

THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOHN WESLEY TO THE DOCTRINE OF PERFECTION

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Introduction

The doctrine of perfection is biblically based. In Matt 5:48 (NIV), Jesus declares, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” However, the meaning of the term “perfection” is contested, with many different interpretations ranging from one extreme to another.¹ At one end of the spectrum, it has been concluded that perfection and Christian growth is not possible, while at the other it is thought that humans can attain a state of sinless perfection. Within this range of understandings, scholars agree that no one has better described the biblical doctrine of perfection than John Wesley. For example, Rob Staples proposes that this doctrine “represents the goal of Wesley’s entire religious quest.”² Albert Outler notes that “the chief interest and significance of Wesley as a theologian lie in the integrity and vitality of his doctrine as a whole. Within that whole, the most distinctive single element was the notion of ‘Christian perfection.’”³ Harald Lindstrom indicates that “the importance of the idea of perfection to Wesley is indicated by his frequent mention of it: in his sermons and other writings, in his journals and letters, and in the hymn books he published with his brother Charles.”⁴ John Wesley himself affirmed that “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 us up.”⁵

This article will examine Wesley’s basic contributions to the doctrine of perfection. The study will (1) address factors that played a major role in the formation of his understanding of perfection, and (2) examine his contribution to the doctrine of perfection.

¹For full theological and historical treatment on the doctrine on perfection, see H. K. La Rondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism: A Dogmatic-Ethical Study of Biblical Perfection and Phenomenal Perfection* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1971).

²Rob Lyndal Staples, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of Christian Perfection: A Reinterpretation” (Ph.D. dissertation, Pacific School of Religion, 1963), vi.

³Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 30.

⁴Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (London: Epworth, 1950), 126.

⁵*Ibid.*

*The Formation of Wesley's Understanding
of Perfection*

Wesley's understanding of perfection must be studied against two major factors: (1) practical mystical, and (2) the influence of the Eastern church fathers.

Practical Mystical

Wesley noted at the beginning of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* that he had been influenced in his understanding of the doctrine of perfection by practical mysticism. "This [the doctrine of Christian perfection] I owe to the serious part of mankind," he wrote, "those who desire to know all the truth as it is in Jesus."⁶ Several sources made a strong impact on him. For example, in 1725, he read Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* (1650) and *Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651), of which he noted:

In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly affected; that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced there was no medium; but that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or myself, that is, in effect, to the devil.⁷

So deeply influenced was he by Taylor that he began to keep a diary in order to record and measure "his progress in holy living."⁸

A year later, in 1726, Wesley read Kempis's *Christian Pattern*. He was greatly moved by the idea of "inward religion," or "religion of the heart." As a result, he noted that "even giving all my life to God . . . would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart to him."⁹ This conversion moment proved transformative for him. "I began to alter the whole form of my conversation," he stated, "and to set in earnest upon a new life." In response to his ever-deepening experience, he noted, "I set apart an hour or two a day for religious retirement. . . . I watched against all sins, whether in word or deed. I began to aim at, and pray for, inward holiness."¹⁰ He became certain that true religion had to come from the heart.

⁶John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley in Ten Volumes*, 1st American ed. (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1827), 3:5.

⁷Ibid., 5.

⁸Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 35.

⁹Wesley, 4-5.

¹⁰Bruce Eugene Moyer, "The Doctrine of Christian Perfection: A Comparative Study of John Wesley and the Modern American Holiness Movement" (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 1992), 29.

A year or two later, Wesley became acquainted with William Law's books, *Christian Perfection* (1726) and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729). "These [books] convinced me," he stated, "more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian; and I determined, through his grace, (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of), to be all devoted to God, to give him all my soul, my body, and my substance."¹¹

These authors greatly impacted Wesley's view of holy living and of a complete heartfelt commitment to God. But it was not the only influence on his understanding of perfection—the Eastern church fathers also brought an ever-deepening transformation to Wesley's doctrine of perfection.

The Eastern Church Fathers

Outler concludes that Wesley's writings on perfection should be read "in the light of its indirect sources in early and Eastern spirituality."¹² A first important influence was that of his father, Samuel. Wesley read at least two important documents that his father wrote: (1) *The Young Student's Library* (1692), which contained a list of various books among which were two works on Greek Christianity—William Beveridge's *Synodikon* and Cotelier's *Ecclesiae Graecae Monumenta* (or "Documents of the Greek Church");¹³ and (2) *Advice to a Young Clergyman* (1735), which contained "a more extensive prospectus of his recommended readings in ancient Christianity."¹⁴ Ten pages of this work were specifically concerned with the importance of the early Christian fathers. In the years 1724 to 1725, while Wesley was seeking ordination as a priest of the Church of England, his father also urged him to read Chrysostom's work, *De Sacerdotio* ("On the Priesthood"). "Master it, he urged, 'digest it.'"¹⁵

A second source for Wesley's appreciation of early Christian tradition came from a small group organized at Oxford by his brother Charles that studied ancient liturgies and monastic piety of the fourth-century Christian fathers.¹⁶ By early 1732, the group also started to observe "fasts" on Wednesday and Fridays in imitation of early church practices. It is possible that the group may have learned about these practices from Robert Nelson's *Companion to the Festivals and Fasts of the Church of England*, a book which Wesley had read the previous year.¹⁷ Or, as Wesley himself admitted, the suggestion of observing

¹¹Wesley, 5.

¹²Outler, 252.

¹³Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1991), 24.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 25.

¹⁶Outler, 8.

¹⁷Campbell, 26-27.

the weekly fasts may have come from his friend, John Clayton. Whatever the case, it is clear that Wesley began to be more and more interested in the beliefs and practices of the early church.

A third source of Wesley's interest in ancient Christianity was his fellow "Methodist" friend, Clayton. Because of Clayton's influence, Wesley began to study deeply newly available ancient Christian literature, discovered during "the patristic renaissance of the last half of the seventeenth century."¹⁸ British scholars began to show a particular interest in the history and teachings of the church during the first three centuries as this literature became available.¹⁹ By the time Wesley went to Oxford, the libraries were full of scholarly editions of works on early Christian tradition and the church fathers. The revival of classical antiquity greatly influenced Wesley's theological understanding of perfection.

A fourth source of Wesley's interest in early Christian traditions was his meeting with the Moravians, who had brought with them to the United States their understanding of German pietism. During his stay in Georgia, he often engaged in the study of early Christian texts with the Moravians. Consequently, he read several works including Laurence Echard's *General Ecclesiastical History* (1702), the works of William Cave such as *Primitive Christianity*, and *Spiritual Homilies* attributed to Macarius of Egypt.²⁰ What Wesley found particularly fascinating about these authors was their views about the doctrine of perfection. "Their concept of perfection as a process rather than a state," observed Outler, "gave Wesley a spiritual vision quite different from the static perfectionism envisaged in Roman spiritual theology of the period and the equally static quietism of those Protestants and Catholics whom he later deplored as 'the mystic writers.'"²¹ Outler also insightfully noted that "in the writings of what he [Wesley] thought was 'Macarius the Egyptian,' he was actually in touch with Gregory of Nyssa, the greatest of all the Eastern Christian teachers of the quest for perfection."²² This is significant since it is likely that Gregory of Nyssa was the main source of Wesley's doctrine of perfection.

Gregory of Nyssa composed, probably late in life, an influential work, *On the Life of Moses*, in which he discussed the idea of perfection.²³ The work has been traditionally divided into two sections: "History" and "Contemplation."

¹⁸Outler, 9.

¹⁹Campbell, 9.

²⁰Ibid., 35.

²¹Outler, 9-10.

²²Ibid., 9, n. 26.

²³Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Routledge, 1999), 99. It is impossible to date with certainty this work. Most historians, however, date it toward the end of Gregory's life on the basis of external and internal evidences.

Section 1, “History,” is a paraphrase of the story of Moses as it is revealed in the book of Exodus. Section 2, “Contemplation,” is an allegorical interpretation of Moses’ story and is much longer than the first section. It is in this second section that Gregory expounded his idea of perfection.

There are three similar ideas about perfection and Christian holiness in *The Life of Moses* that correspond to those held by Wesley. First, the *Life of Moses* reveals Gregory’s principal doctrine that “human goodness is a continued progression towards an infinite God, *eppektasis*.” Gregory proposed that it was only in this context that Paul’s words in Phil 3:13-14—“Forgetting what lies behind me and reaching out to what lies ahead, I press towards the goal to win the prize, which is God’s call to the life in Christ Jesus”—could be realized.²⁴ Since human beings are finite, concluded Gregory, the progress toward the infinite God and his loving character was without end. Perfection, therefore, was a constant progress from darkness toward “greater truth.”²⁵ The paradox, however, was that although a Christian was in Christ, yet he or she was “summoned to an ever-increasing truth.” The life of virtue was a paradox of “standing on the rock which is Christ and forever moving forward.”²⁶

Second, Gregory emphasized the idea that Christian perfection and the striving for excellence was important for the life-experience of every believer. As Anthony Meredith puts it, “Gregory was becoming increasingly convinced that Christian excellence was ethical rather than mystical.”²⁷

Third, “religious virtue” consisted of two parts: God and a right conduct. Gregory’s refusal “to divorce right conduct from correct belief” set him “apart from pagan religion,” which seems to have practiced a form of amoral worship, and from those Christian writers who seem to have believed that it was possible to reach a state “after which virtue ceased to matter or to be demanded simply because it was already firmly possessed.”²⁸

These same three ideas will be found in Wesley’s writings on perfection. Thus, while Wesley was influenced by both Western and Eastern Christianity, his idea of perfection came from the Eastern tradition of *teleosis* (“becoming perfect”), rather than from the Western Latin tradition of *perfectus est* (“made perfect, or static”; “completed perfection”).²⁹ Because of the influence of the Eastern church fathers, Wesley’s idea of perfection was open to continual growth.

²⁴Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 69.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 73, 77.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 69.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 100.

²⁹Moyer, 24.

How, then, did practical mysticism and the Eastern church fathers influence Wesley's understanding of perfection?

Wesley's Contributions to the Doctrine of Perfection

Generally, it is believed that there are three Wesleyan contributions to the question of perfection: (1) perfection understood as a process rather than a state, (2) perfection seen as "perfect love," and (3) perfection understood as not being sinless.

Perfection as a Process, not a State of Being

One of the most valuable contributions that Wesley made to the doctrine of perfection was his affirmation that perfection was a "process rather than a state."³⁰ Thus, for example, at the beginning of his first tract on the subject of perfection, *The Character of a Methodist* (1739), he noted that perfection was not something that he "had already attained," but rather it was something that was a continuous process throughout his life and beyond.³¹ Wesley believed that even heaven would be a place where believers would grow in grace and perfection.³² In this vein, Wesley noted in his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," that

from the time of our being 'born again' the *gradual work of sanctification* takes place. We are enabled 'by the Spirit' to mortify the deeds of the body, of our evil nature. And as we are more and more dead to sin, we are more and more alive to God. We go on from grace to grace, while we are careful to 'abstain from all appearance of evil', and are 'zealous of good works', 'as we have opportunity, doing good to all men'.³³

In the preface of the second volume of hymns that he and his brother Charles published in 1741 he explained further that,

"This great gift of God, the salvation of our souls, is no other than the image of God fresh stamped on our hearts. It is a 'renewal in the spirit of our minds, after the likeness of him that created them'. . . . Having this hope, that they shall see God as he is, they 'purify themselves even as he is pure; and are holy, as he that hath called them is holy, in all manner of conversation. Not that they have already attained all that they shall attain,

³⁰Outler, 10.

³¹Wesley, 13.

³²See Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 191.

³³John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenraters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 374, emphasis supplied.

either are already (in this sense) perfect. But they daily 'go on from strength to strength.'"³⁴

Wesley thus clearly differed in his understanding of perfection from Calvinists and even those American Methodists who interpreted perfection in terms of "the second blessing" or 'entire sanctification' as a state of grace." For Wesley, perfection was to be a process of growing.³⁵

Perfection as "Perfect Love"

Wesley's second contribution to the doctrine of perfection was his description of it in terms of being loving. While he used terms such as holiness, sanctification, and Christian perfection interchangeably,³⁶ his favorite way to describe the concept of perfection was the process of being perfect in love.³⁷

During the first Methodist conference in 1744, Wesley reported several questions that people asked concerning the doctrine of sanctification or perfection. On the question, "What is implied in being a perfect Christian," he answered: "The loving God with all our heart and mind, and soul; Deut. vi, 5."³⁸ In the *Character of a Methodist*, he wrote that "a Methodist is one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength."³⁹ Again, in another sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," he asked, "What is perfection?" His immediate answer was: "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.'"⁴⁰ Similarly, in the sermon "The Circumcision of the Heart," he again showed that, for him, perfection meant "love," explaining that,

If thou wilt be perfect, add to all these charity: add love, and thou hast the 'circumcision of the heart.' 'Love is the fulfilling of the law,' 'the end of the commandment'. Very excellent things are spoken of love; it is the essence, the spirit, the life of all virtue. It is not only the first and great command, but it is all the commandments in one. . . . In this is perfection and glory and

³⁴Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 15.

³⁵Outler, 31.

³⁶For example, in his sermon, "Christian Perfection," John Wesley wrote that perfection was "only another term for holiness" and that they were "two names for the same thing" ("Christian Perfection," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenraters [Nashville: Abingdon, 1991], 73).

³⁷W. E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection: An Examination and Restatement of John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943), 77.

³⁸Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 48.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁰Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," 374.

happiness. The royal law of heaven and earth is this, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."⁴¹

For Wesley, perfection came to mean "perfect in love."⁴²

Perfection as Not Being "Sinless"

A third contribution by Wesley to the understanding of perfection was his refusal to define perfection as being "sinless." This point was controversial even among Methodist followers. For example, Thomas Maxfield, one of the first lay preachers of the Methodist movement, and George Bell, a soldier in the King's Life Guards, claimed that "perfect Christians were without sin and, once perfected, would persist in this angelic-like state."⁴³ In response, Wesley wrote a letter to Maxfield in November 1762 in which he expressed his disagreement with the sinless and angelic perfectionism promoted by the two men.

There was, for Wesley, a "distinction between the absolute perfection required of Adam before the debilitating effects of sin and the more limited post-Fall expectations of fulfilling the law of love."⁴⁴ Perfection was attainable in this life, but it was not an absolute perfection. Perfection was subjected to the "limitations of human life" as "no one could be so perfect as to achieve deliverance from all defects."⁴⁵ In 1742, he wrote: "We willingly allow, and continually declare, there is no such perfection in this life, as implies either a dispensation from doing good, and attending all the ordinances of God; or a freedom from ignorance, mistake, temptation, and a thousand infirmities necessarily connected with flesh and blood."⁴⁶ On the question, "Do you affirm that this perfection excludes all infirmities, ignorance, and mistake," Wesley answered: "I continually affirm quite the contrary, and always have done so."⁴⁷ Thus, he concluded that even "the most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ."⁴⁸

Wesley, in the context of perfection and its relation to freedom from sin, made a crucial distinction between "sin, properly so called," and "sin, improperly so called." "Sin, properly so called," was "a voluntary

⁴¹John Wesley, "The Circumcision of the Heart," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenraters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 27-28.

⁴²Lindstrom, 141.

⁴³Heitzenrater, 209.

⁴⁴Maddox, 185.

⁴⁵Lindstrom, 145.

⁴⁶Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 178.

⁴⁷Ibid., 27.

⁴⁸Ibid., 28.

transgression” of God’s law. On the other hand, “sin, improperly so called,” was an “involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown.”⁴⁹ In other words, he differentiated “willful and conscious sins from involuntary and unconscious shortcomings and failures.”⁵⁰ It is because of this distinction that he found his idea of perfection to be in accordance with the Bible. In one sense, a man could be called perfect, while, on the other, he or she could not be considered as absolutely perfect. In this regard, he noted:

I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions, which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality. Therefore *sinless perfection* is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself. I believe a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not.⁵¹

This understanding of sin and perfection explains his sermon, “Christian Perfection.” Wesley wrote the sermon “in order . . . to remove the difficulty arising from this seeming contradiction” in his views on sin and perfection. In this sermon, he first considered the question “in what sense Christians are *not* perfect,” before explaining “in what sense they *are* perfect.”⁵² Not surprisingly, his conclusion was that “Christian perfection” did not “imply . . . an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations.” For him, there was not an “absolute perfection on earth.” He explained:

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 hath attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to ‘grow in grace’, and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.⁵³

Wesley’s idea of perfection was, therefore, “adjusted to the present circumstances of man.”⁵⁴ Distinguishing perfection from “sinlessness” was an important Wesleyan contribution to the better understanding of the biblical concept of perfection as a whole. Though the doctrine of perfection had been “much abused,” Wesley encouraged his fellow Methodist preachers to teach it to the believers “constantly, strongly, and explicitly.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹Ibid., 66-67.

⁵⁰Rolf J. Poehler, “Sinless Saints or Sinless Sinners? An Analysis and Critical Comparison of the Doctrine of Christian Perfection as Taught by John Wesley and Ellen G. White” (Unpublished paper, Andrews University, **date**), 25.

⁵¹Wesley, *A Plain Account*, 29.

⁵²Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” 70.

⁵³Ibid., 73.

⁵⁴Lindstrom, 146.

⁵⁵Ibid., 169.

Conclusion

Wesley's view of perfection did not appear in a vacuum. There were important influences that played a vital role in the formation of his view on perfection. The practical mystical works of Taylor, Kempis, Law, and the traditions of the Eastern church fathers were particularly important sources from which he drew as he contemplated the significance of inner holiness and growth in one's Christian life.

Second, the doctrine of Christian perfection became one of the most important elements of Wesley's theology; indeed, it might even be said to be the most important element in his theology. He brought a deeper and fuller understanding of biblical perfection. His position that biblical perfection was not a state, but rather a growing process, that it was based on love, and that it did not mean "sinless" condition continues to resonant in evangelical theology.