Within each of us is the desire to love God without reservation, to live in faithful obedience to him, and to give ourselves in love and service to other people, just as Christ did. This is the human yearning for holiness. Every Christian knows this longing. It comes to us in quiet moments of personal devotion or public worship when our soul experiences God’s holy presence. It arises in moments of frustration when our best intentions to follow Christ falter and we fail God once again. And it arises in moments when we serve others, but recognize our service is motivated by selfish motives. As we go through life, inevitably, there are moments in which our heart’s cry for holiness comes to the fore.

Jesus taught that we are created by God to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. By God’s grace we are capable of reflecting divine love and walking in the righteousness of love.
However, we recognize immediately the disparity between our internal motivations, outward actions and the holiest desires of our heart. Because of human sinfulness, the natural bent or tendency of our heart is to love ourselves more than God and neighbor. Even when we want to serve God and to give ourselves selflessly to others, when “the rubber hits the road,” we falter all too often.

Is there grace available through Christ that can heal the distorted conditions of our lives? To resolve the conflict of a divided life seems like a glorious dream and a stunning answer to our heart’s prayer. The good news of Jesus Christ is God can set us free to love and walk as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

When the Spirit takes residence in our lives at conversion, he begins the process of transforming our attitudes, interests, and actions, while confronting us with our selfishness and sin. This is often called “initial” and “progressive” sanctification. Wesleyans believe the Spirit can (1) deliver us from this selfishness, (2) enable us to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves and (3) make possible our complete obedience to God’s revealed will. This work of the Spirit has been called Christian perfection, perfect love, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, entire sanctification, and the filling of the Spirit. However, the work of sanctification does not end here. Over time, as we continue to submit to the Spirit, our love deepens, and our knowledge and understanding of God’s will increases, thereby bringing us into greater conformity with Christ until we reach “final sanctification” at the moment of glorification in death.

While all groups in the Wesleyan branches of the church teach about initial, progressive, and entire sanctification, there are differences in their teaching on how a person experiences entire sanctification.

I will outline the three primary positions, beginning with the most optimistic and concluding with the most pessimistic...
Believers surrender their lives to the lordship of Christ and trust God. The work of consecration and faith by a Christian is met immediately by the Holy Spirit with deliverance from the inner bent toward sin. Power is given to walk in love of God and neighbor.

Every believer has the God-given ability, as a gift of prevenient grace or regenerating grace, to do the human work required in entire sanctification. From the moment of conversion, any Christian has the ability to receive entire sanctification. Because the Holy Spirit is always ready to respond to a personal act of consecration and faith, only ignorance on the part of a believer, an unwillingness to surrender fully to the Lord, or a lack of will to believe become the root causes for not experiencing entire sanctification.

This teaching makes a distinction between entire sanctification and Christian maturity. It is possible for a person to be set free from inward and outward sin, perfected in love, and empowered for ministry, but not have the knowledge, wisdom, and experience necessary for Christian maturity.

Traditionally, this view has been termed the "shorter way" for its emphasis on the immediate possibility of the experience of entire sanctification and not necessarily having to wait a great length of time after conversion. Primarily associated with the teaching of Phoebe Palmer and the American holiness movement, this position can be seen in Keith Drury’s Holiness for Ordinary People, in Kenneth Grider’s A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology, and is the position expressed in the Articles of Religion of The Wesleyan Church.

The most optimistic view on holiness teaches that Christians can experience entire sanctification now, in the present moment, through an act of full consecration and faith. This perspective does not propose that the faith required to receive entire sanctification is a power given to us to exercise at any moment. Rather, sanctifying faith is seen as a special gift of God in his timing, a grace with which a Christian can choose to cooperate or not.

Unlike the “shorter way,” this perspective does not propose that the faith required to receive entire sanctification is a power given to us to exercise at any moment. Rather, sanctifying faith is seen as a special gift of God in his timing, a grace with which a Christian can choose to cooperate or not.

John Wesley’s teaching on grace and faith is at the heart of this holiness teaching. Wesley taught that a person is totally dependent on God’s grace for the work of salvation, even for saving faith. At each stage in the road of salvation more grace is needed to move forward.

Wesley taught that prevenient grace (literally, the grace that “comes before”) is available to every person, giving us the ability to respond to God's love. Then more grace has to be given to create the possibility of saving faith. This grace is communicated through the various “means of grace,” most notably through the Word of God, prayer, and the preaching of the gospel. A person can choose to cooperate with God's grace or not. To the grace made available at conversion, more grace must be given in order to make entire sanctification possible.

In this perspective, Christians actively continue in the various means of grace, consecrate themselves, and seek the gift of entire sanctification, waiting for God’s gracious action to enable it. Thus, a person cannot be entirely sanctified at any given moment, but only in those times and places in which God may choose to make grace available that can create such faith.

Among the various Wesleyan models, this teaching may be called the “middle way,” navigating between the simplicity of the “shorter way” and the arduous nature of the “longer way,” addressed next. “The middle way” is seen in Steve DeNeff’s Whatever Became of Holiness?, in some of John Wesley’s writings like “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” and can also be argued as a possible interpretation of The Wesleyan Church’s Articles of Religion.

The “middle way” is often a default position for Christians holding to the “shorter way.” When the “shorter way” has not immediately brought about entire sanctification in people’s lives, the “middle way” has been used in offering practical counsel. For example, when people have consecrated themselves fully to Christ and they have done all they know to do to receive entire sanctification, and still it remains unrealized, often they are counseled to keep seeking this experience earnestly until God brings it to them. Consciously or unconsciously, there is the recognition of the role of God’s timing in this experience. This is seen clearly in Keith Drury’s book Holiness for Ordinary People where he articulates the “shorter way,” but in his practical instruction for “seekers” of entire sanctification, he advises people who have not immediately experienced this work of grace to keep seeking it in the various “means of grace” until God brings it.

Wesleyans have the most optimistic view of how dramatically we can be changed by God’s grace.
**POSITIONAL VIEW**

- Focus is exclusively on positional holiness
- One view: Christians are so sinful to the core, even minimal imparted sanctification is impossible
- Another view: Salvation is seen almost exclusively as a “ticket to heaven.”
- This view is a misunderstanding, a misappropriation of Luther’s and Calvin’s theology of imputed righteousness.

No credible theologians

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**REFORMED VIEW**

- Christians always fall short of God’s law in thought, word, and deed. Everything is tainted by the sin nature.
- Christians can better approximate God’s law through sanctification, but never meet it.

John Calvin, J.I. Packer, R.C. Sproul

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**LUTHERAN VIEW**

- Christians gripped by the realization of justification can do good works untainted by sin or selfishness, motivated solely out of love for God or neighbor.
- In any given moment Christians either act out of the “new man” or “old man.” The “new man” acts out of love alone. Can’t ever be free of “old man.”

Martin Luther, Gerhard Forde, John Brug

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**KESWICK VIEW**

- Christians can be free from willful sin, but cannot be liberated from original sin.
- Willful sin is the exception rather than the norm in the Christian life.

Robert McQuilkin, Bill Bright, Ian Thomas
LONGER WAY

- Can be free from willful sin and original sin, not infirmity
- Believers can experience entire sanctification after a long process of dying to self and spiritual development.
- Few Christians will experience this depth of sanctification in this life.
- Entire sanctification and ultimate spiritual maturity are synonymous.

Thomas Oden, Randy Maddox, The more pessimistic John Wesley

MIDDLE WAY

- Can be free from willful sin and original sin, not infirmity
- Consecration and faith are not inherent powers in Christians. To grace given in conversion, more grace must be given.
- Believers can experience entire sanctification when grace capable of creating sanctifying faith is made available.

Steve DeNeff, The more optimistic John Wesley

SHORTER WAY

- Can be free from willful sin and original sin, not infirmity
- Consecration and faith are inherent powers in Christians as a result of prevenient grace or conversion.
- Believers can experience entire sanctification when they become fully devoted.
- Makes distinction between entire sanctification and spiritual maturity.

Phoebe Palmer, Keith Drury, The Wesleyan Church

ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

A decisive event that occurs when a believer chooses entire consecration, then by faith receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which cleanses the heart from inbred sin.
The third Wesleyan teaching on holiness emphasizes that entire sanctification is realized most often in a Christian’s life only 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 sin forms the heart of this belief, a stubbornness that can be overcome only through long and gradual growth in grace, personal denial, and spiritual development.

While this view does not deny the possibility of a shorter process, or the exercise of personal faith in appropriating entire sanctification, its focus is on the long progression. Many who adhere to this equate entire sanctification with Christian maturity. It can be viewed, therefore, as a more lofty view of entire sanctification. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is always being fully manifested, so that Christians are always joyful, always giving thanks, always loving to the fullest extent. The movement toward this state of perfection generally is only possible by gradual growth in grace, wisdom, knowledge, experience, and the practice of spiritual disciplines. As such, entire sanctification is not really seen as a possibility for new converts, but only for those who have diligently followed Christ for many years. Entire sanctification from this perspective is ultimate spiritual maturity.

This view has been called the “longer way.” It is embraced in Thomas Oden’s Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology Volume Three, in Randy Maddox’s Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology, and in John Wesley’s more pessimistic writings, such as “Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection.” While this has not been the dominant teaching in the American holiness tradition, or the official teaching of The Wesleyan Church, it has been embraced by many in various Wesleyan circles.

One of the clear distinctives common to the three Wesleyan traditions, and setting us apart from some other evangelical teachings, is the depth to which sin is addressed. Not only do Wesleyans believe Christians can be liberated from willful sin, being empowered to live lives of obedience to Christ, we also teach that through the work of the Holy Spirit believers can be set free from the inner propensity to rebellion, selfishness and pride, and have their hearts oriented in love to God.

The ultimate purpose of sanctification is to re-orient our hearts toward God, so we may truly love God and love others.

What does this all mean?

Baptism with the Holy Spirit – Associated with entire sanctification, it is based on biblical passages stating that the baptism Jesus Christ would perform surpasses water baptism.

Christian perfection – Wesley defined Christian perfection as “pure love” that reigns in the heart of an individual, a possibility for every person who has been justified by faith.

Consecration – In the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, this term refers to absolute surrender, entire devotion of one’s life to God.

Imparted righteousness – A gift of God given at the moment of the new birth, in which God begins the process of making us holy; different from imputed righteousness.

Imperfections – A category in Wesley’s thought, not equivalent to sin, similar to involuntary transgressions and infirmities; human limitations that do not have a moral quality.
from temptation or the possibility of being drawn to sin. Believers are dependent upon God’s grace for continuing to walk in entire sanctification. Wesley compared this dependency to a branch being connected to a vine. A Christian must be connected continually to Christ, dependent upon Christ for the grace necessary to walk in perfect love. Christians must therefore always avail themselves of the means of grace.

For those who have desired to be fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ and have not had the inner resources to be so, this offers hope and promise in the present life. The proclamation of holiness and the experience of entire sanctification truly becomes good news.

In the history of Christianity, all three views have been used by God to bring people into the experience of entire sanctification. God in his care has used different avenues in helping his people in move toward perfect love. But one of the chief contributions of the holiness movement and the teaching of The Wesleyan Church has been the optimism in which it has affirmed that entire sanctification can truly be experienced sooner rather than much later. A Christian does not have to wait a lifetime to “grow into” entire sanctification.

The beauty of The Wesleyan Church’s teaching is the optimism that God does work in the present moment to bring about entire sanctification. It fosters a posture of expectation and earnest seeking, confident that the holiest longings of the human heart can be realized in our lives, sooner rather than later.

**CONSECRATION**

If we desire to experience entire sanctification, we need to fully surrender our lives to Jesus Christ. We need to give it all to God—our dreams, talents, fears, hurts, physical resources, strongholds of sin, pride, etc.—and withhold nothing. Christ must have it all.

**BELIEVE GOD’S PROMISES**

All the New Testament is dripping with the stories of people whose hearts were completely changed. We are “made new in the attitude of your minds; and . . . created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:23-24).

If we desire to experience entire sanctification, we need to believe that Christ presently makes people holy in decisive moments. Our hearts can be reoriented, now, in love toward God and neighbor.

**ASK**

Because this is the work of Christ made possible through the cross and the Resurrection, we are dependent upon God to do this miraculous work in our lives. Therefore, we must ask him for this grace. The filling of the Spirit comes in response to prayer. This is a prayer of faith in which we truly believe that Christ desires to do this work and is willing to do it now in our lives. If we lack faith, then we must pray first for the faith. As one disciple said, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”

**KEEP SEEKING**

If the grace of perfect love is not received when Christians first ask for it, we should persistently seek this experience and the necessary faith. We do this through the various means of grace. In scripture reading and worship, listen for the still, small voice of God. During the Lord’s Supper, focus on the cross and your consecration. Set times aside for fasting and prayer—look forward to quiet times with the Lord. Seek out godly Christians to hear their testimonies of how God worked in their hearts. Read biographies of Christians who lived lives of complete surrender to God. When the altar is open, go forward to pray. Take opportunities to reach out in service to the least, the last, and the lost, asking God to give you a heart of love for people as you serve them. If you consecrate yourself and persist, God will come with his grace.

May we as The Wesleyan Church continue to be faithful in our proclamation of “Holiness unto the Lord” and may God continue to use us to bring people into the grace of full salvation.

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**SPIRITUAL COUNSEL ON EXPERIENCING ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION**

**Imputed righteousness** – The righteousness of Jesus credited to the Christian, enabling one to be justified. This does not speak to God’s inwardly transforming and cleansing the individual.

**Love (agape, Greek)** – Unconditional, self-sacrificing love of God for humanity, which we are called to imitate in our own lives, both to friends and enemies.

**Prevenient grace** – Grace that awakens the spiritual senses; God taking the initiative in conversion, inclining us to turn to him, repent, and believe, but never irresistibly.

**Redemption** – Implies liberation from sin and receiving a new purpose, namely, to love God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves.

**Sanctification, entire** – A second crisis experience following regeneration that cleanses one from original sin, or cancels out the carnal nature and the bent toward sinning.

Selected glossary items from Discovering Christian Holiness, by Diane Leclerc

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