

# JOHN WESLEY'S TEACHING CONCERNING PERFECTION

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## I

Wesley has often been characterized as Arminian rather than as Calvinistic. The fact that he continuously called for repentance from sin, published a journal called the *Arminian Magazine*, was severe in his strictures against predestination and unconditional election, engaged in controversial correspondence with Whitefield over the matter of election, perfection and perseverance seem to indicate a great gulf between his teaching and that of Calvin. Gulf there may be, but it need not be made to appear wider at certain points than can justly be claimed. The fact is that exclusive attention to his opposition to predestination may lead to neglect of his teaching on the relationship between faith and grace.

This is not to deny that Wesley was opposed to important Calvinistic tenets. In his sermon on Free Grace,<sup>1</sup> delivered in 1740, he states why he is opposed to the doctrine of predestination:

- (1) it makes preaching vain, needless for the elect and useless for the non-elect;
- (2) it takes away motives for following after holiness;
- (3) it tends to increase sharpness of temper and contempt for those considered to be outsiders;
- (4) it tends to destroy the comfort of religion;
- (5) it destroys zeal for good works;
- (6) it makes the whole Christian revelation unnecessary and
- (7) self-contradictory;
- (8) it represents the Lord as saying one thing and meaning

<sup>1</sup> J. Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, I (New York, 1827), 13-19.

another: God becomes more cruel and unjust than the devil.

In Wesley's correspondence with Whitefield, both men stood firm for their point of view. Now and again an overtone of predestinationism creeps into Wesley's expressions to Whitefield as in the following: "But when his time is come, God will do what man cannot; namely make us of one mind."<sup>2</sup>

But it is not entirely appropriate to speak of Wesley as "this noble English Arminian" and his doctrine as "true Arminianism" as has been done.<sup>3</sup> If Calvinism be equated with the doctrine of predestination this is possible; it is significant that these designations are taken from a work which defines Arminianism in its subtitle as "A Revolt from Predestinationism."

But Wesley also contended against teaching the necessary inherence of sin in the redeemed, the denial of which was a tenet of Calvinism as well. This led to his doctrine of sanctification. The current orthodoxy not only limited the number of the elect but also the degree to which the salvation of Christ might be attained. Wesley's teaching of free salvation meant that "whosoever will" might come, and having come, might be freed from all conscious sin, and thus know a state of "entire sanctification." It was, for Wesley, a matter of making God's grace freely available that led to such a doctrine, a grace first made known to him through being experienced. Because the effect of such preaching was to promote revival, the term "Arminian" was attached to Methodist revivalism, as the following citation, written in 1899, illustrates:

At the present time, Arminian is a term associated with Methodism, and so with religious zeal, pointed preachings and revivals, but there was no Methodism at that time [*i.e.* before the Great Awakening] in this country, [*i.e.* the U.S.] and the term

<sup>2</sup> Letter, August 9, 1740. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (London, 1931), I, 351. Henceforth referred to as *Letters*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. George L. Curtiss, *Arminianism in History* (Cincinnati, 1894), pp. 172, 165.

seems to have been used to designate any kind of laxity and indifference in Christian life. <sup>4</sup>

When put to such usage a term becomes a theological swear word, a symbol to express hostile feeling toward an opponent. Thus it is robbed of clear meaning and becomes useless for accurate description.

Wesley's affinity to and divergence from Arminian teaching may be seen by examining their respective accounts of faith in the experience of conversion. Calvin had made the sovereignty of God a key-category of his thought. As this related to conversion it meant that to the sinner who could not choose God, since his will was corrupt and since he did not possess the capacity to choose between good and evil, it must be granted that God find him and he be given the divine grace. Thus there was no human control of salvation (as in Catholicism) nor an independent remaking of the self (as in humanism). It was all of God. Thus saving faith is related only to the divine causation. If man believes, it is a work of divine grace: faith is not a virtue which man has independently and which he can give to God to gain special favor. In contrast, faith came to be regarded by the Arminians as a kind of imperfect righteousness, a lesser work, which was regarded by God as obedience and through which means the sinner could receive acceptance.

Wesley was opposed both to extreme Calvinism and also to the humanistic tendencies of the eighteenth century. In reference to the former it is instructive to set two statements side by side. The first is contained in a letter to John Newton:

You have admirably well expressed what I mean by an opinion contradistinguished from an essential doctrine. Whatever is "compatible with a love to Christ and a work of grace" I term an opinion. And certainly the holding Particular Election and Final Perseverance is compatible with these. "Yet what fundamental error," you ask, "have you opposed with half that frequency and *vehemence* as

<sup>4</sup> G. N. Boardman, *A History of New England Theology* (New York, 1899), p. 31.

you have these opinions?" So doubtless you have heard. But it is not true. I have printed near fifty sermons, and only one of these opposes them at all. I preach about eight hundred sermons in a year; and, taking one year with another, for twenty years past I have not preached eight sermons in a year upon the subject. But "How many of your best preachers have been thrust out because they dissented from you in these particulars?" Not one, best or worst, good or bad, was ever *thrust out* on this account. <sup>5</sup>

The second is taken from the minutes of the second of the conferences which Wesley held with his assistants, 1745: <sup>6</sup>

Q. 22: Does not the *truth of the Gospel* lie very near both to Calvinism and Antinomianism?

A. *Indeed it does, as it were within hair's breadth*, so that it is altogether foolish and sinful, because we do not *quite agree* either with one or the other, to run from them as far as ever we can.

Q. 23: Wherein may we come to *the very edge of Calvinism*?

A. (1) In ascribing all good to free grace, (2) in denying all natural free will, and all power antecedent to grace, and (3) in excluding all merit from man even for what he has or does by the grace of God. <sup>7</sup>

These passages indicate that:

1. Wesley's intention in denying the doctrines of Calvinism mentioned was not polemic.

2. These doctrines were not denied because they were Calvinistic: this is obvious since on the question of free will and grace he was prepared to come to "the very edge of Calvinism."

3. A denial of Predestination and Election was not a main emphasis; it formed a very small part of his preaching.

4. Disagreement over one issue does not mean an abandonment of the whole system: thus Wesley agreed with the doctrine of conversion as a work of grace, but disagreed over the question of its universal availability. For Wesley, faith was not a unique human work. God requires faith as a condi-

<sup>5</sup> Letter, May 14, 1765, in *Letters*, IV, 297. Italics in text.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley held conferences with his assistants periodically in which doctrinal questions were the chief subjects of discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in G. C. Cell, *Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York, 1935), p. 249. Italics in Cell's text.

tion of salvation, but the requirement is itself a gift. Grace gives what God requires. Wesley made plain that the salvation of man is "by grace through faith" in his sermon delivered at Oxford, June 18, 1738, entitled, "Salvation by Faith." Note the following excerpts:

If sinful men find favour with God, it is "grace upon grace! "... Grace is the source, faith the condition, of salvation.

Of yourselves cometh neither your faith nor your salvation: "It is the gift of God;" the free, undeserved gift; the faith through which ye are saved, as well as the salvation which he of his own good pleasure, his mere favour, annexes thereto. That ye believe is one instance of his grace; that, believing, ye are saved, another. <sup>8</sup>

While the salvation is *sola gratia*, it is universally available:

"Whosoever believeth on Him shall be saved," is, and must be, the foundation of all our preaching; that is, must be preached first. . . . Whom shall we except? <sup>9</sup>

The free gift is for all without exception. While a Bishop Butler may propose the dilemma that unless there were some prior merit, God would be unjust in justifying only those He does, Wesley relies "on the experiential confirmations of the Word of God and not on any rational consistencies or inconsistencies." <sup>10</sup> Thus it is that a synthesis is possible. The unity is an experienced one, not a logical one. In the moment of freedom from sin's guilt or its power, man knows it is none of his doing. That Wesley gives primacy to the free grace of God springs from a recognition of this fact. In this he is in agreement with Calvin. But the fact that this grace is not limited unconditionally is Wesley's point of divergence from Calvinism.

Wesley was not attempting to establish the absoluteness of human freedom. The basis of his teaching is not the natural ability of man but the grace of God. Man is unable to produce faith. It must be given him by God; this being so, salvation

<sup>8</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, V (Grand Rapids, n.d.), 7-16. Excerpts form pp. 8, 13, 15. Henceforth referred to as *Works*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Cell, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

is by grace alone. But does not faith presuppose itself? On Wesley's terms no man can be saved, but men are saved.

## II

Wesley defined the object of Methodism as being to "spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land." An examination of the sermons, articles and hymns of the Wesleyan movement amply bears this out. The work which treats of this most comprehensively is the "Plain Account of Christian Perfection." In the following exposition this is our main source. Wesley's thesis is: "In conformity, therefore, both to the doctrine of St. John and the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion: A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin." <sup>11</sup>

The doctrine was a biblical one, based on New Testament teaching, in which grace had superseded law. Wesley denied that any Old Testament personalities had attained holiness; the regimen of law was not sufficient for this: Wesley here laid stress upon divine grace as the source of enabling power. It will be remembered that one of the points upon which Coelestius, companion of Pelagius, was condemned at the council of Carthage and subsequently, was that among other things he taught "that before the coming of Christ there were persons without sin." <sup>12</sup>

Augustine was willing to admit that holiness is possible. Indeed, he strongly asserted the fact. However, it is only by means of grace, and so could not be attained under a dispensation of law. Accordingly, he commended Pelagius for "rightly replying that a man by God's help and grace is able to live ἀναμάρτητος, that is to say, without sin." <sup>13</sup> Between Pelagius' attenuated misunderstanding of grace and Augustine's misconception of it as almost a physical force, Wesley did

<sup>11</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London, 1952), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *De Peccato Originale*, XI (NPNF, V, 240, 241).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

not have to choose. He linked his doctrine of perfection through grace to personal categories. He defined perfection in terms of love, love to God and man. Perfection was to "love nothing, but for his sake,"<sup>14</sup> to please God, not self.

Wesley's doctrine was based on passages of Scripture (for example Mt 5 : 48; Jn 17 : 20-23; 1 Th 5 : 23; Gal 2 : 20; 1 Jn 4 : 17; 1 : 7, 9). He used 1 Jn 1 : 7, 9 to indicate that the experience of perfection is one to be expected here and now and not to be awaited at the moment of death. "Cleanseth," he points out, is the present, not the future tense; thus cleansing, and that means perfection, is to be expected here and now after the experience of justification. Note his propositions,

That this faith, and consequently the salvation which it brings is spoken of as given in an instant. That it is supposed that instant may be now; that we need not stay another moment; that "now," the very "now is the accepted time; now is the day of this full salvation."<sup>15</sup>

The reason why it is not given as soon as it might be is that it is not expected. To those who do not expect it sooner, it is given a short while before death. This delay is not necessary however. Ideally it should follow justification. Wesley believed and taught that, in an instant, perfection was "wrought in the soul" by a simple act of faith. The two experiences of conversion and perfection are to be distinguished. The former is preparatory to the latter. He denies that they are simultaneous, stating that he is not aware of a single such case.

In defining his understanding of the believer's experience of holiness, Wesley specifies particular sins from which he would be free. Such are pride, desire, self-will, anger, evil thinking.<sup>16</sup> These are things which can and should be recog-

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27 (cf. p. 41).

<sup>16</sup> It was a matter of controversy between the "extinction" group and the "suspension" group whether a person would have to battle against an evil will in order to suppress it or whether it was so sanctified as not to make its sinful demands. Wesley preferred to say that the evil desires and thoughts did not come into expression. "The expulsive

nized and of these in himself the sanctified person has no knowledge. Perfection is defined on a deeper level as being in effect nothing "contrary to pure love."<sup>17</sup> This oscillation in the significance given to the term "sin" tends somewhat to confusion. He did not like the term "sinless perfection" because it is not scriptural, although later he wrote that while not contending for the term "sinless" he did not raise objections against it. He appears to mean that the actual adjective "sinless" is not used in the New Testament in reference to perfection, therefore he would avoid using it. However he did use the expression, but its lack of consistently sharp edges is undoubtedly due to the press of the controversies on the topic, in which he was engaged. A later Methodist leader contended that "only *recognized* sins are sins to Wesley,"<sup>18</sup> and that Wesley was concerned to teach that it is possible to be free of conscious sin here and now. Flew summarises Wesley's position in the following words:

Evidently Wesley is using the word sin in two distinct senses. Sin means either any falling short of the divine ideal for humanity, or it means a voluntary transgression of a known law of God which it was within our power to obey. It was only in the latter sense that Wesley maintained we could be free from sin.<sup>19</sup>

A person could be sinless and yet make mistakes of various kinds. "Omissions...are all deviations from the perfect law.... Yet they are not properly sins," "a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions." Then there is the curious statement made that even although these are not sins, they still need the atoning blood of Christ for their cleansing. An omission or a mistaken opinion, even a mistaken word or action, provided that it "power of a new affection" had eradicated them. Note the following: "Aforetime when an evil thought came in, they looked up, and it vanished away. But now it does not come in, there being no room for this in a soul which is full of God." *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Mrs. Maitland, May 12, 1763, in *Works*, XII, 257.

<sup>18</sup> W. E. Sangster, *The Pure in Heart* (Nashville, 1954), p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> R. N. Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology* (London, 1934), p. 326.

spring from love, is not a sin. "However it cannot bear the rigour of God's justice, but needs the atoning blood."<sup>20</sup>

Is there any sure way of knowing that one has this experience of perfection and if so should one claim to have it and speak of having it? It is an interesting fact that while Wesley was so certain of the possibility, he never claimed the attainment of perfection himself. He urged his preachers to declare the doctrine, noting that as it was preached the spiritual health of the church was improved: he was willing to consider sympathetically the claim of others who were assured of this perfect love. While one could not infallibly know if another had the experience, there were certain indications that provided "reasonable proof." These were: (1) clear evidence of exemplary behaviour, (2) an account of the time and manner of the change, (3) unblameableness in words and actions.<sup>21</sup>

The individual himself could be assured not by any feeling but by "the testimony of the Spirit witnessing his entire sanctification as clearly as his justification." He is thus to have an entire renewal plus a consciousness of this renewal: this gives assurance of the validity of the experience. He is no longer conscious of anything but love as the animating power of the life. This consciousness being present "he is not only happy, but safe."<sup>22</sup> Here the proof of the experience is made to rest upon the testimony of the subject, which is based upon an inner certainty. To this test of the validity of a Christian life may be compared that of Jonathan Edwards:

Many have taken it as "an inward immediate suggestion..." not observing the manner in which the word "witness" or "testimony" is often used in the New Testament where such terms signify, not a mere declaring and asserting a thing to be true, but holding forth evidence from where a thing may be argued and proved to be true.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Wesley, *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> J. Edwards in J. E. Smith, ed., *A Treatise on the Religious Affections* (New Haven, 1959), p. 231.

“The seal of the Spirit is grace itself in the soul.”<sup>24</sup> Another point at which the two revival preachers might be compared is on the question of the activity of God in the process of producing Christian experience. The title of one of Edwards’ treatises, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,” indicates amply his point of view: Wesley also always gave the activity of God the primary role. While a pattern could be discerned in this activity, it was not a stereotyped one: God does not always act through the same procedures or stages. He dispenses His gifts as He pleases:

God’s usual method is one thing, but His sovereign pleasure is another. He has wise reasons both for hastening and retarding His work. Sometimes He comes suddenly and unexpected; sometimes not till we have long looked for Him.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the experience of perfection is not to be limited only to one who has been a believer for a long period of time. What is important is not length of time but attitude. The above statement is a rebuke for the “coldness, negligence and unbelief” of believers. The reason why the experience of perfection is not obtained is because it is not expected, or because it is not adequately understood. It is no attainment to be worked up. It is not a product of works. Because it is a product of faith it may be had instantaneously. John Fletcher, who followed Wesley’s doctrine closely, wrote a small work entitled “Christian Perfection.” Fletcher, quoting Wesley profusely in the course of a less redundant and better arranged treatise than Wesley’s *Plain Account*, is in entire agreement on this point.

Certainly you may look for it now, if you believe it is by faith. And by this token, you may surely know whether you seek it by faith or by works. If by works, you want something to be done first, before you are sanctified. . . . If you seek it by faith, you may expect it as you are; and if as you are, then expect it now.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>25</sup> Wesley, *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup> J. Fletcher, *Christian Perfection* (Barbee, 1796), pp. 77, 78. “The attainableness of Christian perfection is one of the cornerstones in the grand structure of Christian doctrine as presented in the gospel of Christ.” *Ibid.*, (American ed.; Nashville, 1860), p. 83.

The key points in Fletcher's treatment of the topic are as follows:

1. The doctrine of perfection rests solidly upon the precepts and promises of Scripture. The injunctions are made in the light of a possibility for which the promises received supply the power.

2. It is necessary to have clear ideas of this perfection, setting the ideals neither too high in an angelic perfection, nor too low in the morality of a good-natured heathen.

3. While free grace is primary and is passively received by the believer's faith "the way to perfection is by the due combination of prevenient assisting free grace and of submissive assisted free will." Thus the believer is saved on the one hand from Pharisaism and on the other from Antinomianism.

4. Instantaneous sanctification is possible but not inevitable; since it is possible it is to be sought here and now by faith and by the works of faith. Thus will the believer avoid Pharisaic works and "solifidian sloth."

5. Resolutions are to be made, in an acknowledgement of personal weakness but divine strength, indwelling sin is to be repented of, self-denial to be practised.

Neither Wesley nor Fletcher held that such a condition was unchangeably permanent. Both strongly denied it in fact. The latter's "Address to Perfect Christians" is an attempt to prevent the sanctified one from falling. Certainly there is to be no assumption that the state is now fixed. Fletcher roundly declares: "The doctrine of the absolute perseverance of the saints is the first card which the devil played against man."<sup>27</sup> And one he is still playing. Suffering, contradiction and opposition are not to cause surprise to the believer; they are to be accepted and to promote humble love, self-denial and modesty.

While Wesley did not claim holiness, Fletcher did, as well as many other less worthy claimants. Wesley was prepared

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

to put the best construction upon the reports he heard. "But the claimants of perfection were not all Fletchers and, as Wesley himself admitted, some who professed it 'made the very name of Perfection stink in the nostrils.' " <sup>28</sup>

### III

In criticism it may be pointed out that the distinction Wesley made between "involuntary transgressions" and wilful sins is a tenuous one, and one which it is not possible consistently to carry through. A mistake in judgment may cause one's love to be misdirected and this is then not a deliverance from "all tempers contrary to pure love." Why too, if an error of judgment or ignorance is not sin is it necessary to be cleansed by the atoning work of Christ? It is expressly stated that "involuntary transgressions" are not sins. Is the criterion for what is sin the individual consciousness of it as such? Of course there is culpable ignorance: but quite apart from the wider dimensions, the definitions of sin given by Wesley in different places do not completely harmonize with one another. Wesley taught emphatically the doctrine of total depravity with no attempt to soften its asperity, remove its sting. Like Augustine he was in great earnest with reference to the doctrine of Original Sin. "The Wesleyan representation... goes the limit with Augustine." <sup>29</sup> The important matter for Wesley was to state with no diminution the seriousness of man's sinful *condition*. Wesley's statements concerning the sinful condition of man are not in complete harmony with his statements concerning holiness. For the one who is perfect, there is no conscious knowledge of wrong, he is no longer cognizant of dispositions toward evil. But he may still make errors of judgment.

In body and mind the perfect Christian is still finite; he makes mistakes in judgment as long as he lives; these mistakes in judgment

<sup>28</sup> Sangster, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>29</sup> G. C. Cell, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

occasion mistakes in practice, and mistakes in practice often have bad moral consequences. Thus perfection in the sense of infallibility does not exist on the face of the earth.<sup>30</sup>

The problem is to speak in such a way that there is no conflict between the definition of original sin, and the definition of the state of the sanctified believer. For Wesley there is no conscious sinning after the moment of sanctification: there may be ignorance and mistaken judgment but, in the state of sanctification, there is no consciousness of sin. In this state there is progression. If this is so, there is progress in holiness. Wesley did not teach that holiness was a static condition.

The confusion lies in the failure to make explicit the relation between original sin and sanctification. If man is only holy when there is no consciousness of sin, why is it important to speak of a moment when sanctification takes place? What is this "now" of sanctification? How is it to be related to the experience of conversion? Moreover, if there is progress in the light of what had not yet been attained, for that is what progress means, is this not progress in a state of sinfulness? The relationship between original sin and sanctification has not been presented as clearly as it might. He even admits that it is the lack of consciousness of sin that is the evidence for sanctification. He says that he does not know whether sin is *in fact* present or not. So he writes:

But is there no sin in those who are perfect in love? I believe not: but be that as it may, they feel none. . . . And whether sin is suspended, or extinguished, I will not dispute: It is enough that they feel nothing but love.<sup>31</sup>

We ask in the light of this profession of ignorance: about what is Wesley in doubt here? If the identification of sin with the consciousness of violated law is the only meaning of sin, there should be no doubt as to its absence. Wesley had

<sup>30</sup> William R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (New York, 1946), p. 242.

<sup>31</sup> Letter to Mrs. Maitland, May 12, 1763, in *Works*, XII, 257, 258.

another meaning of the term "sin" in mind as he evinced the skepticism of this letter. For Wesley there is sin which is not known sin. There are two possibilities for interpreting Wesley on this point. He is (1) either referring to original sin which he took so seriously, and is not willing to decide whether it is eradicated or not even when it does not come to expression in sinful act; or (2) he has a more subtle distinction in mind: namely, the commission of an act which, were it recognized as a violation of law, would be a sinful act. It is not sinful because it is unrecognized. But this seems too artificial and subtle a distinction for Wesley. We shall not therefore consider it further. Rather we shall propose that the relating of original sin to the process-state of sanctification had not been carried out by Wesley as it might have been.<sup>32</sup>

This perfection of which Wesley speaks does not allow

<sup>32</sup> The judgment that Wesley's doctrine of original sin was a means of emphasizing the need for repentance and that he had not related the doctrine of original sin with that of sanctification is clear from such paragraphs as the following.

"God does produce the Foetus of Man, as He does of Trees, empowering the one and the other to propagate each after its kind. And a *sinful man* propagates after his kind, another *sinful man*. Yet God *produces*, in the sense above mentioned, the man, but not the sin." Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience* (Bristol, 1757), p. 171. (Italics ours.)

"For I testify unto you, there is no peace with God, no Pardon, no Heaven for you in this state. There is but a step betwixt you and eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord. If the brittle thread of life, which may be broken with a touch, in a moment, or ever you are aware, be broken *while you are in this state*, you are ruined for ever and without remedy. But come ye speedily to Jesus Christ. He hath cleansed as vile souls as yours. Confess your sins and He will both forgive your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness." *Ibid.*, p. 52. (Italics ours.)

This judgment is clearly correct in spite of the very striking and emphatic descriptions of the corruption of man's actions and thoughts (cf. *e.g.*, *ibid.*, pp. 514-515). He is concerned here to set forth as sharply as possible the indispensability of repentance—hence it is presented as the solution to the state of man's corruption. But when he turns to deal with the state of man after conversion the tone becomes different and the question of original sin is not given the emphasis which it has received in reference to the pre-conversion state.

the individual to be independent of Jesus Christ: it is not a perfection which fulfils the whole law. What, we may ask, is it then? Is Christian perfection a consciousness that he does not need to be forgiven? But Wesley says that one who is sanctified makes mistakes. Is it another name for justification? But Wesley distinguishes between that and perfection. Is it a way of saying that original sin is eradicated? But Wesley would not commit himself on that question. Is the doctrine of perfection a way of restating the meaning of Christian assurance? If that is so, why did not Wesley claim it himself? But then, if one is saved, the assurance should come at conversion? Or is there a progress toward a conviction of security that presses doubts, which are initially present and continue for a time to persist, out of the consciousness? Is the feeling that there is no known sin a development in the life of the believer later than the experience of conversion? Do we have here a two-stage doctrine of conversion, where at the second stage we reach the plateau level, after having vanquished known sin from the life and so from the consciousness? Beyond this level there may still be progress to be made. But it is made in the knowledge that the vanquishing of conscious sin lies in the past. Wesley wishes to retain the decisiveness of the change from a life of sin and the progressive character of the post-conversion life. There is progression both before and after conversion: after conversion when the certainty of forgiveness is given there is the attainment of certainty that known sin has been disposed of. That Wesley was concerned to allow for flexibility and change in the Christian life is obvious from his denial of the necessary permanence of this experience of perfection. Though man was perfect he could fall from this condition. If there is fluctuation there may, on the one hand, be a falling away, there may, on the other hand, be progress. There is a kind of "fixation" of such progress on two levels, at two points as there is both forgiveness and conquest of known sin.

We might find a parallel to the phenomenon to which Wesley is here pointing, by the use of his terminology, with that to which Friedrich Schleiermacher is pointing by the

employment of a different terminology. An interesting similarity is the employment of the same illustration: that of birth. In each case this is used to indicate, in slightly different contexts, the continuity of the preceding life with the new that comes to be. Schleiermacher points out that a period of hidden life precedes the new birth,<sup>33</sup> so that conversion is not to be distinguished from the effects of preparatory grace.<sup>34</sup> He conceives of sanctification as a progress, a process of becoming. The turning point from the life of sin is called "regeneration," the growing continuity of the new life is called "sanctification."<sup>35</sup> Sanctification means severance from participation in the common sinful life.<sup>36</sup> It is "an essential tendency of being" precisely opposite from that in the common life of sin.<sup>37</sup> "It is chiefly by this fact, that *sin can win no new ground*, that the state of sanctification is most definitely distinguished from all that went before;"<sup>38</sup> "... in spite of all fluctuations an increasing sway of the life of Christ over the flesh marks out the state of sanctification."<sup>39</sup> There is one brief sentence in which Schleiermacher treats of the problem with which Wesley is concerned. It is the following:

To sin with knowledge and with will... belongs to that fluctuating less or more found in everyone who is in the state of sanctification, where even the imperfection of a good work is often enough known and willed....<sup>40</sup>

It is by faith that, even in the state of sanctification, one can say that even after sin, he is still the child of God.<sup>41</sup>

While both writers admit the possibility of defectibility of

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 486.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 476, 477.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 505.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 512.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 514.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517.

progress within the life of sanctification, Schleiermacher's assertion of the conscious committal of sin after conversion in the state of sanctification is a more adequate one than Wesley's. The latter appears to be creating an abstract ideal which does not take into full consideration the presence and the intermittent manifestation of original sin. That he virtually but vaguely recognizes this is evident in his saying that the faults of the sanctified man, while not sins, still require the blood of the Saviour to atone for them. What can these faults be but the coming to expression of the original sin which Wesley has desired to take so seriously?

Finally, it is difficult to see that Wesley has carried through to the last his thematic contention that it is only through the faith of the believer that salvation is possible. Would it not immediately need to be added to the assertion of the sanctified, "we know that we have no known sin," the assertion, "but this does not mean we are not sinners. Even if we are not conscious of sin, we are nevertheless accepted in faith." The very claim to be thus sanctified might in itself be an example of an unconscious sin—for there are certainly those who would stumble when such a claim would be made. It certainly seems closer to experience, and thus more realistic, to assert, drawing on Luther, that where there is faith there is also acknowledgement of the fact that, with all the progress that one has made, and with all the consciousness that one does not commit this or that sin any more, in being sanctified one is *simul justus et peccator*, and therefore is sanctified by faith, as he is justified by faith; even ultimately that sanctification is a way of describing the life of faith in which one has been and continues to be justified. The only claims that one can then make are that one is reconciled to God as faith is granted to him in his response to the revelation of God. God is revealed to the man of faith, as gracious and forgiving. To continue in this condition of faith in spite of conscious sin—a conscious sin which is a diminishing quantity—is sanctification.