Holiness as "Christian Perfection": Further Thoughts on Entire Sanctification

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Introduction

A proper understanding of The Salvation Army’s commitment to the doctrine and experience of holiness, requires placing it within the larger context of a Wesleyan understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the divine work of redemption. Having dealt in previous articles with the relationship of holiness to the broader concerns of the work of salvation, and the vital place the doctrine of entire sanctification has in John Wesley’s “way of salvation,” this article will explore in further depth, the dynamic nature of holiness as “Christian perfection.”

1. Christian Perfection Clarified

The year before his death, Wesley referred to the doctrine of Christian perfection as “the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people

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called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up."³ Synonymous with entire sanctification, Christian perfection (grounded in the biblical conception of perfection – *teleiotes*)⁴ is to be understood as one of the operations of grace in the process of salvation. Thus, the Christian life is seen as a process towards the goal of perfection.⁵

Wesley's doctrine of perfection finds its basis partly in the practical mysticism of Thomas à Kempis, and such Anglican High Churchmen as Jeremy Taylor and William Law (both of Arminian persuasion). Wesley understands Christian perfection as inward and outward conformity to Christ, a circumcision of the heart, involving purification from sin and spiritual renewal. Above all it is seen in love to God and neighbor, the love of a whole and undivided heart.⁶ In his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Wesley defines entire sanctification as "love excluding sin, love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul ... as long as love takes up the whole heart, what room is there for sin therein?"⁷

Early on, Wesley recognized that holiness was the end or goal (*telos*) of religion. In 1725, he encountered Bishop Taylor's *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living*, which convinced him of the importance of purity of intention, whereupon he dedicated all of his life to God. The following year (1726) Wesley read Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, which stressed "the nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart."⁸ And a few years later (1728 or 1729) he read William Law's *Christian Perfection*, which persuaded him "of the impossibility of being half a Christian."⁹ Wesley preached a sermon on the subject of Christian perfection a few years later, "The Circumcision of the Heart," which reveals the essence of his understanding of the doctrine. In it he views this work of grace principally in terms of "holy tempers" or a "habitual disposition of the soul" which involves the gift of "those virtues which were in Christ Jesus." Christian perfection describes, in other words, the characteristics of holy love reigning in the human heart, a love that not only embraces the love of God and neighbor, but that also excludes all sin.¹⁰ The influence of à Kempis, Taylor and Law can be seen in Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1767), where he defines such perfection as purity of intention ("a single eye"), the imitation of Christ, and love of God and neighbor.¹¹

Positively, perfection is perfect love. Negatively, it is deliverance from
inward and outward sin. The entirely sanctified person, having received the gift of perfect love for God and neighbor, is freed from the necessity of ongoing, intentional sin. Heart purity for Wesley also involves deliverance from evil thoughts and evil tempers. In his sermon “On Perfection” (1788), he uses the following terms to define entire sanctification: to love God with all one’s heart and one’s neighbor as oneself; the mind that is in Christ; the fruits of the Spirit unified; the recovery of the moral image of God, which consists of “righteousness and true holiness”; inward and outward righteousness; man’s perfect consecration to God; and salvation from all sin. Note that even in the work of perfection, man is not altogether passive, for it involves a total consecration of the human heart to God. Perfection is understood as both a requirement and a promise. Wesley believed that the scriptures bear witness to God’s promise of perfection; that what God has promised he is able to perform; and that God is both able and willing to sanctify now. What is important to recognize is Wesley’s optimism concerning the possibilities of transformation in this life, which stems from his commitment to the sovereignty of God’s grace in Christian perfection.

Dealing with the issue of when entire sanctification occurs, Wesley seems to emphasize different elements in various writings. It is, on the one hand, to be received instantaneously in a crisis event, and on the other hand, to be received gradually as one matures spiritually. “The genius of Wesley as a theologian...is that he held both of these elements together, process and realization, a gradual element and an instantaneous one, in subtle and well-crafted tension.” A gradual work of sanctification both precedes and follows the experience of Christian perfection as an instantaneous event, thus holding together both the possibilities and actualities of grace in the Christian life.

Love as the essence of perfection is meant to develop in the Christian life. Thus, Wesley understands Christian perfection as a perfection in love. What then is the difference between new birth (“initial sanctification”) and perfect sanctification? Love has already been instilled into the human heart at new birth. From then on there is a gradual development, with no perfection of concluded development. Wesley states that “there is no perfection ...which does not admit a continual increase.” The distinction between new birth and entire sanctification is a difference in degree within a continuous development of love. Since love is the sum of sanctification, there is only one kind
of holiness (love), which is found in various degrees in believers.

Entire sanctification is seen more clearly as a distinct stage, higher and different from that of new birth, when viewing perfection as liberation from sin. Entire sanctification involves a love incompatible with sin. It is a love unmixed with sin, a pure love. The difference between new birth and entire sanctification is also seen in the fact that the deliverance from the power of sin takes place in an instant. Deliverance from sin in entire sanctification is regarded as analogous with the entrance of death into the body. Wesley writes: "A man may be dying for some time; yet he does not, properly speaking, die till the instant the soul is separated from the body; and in that instant he lives the life of eternity. In like manner, he may be dying to sin for some time; yet he is not dead to sin, till sin is separated from his soul; and in that instant he lives the full life of love."¹⁹

Entire sanctification is not absolute perfection. It is a perfection subject to the limitations of human life (i.e., ignorance, bodily infirmities, mistakes, etc.). Wesley's concept of a perfection of love focuses on the intention and will. In other words, defects in the fully sanctified are not sins "properly so-called." There can be no sin when love is the only principle of action. Mistakes and defects, however, can be regarded as sins in the sense that they constitute deviations from the perfect law. Deliverance from such "sins" comes only at death (absolute perfection). This dual view of perfection maintains both the possibility of perfection, on the one hand, and on the other, its relative character and the continuous need for forgiveness on the part of the fully sanctified. For Wesley, even the most sanctified individual must live on the basis of forgiveness, in unceasing contact with Christ. This is due to the fact that alongside a relative and subjective perfection, he retains the conception of an objective and absolute perfection and a corresponding view of sin.²⁰ In an attempt to explain Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection, Colin Williams writes: "In terms of sin in the absolute sense, as measured by the 'perfect law,' there is no such thing as perfection in believers. It is in terms of the sin of conscious separation from Christ that there can be perfection — a perfection of unbroken conscious dependence upon Christ."²¹

In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766),²² Wesley takes great care to state in what sense Christians are not and can never hope to be perfect.
First, believers are not perfect in knowledge. The pure in heart must continue to study and learn, to develop their minds, in order to avoid "enthusiasm" or fanaticism. Second, since those who are perfected in love are not free from ignorance, neither can they be free from all mistakes, such as errors in judgment or even faulty interpretation of scripture. Having a purified heart by the love of God does not render the believer either infallible or omniscient. Third, Christians are not so perfect as to be free from infirmities: limitations of body or mind. Fourth, perfect love does not eliminate temptations or trials. Fifth, Christian perfection is not a static state, but is always in need of increase and growth in grace. Such a dynamic view of "perfecting perfection," rejects the notion of a "perfected perfection." Nevertheless, the emphasis on growth and development in Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection must not minimize his clear teaching on the instantaneous nature of the realization of holiness (crisis), both preceded and followed by process.

When Wesley addresses in what sense Christians are perfect in his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he emphasizes not only victory over the power of sin, but also victory over the being of sin. Those who are entirely sanctified are free from evil thoughts and tempers. By the latter, Wesley means freedom from pride, self-will, and love of the world. Positively speaking, Christian perfection entails the freedom, now graciously restored, to obey the two great commandments — loving God and neighbor. Entire sanctification is *love replacing sin*, love conquering every vile passion and temper, resulting in the renewal of the *imago Dei*, especially the moral image. Thus, salvation is more than a forensic exchange in the sense that people are declared to be other than they are (imputed righteousness), but involves actual renewal, transformation, purification by grace (imparted righteousness).

A proper conception of holiness (the solution) is conditioned by one's understanding of the nature of sin (the problem). "Thinking of sin primarily as violation of a set of behavioral expectations is to risk a seeking of righteousness by human works and to limit holiness to those few functioning at a flawless level in relation to these expectations." Thinking biblically, however, Wesley viewed sin in more personal and relational terms. Rather than being a negative "thing" within the person, sin is the deliberate turning away from God, a defective or perverted love, or the violation of covenant
relationship. Thus, "if sin is the orientation of the whole person away from God, then holiness is the whole person turned in love to God. It is not merely the absence of sin, but the presence of the God-given love for God." It involves a genuinely restored relationship. In focusing on Christian holiness from a Wesleyan perspective as restored relationship, believers are free from the dilemmas of perfectionism that have plagued many holiness seekers. "The sanctifying goal is a perfect love characteristic of restored relationship, not perfect performance in spite of human frailty, ignorance, and immaturity. The issue is the set of the will, the focus of one's true affection. John Wesley's phrase "perfect love" should be thought of as mature, life-restoring relationship to God."

2. Role of Religious Affections in Christian Perfection

Wesley's conception of human nature is reflected in his view of the image of God as including the understanding, the will, liberty, and conscience. He does not use "will" to designate a human faculty of rational self-determination, but rather, he equates the will with the affections. These affections are not simply "feelings," but the motivating inclinations behind all human action. They integrate the rational and emotional dimensions of human life into a holistic inclination toward particular choices or acts. Wesley called such habituated dispositions "tempers" (in a characteristically 18th century use of the term). The chief example of such a temper (or habituated affection) for Wesley was love for God and neighbor. He viewed holy actions as flowing from holy tempers.

The role of the affections was central to Wesley's understanding of both human sin and salvation. In the case of sin, Wesley insisted that the issue was more than individual wrong actions; he frequently discussed sin in terms of a 3-fold division: sinful nature or tempers, sinful words, and sinful actions.

The point of this division was that our sinful actions and words flow from corrupted tempers, so the problem of sin must ultimately be addressed at this affectional level. This point is also reflected in the way that the mature Wesley shifted his discussion of the classic Western doctrine of
Original Sin away from questions of inherited guilt, focusing instead on the present disordering impact of Inbeing Sin....The most basic cause of our present infirmity for Wesley was not some “thing” that we inherit, but the distortion of our nature resulting from being born into this world already separated from the empowering Divine Presence. Deprived of the effect of this essential relationship, our faculties inevitably become debilitated, leaving us morally depraved. For one particular, our weakened affections take on unholy tempers.31

Wesley believed that salvation involved the affectional dimension of human life, as well as outward matters. He defined the Christian life as the renewal of this inward dimension, describing such as: the life of God in the soul; a participation in the divine nature; the mind of Christ, or the renewal of the heart in the image of God. The affections are thus awakened in response to God’s gracious empowerment, and then these affections are shaped into holy dispositions (tempers). In fact, Wesley once identified the goal of all true religion as the recovery of holy tempers.32

The doctrine of entire sanctification obviously brings to bear the issue of the extent which Christians can expect to recover such holy tempers. Wesley defined Christian Perfection as “the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions.”33 Note that love is not only said to be present, but it is ruling. God’s love is shed abroad in the lives of all Christians, awakening their love for God and others. But this love is weak, sporadic, and offset by contrary affections in new believers. In the entirely sanctified, love rules to the point that “there is no mixture of any contrary affections – all is peace and harmony.”34 One of Wesley’s most characteristic descriptions of those who have attained Christian perfection was that they are now adult, or mature, Christians.35 Such developmental language highlights the dynamic nature of his conception of “perfection” in the Christian life. Wesley assumed that growth in holiness would continue within Christian perfection and not just before it.

Affections contrary to love would, of course, be “inward sin.” Wesley believed that this inward sin was overcome in entire sanctification. In a few instances he described this overcoming as a “rooting out” or “destruction”
of inward sin.\textsuperscript{36} He came to realize, however, the problematic nature of such language, in that to talk of the “destruction” of sinful affections could connote the impossibility of their return. By contrast, he recognized the sad reality that sinful affections (and resulting outward sins) may reemerge in lives previously ruled by love. In order to express the benefits of Christian perfection without denying the potential for the return of sinful affections, Wesley maintained that within the entirely sanctified person, holy tempers (i.e., enduring affections) are presently “reigning” to the point of “driving out” opposing tempers (although these may return).\textsuperscript{37} Understood in this way, Christian perfection involves “the expulsive power of a new affection.”\textsuperscript{38} In other words, Wesley was convinced that the Christian life did not have to remain a life of continual struggle. He believed that both Scripture and Christian tradition attested that God’s loving grace can transform our lives to the point where our own love for God and others becomes a “natural” response. To deny this possibility would be to deny the sufficiency of God’s empowering grace and to make the power of sin greater than that of grace.

In emphasizing affections in relation to Christian perfection, Wesley did not wish to de-emphasize actions. He understood actions, however, as flowing from a temper of love. Yet he also believed that ignorance, mistakes, and other human frailties often distort the passage from affection to action. Although Christian Perfection was understood as consisting of holy tempers, it was not characterized by an infallible expression of those tempers in actions. Thus, Wesley’s affectional view of entire sanctification allowed for the transformation of human lives by God’s gracious Spirit, enabling a free response of love to God and neighbor, within the constraints of human infirmity.\textsuperscript{39}

3. The Idea of Love in Wesley’s Theology

It is important to recognize the centrality of love in the theology and preaching of John Wesley. Thus, it is more appropriate to characterize Wesley’s thought as a “theology of love”\textsuperscript{40} than a theology of holiness. In his own words, Wesley indicates the priority and vitality of the dynamic of love:
It were well you should be thoroughly sensible of this, "the heaven of heavens is love." There is nothing higher in religion; there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything more than love, you are looking wide-of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way, and when you are asking others, "Have you received this or that blessing?" if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them upon a false scent. Settle it then in your heart, that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing more, but more of that love described in the thirteenth of the Corinthians. You can go no higher than this, till you are carried into Abraham's bosom.41

If love is the theological key to Wesley's thinking, then by implication, holiness theology that is authentically Wesleyan must be marked by the dynamic of love. Wesley not only related the terms of "holiness" and "love," but equated them. "They are not, to him, two concomitant aspects of grace but one blazing unity of truth."42 These concepts are best understood not in the abstract, but in relation to the dynamic of personal relationship.

Love is the essential inner character of holiness, and holiness does not exist apart from love. That is why Wesley consistently defined holiness, as well as Christian perfection, as love. For Wesley, holiness has to do with persons in relationship, and the dynamic of personal relationship is love. In the words of Mildred Bangs Wynkoop:

Love is the quality of response between persons. Love can only exist in freedom. It cannot be coerced. Freedom is the most fundamental ingredient of love. When love is spoken of, freedom is presupposed and persons are involved. Love describes the kind of response that exists between persons. Love may link the persons into a fellowship or it may short-circuit about itself and reject other persons. In either case it is the relation between persons that is the issue. Love, then, positively or negatively defines holiness or sin. Love, being dynamic and free, includes or excludes others in its search for fulfillment. When the object of love, that about which the total self centers, is God, holiness is described. When...love centers in the self, God is excluded and sin is described.43
If holiness is characterized by love, it is then ethically oriented. This is not to be confused with moralism or legalistic perfection, which serve as superficial counterfeits to a life marked by holy love. Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection was consistently expressed as a perfection of relationship, a perfection of love with both vertical and horizontal dimensions. “Purity is not an end in itself. Purity permits the personality to live in full expression of love to God and man. It is the power of a single-hearted devotion and must be kept intact by daily fellowship with God.”

In answer to the question “who is a Christian?” Wesley wrote a letter that reveals his emphasis on love as the chief evidence:

Above all, remembering that God is love, he [the Christian] is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbor, of universal love, not confined to one sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions or in outward modes of worship... Neither does he love those only that love him or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance...His love...is in itself generous and disinterested; springing from no view of advantage to himself, and from no regard to profit or praise...And this universal, disinterested love is productive of all right affections. It is fruitful of gentleness, tenderness, sweetness...courtesy, and affability.

Love is so central to Wesley’s understanding of the Christian faith, that one finds it in almost every theological discussion: God is love; the atonement is an expression of love; holiness is love; the meaning of “religion” is love; Christian perfection is a perfection of love. In fact, every stage of Wesley’s “way of salvation” is marked by love.

4. Perfection in Love as the Goal of Salvation

Wesley’s teleological approach to soteriology is expressed in the idea of the human spirit coming from God, whose object is to return to him. Everything is directed toward the perfecting of humanity as the condition of glorification. Salvation becomes a process of sanctification by which human-
Holiness as "Christian Perfection": Further Thoughts on Entire Sanctification

ity is increasingly purified and perfected to attain its final goal. Everything in the Christian life is to be valued only in so far as it leads to establishing the law of love in the human heart. "Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things." The object of salvation is the restoration of humanity in the love of God. This is effected by faith, but faith is only the means. The end is love.

This love is linked chiefly to faith in atonement and forgiveness. Love is seen as the direct fruit of justifying faith. Love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Thus God’s love, manifest chiefly in the atonement, precedes humanity’s love of God, the former regarded as the cause of the latter. God’s love in Christ is the source for humanity’s love of God and neighbor. A similar causal approach is seen in the bestowal of perfect love on humanity in entire sanctification. As love is the essence of the Christian life, the causal approach is combined with a teleological one in the idea of love. In the process of salvation, love is both the point of origin and the unifying force of the Christian life in new birth (causal). But love is also the final goal—the restoration of the divine image, or being made perfect in love (teleological).

The idea of Christian love is closely bound up with the idea of law. Love of God and neighbor is understood as the fulfillment of the law, the law of love. Obedience to God is regarded as a fruit of the Spirit leading to love for God and neighbor. In undertaking to write his law on the heart of humanity, God has determined to give what he commands. The moral law remains a law to be fulfilled by Christians, although fulfillment occurs through faith and therefore can be regarded as a work of God. The close association of love with the law is evident in Wesley’s definition of Christian freedom. In a negative sense it means deliverance from the guilt and the power of sin; in a positive sense it includes freedom to love both God and neighbor—the fulfillment of the law. It comes to mean above all, deliverance from the power of sin, resulting in ethical change. The concept is almost identical with that of sanctification: “And what is Christian liberty but another word for holiness?”

Conclusion

As heir to the Wesleyan-holiness tradition, The Salvation Army needs to
remember its theological heritage, especially in relation to its commitment to the doctrine of holiness. Wesley’s concept of entire sanctification as entailing a perfection of love for God and neighbor is crucial for a proper understanding of the dynamic and power of this essential Army doctrine. During a period of “trans-Atlantic revivalism,” this eighteenth century Wesleyan theological emphasis underwent some modification as it resurfaced in America in the subsequent century. The late nineteenth century British holiness revival (which serves as the theological milieu for the birth of the Army) was mediated by American perfectionist evangelists, as evidenced in the impact of James Caughey and Phoebe Palmer on the Booths themselves. 49

Although Salvation Army holiness teaching was fundamentally influenced by both the message and methods of the nineteenth century holiness movement, 50 its roots in the theology of John Wesley must not be overlooked. The Army from the beginning was committed to the doctrine and experience of holiness of heart and life, viewing this teaching as foundational to its identity and mission. Amidst the varied interpretations of the movement’s tenth doctrine over the years, 51 perhaps it is time to reconsider the importance of Wesley’s understanding of entire sanctification as being made perfect in love, and recognize this as the goal of the saving work of God in Christ, and the necessary dynamic of the Army’s future life and ministry.
Notes


4 The Greek *teleiotes* (Col 3:14; Heb 6:1) has been commonly translated as perfection, but also under metaphors of maturation and completeness. The Christian life is not a static *perfectus* in the sense of no further possible improvement, but a dynamic *teleiotes*. Wesley’s references to “perfection” assumed the Greek notion of perfecting (not perfected) grace, a “never ending aspiration for all love’s fullness,” as found especially in the pre-Augustinian Eastern Church writers. Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 320.

5 The idea of perfection can be seen as a typical expression of the teleological alignment of Wesley’s view of salvation. “Everything is directed toward the perfecting of humanity as preparation for glorification. Salvation is understood as a process of sanctification by which humanity is increasingly purified and perfected to attain the final goal. God’s love in atonement and justification aims at the establishment of the law of love in the human heart. The stress falls on the ethical transformation in the human heart, the restoration of the love of God in humankind.” Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 171-73.


9 Ibid., 367.

10 "The Circumcision of the Heart" (1733), Sermon 17, *Works* (Jackson), 5: 202-12.


19 "Thoughts on Christian Perfection" (1759), in *A Plain Account on Christian
Perfection, in Works (Jackson), 11: 402.

20 Ibid., 394-96.


22 This work affirms what Wesley had written in the sermon “Christian Perfection” (1741), “which remained his standard statement of the doctrine.” Outler, John Wesley, 253.


24 “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” in Works (Jackson) 11: 387. See also “On Working Out Your Own Salvation,” Sermon 83 in Works (Jackson) 6: 509, where Wesley refers to sanctification as being “saved from the power and root of sin” and being “restored to the image of God.”


26 Barry Callen, God as Loving Grace (Evangel, 1996), 297.


28 In line with his Wesleyan heritage, E. Stanley Jones reminds us that such perfection in love is not to be confused with 'perfectionism': “Make up your mind that you are to be perfect, but perfect only in love, never in the expression of that love. When Jesus said, 'Be ye therefore perfect' the word 'therefore' pointed back to the preceding verses which tell of love – love your enemies, love those who do not return the love. A child may love a parent perfectly – as a child – but the expression of that love is imperfect. And the parent knows it, sees through the imperfect expression to the love itself, and rejoices in it. The perfection in love is perfect but growing. The bud is perfect as a bud, the flower perfect as a flower, the fruit perfect as a fruit. Each stage is perfect and yet
Surrender your perfectionism into His hands—this perfectionism which is only another name for pride. Be willing to make mistakes and to stumble, knowing you will always be stumbling forward. Rejoice not in what you are, but in what you are becoming through His grace. You are on the Way—not at the Goal...You are not perfect, and yet you have a perfect Savior." *The Way* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 186.

29 Callen, 297. In a similar vein, Mildred Bangs Wynkoop defines sin as "love locked into a false center, the self," and holiness as "love locked into the True Center, Jesus Christ our Lord." *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1972), 158.


31 Ibid., 154.


33 "Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection" [1767], Jackson ed. 11: 446.


38 Umphrey Lee, John Wesley and Modern Religion (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1936), 185.


41 A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, in Works (Jackson), 11: 430.

42 Wynkoop, 22-23.

43 Ibid., 25.

44 Ibid., 362.


46 Rather than understanding the operations of grace in the process of salvation in terms of the classical construct of an ordo salutis ("order of salvation"), Randy Maddox maintains that Wesley's dynamic soteriology should be characterized as a via salutis ("way of salvation"). See chapter 7 in Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).


48 Letter to Mr. Joseph Benson, 5 Oct. 1770, Works (Jackson), 12: 413.
