “[Living Without God](#),” Wesley describes the “Atheist,” the fallen person devoid of the Spirit of God, as one who “has not the least sight of God ... [or] any desire to have any knowledge of his ways.... He tastes nothing of the goodness of God” (*Works* 7:351). See also “[The New Birth](#),” *Works*, 6:70.

³⁸ “The Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Works* 9:193–194.

source of all sin and corruption that subsequently follows in all the children of Adam and Eve:

How wide do those parent-sins extend, from which all the rest derive their being;—that carnal mind which is enmity against God, pride of heart, self-will, and love of the world! Can we fix any bounds to them? Do they not diffuse themselves through all our thoughts, and mingle with all our tempers? Are they not the leaven which leavens, more or less, the whole mass of our affections? May we not, on a close and faithful examination of ourselves, perceive these roots of bitterness continually springing up, infecting all our words, and tainting all our actions?⁴⁰

The real loss that Adam and Eve suffered in their rebellion against God was the loss of the *imago Dei*, which they had enjoyed. For Wesley, this consisted of three aspects: (1) *The natural image*, which gave men and women immortality, free will, and affections; (2) *The political image*, which gave them the authority to rule the natural realm; and, most important, (3) *The moral image*, by which they were imbued with righteousness and true holiness and were like their Creator in love, purity, and integrity. This third aspect of the divine image also gave them their intellectual powers. The Fall affected all of these dimensions, with the result that the *imago Dei* was lost. Every part of humankind's nature was infected by sin. Love and knowledge of God were replaced by alienation and loss of desire to know Him. Free will rebelled against the divine will in deliberate disobedience. The intellect was darkened and dulled.⁴¹

In summary, then, Wesley defined original sin as a total corruption of the whole of human nature.⁴² In the sermon “The Deceitfulness of Man’s Heart,” written in 1790, self-will, pride, love of the world, independence of God, atheism, and idolatry are specified as the origin of human evil.⁴³ Such views clearly link Wesley’s views of original sin and its consequences for the race with those of Augustine: both interpret Paul’s teaching on it in a similar fashion, and both regard Adam as the first ancestor and the representative of humankind.⁴⁴ Unlike Augustine, however, Wesley sees the Fall as the result of a lack of love, not of concupiscence.

When Wesley discussed the loss of the image of God through the Fall, however, he spoke in ultimate terms only of the moral image, which he said was preeminent and alone related to salvation. Human beings after the Fall did retain vestiges of the natural and political images; people are self-motivated, unlike the passive material creation, and still retain a degree of lordship over the created order.⁴⁵ From this understanding of the scriptural account of the Fall, Wesley saw God’s response as a plan of salvation that promised the gracious restoration through faith of that relationship of perfect love for God that the first man and woman enjoyed.⁴⁶ The promise is to everyone who will believe on the sufficient sacrifice of the Second Adam. The remedy for the imperfections of the created order and for the loss of the natural and political aspects of the divine image that Adam once enjoyed will have to wait for the consummation of all things. Consequently, Wesley believed, because we are imperfect persons in an

³⁹ Sermon, “Original Sin,” *Works* 6:63.

⁴⁰ “Sermon on the Mount, XI,” *Works* 5:406.

⁴¹ Sermon, “The New Birth,” *Works* 6:66–67.

⁴² “The Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Works* 9:433.

⁴³ *Works* 7:337–43.

⁴⁴ *Works* 9:242–43; 10:190.

⁴⁵ “The Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Works* 9:381.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

imperfect world, perfection “in love” is consistent with a “thousand mistakes.” But limited as we are by our own and the world’s imperfections, we may still enjoy a relationship in which, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can fulfill the great and final commandment of loving God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves. Any lesser expectation falls short of the fullness of the “great salvation.”⁴⁷

This optimism, which springs up among the ruins of so drastic a reversal as the loss of the divine image, as described by Wesley and all Evangelical theologians of the Christian church, is an “optimism of grace.” At this point Wesleyan theology diverges drastically from much of Reformation thought on how and to what degree God’s grace overcomes and reverses the losses of the Fall. The optimism of grace, which leads to the belief in the promise (and therefore the possibility) of the full release from the effects of the loss of the spiritual relationship in the Garden of Eden and the full restoration of perfect love in the Christian’s relationship with God and neighbor, rests in large measure on Wesley’s understanding of the prevenience of grace and the freedom of human response. God is extending varying measures of grace to us all, and if we respond and receive it, “we *may* live,” but if we choose not to, “we *will* die.”⁴⁸ Wesleyans acknowledge that after the Fall persons have been infected by sin, pride, and a rebellious spirit in every part; by their own power and their own will they can choose nothing but sin.

Wesley held that there is neither natural knowledge of God nor natural conscience in men and women. When Paul speaks of these two sources of the knowledge of God, for which all are held accountable and because of which any who continue in their sin are condemned, he is speaking of the prevenient grace of God at work in drawing all persons to Himself. After the Fall, they possessed no natural ability by which they could know God or merit His salvation. Wesley summed up his view in this way:

For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by *nature*, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called *natural conscience*. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, *preventing grace*. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man.... So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.⁴⁹

The “light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world” immediately began to make them aware of the need and the possibility of restoration in the midst of their ruin. God’s immediate and unceasing effort to awaken and bring men and women to a consciousness of their need and to a trust in His grace is the dynamic force that carries along the continuum of grace, which leads them from grace to grace in a continuum of salvation. The critical end of this grace, which comes before saving grace, is love in the heart of every son and daughter of Adam and Eve so that they may serve God in “righteousness and true holiness” all of their days. Prevenient grace, then, is the beginning of the process by which God begins to lighten the darkness of the Fall for all men and women; it will bring those who faithfully receive it to saving grace, sanctifying grace, and grace for the life of love. When brought into dynamic interaction with all that Wesley says about the utter fallenness of man in any natural terms, it indicates that salva-

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 255; Sermon, “[The Fall of Man](#),” *Works* 6:223.

⁴⁸ “The Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Works* 9:275.

⁴⁹ Sermon, “[Working Out Our Own Salvation](#),” *Works* 6:512.

tion comes to us only by the grace that flows from the atoning work of Jesus Christ, never because of any natural ability or achievement.

The Continuum of Law and Love

The second set of complementary doctrines that are integral to Wesley's understanding of sanctification is *law and love*. His studies of the Old and New Testament led him to the conclusion that persons who, under grace, fulfill the "royal law of love" as taught most simply and explicitly by Christ Himself in the Sermon on the Mount and subsequently by all of the New Testament writings are also fulfilling the moral intent of the Ten Commandments. Wesley thus relates the fulfillment of the law's moral obligations to the process and end of sanctification rather than to the more objective views of Reformation orthodoxy, which find the fulfillment and satisfaction of the moral law in the act of the believer's justification. There the emphasis is on our freedom from the moral obligations of the law because we are "clothed in the righteousness of Christ." Wesley, too, used such terminology,⁵⁰ but with a significant difference of application. The righteousness of Christ clothed us with God's forgiveness and favor; in this He maintained an objective stance toward the significance of our justification. But the fulfillment of Christ's work in atonement as it respects the law lies not so much in what He did on the cross "for us" as in what His work on the cross does "in us" as the life of Christ becomes ours in the new birth and sanctification.⁵¹ As Lindström indicates, "This explains why sanctification in the sense of the fulfillment of the law occupies such an important place in his theology."⁵²

Wesley always regarded the law as holy and good. There was not the strong law-versus-gospel tension that pervaded Luther's theology.⁵³ Wesley's understanding of the significance of the Sermon on the Mount became the heart of his understanding of the relationship between perfect love and the commandments of God as the royal law of love. Wesley declared that the Ten Commandments are renewed in the Sermon on the Mount in their sanctifying purity and spirituality and that they describe the life of practical Christian holiness, which is the end of faith and the commandments.⁵⁴ He concluded that to provide humankind with the grace to love God and to keep His commandments is the persistent promise that always attends the presentation of the law of God in the Old Testament. The subsequent promise of the gospel is in no sense contrary but fulfills the essential purposes of the moral law.⁵⁵

The moral law, he said, "is an incorruptible picture of the High and Holy ONE that inhabiteth eternity... It is the face of God unveiled; God manifested ... to give, and not to destroy, life—that they may see God and live."⁵⁶ The law is good, therefore, and in itself is a revelation of the divine holiness, justice, and goodness. Although it unmask us in our self-righteousness and is the severe taskmaster that brings us to Christ, behind all the apparent severity of the law is the love of God, driving and luring us to the life of love, which is the end of the law. The law in

⁵⁰ See Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, pp. 61ff.

⁵¹ Sermon, "Justification by Faith," *Works* 5:57; also, "The Lord Our Righteousness," *Works*, 5:237–45.

⁵² Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, p. 75.

⁵³ Journal for June 15, 1741, *Works* 1:315.

⁵⁴ "Sermon on the Mount, V," *Works* 5:311–14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ "The Original [sic], Nature, Property, and Use of the Law," *Works* 5:438.

this sense becomes a gospel. But its fulfillment and the blessing that springs from obedience to it come only to those who participate in the life of Christ, who are partakers of the divine nature. The commandment and the promise are joined, and the royal law of love becomes the vision and delight only of those who are under grace.

Wesley rejected suggestions that this strong insistence on the importance of the law represented legalism, maintaining that the Bible nowhere condemned this understanding of what it meant to fulfill the law of God. He declared further that he rejected as well any purported liberty that was not “the liberty to love and to serve God,” and he was fearful of no enslavement except “bondage to sin.” Furthermore, Paul’s declaration that God sent “His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh ..., that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us” teaches us that the New Testament regards “the righteousness of the law” as “legal righteousness.”⁵⁷ But Christians are absolved from “the curse of the moral law” and from its condemning power.⁵⁸ They are not even required to keep the moral law as a condition of their acceptance. They are always accepted only “in Christ.”⁵⁹ But the Christian is under obligation to fulfill the law on the basis of faith. **The fulfilling of the law therefore, is related to the act of sanctification rather than to the act of justification.** The Christian’s life is designed under grace to be a progressive movement from the new birth to entire sanctification and perfection in love. The end result of Christian perfection is not an inner spirituality but works of love. Saving faith is fulfilled in the outgoing life of holiness and self-giving in the love of Christ; otherwise, it is dead. By *salvation*, Wesley meant

not barely, according to the vulgar notion, deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.⁶⁰

Faith is the means by which the law is established, and love is the fulfillment of the commandment. Love, not faith, becomes the final goal of the plan of salvation. Love is “the end of all the commandments of God,” Wesley said. It is “the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things.”⁶¹ Faith in Christ is not to supersede but to produce holiness. Faith is only the “handmaid of love.... Biblical faith, for Wesley, is so entangled with love and obedience ... that it does not exist without them.”⁶²

Since love cannot exist without the action of a moral being, the bent of Wesleyan theology is decidedly ethical; the essence of sanctification is love in action. True Christianity is to “have the mind of Christ,” which is demonstrated in love for God and neighbor.⁶³ The real freedom of the Christian is not the freedom from guilt or release from the pangs of hell but the freedom to love with the love of God Himself shed abroad in the heart by the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ In his

⁵⁷ Letter to Joseph Benson, November 30, 1770, *Works* 12:415. Wesley refers for proof to [Romans 8:3](#).

⁵⁸ “[Sermon on the Mount, V](#)” *Works* 5:311.

⁵⁹ Sermon, “[The Law Established Through Faith, I](#),” *Works* 5:450, 454; “Plain Account,” *Works* 11:414–16.

⁶⁰ “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” *Works* 8:47.

⁶¹ “[The Law Established Through Faith, II](#),” *Works* 5:462.

⁶² Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, p. 222.

⁶³ Sermon, “[The Almost Christian](#),” *Works* 5:21, 22.

⁶⁴ Sermon, “[The First Fruits of the Spirit](#),” *Works* 5:88–89.

Plain Account, Wesley summarized freedom as “nothing higher and nothing lower than this ... love governing the heart and life, through all our tempers, words, and actions.... Christian perfection is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is giving God all our hearts.”⁶⁵ “The saving Christ is not a proposition to be accepted, but a Person to be loved and obeyed,” Wynkoop notes at this point of Wesley’s teaching. The expression of faith is obedience and love.⁶⁶

The Nature and Work of the Holy Spirit

The third essential element that contributes in a significant way to the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification is the work of the sanctifying Spirit. If the essence of the Divine is holy love, then His supreme desire is to communicate that holiness to His creatures whom He desires to share in His own image. The Holy Spirit is called *holy* not only because He is God but because, as the Scriptures reveal, He communicates God’s own nature to His children. He imparts the life of love through the life of Jesus Christ who dwells in them by the Spirit’s own presence and power. Holiness, in relation to God, Wesley understood as a verb as well as an adjective.⁶⁷ The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Wesley regarded this promise of the Holy Spirit as the one who will finally restore the true and wholehearted love of God in the hearts of all who will believe on Jesus Christ as one of the grand salvation themes of both the Old and the New Covenants. The “litany of biblical promises of purity of heart and perfect love”⁶⁸ that he recited repeatedly throughout his life usually began with God’s promise to Moses in [Deuteronomy 30](#) that He would “circumcise the hearts of the people” so they might love Him with all their hearts and keep His statutes. It moved on to the bold promises of [Jeremiah 31](#) and [Ezekiel 36](#), where God declares His purpose to restore His Spirit to His people in a New Covenant that will enable them to walk in His ways and obey Him because He will give them a new heart—a will to love rather than to disobey.

Wesley heard this theme of the centrality of the sanctifying Spirit resonating in Jesus’ promise that those who seek after righteousness shall be filled. The theme was reiterated by Christ in the discourses with His disciples just before His death, as recorded by the apostle John. Charles Wesley’s hymns on sanctification reinforced the Wesleyan belief that through the power of the indwelling Spirit the new people of God would be enabled to live in righteousness and true holiness all their lives. Inherent in the biblical command to be perfect is the promise of its fulfillment; the law, as we have noted, is also a gospel. God makes gracious provision for all that He asks of men and women. Wesley pointed out that a greater measure of the Holy Spirit is granted under the Christian dispensation than under the Jewish one, for the Christian’s possibilities of salvation are much greater than anything that the previous dispensation could provide. Only after the glorification of Jesus Christ was the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit accorded to true believers in full measure.⁶⁹ Wesley found support for his doctrine of perfection in Christian

⁶⁵ “Plain Account,” *Works* 11:401.

⁶⁶ Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, p. 248.

⁶⁷ Timothy L. Smith, “John Wesley and the Wholeness of Scripture,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 39 (July 1985): 258.

⁶⁸ See *Ibid* p. 260; see also n. 15 above.

⁶⁹ “Plain Account,” *Works* 11:408; Sermon, “[Christian Perfection](#),” *Works* 6:10–11.

experience as well as in the Scriptures. Through the Holy Spirit believers could have the assurance of his relationship with God in love, even as they had received the Spirit's witness to their new birth in Christ.

Although Wesley always advocated the zealous preaching of the pursuit of Christian perfection in his societies and all the church, he also advocated a pastoral approach in its presentation and application. Sincere, seeking persons should be "drawn" by hope, joy, and desire and should not be "driven" to the experience by slavish fear. Neither should they be overcome by anxiety, even because of the sin that remains in them. Their hope in Christ is always greater than their despair and should drive them all the more to the promises and the love of Christ, which will bring them the cleansing and freedom they desire.⁷⁰ Nor should they deprecate the grace they have already received through the Holy Spirit, who came to dwell in them when they first became a child of God. Wesley admonished his followers to "describe the blessings of a justified state as strongly as possible" whenever they testified to entire sanctification.⁷¹

THE BIBLICAL MILIEU

The doctrine of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, which is at the heart of the Wesleyan "Theology of Love," has often been attacked as a purely perfectionist ideal—an attractive one, but unrealizable in this world of imperfection and sin. Wesleyans, however, have focused on that very ideal, which they regard as the reigning vision of the Scriptures themselves, set forth throughout as the essence of the gospel. To deny the expectation of its realization in some true measure when properly presented in its biblical balance and integrity is to fail to communicate the full riches of God's grace now available to His people for life and service. I cannot present here in full the arguments by which Wesley and his followers have sought to establish these biblical data. The brief review that follows, however, will amplify some of the biblical themes that were woven into the preceding theological summary and will introduce others that get to the heart of what Wesleyans see as the scriptural mandates and promises concerning the nature of Christian holiness.

It is critical to remember that Wesleyans do not come to their biblical understanding of sanctification by a system of logical deduction from certain proof texts or propositions. Their convictions on the possibilities of perfection in love in this life and a faith experience of heart cleansing subsequent to justification grow out of their attempt to see Scripture holistically. Wesleyans believe that lying behind the biblical and theological themes outlined above—the meaning of creation, the fall of men and women, the understanding of law and grace, and the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit—is the most prominent of all biblical themes, namely, the call to sanctification, or holiness, itself, with its ultimate end an ongoing relationship in love with God and all others. The life of holy love, therefore, should be the quest and expectation of everyone who is born of God. Christ's summation of the fulfillment of the law as the loving of God with all our heart, soul, and mind and our neighbor as our self (Matt. 22:37–39) is the basic biblical truth that sets the hermeneutical agenda for understanding God's purpose in all of His work of redemption in His Son Jesus Christ. Upon this command hangs all the law and the prophets. Expression of the holy love of God out of an undivided heart is the goal of the Christian life. All

⁷⁰ *Works* 8:297, 298.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

else is commentary.

The fundamental meaning of the word *sanctify* is “to set apart,” or “to consecrate”; it is derived from the Hebrew *qādaš*, meaning “to separate” or “to divide.” It means to remove persons or things from the realm of the profane and to set them apart to God. They become thereby “holy.” Thus the entire nation of Israel was sanctified to the Lord (see [Exod. 19:10](#)). Peter declares that the church constitutes “a chosen people, ... a holy nation, a people belonging to God” ([1 Peter 2:9](#)). In this sense all true Christians are sanctified and saints (see [Acts 20:32](#); [26:18](#); [Rom. 15:16](#); [1 Cor. 6:11](#); [Eph. 5:26](#); [Heb. 2:11](#); [10:10, 14](#); [13:12](#)).

But the New Testament term carries a strong emphasis on another element—the ethical. The sanctified are to demonstrate the holiness and love, or character, of their God to whom they are consecrated. The concept is not absent from the Old Testament, but it is certainly muted. In this context then, we see Peter applying to the church God’s admonition to Israel, “I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy” ([Lev. 11:44](#)). He urges Christians, “Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’ ” ([1 Peter 1:15–16](#)). Peter, of all persons, does not speak of some abstract concept of holiness. He admonishes believers, rather, that in contrast to their former wickedness, obedience and careful living should characterize their conduct. The context reveals that love is the test of holiness. In a similar manner Wesleyans would interpret Jesus’ command in the Sermon on the Mount to “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” ([Matt. 5:48](#)). God insists that Christian holiness is more than an objective legality; it is also a subjective reality. “By their fruits ye shall know them” ([Matt. 7:20](#) KJV). These words of Christ and the apostles cannot be taken as only ideals that become a new kind of legalism that entices us to do better but denies to us any real measure of experienced integrity and wholeness in our relationship with God in love.

God wants to have (indeed, needs to have) a holy people to have fellowship with—a theme that pervades Scripture. Consider, for example, Paul’s prayer for the Christians at Thessalonica, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless” ([1 Thess. 5:23](#)), and his declaration that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy ... to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” ([Eph. 5:25–27](#)). A more literal translation of the latter text shows its true implications more clearly: “Christ loved the assembly and gave up himself for it, in order that he might sanctify it, having already [or first] cleansed it by the washing of water by the Word.” To prepare the church as His bride is the fundamental idea or goal. “Without stain or wrinkle” is another way of saying “holy and blameless”; both express the reality of the sanctification of the Christian and of the church and clearly carry moral connotations, as Paul expresses. [Hebrews 13:12](#) expresses the same theme: “And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.” The central purpose of the cross was the sanctification of His people both corporately and individually.

The purpose of such sanctification is moral and ethical and not merely a Christian’s claim to some special standing before God, as indicated in a study of the great prayer of Christ for His disciples in [John 17](#). The Father has sanctified Him so that He might sanctify them and bring them into such a unity of love with the Father that their witness would convince the world. The world could know the reality of that unity only by concrete evidence of moral fitness issuing

out of the divine love they were experiencing. The prayer was for the disciples and all who would believe on Christ through their word and their works, the “greater works” that they would do in the power of the Spirit ([John 14:12](#) RSV). It is evident within this context that a purely positional standing in Christ or otherworldly experience of Him could never effect the witness in the world that Christ prayed for.

Mildred Wynkoop notes that [John 17](#) parallels the [Ephesians 4](#) passage remarkably:

- (1) Jesus had in mind a spiritually unified body of believers
- (2) that would bring glory to himself.
- (3) He died to sanctify them. All other elements of redemption were included but incidental to this.
- (4) Sanctification was in word and truth. This “word” obviously was not the Scripture primarily, but was found in living fellowship with the living Word, who is himself Truth.
- (5) The commission was accompanied by a moral fitness—for the unity of spirit indicated in both passages is moral clear through.⁷²

All these passages sound the same note of divine intent: salvation centers on the practical sanctification of believers individually and as the people of God.

Adherents of this understanding recognize that there is no explicit exhortation to seek sanctification as such in the New Testament. Rather, there are admonitions to “let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” ([Phil. 2:5](#) KJV). Maturity of Christian life is to be found among those believers who have “put off ... the old man” and have “put on the new man” ([Eph. 4:22, 24](#) KJV). Christians are urged to cleanse themselves “from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit” ([2 Cor. 7:1](#) KJV). “Every thought” is to be brought captive “to the obedience of Christ” ([2 Cor. 10:5](#) KJV). We are to “lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us” ([Heb. 12:1](#) KJV). Paul says that in the church at Corinth some believers were spiritual and some were carnal: “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ” ([1 Cor. 3:1](#) KJV). In the previous chapter he speaks also of some as perfect—thereby implying that some are not perfect. Here, then (and in many similar texts), Christians are addressed and admonished who apparently have not yet experienced the spirituality, perfection, or freedom that should and could be theirs through the grace that is now available to them as children of God.

The call to such a life of freedom from the old rebellious nature and the concomitant call to the liberty to serve God and others wholeheartedly are central to apostolic work and preaching. Paul says:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ([Eph. 4:11–13](#))

These latter phrases all describe a wonderful ideal, or goal, in the Christian life, and the leader’s primary task is to strive continually to bring all believers to that goal. Paul also says that the work of a minister of Christ is to “present everyone perfect in Christ” ([Col. 1:28](#)). He speaks of himself as praying night and day “most earnestly” that he might “supply what is lacking in your faith” ([1 Thess. 3:10](#)). John indicates his own expectations for believers when he declares that “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” ([1 John 1:7](#)). His statement in [1 John 3:8](#) that

⁷² Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, p. 320.

“the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” is basic to a biblical understanding of God’s plan and purpose in salvation, especially in view of the moral, ethical, and existential connotations of the verses that surround this text. These and many other texts illustrate and enlarge on the words of Jesus: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34–36). The call to holiness and love as the expectation of the Christian life is a clarion call not left open to question; the ministry of the gospel must lead believers into the fullness of the biblical promise.

The biblical teaching on the creation of men and women in the “image” and “likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26–27) is another theme that reinforces and authenticates Wesleyans’ concerns for this freedom from sin and the corresponding power to become wholehearted lovers of God. The concept of this image is not to be limited or even warped by identifying it with philosophical concepts of spirituality, rationality, and eternity; rather, it is to be expressed in terms of a loving interpersonal relationship that is marked by communion (1 John 1:3–4), responsibility (Gen. 2:15–17), and stewardship (Gen. 1:26–27). All these gifts were due to God’s love, and men and women can never be fully redeemed without enjoying the freedom to serve God and each other in relationships of divine love from their whole hearts. This freedom and love is the goal of salvation. As we have already indicated, the Fall, then, was finally centered not in concupiscence but in a loss of love, of the divine image. It was a rebellion of free, willing agents acting out of selfishness. The antidote, according to Paul, is that in Christ we receive a “new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:10 RSV). In “union with Christ,” a new humanity is created. Wesleyans maintain that to allow any lesser standard than this restoration of the image of God to the souls of men and women is to diminish the fullness of atonement in Christ.

This “in Christ” life of believers is central to the Pauline understanding of the nature of salvation. Jesus Christ Himself introduces the theme, particularly in the intimate discourses with His apostles before His death, as recorded by John. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Paul mentions that Christians are “in Christ,” “in Him,” or “in the Lord” in all but one of his letters—164 times in all. The total impact of such a biblical witness indicates to Wesleyans that a subjective, existential, and personal understanding of sin and salvation is necessary as well as one that is objective, or legal. The themes already represented are united when Paul exclaims, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17; see also Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 15:22).

This incorporation into Christ involves justification, adoption, regeneration, and sanctification. The believer’s righteousness, sanctification, and redemption are found in Him (1 Cor. 1:30). Wesleyans fully accept the persistent truth sounded by the Reformers that all of the merit that brings us salvation lies in the work of Christ alone and is appropriated by us through faith alone. It is all the gift of God (Eph. 2:8–9; cf. Acts 15:11; Rom. 3:24; 5:15; 11:6; Titus 2:11; 3:7). Salvation is by grace. However, although the Reformation tradition frequently emphasizes justification and adoption, it often neglects regeneration and sanctification; a wholly *imputed* righteousness (objective salvation) comes to the fore, but *imparted* righteousness (subjective salvation) is neglected. Wesleyans would maintain that the biblical concept of salvation encompasses both and that both are found in the Pauline concept of being “in Christ,” which constitutes the basic definition of a Christian in the New Testament.

Christ, however, is also in the Christian ([Gal. 2:20](#)). It is “the secret hidden for long ages and through many generations, but now disclosed to God’s people.... The secret is this: Christ in you” ([Col. 1:26–27](#) NEB; see also [John 14:20](#); [17:23](#); [Eph. 3:17](#); [Rev. 3:20](#)). Wholeness and restoration are found in union with Christ. It is not a union of identity but a relationship of freedom made possible by the qualities of Christ Jesus for “you have been brought to completion” ([Col. 2:10](#) NEB).

Paul expresses this freedom when he says, “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body.... For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.... But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” ([Rom. 6:12, 14, 22](#)). The kingdom of God is within Christians ([Luke 17:21](#)), and the life of the kingdom (the Sermon on the Mount) is theirs. The life of Jesus is being revealed in their mortal bodies ([2 Cor. 4:10](#)). The resources for victory lie not in the individual but in Christ. Christians do not serve out of strength but out of yieldedness. God, through the grace of Christ and the power of the indwelling Spirit, sheds the love of God abroad in their hearts.

The presence of Christ and the freedom from the rebellious nature of the old Adam in the Christian’s life in the Spirit, however, are not the final release from the presence and threat of sin. Its power and presence threaten and tempt us through our fallen bodies and minds as well as in all that surrounds us in a world that is yet to be redeemed. Paul plainly outlines this teaching in [Romans 8](#), a chapter that is especially critical to a Wesleyan understanding of the life of holiness. After declaring freedom from the dominion and inner presence of sin in the life of the Spirit-filled Christian (vv. 1–17), he nevertheless acknowledges that we still live in a fallen, sinful world, even though we are the people of God who are already citizens of the new world order (vv. 18–30). Our minds and our bodies are subject to limitation ([1 Cor. 13:12](#), [Matt. 26:41](#)). Completed redemption in these areas awaits the final consummation of all things. In the face of all the seeming contradictions that this truth presents, even to people who are already redeemed, the apostle says that we are kept in the love of God until the new order is established universally, ([Rom. 8:18–30](#)). “We eagerly await a Saviour ... who ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body ([Phil. 3:20–21](#)). God *will* save us from sin’s power and dominion so that we may serve Him with a whole heart. He *may* save us from sickness and other realities of the time in which we now serve Him, as we trust ourselves to the goodness and wisdom of His divine lordship over time and all that He has created. Paul gives similar reassuring words to Titus. Christians are to live lives of holiness while they “wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” ([Titus 2:13–14](#)).

In the rich milieu of these and numerous other biblical patterns concerning the basic intent of the truths of salvation, Wesleyans interpret and understand the content of the life that is in Christ Jesus. With Wesley, they maintain that any doctrine of sanctification that stops short of these promises and potentials falls short of the full gospel. There have always been tensions of understanding as to how sanctification shall be entered into and maintained or how it may be expressed in all the vicissitudes of life. Differences have risen at times among Wesleyans themselves and at times with those who have a different understanding of sanctification. The objections of those who hold other opinions will be addressed in a limited way in the responses pre-

sented in this book. A brief survey of some of the tensions that have arisen in Wesleyanism itself in relation to the “Grand Depositum,” as I have presented its classical-historical features here, is more appropriate to this essay.

SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

The foremost proving ground for the full-fledged application of the Wesleyan understanding of Christian perfection, or entire sanctification, to the life of the church was the Wesleyan movement in America. More than twenty years before Wesley’s death in 1791, lay men and women from his societies in England had already established similar centers of revival in New York City and Philadelphia. In his letters to these early lay evangelists, Wesley urged them to encourage new believers in Christ to press on to entire sanctification immediately upon their justification and new birth by the Spirit. Francis Asbury, who became the foremost leader of the Methodist Episcopal Church after its organization in 1784, also advocated the ardent preaching of the experience as one that every believer should expect immediately by faith. Wesley’s sermons and tracts, especially his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, became the basic commentaries that aided Methodist circuit riders as they ranged through every nook and cranny of the new American nation, calling men and women to Christ and holiness.⁷³

By the end of the famed post-Revolution revival known as the Second Great Awakening, a renewed interest in the experience of Christian perfection appeared within both the Methodist and Reformed wings of that movement. The doctrine was seen as the biblical answer to the instability and feeble witness that characterized so many of the revival’s converts. Within their revivalistic Calvinist tradition, Charles G. Finney and his Oberlin College colleague, Asa Mahan, began to preach a message of Christian perfection and of a higher Christian life. They ardently espoused the doctrine in response to the need they sensed in their converts for a much clearer and more committed relationship with God. Within the framework of their New School Calvinism, their doctrine of entire sanctification closely paralleled that which was being preached in Methodism.⁷⁴ These variations and differing doctrinal contexts contributed to the later growth of the Keswick holiness movement and the often vigorous polemics that flowed back and forth between the Wesleyan holiness tradition and the more Calvinistically oriented movement.

At the same time, the ministry of a Methodist lay couple, Phoebe and Walter Palmer, became the catalytic agent of a revival of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection within their own church, a doctrine that many felt was being neglected in the midst of the exponential growth that had catapulted the Methodists to the front of the denominational world by 1840. The New School higher-life movement within American Calvinism and the holiness movement within Methodism quickly found a common ground, aided by the puritanism, pietism, and millennial-

⁷³ John Leland Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon, 1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1985), and Charles E. Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867–1936* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1974), thoroughly review this aspect of American Methodism.

⁷⁴ For fuller development, see Melvin E. Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1980); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon, 1957); and idem, *Called unto Holiness: The Story of the Nazarenes, the Formative Years* (Kansas City: Nazarene, 1962).

ism that permeated the warp and woof of American revivalism of the nineteenth century. They interpenetrated one another as they both promoted their concern for Christian holiness within almost all of American Protestantism—Wesleyan, Reformed, and Anabaptist. In this dynamic milieu the classical Wesleyan teachings on Christian perfection outlined above were proclaimed, tested, expanded, and, some believe, even altered, at least in tone and emphasis. A brief summary of these elements and the conflict that sometimes surrounded them within Methodism and the American holiness movement is necessary to understand the Wesleyan teaching on holiness as it came to be espoused in the new holiness churches that sprang up at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in America and England.⁷⁵

The preaching of the experience of sanctification was strongly colored by the fact that in America the doctrine developed within a revivalistic context. Revival preaching emphasized immediate and definable turning points in personal experience as essential to the Christian's life. Holiness preaching clustered the elements of Wesley's teaching on sanctification around the second crisis of faith, subsequent to justification, commonly called *entire sanctification*. This focusing of Wesley's message through the prism of the revivalists' direct call for immediate decision created conflict and criticism as the holiness revival blossomed within and beyond Methodism. Opponents claimed that the Wesleyan understanding that salvation was a continuum in which certain radical points of decision and infusions of justifying and sanctifying grace were set within a lifetime of process was being compromised. Proponents of the renewed emphasis on the crisis moment of entire sanctification—the Spirit's cleansing from all sin and freeing the soul to love—feared that their opponents' overemphasis on process and downplaying of crisis experience tended to destroy the hope of being entirely sanctified in this life. Such critics, they claimed, were departing from Wesley at the very point that made his view of sanctification unique in the first place. In this struggle to represent Wesley's views, which persisted within Methodism for most of the nineteenth century, the revivalist Wesleyans generally prevailed. According to their teaching, the Word of God called all Christians to receive entire sanctification as a work of grace subsequent to regeneration. The tensions within the prevailing church structures of the late nineteenth century, however, mainly those of Methodism, were such that those structures often could not contain the vigor (and sometimes the excessive zeal) of the holiness revival. Separation and new churches were the common result.⁷⁶

After many adherents of the Methodist holiness movement either separated themselves or were separated by ecclesiastical pressure from the major branches of the church, North and South, they gathered themselves and the many converts that they had won outside of mainline Methodism into what we now know as the holiness churches. The new groups displayed disparate positions on a variety of issues, but their preaching of the centrality of entire sanctification as a second work of grace and the possibilities of living daily in obedience to God and love for others bound them together in a common identity. In the Church of the Nazarene, the Salva-

⁷⁵ See Melvin E. Dieter, "The Development of Nineteenth Century Holiness Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20 (Spring 1985): 61–77, for more extensive development and documentation of the issues under discussion here and following.

⁷⁶ The largest of these today, often representing subsequent mergers of smaller bodies, are the Salvation Army, the Church of the Nazarene, the Church of God (Anderson, Ind.), the Wesleyan Church, and the Free Methodist Church. The former three grew out of the revival; the latter two were smaller Methodist bodies that espoused the revival. The world-wide movement numbers about eight million members today.

tion Army, the Pilgrim Holiness Church, the Wesleyan Methodist Church (the latter two now merged into the Wesleyan Church), the Free Methodist church, the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), and many related smaller religious bodies, the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification found its major expression within the Methodist tradition after the turn of the nineteenth century.⁷⁷

In the course of the doctrine's development in nineteenth-century Methodism and its subsequent creedalization as the formative doctrine of the holiness churches, certain emphases at times threatened the balance of the classical Wesleyan teaching. Phoebe Palmer's perception of the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification became one of the first of these points of tension in its development in America. Her teachings on Christian holiness became a fixed element in the theology of the Methodist holiness movement because of her early prominence in the revival movement. Her simple, biblical exhortations to holiness were set in what is commonly known as her "altar terminology," and "shorter way." She believed strongly in the absolute authority of the Bible and, as is common in the revivalist tradition, applied it directly to preaching and life. Christ, she said, is the Christian's altar. [Exodus 29:37](#) told her that whatever touched the altar would be holy; therefore, every Christian believer who was willing in faith to present himself or herself, without any reservation whatsoever, as a "living sacrifice" ([Rom. 12:1](#)) upon the altar provided by the finished work of Christ would be entirely sanctified and cleansed from all sin.

Mrs. Palmer taught that the clear promises of Scripture are the voice of God because the Spirit is speaking them to us. Action upon a divine promise in faith constitutes the assurance that the promise is fulfilled in us. In this view, she seemed to be blending the act of faith and the assurance of faith into one. Her more theologically disciplined friends warned her of this tendency. She did believe, however, that the testimony of the inner witness of the Spirit, which Wesley strongly emphasized, would accompany the witness of God's faithfulness quickly, if not immediately, to those who cast themselves completely upon Christ for full salvation. The Bible also taught her that without holiness no one will see God and that our sanctification is His will for us; furthermore, "now" is always God's time for acceptance of His gracious offer of salvation. Therefore, the failure to act on these words of promise issues in unbelief, and unbelief issues in sin and disobedience. She also insisted that when persons experienced the blessing, it was their duty to confess it and zealously to seek to bring others into the same experience.⁷⁸

Time will not allow us to consider all of the complex questions that are raised here, but we can sense that something has changed theologically. Although each of Mrs. Palmer's assumptions and statements can be documented with almost identical statements in Wesley himself, at the very least she has shifted the focus for understanding the tension between the Wesleyan polarities of growth and crisis as these relate to coming to perfection in love. It is obvious in her message that the "moment" of revivalist appeal, the immediacy of response anticipated (lest the hearer demonstrate unbelief and fall into condemnation by delay), and the entire cleansing in the moment of total consecration all tended to shift the point away from the balance that

⁷⁷ See Frank Baker, "Unfolding John Wesley: A Survey of Twenty Years' Studies in Wesley's Thought," *Quarterly Review: A Scholarly Journal for Reflection on Ministry* 34 (Fall 1980): 44–58.

⁷⁸ Phoebe Palmer, *The Way of Holiness* (New York: Palmer & Hughes, 1867), pp. 52ff.; idem, "The Act of Faith by Which the Blessing Is Obtained," in *Sanctification Practical: A Book for the Times*, ed. J. Boynton (New York: Foster & Palmer, 1867), pp. 115–30.

Wesley had maintained. For Mrs. Palmer, the experience of Christian perfection as the beginning of the life of growth in holiness rather than the culmination of its mature graces became the focal point of the Christian life. Her emphasis tended to revise the continuum of salvation within which Wesley had envisioned the experience.

“Altar terminology” when used as a formula for experiencing entire sanctification, as it sometimes was, was often abused under the assumption that it offered a kind of automatic operation of Scripture. When properly presented in the broader Wesleyan understanding, however, as she herself and many of her followers did, it became an effective means by which many people realized the life of love. The terminology is used prominently (indeed, almost universally) in holiness and higher-life teaching and preaching today.

The emphasis that teaching such as the above placed upon the moment of entire consecration and upon the crisis of complete moral adjustment of relationship tended to focus sanctification wholly on that single point of wholehearted commitment and to divorce it from the process of the gradual sanctification of the heart that began in regeneration and from the continuing growth in grace that follows the instant of death to self and perfection in love. Thus, the moment of the death to self and the birth to love readily became an end in itself—a goal rather than an essential element in the establishment of a dynamic new relationship of freedom and love in the hearts of believers as the Holy Spirit led them on from grace to grace in the will of God.⁷⁹

Although Wesleyan holiness theology and its advocates never totally neglected the biblical and Wesleyan element of growth in grace before and after the event of entire sanctification, nevertheless the focus of many who testified to having received this second blessing centered more on the significance of the experience of the critical moment than on the nature of the ongoing relationship. Entire sanctification for Wesley was the moment of the believer’s perfection in love, but only in a qualitative sense. Quantitatively, the lure of divine love was so immeasurable that the lifestyle of the sanctified believer was always that of a pilgrim and not that of a settler. There was no stopping place in the constant quest for personal spiritual growth and witness in love—in relationship with God and others.

Another emphasis widely disseminated, both in preaching and in some theological writings, implied that sin was some material-like substance that might be rooted out of the heart. Wesley himself contributed to this tendency by using terms such as “the circumcision of the heart” for the experience and by referring to the desires and tempers of the old nature of sin as a “root of bitterness” in the soul. On the whole, however, his concept of entire sanctification as a systemic cleansing of the person, of the experience as producing health and wholeness, tempered the concept of sanctification as an eradication of sin as though it were some unified entity that might be excised.⁸⁰

The American revival context, especially as the movement grew, seemed to expedite the ease with which eradication could move from a simple analogy that was useful to describe the extent of the promised release from sin to become, rather, a concept in holiness teaching that created the impression for many hearers that sin was a substance that could be excised from the heart in the grace of the sanctifying moment. The use of eradication terminology became pervasive. It tended to narrow the focus of the popular theology of the movement and of the

⁷⁹ See Dieter, “Development of Holiness Theology,” pp. 64–65.

⁸⁰ Sermon, “[The Repentance of Believers](#),” *Works* 6:165.

holiness churches, shaped as they were by the preaching of their evangelists, who presented sanctification teaching almost exclusively within special revivals or camp meetings held for the promotion of the doctrine. In concert with strong emphasis upon the critical nature of the moment of entire sanctification, their eradication theory further encouraged the development of an absolutist-static concept of grace within the Methodist tradition. The emphasis on eradication of the sinful nature among Wesleyan holiness advocates became more pronounced as the movement struggled with the Keswick higher-life movement over the question of whether the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the sanctified life freed one only from the dominion of sin or also from the presence of sin in the heart.⁸¹

Over the course of the last few decades, extensive biblical, theological, and historical reflection upon the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian holiness, much of it by the movement's own scholars, has turned its theology and preaching of sanctification more toward the post-justification process-crisis-process continuum that Wesley had described. Wesleyan holiness preaching has reemphasized also the cleansing and healing motifs of the redemption from all willful sin and thereby moderated the eradicationist terminology so that it is understood descriptively rather than prescriptively. Contemporary understanding also has commonly begun to express the believer's sanctification in Christ in terms of a perfect but dynamic relationship rather than a fixed state of experience. The experience is seen more holistically; the content and meaning of the second crisis has been enlarged, while its significance as an essential element in entering into perfection in love remains.⁸²

The final emphasis in Wesleyan holiness preaching throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that has become a focal point of contemporary doctrinal debate is the use of Pentecostal, or "baptism with the Spirit," language to describe the dynamic of entire sanctification. The work of the Spirit is essential to any evangelical explication of the doctrine of sanctification. It is especially central in a Wesleyan understanding because of its historical emphasis upon Christian experience.

Although Wesley always acknowledged the Holy Spirit to be the active agent in the sanctification of believers, the texts that formed the biblical bases for the truth were largely drawn from Old Testament promise and prophesy as they were fulfilled in the New Testament words, work, and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Gospels and the Epistles furnished the major New Testament context of his teaching on Christian holiness.

The first and foremost of his classical defenders, his friend and confidant John Fletcher, however, interpreted and defended Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection in a different manner. Drawing mainly on the Lukan and Johannine texts, he set his arguments for the Wesleyan teaching within the context of a Trinitarian-dispensationalist view of salvation history. He regarded the new age of the Spirit, which was ushered in on the day of Pentecost (following upon the ages of the Father and the Son), as the context that now prevails in God's gracious relationships with His people. The promise of the prophet Joel (that this age was coming) was fulfilled and continued to be fulfilled at and beyond the Pentecost experience, which had given

⁸¹ See for example, E. G. Marsh, *The Old Man* (Cincinnati: Revivalist, 1930), chap. 16. The emphasis is much more moderate in Donald S. Metz, *Studies in Biblical Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1971), 142–43, 173.

⁸² Wynkoop's *Theology of Love* represents the most thorough development of this trend. J. Kenneth Grider represents a more traditional view in his *Entire Sanctification: The Distinctive Doctrine of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1980).

birth to the new people of God. Pentecost represented the promise to every believer of the Holy Spirit's full blessing. Since Pentecost, he taught, every believer has received the Holy Spirit in measure when born of God, but the full potential of salvation from sin inherent in the promise of the Spirit is not realized until, in a subsequent moment of complete faith and obedience to the will of God, one becomes so filled with the Spirit that holiness and love become the habitual pattern of one's life. There could come the moment of entire sanctification in which God, because of the sanctification won for us by Christ on the cross, cleanses those who believe from every inclination contrary to the love of God and fills their hearts with the pure love of God and neighbor by the "baptism of the Holy Ghost" as promised by John the Baptist.⁸³

Wesley and his brother Charles were fully aware of the new tack that Fletcher was following in his explication of the Methodist doctrine of Christian perfection. John Wesley did caution him on one occasion to guard against any use of the phrase "receiving the Spirit" in describing the second work of grace. He feared that if such language were employed it would imply that the Holy Spirit did not already live in those believers who had experienced the new birth but who had not yet been perfected in love. Consequently, he would appear to be denying the initiatory work of the Spirit in baptism into Christ. It appears that otherwise the Wesleys, who edited and published Fletcher's work after his untimely death, gave assent to applying his Pentecostal and dispensational hermeneutic to their teaching on Christian perfection. Explicitly in sermon and letter and implicitly in his editing of some of Fletcher writings on these themes, John Wesley accepted, or at least showed no special concern for, the implications of Fletcher's methodology as he developed the first formal theology of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection.⁸⁴

However, Fletcher's explicit use of Pentecostal language in his definition of the doctrine is only implicit in Wesley; it was not his primary emphasis, as we have noted above. Fletcher's works were widely read in Methodism as it established itself as the dominant movement in America in the nineteenth century. The Methodist holiness movement, reinforced by the perfectionist movement led by Charles G. Finney and Asa Mahan within New School Calvinism, adopted the same eschatological themes. Both revival movements were encouraged by the millennialism that has pervaded and shaped American history so significantly. By the end of the nineteenth century, the crisis of entire sanctification, or perfection in love, was commonly identified as "the baptism with the Holy Ghost." It was an expanding eschatological note in the whole of American revivalism.⁸⁵

Subsequent use of "Spirit baptism" language within Pentecostal and charismatic movements and the publication of significant new studies of the meaning of the Pentecost event and the theology of the Holy Spirit have renewed the Wesley-Fletcher issues at this point again.⁸⁶ Cur-

⁸³ John Fletcher, "The Last Check to Antinomianism," in *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher, Late Vicar of Madeley*, 4 vols. (New York: Mason & Lane, 1836), 2:526.

⁸⁴ See extended discussion of Fletcher's use of a Pentecostal hermeneutic in understanding entire sanctification, in Lawrence W. Wood, *Pentecostal Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), pp. 177–239; also see Dieter, "Development of Holiness Theology," pp. 66–74, and Timothy L. Smith, "How John Fletcher Became the Theologian of Wesleyan Perfectionism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 15:1 (Spring 1980): 66–87.

⁸⁵ Donald W. Dayton, "Asa Mahan and the Development of American Holiness Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 9, (1974): 60–69; Idem, "The Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit: Its emergence and significance," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 13 (Spring 1978): 114–26.

⁸⁶ See especially Fredrick Dale Brunner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit: The Pentecostal Experience and the*

rent response within the Wesleyan movement to questions being raised about the movement's use of "the baptism of the Spirit" as the most apt understanding of the act of entire sanctification has been varied. On the one hand, some maintain that the predominant pattern and interpretive center of the sanctification experience is the Pentecost event. They continue to reject the exegesis of the passages in the Acts of the Apostles by James Dunn and others with similar exegetical understandings; they retain their strong support for the exegetical patterns established by late nineteenth-century holiness advocates.

Others acknowledge, with Wesley, that the texts in Acts certainly describe the initiatory reception of the Spirit in the new birth and baptism. They take seriously the validity of the recent exegetical questions being raised. They maintain, however, that interpretations of the Pentecostal texts by persons such as Dunn unduly restrict the full intent of these texts. They contend that the scope of the meaning inherent in "Spirit baptism" passages reaches much further than has been suggested by these exegetes. Therefore such language as used within the holiness tradition is still exegetically valid. The more restricted exegesis of the Pentecost texts, they believe, limits the expectations of the Old Testament promises that when the Spirit comes in His fullness, He will enable all the people of God to keep His commandments and walk before Him in a constancy of moral integrity. The use of these texts and terminology for the experience of the fullness of the Spirit, they maintain, is exegetically defensible and true to the plan of salvation as it is revealed in Old Testament type and in New Testament fulfillment.

Still others in the movement have tended to move away from the use of the Pentecostal hermeneutic and "Spirit baptism" motifs and to return to Wesley's basic terms of "death to sin," "circumcision of the heart," and the restoration of "the mind that was in Christ Jesus." The latter view moves more toward an interpretation of the experience that clusters around classical Christology and the sacrifice for sin on the cross; the former has an interpretation that clusters around pneumatology and the more eschatological-dispensationalist themes of the Spirit-empowered people who live in the Pentecostal age. Given the historical roots of the differences at this point of interpretation, it is likely that both understandings of the experience of entire sanctification will continue to exist in Wesleyanism.⁸⁷

In spite of the variety of understandings and presentations of the doctrine of Christian holiness in the broad Wesleyan movement within contemporary Methodist, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches, all of them basically still find their understanding of "full salvation" in the succinct questions and responses John Wesley outlined at one point in his *Plain Account*:

Q. What is Christian Perfection?

A. The loving God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength....

Q. Can any mistake flow from pure love?

A. I answer, (1) Many mistakes may consist with pure love. (2) Some may accidentally flow from it; I mean love itself may incline us to mistake....

Q. How shall we avoid setting perfection too high or too low?

New Testament Witness (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), and James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970).

⁸⁷The *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 14 (Spring and Fall 1979) carries the heart of the Fletcher-Wesley debate in the contemporary movement.

- A. By keeping to the Bible, and setting it just as high as the Scripture does. It is nothing higher and nothing lower than this ... love governing the heart and life, running through all our tempers, words, and actions.... [Christian] perfection ... is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God.⁸⁸

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Responses

Response to Dieter

Anthony A. Hoekema

With many of Melvin Dieter's points I agree wholeheartedly. I concur with his affirmation of the "total corruption" and "utter depravity" of fallen humanity. I agree that Christ works both for us and in us and that being in Christ brings both justification and sanctification. I am grateful for his insistence on continued growth in the Christian life. I appreciate especially the emphasis on holy living as the goal of salvation.

In connection with this last point, however, I should like to make a correction. On page 35 Dieter says, "Although the Reformation tradition frequently emphasizes justification and adoption, it often neglects regeneration and sanctification." The "Reformation tradition" obviously includes John Calvin. But Calvin stressed the need for regeneration and sanctification as much

⁸⁸ "Plain Account," *Works* 11:394, 397, 444.

as the need for justification. As a matter of fact, in his *Institutes* he deals at length with regeneration and sanctification (including the Christian life, self-denial, and cross-bearing; see [book 3, chaps. 3–10](#)) before he takes up justification (chaps. 11–16). Dieter also says that Wesley “relates the fulfillment of the law’s moral obligations to the process and end of sanctification rather than to the more objective views of Reformation orthodoxy, which find the fulfillment and satisfaction of the moral law in the act of the believer’s justification” (p. 25). Here again I must demur. To be sure, Calvin taught that Christ kept the law for us so that we do not need to keep it to earn our salvation. But Calvin also insisted that believers should keep God’s law as proof of their gratitude for the salvation they have received. In fact, he called this function of the law its “principal use.”¹ Calvin also agrees with Wesley that holy living is the goal of salvation: “Since it is especially characteristic of his [God’s] glory that he have no fellowship with wickedness and uncleanness, Scripture accordingly teaches that this [holiness] is the goal of our calling to which we must ever look if we would answer God when he calls.”²

My major difficulty concerns the doctrine of “entire sanctification.” Dieter presents this doctrine in three stages. First, the process of sanctification begins in regeneration (pp. 16–17, 19). Then, usually some time after regeneration, entire sanctification may occur “by the same faith ... which initially had brought justification” (p. 17). Third, however, the believer must continue to grow in grace (p. 41). There must, in other words, be spiritual growth both before and after entire sanctification, the usual pattern being “process-crisis-process” (p. 42).

I conclude that, for Dieter, “entire sanctification” means the ability to live without sin during this present life. My evidence for this conclusion is the way he describes this stage in the Christian life: (1) in entire sanctification the “bent to sinning” is taken away (p. 21) and the “war within oneself” against “an innate inward rebellion” is over (p. 17); (2) entire sanctification is described as “an entire renewal in the image of God” (p. 17), “Christian perfection” (p. 36), “perfection in love” (p. 30), “perfect consecration to God” (p. 18), “perfect love to God and others” (p. 18; note that Webster’s *New Collegiate Dictionary* defines *perfect* as “being entirely without fault or defect: flawless”), and “salvation from all sin” (p. 18). It should be noted that this salvation is qualified as meaning “salvation from all willful sin” (p. 15) and deliverance from “the necessity of voluntary transgressions” (p. 14).

To be sure, certain limitations to this “perfection” are suggested. Wesley, the author says on pages 13–14, “never allowed that entirely sanctified Christians could become sinless in the sense that they could not fall again into sin through disobedience.” The word *again*, however, clearly implies that, during the time previous to such lapses, they were not falling into sin. “Total freedom from the effects as well as the presence of all sin had [according to Wesley] to await the glory to come” (p. 14). But “effects of sin” seems to point only to the fact that these believers still live in a “deranged worldly order” (p. 14; cf. pp. 35–36), and the “presence of sin” that still remains is explained as something other than the “inner presence of sin in the life of the Spirit-filled Christian” (p. 35).

What Scripture evidence does Dieter offer to prove the possibility of living without willful sin in this life? [Matthew 5:48](#) is quoted (p. 31)—“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Christ holds the ideal of perfection before us. But Jesus’ words do not imply that we

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.7.12.

² *Ibid.*, 3.6.2.

can attain this ideal in this life; the petition He taught us to pray daily, “Forgive us our debts” (6:12), rules out that possibility. The same comment can be made about Paul’s aim to “present everyone perfect in Christ” (Col. 1:28, p. 33); the perfection here spoken of will not be realized until the time of Christ’s return (cf. v. 22). The Bible nowhere teaches that the presentation of the church as “without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish” (Eph. 5:27, p. 31) or the attainment by believers “to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (4:13, p. 33) will occur before Christ’s second coming. Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:23, p. 31) specifically mentions “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” as the point at which they will be totally blameless. The new nature, which, according to Colossians 3:10 (p. 34), we are said to have put on, is “being renewed ... in the image of its Creator.” If it is being renewed, it is not yet perfect.

I do not believe that the Bible allows for the possibility of living without sin, even without “willful sin,” in this life, and therefore I do not accept Wesleyan teaching about entire sanctification (the doctrine set forth in this chapter). Since I have given the biblical evidence against this doctrine elsewhere in this volume, I will not repeat it here. On the question of the possibility of living sinlessly before our final glorification, the reader is referred to my chapter on the Reformed view of sanctification (pp. 75, 81, 83–85, 89–90). On the question of deliverance “from all willful sin” in this present life, the reader is referred to my response to McQuilkin (p. 188).

While I appreciate Dieter’s insistence on continual spiritual growth, I must reject the possibility of sinless living on this side of glory. We are in Christ, to be sure, and we need to be more and more filled with the Spirit. But we are not yet perfect, either in love or in consecration. We are *genuinely new* but not yet *totally new*.

Response to Dieter

Stanley M. Horton

After a meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, I was thanking Gordon H. Clark for some of the things I appreciated in his writings. When he found out I was Pentecostal, he immediately said, “That’s experience, and experience can only lead you astray. All I want is the Word!” Probably, he would have given a similar response to John Wesley, due to Wesley’s conviction (as Melvin Dieter states it) “that true biblical Christianity finds its highest expression and ultimate test of authenticity in the practical and ethical experience of the individual Christian and the church and only secondarily in doctrinal and propositional definition” (pp. 11–12). Pentecostals, however, make the Word primary. The first point in the Assemblies of God’s “Statement of Fundamental Truths” is “The Scriptures Inspired,” which states that they are “the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct.” Experience must be tested by the Word. But if we truly believe the Word, experience will follow. If it does not, then there is no reality to the faith that is professed.

The initial phase of the Pentecostal revival in the early 1900s was very much influenced by the Wesleyan holiness doctrine of a “second blessing” and came out of the same American revivalist context. A few went to the extreme of saying that this “second definite work” took out sin, “root and branch,” to the point that individuals were not able to sin any more. Durham’s “finished work of Calvary” teaching turned the Assemblies of God away from that type of teaching

altogether. Most also recognized that, in their experience, neither the ability nor the tendency to sin was removed, even though they had previously claimed the experience.

Pentecostals remain highly influenced by Wesleyan theology, especially by Wesley's "passion for seeing God's truth expressed in the experience and witness of faithful Christians," and we too are fortified in this view by our conviction "that every person could respond positively or negatively to God's offer of salvation" (p. 12). We agree that, as creatures of free will, we are "able to respond obediently or disobediently to the grace of God." We would also agree that we can "be delivered from the necessity of voluntary transgressions by living in moment-by-moment obedience to God's will" (p. 14). We appreciate Wesley's emphasis on growth in grace but, from Scripture and experience, deny that there is an experience of "entire sanctification" that is a "total death to sin and an entire renewal in the image of God" (p. 17). We take it that the believer must continue to press on in faith and obedience and that we must still expect to be changed from "one degree of glory" to another while we are in this life. Rather than one experience of dedication or consecration, repeated—even daily—consecrations are necessary.

With respect to Wesley's "continuum of law and love," Pentecostals would also disagree with Reformation orthodoxy, which finds the fulfillment and satisfaction of the moral law in the act of the believer's justification. Rather than following the letter of the law, Pentecostals suggest that the Holy Spirit helps us to do the good things God really wanted when He gave the law.

Perhaps the key difference between Wesleyans and Pentecostals is the Wesleyan tendency (which was proposed by Fletcher, not Wesley) to identify entire sanctification with the baptism with the Holy Ghost. Pentecostals teach that the baptism in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was an empowering experience, not an act of entire sanctification. It is interesting to note here that some Wesleyans have been influenced by James D. G. Dunn's exegesis of the Acts passages. I pointed out the weakness of some of Dunn's exegesis in my book *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel, 1976). Recently, Howard Ervin of Oral Roberts University has given a more thorough and detailed critique of Dunn in his book *Conversion-Initiation and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984). We hold that the Bible teaches that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a distinct experience given to those in the Book of Acts who were already believers and is still available to all believers today. We recognize the Holy Spirit as our Helper, through Whom we can live a life of victory. We too desire to be channels of Christ's love and seek to dedicate everything, "soul, body, and substance to God," as Wesley taught. It should be noted also that the Assemblies of God leaders and scholars are now able to talk more freely and cordially with those of Pentecostal holiness persuasion.

Response to Dieter

J. Robertson McQuilkin

Christians of all persuasions can be grateful to Melvin Dieter for summarizing the doctrine of sanctification as originally promoted by John Wesley, giving us a biblical exposition of selected themes that are central to that theology and tracing the subsequent historical development of holiness teaching, a development that has strongly conditioned present perceptions of Wesleyan teaching both externally and internally. Many will applaud the strong emphasis on

practical, experiential sanctification, an emphasis often missing in theological expositions and even more often in Christian experience. We may also applaud the clear emphasis on a loving relationship with God as the ultimate purpose of law and grace, faith and holiness, and all else pertaining to our salvation.

Yet I am perplexed by certain ambiguities that seem to stem from a lack of careful biblical analysis of certain basic concepts: sin, holiness, perfection, and sanctification. Is *sin* to be defined as deliberate transgression of the known will of God, or is it any falling short of the glorious character of God in thought, word, or deed? The definition is perhaps the crucial issue in the debate on sanctification, but neither Wesley nor Dieter provides a biblical analysis of the term. Wesley seems to define sin as “voluntary transgressions” (p. 14). Any other failure to measure up to Godlikeness in moral character is a human error, “mistake,” or “accident” (pp. 14, 23, 45). If the ability to refrain from sinning means merely the ability to refrain from deliberate rejection of God’s known will, surely it is part of saving faith and available to any true child of God. But if sin includes any disposition or attitude that falls short of loving as Christ loves, of being as pure, contented, courageous, or self-controlled as He, who can claim to be sinless? So the definition of sin is crucial. It not only deserves recognition as a crucial issue, which I fail to find in the treatise, but it also deserves a thorough textual and theological analysis.

In the second place, what are we to understand by *holiness*? Does the Bible mention a holiness that is imputed, a standing based not on the believer’s condition but on Christ’s covenant with the Father? Dieter makes a strong case for a biblical use of *holy* as referring also to a condition that believers experience. But if Scripture uses the term in at least these two distinct ways, is it not imperative in key passages to demonstrate which meaning the biblical author intended? To use a passage intended to apply to all Israelites (or all Christians or the actual local assembly) as legally set apart for God’s own possession, whether or not they behave that way, to prove a doctrine of experienced Godlikeness is to violate basic biblical hermeneutics.

The third crucial term demanding rigorous biblical definition is the elusive word *perfect*. Since the term is used in Scripture with a wide range of meaning, it is especially important when offering the possibility—indeed, the imperative—of “Christian perfection” to be sure of exactly what is offered and of whether such an offer is biblical. If Wesleyans mean by “Christian perfection” that it is possible for a believer, by the power of the Holy Spirit (or of the indwelling Christ), to obey God consistently in the conscious choices of life, I have no controversy, other than the practical problem that most people mean by *perfection* something different and thus may be confused or actually misled. The common understanding, both inside and outside perfectionist circles, is that *perfect* has an absolute sense of unfailing Godlikeness. I believe that neither Wesley nor Dieter teaches this view, but without precise definitions of *sin* and *perfect*, many will continue to aim for the absolute and may end up disappointed or self-deceived.

The final key term is a problem, not through any failure on the part of the author, but because of a basic ambiguity within Wesleyan and the broader holiness movement. Dieter analyzes the issue carefully and very helpfully. What does *entire sanctification* as an experience mean? The author clearly states that this experience, which enables a believer to love God with all one’s being and to live a life of obedience, “need not be chronologically distinct from justification and the new birth” (p. 18). Even Wesley himself demonstrated some ambiguity (see pp. 18–19, 30, 43–44), which may be explained by the distinction between ideal (theoretical, logical, theological) sanctification, which occurs at regeneration, and the actual experiences of all

Christians who do not continue on in “perfect love” and hence need a subsequent crisis experience. Dieter shows that developments in nineteenth-century American holiness teaching not only firmly set this second experience as theologically necessary but also increasingly identified it with the “baptism of the Spirit.” My problem with believing in a theologically necessary second crisis experience is best expressed by Dieter himself: “Adherents of this understanding recognize that there is no explicit exhortation to seek sanctification [in the technical Wesleyan use of the word] as such in the New Testament” (p. 32).

It might be added that Scripture contains no exhortation to have nor teaching about a crisis experience subsequent to regeneration and necessary for sanctification. The consistent teaching of the New Testament on the problem of substandard Christian living is to point the believer back to the original event. Acts does report experiences with the Holy Spirit subsequent to regeneration, but nowhere are those events explained theologically or tied to the idea of experiential sanctification. Biblically uninterpreted history is not legitimate raw material from which to construct any doctrine, let alone so crucial a doctrine. It is more helpful to follow John Wesley in his original understanding that a second crisis encounter with God is not necessary theologically and ideally but is commonly needed by the believer. Reaffirmation of the original contract relationship may indeed be a crisis experience, and a necessary one for the drifting or rebellious believer.

Thus, if the ambiguous terms are defined in a particular way, classical Wesleyan teaching and the Keswick approach are quite compatible. If *sin* is any falling short of God’s glorious character, no one is perfect. Yet, every Spirit-empowered believer may consistently refrain from deliberately violating God’s known will. Believers receive this enabling at the time of conversion, when they are judicially sanctified, or set apart by the Spirit as God’s possession. Should they fail to maintain this loving, obedient relationship, they no longer experience sanctification in the sense of spiritual growth, and they need a fresh encounter with God, a renewal that could be described as a second crisis experience.

Response to Dieter

John F. Walvoord

Melvin Dieter is to be highly commended for a comprehensive, lucid, and accurate presentation of Wesleyan theology. The views expressed will be echoed by many others who seek, as John Wesley did, to have their lives in conformity to the holiness of God. John Wesley was a man of God who blazed a trail that not only influenced the lives of thousands in his generation but also affected the course of the church ever since. Today, as in the time of Wesley, there is so much need for cutting through the ritual, form, and theological debate that characterizes the church and for gaining a fresh glimpse of the holiness of God and the divine purpose to transform sinners into saints. Earnest Christians can certainly find much in the teachings and example of Wesley that accurately presents the Bible teaching on the subject of holiness.

Who can question Wesley’s emphasis on the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and practice, the necessity of translating doctrine into life, the desire of God to bring holiness into the life of every Christian, and the marvelous grace of God as the cure for total depravity? Many admirers

of John Wesley will echo these great truths. If there are problems in Wesleyan doctrine, often they spring from those who did not follow accurately the theological guidelines of the originator. The fact that some in the Wesleyan tradition have gone to extremes perhaps justifies suggestions for sharpening some of Wesley's definitions, which might have prevented these misapprehensions.

In Wesley's point of view, justification and sanctification occurred at the same time. But the distinction needs to be made that justification is a legal act of God that in itself is not experiential and that the original act of sanctification is a matter of position in Christ rather than a matter of experience. Both justification and positional sanctification occur when a person becomes a believer in Christ and are the grounds for progressive sanctification and spiritual experience. What needs to be emphasized is the teaching of Wesley that ultimate perfection is not to be achieved until the believer stands in the presence of God in heaven.

Wesley is right that, subsequent to the initial act of being born again and receiving salvation in Christ, there is normally a later act of the will in which individuals surrender their life to the will of God. In a sense, this step fulfills [Romans 12:1–2](#), in which believers offer themselves as living sacrifices totally committed to God. While Wesley made clear that this initial act does not justify expectation of complete holiness in the days that follow, some of his admirers have implied that it puts the believer on a plateau of victorious life, a plateau that proves to be not permanent but transitory. Though Wesley did not believe that the sin nature could be eradicated in this life, some of his followers taught that the experience of personal commitment resulted in such a change in human nature.

Confusion also exists among the doctrines of the baptism of the Spirit, regeneration, and the filling of the Spirit. Regeneration and the baptism of the Spirit actually occur when a person believes on Christ and is born again and placed (baptized) into Christ ([1 Cor. 12:13](#)). The filling of the Spirit, however, is a repeated experience. Although it occurred at the same time as the baptism of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, subsequently it was distinguished from it and reoccurred. Baptism of the Spirit happens once for all at salvation; the filling of the Spirit may occur many times and is an important aspect of spiritual experience. This clarification would do much to prevent Pentecostal misuse of Wesleyan truth. While believers can be momentarily completely cleansed from sins committed, they cannot be cleansed from the sin nature, as Wesley himself would make clear. Wesley believed that the holy life is characterized by a moment-by-moment dependence upon God and upon the Holy Spirit and by the experience of the fruit of the Spirit ([Gal. 5:22–23](#)). Had the teachings of John Wesley been followed closely with caution, most of the proper grounds for criticism of Wesleyan theology would have been precluded.