

Holiness of Heart and Life: Wesley's Vision of Christian Existence

1. Key Biblical Texts to which Wesley Appeals

(See *Minutes*, June 17, 1747)

The Promises of Scripture

"The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." [Deut. 30:6]

"I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols. ... I will save you from all your uncleannesses." [Eze. 36:25, 29]

"Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God." [2 Corinthians 7:1]

The Assertions of the New Testament

"He has raised up a horn of salvation for us ... Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors ... the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." [Luke 1:69-75]

"The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." [1 John 3:8]

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind--yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish." [Ephesians 5:25-27]

"God sent his Son ... that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit." [Romans 8:3-4]

"The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." [Titus 2:11-14]

The Prayers of the New Testament

"Deliver us from evil (or the evil one)" [Matthew 6:13]

"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ... I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me, that they may be made perfect in one [or, become completely one]." [John 17:20-23]

"I bow my knees before the Father ... I pray that ... he may grant that you, ... being rooted and grounded in love ... may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." [Ephesians 3:14, 16-19]

"May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it." [1 Thess. 5:23-24]

The Commands of the New Testament

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." [Matthew 5:48]

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." [Matthew 22:37]

2. A Sampling of Wesley's Doctrinal Summaries

"Circumcision of the heart ... is that habitual disposition of soul which in the Sacred Writings is termed 'holiness', and which directly implies the being cleansed from sin, 'from all filthiness both of flesh and

spirit', and by consequence the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus, the being so 'renewed in the image of our mind' as to be 'perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect'." ["The Circumcision of the Heart," I.1]

"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'. God has now laid 'the axe unto the root of the tree, purifying their hearts by faith', and 'cleansing all the thoughts of their hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit'." [Preface to 1741 Hymns]

"Christian perfection ... is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus everyone that is perfect is holy, and everyone that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect." ["Christian Perfection," I.9]

"Christian perfection ... is the loving [of] God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. This implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul and that all the thoughts, words and actions are governed by pure love." ["Thoughts on Christian Perfection"]

"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.'" ["The Scripture Way of Salvation," I.9]

"A Methodist is one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him' ... Agreeable to this his one desire is the one design of his life, namely, 'not to do his own will, but the will of him that sent him'. His one intention at all times and in all things is, not to please himself, but him whom his soul loveth. He has a single eye. And because 'his eye is single, his whole body is full of light'. Indeed where the loving eye of the soul is continually fixed upon God, there can be no darkness at all' ... God then reigns alone. All that is in the soul is holiness to the Lord." ["The Character of a Methodist," par. 5, 11]

"What then is the perfection of which man is capable while he dwells in the body? It is the complying with that kind command, 'My son, give me thy heart'. It is the 'loving the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind'. This is the sum of Christian perfection: it is all comprised in that one word, love." [On Perfection," I.4]

"In one view, it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God. In another view, it is all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a renewal of the heart in the whole image of God, the full likeness of him that created it. In yet another, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Now take it in which of these views you please (for there is no material difference) and this is the whole and sole perfection ... which I have believed and taught for these forty years ..." [Plain Account of Christian Perfection, par. 28]

3. Wesley's Eleven-Point Summary

(Plain Account of Christian Perfection, par. 26)

There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.

It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to 'go on unto perfection' (Heb. 6:1)

It is not so late as death; for St. Paul speaks of living persons that were perfect. (Philippians 3:15)

It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to humans, nor to angels, but to God alone.

It does not make a person infallible: No one is infallible, while he or she remains in the body.

Is it sinless? It is not worthwhile to contend for a term. It is 'salvation from sin.'

It is 'perfect love' (1 John 4:18). This is the essence of it; its properties, or inseparable fruits, are, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks. (1 Thess. 5:16, etc.)

It is improvable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that those perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than they did before.

It is amissible, capable of being lost.

It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.

It is instantaneous in that there must be an actual moment when self dies and sin ceases, even though some may not perceive the instant.