Wesley on Personal Holiness

Nothing caused Wesley so much trouble and controversy as his teaching about Christian Perfection.\(^1\) And yet he maintained this teaching throughout his entire life. He even considered it to be the **Grand Depositum**\(^2\) to the people called Methodists in his time and in time to come. The phenomenon yearned for had some different names: Christian Perfection, Sanctification, Holiness or Perfect Love. Although he all the time kept Christian Perfection as the proper name, he seems himself to have preferred Perfect Love. The main difficulty with **Perfection** is its kinship with the Latin **perfectus** with its savour of something static, something achieved. The Biblical references use instead the Greek word **teleios** with its connotation of goal, something to press forward to. The late Norwegian Wesley-scholar Tore Meistad describes it as “belonging to the goal”\(^3\).

Why then did Wesley with such fervour insist on ‘Christian Perfection’? He wanted to get his people to heaven! His presupposition was, with Hebrews 12:14 in mind, that without holiness none could see God; and if the total cleansing from sin could take place in the *article of death* it could as well take place before this *awful moment*. He rejected Catholic teaching on Purgatory and was convinced that what you are in your moment of death, you are in eternity.

Wesley firmly believed that not only men and women could be renewed in the image of God, but that the whole creation could be renewed. The aim of God’s messengers was to **Spread Scriptural Holiness over the Nation**. “The renewal of the creation and the creatures through the renewal of the *image of God* is what Wesley identifies as the very heart of Christianity. ‘Ye know that the great end of religion is to renew our hearts in the image of God’”.\(^4\) It is the renewal of the heart, the restoration of the image of God on the personal level that is the key to the renewal of the creation.

What did Wesley really teach about Christian perfection? His starting-point is his view on *grace*. To Wesley grace was not merely understood as *forensic*. In justification grace operates forensically. It means simply *forgiveness of sins*. “The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins.”\(^5\) This says that in justification a person is restored to the favour of God, you are in *favor Dei*. But Wesley believed that God could do more with sin than forgive it. He believed in the restoration of the *imago Dei*. He was sure that there is a transforming power in grace. In the moment of justification the new birth takes place. Here begins the process of sanctification, of a growth in holiness towards Christian perfection.

The teaching of holiness is scattered through most of Wesley’s sermons and letters. You can find it in his *Notes upon the New Testament*. His teaching, however, is given in a concentrated form in his *Plain Account on Christian Perfection*.

In his theology Wesley tried to keep together the teaching on justification through faith and the tradition of holy living or, in other words, a *pessimism of nature* and an *optimism of grace*. Justification had as its background the Reformation teaching of *Original Sin*. “This deeper insight into man’s predicament outside grace is naturally bound up with the new knowledge of justification by faith. Indeed Wesley regards the former as an essential condition of the latter. At one with the Reformed outlook, he

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1. As to controversies you could of course also add the question of predestination and free grace.
2. “This doctrine is 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 it up” Letters 8:238
3. Tore Meistad: *FrelSENS veg, Teologi og etikk I wesleyansk tradisjon*, p97
5. Justification by faith*, *Works* 1:188
insists here on the total corruption of natural man, grounding the tenet on the doctrine of original sin".⁶

In this human predicament there is a true need for grace. John Wesley’s theology is a theology of grace. God’s grace is free and general. It is shed over everyone unconditionally. It comes to us first as prevenient grace. Hereby we are capable of saying yes or no to God’s offer of salvation. Justifying grace opens the way to God’s pardon, justification by faith. Justification and the new birth happen at the same moment, but are logically distinct events. Justification changes my relation to God, favor Dei is restored. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.⁷ The new birth or regeneration is something God does in us. We are given victory over the power of sin and have our mind transformed. This is the beginning of our sanctification. The new birth is the door into the work of sanctification. New birth means new creation. Therefore if anyone be in Christ – a true believer in Him - there is a new creation – Only the Power that makes a world can make a Christian. And when he is so created, the old things are passed away – Of their own accord, even as snow in spring. Behold – The present, visible, undeniable change! All things are become new – He has new life, new senses, new faculties, new affections, new appetites, new ideas and conceptions. His whole tenor of action and conversion is new, and he lives, as it were, in a new world. God, men, the whole creation, heaven and earth, and all therein, appear in a new light, and stand related to him in a new manner, since he was created anew in Christ Jesus.⁸

So there is the possibility to grow in grace and achieve a goal (telos) in this life, before the article of death. This matter is dealt with at length in Minutes of some late conversations, where for instance it is stated:

Q. But how does it appear that this is to be done before the article of death?

A. First. From the very nature of a command, which is not given to the dead, but to the living. Therefore, “Thou shalt love God with all thy heart,” cannot mean, Thou shalt do this when thou diest, but while thou livest.

Secondly from express texts from Scripture.⁹

Later on in the same Account Wesley further describes his teaching, not as his, but as the teaching of the Oracles of God, in the Old and New Testament; when I read them with no other view or desire but to save my own soul. But whosesoever this doctrine is, I pray you what harm is there in it? Look at it again; survey it on every side, and that with the closest attention. In one view, it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. … In another view, it is the mind that was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked.¹⁰

He gives a summary of his thoughts in the following way: In the year 1764, upon a review of the whole subject, I wrote down the sum of what I had observed in the following short propositions:

(1) There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture

(2) It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to ‘go on unto perfection’.

(3) It is not so late as death. Cf Hebrews 6:1

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⁶ Harald Lindström: Wesley and Sanctification, p20
⁷ Rom 5:1
⁸ John Wesley: Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament. 2 Cor 5:17
⁹ John Wesley: A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p44. The texts mentioned are Tit. 2:11-14 and Luke 1:69ff.
¹⁰ A Plain Account, p132f. My emphasis
(4) It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone.

(5) It does not make a man infallible

(6) Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is ‘salvation from sin’.\(^\text{11}\)

(7) It is ‘perfect love’.

(8) It is improvable

(9) It is missable, capable of being lost

(10) It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.\(^\text{12}\)

Wesley’s theology is in its form eclectic. He gathered influences from different sources. His system of thinking cannot be squeezed into an already moulded form. He discovered the liberating message in his own life when listening to the Preface of Luther’s Commentary on the Letter to the Romans and felt his heart strangely warmed. As he started to preach this, in its context “new” doctrine, he preferred mostly to refer to the basic teaching of his own church, the Church of England. This is particularly clear in his tract An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion. In this his aim was to prove that his teaching was in accord with that of the Church.\(^\text{13}\)

He is also very keen on proving his teaching on justification through faith to be the same as that of Calvin. He writes: “I think on justification just as I have done any time these seven and twenty years, and just as Mr Calvin does. In this respect I do not differ from him a hair’s breadth.”\(^\text{14}\) In an England very much stamped with the theology of Calvin, it was maybe more important to refer to Calvin than to Luther.

It is when we start to look at Wesley’s theology of sanctification that we must take leave of the theology of the continental reformers. Wesley may have been an eclectic theologian, but he was still a theologian in his own right. He formed his thinking in the tension between justification by faith and the tradition of holy living and formed a theology of New Birth and personal transformation.

In his Introductory comment to Sermons 18 and 19 The Marks of the New Birth and The Great Privilege of those who are Born of God, Albert Outler says: Thus, after ‘The Circumcision of the Heart’ Wesley adds a pair of sermons about regeneration, understood as the act of grace concurrent with justification but not at all identical to it—a ‘vast inward change’ that opens up the lifelong quest for holiness.\(^\text{15}\)

Here we are approaching a different pattern of thinking, a new paradigm, that is more akin to the Eastern Orthodox concept of salvation. Salvation is the cure of the soul, a process of healing that which is ill, devoid of health. The process of sanctification means to the single Christian a participation in the divine re-creation of the image of God in humanity, namely, that sensitivity which enables us to discern, reflect and image the divine will and purpose in the world.\(^\text{16}\) This means simply the restoring of imago Dei in the believer, making the Christians partakers of the divine nature,\(^\text{17}\) which according to Wesley is being renewed in the image of God, and having communion with Him, so as to dwell in God and God in you.\(^\text{18}\) There is great affinity between Wesley’s Christian Perfection and the Eastern teaching of theosis. Behind

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\(^{11}\) We can note, however, that earlier in the same Plain Account, Wesley says explicitly: Therefore, sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself, p53.

\(^{12}\) A Plain Account, p128f

\(^{13}\) Works 11 p 45-94

\(^{14}\) Works 21, Journal 14\textsuperscript{th} May 1765, Letter to John Newton

\(^{15}\) Works 1, p415, my emphasis

\(^{16}\) Theodore Runyon: New Creation, p80

\(^{17}\) 2 Pet. 1:4

\(^{18}\) Wesley’s Notes upon the New Testament, p890
Wesley’s understanding of the renewal of the image of God through regeneration lies in the Eastern Fathers’ notion of “divinization” (theosis), mediated to him indirectly through his Anglican tradition and directly from his reading of the Fathers.\textsuperscript{19} The German Methodist theologians Bishop Dr Klaiber and Director Dr Marquardt in their very fundamental Grundriss einer theologie der EMK, Gerbte Gnade, reject the notion that Wesley was influenced by the ancient Fathers.\textsuperscript{20} In a footnote in The New Creation, T Runyon says: …the translation of the Macarian Homilies which Wesley used avoided translating theosis with ‘divinization’, often using instead ‘sanctification’ or ‘perfection’… Nevertheless, the core idea of theosis – participating in, and transformation by, the creative energy of the Spirit – was central to Wesley’s understanding of regeneration and sanctification.\textsuperscript{21}

In his Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Wesley makes an important statement:

Q. 29. Can those who are perfect grow in grace?

A. Undoubtedly they can; and that not only while they are in the body, but to all eternity.\textsuperscript{22}

This statement means, that Wesley took his inspiration from the Fathers. Perhaps the most interesting point in Irenaeus’ theology is his conception of the final goal of human existence ... God’s purpose was that Adam and Eve would grow in justice and in the knowledge of God, so that they would be ever closer to the creator – a process which continues into eternity.\textsuperscript{23} It does also mean that Wesley’s perfection could not imply a state but a dynamic process, more akin to the Biblical teleiosis, something to move towards, or as expressed by Petronius Arbiter:

Hoc non deficit, incipitque semper, in Helen Waddell’s translation:

And here no end shall be, But a beginning everlastingly.\textsuperscript{24}

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\textsuperscript{19} T Runyon: New Creation, p80
\textsuperscript{20} Klaiber – Marquardt: Gerbte Gnade, p280 n228.
\textsuperscript{21} T. Runyon: New Creation p245 n35. Interestingly both Klaiber-Marquardt and Runyon refer to Ted A Campbell, John Wesley and Christian Antiquity to support their statements.
\textsuperscript{22} A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p103
\textsuperscript{23} Justo L González: Christian Thought Revisited, p61f
\textsuperscript{24} Quoted from Newton Flew: The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology, p72