

WHAT IS ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION?

"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out." — **John Wesley**

1. **The "Grand Depositum" of Methodism.** John Wesley believed that God raised up the people called "Methodist" to proclaim to the world this doctrine of entire sanctification.¹ Referring to entire sanctification, Wesley wrote in a letter "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up."
2. **Defining Entire Sanctification.** Entire sanctification is the fullness of the Spirit, victory over sin, and a life of holy love. By fullness of the Spirit, we mean the state in which the Holy Spirit gets all of us; it means we have the Spirit in every part of us. We have given ourselves over entirely for the Holy Spirit to move freely in us and through us. Entire sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in perfecting our love of God and neighbor by making that holy love our highest desire.
 - a. **Wesley's Definition.** John Wesley defined entire sanctification as: A full salvation from all our sins, from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief, or, as the Apostle expresses it, "Go on to perfection" [Heb. 6:1 KJV]. But what is perfection? The word has various senses: here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love "rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in everything giving thanks" [1 Thess. 5:16–18 KJV].²
 - b. **The Positive and Negative of Entire Sanctification.** According to Wesley, we can think of entire sanctification both negatively and positively. Negatively, entire sanctification is the elimination of sin from our nature. It is the total correction of our inward bent towards self. Positively, entire sanctification is the freedom to have an undivided heart that is singularly fixed on loving and obeying God; it means experiencing the fullness of God's perfect love.
 - c. **The Work of God, Not Human Accomplishment.** The claim that Christians can be made perfect in love seems like a tall order. Still, perfection in love is both the mandatory and natural follow-up of regeneration because if for no other reason than that he who begins a good work sees it through to completion (Phil. 1:6). The promise of entire sanctification is not a claim to what we are capable of but of what the

¹ For more on this see Kevin Watson's [Perfect Love: Recovering Entire Sanctification—The Lost Power of the Methodist Movement](#).

² John Wesley, "Scripture Way of Salvation."

sovereign Holy Trinity can accomplish in sinners. Christian perfection is the fruit of belief that the redemptive work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to transform self-centered sinners into individuals who are fully abandoned to God. It is as Paul says, "Now may the God of peace himself *sanctify you completely*, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it*" (1 Thess. 5:23–24; italics added).

- d. **Pleasing God is the Highest Desire.** The doctrine of entire sanctification affirms the biblical teaching that Christians need not sin. We need not sin because the Holy Spirit has dealt with the cause of sinning, which the Apostle Paul calls the "flesh" (Rom. 7–8). Habitual sin results from a willful determination to have our way in life. As we've been discussing all along, the Holy Spirit can transform this pattern of thinking and acting. The Holy Spirit can make it so that pleasing God is our highest desire. Because of the Holy Spirit, we can have what the Bible calls a "whole heart."³ This is not a heart that is flawless in all its understandings, or even in all its feelings, but one that is completely given over to knowing and serving God.⁴ The result is that a person is no longer inclined or "bent" to disobeying but is now "bent" to please God.
 - e. **The Indwelling of Perfect Love.** Being filled with the Holy Spirit is synonymous with the fullness of perfect, holy love. We discussed above that within the inner life of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the eternal bond of holy love shared between the Father and the Son. Externally, the Holy Spirit is the gift of the Father and the Son to the world. When the Father and Son send the Holy Spirit to indwell believers, it is the indwelling of a holy love free from deficiency or corruption. Entire sanctification is the witness of God's promise to extend the perfect bond of holy fellowship with Christians; it is the embodiment of being given over entirely to the perfect love of God that is the Holy Spirit.
3. **Biblical Support.** We cannot use a concordance to do theology, meaning that the theological message of the text comes through after Holy Spirit-led interpretation. Note that the most essential doctrine of the Christian faith is the Trinity, and the word "Trinity" appears nowhere in scripture. However, the Scriptures themselves witness to God as one, yet three distinct persons. Interpretive work must be done to arrive at that theological conclusion. That said, the broader witness of scripture supports the idea that God can heal believers from the disease of sin.⁵ Here are some Bible verses that Wesleyans have pointed to in support of the doctrine of entire sanctification.
 - a. **1 Thessalonians 5:34–24**, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this." (NRSV)
 - b. **Matthew 5:48**, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
 - c. **Romans 6:1**, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live it in?"

³ See e.g., 1 Kgs 15:14. KJV "perfect heart." Modern translations struggle to avoid the connotations of flawlessness that "perfect" conveys.

⁴ Wesley specified that entire sanctification does not include being perfect in knowledge, free from mistakes, free from infirmities, free from temptation, nor free from further growth.

⁵ For more on this see Ayars, Bounds, and Friedeman, *Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2023).

- d. **Romans 6:4**, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life."
 - e. **Romans 6:6**, "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin."
 - f. **Romans 6:11**, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive in God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions."
 - g. **Romans 8:1–4**, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."
 - h. **Deuteronomy 6:4–5**, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD your God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."
 - i. **Psalms 51:10**, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."
4. **Entire Sanctification in Church History.** It is essential to note that this doctrine of perfect love did not originate with John Wesley. Wesley merely rediscovered and brought attention to the doctrine for a new generation of Christians. One can strongly argue from the Scriptures that the doctrine originates with the Bible and the apostolic witness to the redeeming work of Jesus enshrined in the New Testament, which is why many theologians through history have championed this teaching. Some of those include: (1) the early Christian Fathers (including Ignatius of Antioch, The Didache, Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, Polycarp), (2) the later Greek Fathers (Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian), (3) the Latin Fathers (Cyprian and Ambrose of Milan), (4) the Cappadocian Fathers (Gregory of Nyssa), (5) Augustine, (6) John Cassian, (7) Bernard of Clairvaux, and (8) Thomas Aquinas.
5. **The When and How of Entire Sanctification.** In general, Wesleyans agree on what sanctification is (perfect love). Where there is disagreement is on when and how it happens. Some movements within the history of Methodism believe that all one must do is ask for it and God will do it (the "short way," typically associated with groups such as the Nazarenes, Salvation Army, Pentecostals, and others). Other movements believe that it is a slow and steady process that happens over a lifetime, and one may or may not arrive (the "long way," typically associated with the larger groups like the United Methodist Church).
- a. **The Short Way.** "Christian perfection now by total consecration and faith. The most optimistic view on holiness teaches that believers can experience Christian perfection now, in the present moment, through an act of entire consecration and faith, whereby believers surrender their lives to the lordship of Christ and trust God to purify and empower them. Christian perfection is a simple synergism in which the work of consecration and faith by a Christian is met immediately with deliverance from the inner propensity to sin by the Holy Spirit."⁶ **This perspective makes a distinction between entire sanctification and Christian maturity.**
 - b. **The Middle Way.** "The next view on holiness in the Wesleyan tradition affirms with the "shorter way" that entire sanctification is realized in a Christian's life through personal consecration and faith. Also like the "shorter way," it makes a distinction between Christian perfection and spiritual maturity. Perfection is what makes growth toward

⁶ Matt Ayars, Christopher T. Bounds, and Caleb T. Friedeman, [Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Theology](#) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2023), 335–336.

spiritual maturity optimal. However, unlike the “shorter way,” it does not believe that faith necessary to appropriate Christian perfection is a power inherent at any given moment in a believer’s life. Rather, sanctifying faith is seen as a gift of grace, a grace with which a Christian can choose to cooperate or not. The grace capable of creating this faith is more than what one receives at conversion.”⁷ **This perspective makes a distinction between entire sanctification and Christian maturity.**

- c. **The Long Way.** “In contrast to the previous two positions, the third Wesleyan view on holiness emphasizes that Christian perfection is realized most often in a believer’s life after a long journey of dying to self, following many years of spiritual development. There will be some Christians who will realize entire sanctification in the present life, but most will not experience it until just before death or at the point of death. A belief in the persistence and stubbornness of original sin forms the heart of the doctrine. This recalcitrance can only be overcome gradually over a lifetime through significant growth in grace, personal denial, and spiritual development.”⁸ **Christian maturity and entire sanctification are closely linked in this view.**

A Brief Catechism⁹

What is entire sanctification/Christian perfection? It is loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). Entire sanctification is something that God does in our lives after we believe in Jesus. It frees us from the power and condition of sin and frees us to live like Jesus by the power of the Spirit.

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

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

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

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

⁷ Ibid., 337–338.

⁸ Ibid., 339–340.

⁹ From Ayars, Bounds, and Friedeman, Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Theology (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2023).