

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

Finally, it rouses astonishment that Dr. Harnack, defending Eusebius's date in a matter like a change of procurators, rejects it for the martyrdom of Paul, an event which Eusebius would regard as of infinitely greater importance. Harnack treats it as one of the few certainties in early Christian chronology that Paul was executed in 64, but if the day, 29th June, is rightly given by tradition, no years are open under Nero except 65-67.<sup>1</sup>

W. M. RAMSAY.

## CHRISTIAN PERFECTION.

### III.

#### THE TEACHING OF WESLEY.

IN former papers we have seen that, according to the teaching of various New Testament writers, Christ claims from all who put faith in Him unreserved devotion to His service, a devotion involving victory over all sin; that all this is wrought in them by the Holy Spirit, through faith, and in proportion to their faith; and that this faith is a confident expectation, based on the promise of God, that from this moment He will work in us whatever He requires from us. We also saw that this whole-hearted devotion is practically identical with the maturity or perfection which Christ and His Apostles set before those to whom they spoke and wrote.

A doctrine called by him *Christian Perfection* or *Entire Sanctification* was a conspicuous element of the teaching of Wesley. The effect of that teaching is seen in the great impulse given by the Methodist revival to the spiritual life

<sup>1</sup> The fire was 19-24 July; the persecution of Christians began later. Paul's trial lasted several months, see *St. Paul*, p. 361; he was probably arrested abroad in the second stage of Nero's action (*Church in R.E.*, p. 241); his previous acquittal barred arrest (*St. Paul*, p. 308), until that stage.

of the Anglo-Saxon race. This marvellous result claims for this teaching, and for this conspicuous element of it, special attention.

Wesley's teaching, more perhaps than that of any other great religious leader, was an outflow of his own spiritual life. To him theology and religion were practically identical. And no other writer has thrown open to inspection his own spiritual life as Wesley has done. In his published *Journal* and other works we see his sincerity and earnestness, his all-pervading seriousness, his eager search for truth in things divine, the clouds which at one time gathered round him, various external influences which moulded his thought and life, and the sudden transition from deep gloom into the full light of the favour of God.

A marked crisis took place on Wednesday, 24th May, 1738, which he thus describes: "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation: and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. . . . And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now I was always conqueror." This happy and sudden experience was preceded by long and earnest spiritual effort, by diligent study of the Bible, and by helpful intercourse with good men. All this is fully described in the work just quoted. Evidently this inward experience resulted from a spiritual apprehension of St. Paul's great doctrine of Justification through Faith.

This doctrine thus apprehended armed Wesley with power to proclaim to others the salvation he had himself experienced. After a three months' visit to Germany and to the Moravian settlement at Herrnhut, he began the lifelong evangelistic activity which has done so much to breathe life into English Christianity. Of the day after his arrival in England, he writes, "I began again to declare in my own country the glad tidings of salvation, preaching three times, and afterwards expounding the Holy Scripture, to a large company in the Minories. . . . The next day I went to the condemned felons in Newgate, and offered them free salvation." His *Journal* affords complete proof that the Methodist movement was born in the little gathering in Aldersgate Street, and in the heart of Wesley.

Alongside the experience described above, we note another spiritual development, which began at an earlier period and before the commencement of the *Journal*. An account of it is given in a treatise by Wesley, entitled, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. He writes: "In the year 1725, being the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's 'Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying.' . . . 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." In A.D. 1733, more than five years before he found assurance of pardon of sins, he preached a sermon, still extant, on *The Circumcision of the Heart*, in which he correctly describes the ideal life portrayed in the New Testament. This sermon he quotes in the treatise before us. "In this is perfection, and glory, and 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.' Other sacrifices from us He would not, but the living sacrifice of the heart hath He chosen. Let it be continually offered up to God through Christ in flames of holy love. And let no creature be suffered to share with Him; for He is a jealous God. His throne will He not divide with another; He will reign without a rival."

The rest of the treatise consists of abundant quotations from various writings of Wesley, from hymns published by him, from conversations at his conferences with his helpers, and from the religious experience of various persons; which prove conclusively that throughout his whole course Wesley taught the same doctrine of Christian Perfection. At the conclusion of the treatise he sums up by saying, "In one view it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one 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 neighbour as ourselves. Now take it in which of these views you please, and this is the whole and sole perfection, as a train of writings prove to a demonstration, which I have believed and taught for these forty years, from the year 1725 to the year 1765."

Wesley raises the question whether this experience is instantaneous or gradual. In proof that it is sometimes instantaneous, he appeals to cases known to him; but says that in other cases it was so gradual that the possessor "did not perceive the instant when it was wrought." But he assumes that in all cases, whether perceived or not, it was

actually instantaneous. He also teaches that it is obtained by faith.

A much more concise, and clear, and complete account of Christian Perfection, and an admirable summary of the distinctive elements of Wesley's teaching, are found in his sermon (No. 43) on *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, in the sixth volume of his published works. He describes salvation as including Justification, which he says is another word for pardon, and the New Birth, and Sanctification which begins in the moment of justification and gradually develops into "entire sanctification," which is a "full salvation from all our sins." This last he calls "perfection," which, he says, is "love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul."

He teaches that faith is the one condition both of justification and sanctification. "Everyone that believes is sanctified, whatever else he has or has not. In other words, no man is sanctified till he believes: every man when he believes is sanctified." He adds that, as for justification repentance also is necessary, so there must be a sort of repentance consequent on justification and preceding sanctification: and with great clearness he harmonises this teaching with the statement that faith is its one condition. He then asks, "But what is that faith whereby we are sanctified, saved from sin, and perfected in love?" This question he answers by saying that "it is a divine evidence and conviction, first, that God hath promised it in the Holy Scripture . . . secondly, that what God hath promised, He is able to perform . . . thirdly, that He is able to do it now . . . one thing more, a divine evidence and conviction that He doeth it. In that hour it is done: God says to the inmost soul, 'According to thy faith be it unto thee!' Then is the soul pure from every spot of sin: it is clean from all unrighteousness."

The above teaching seems to me to be in the main in

close accord with that of the New Testament. Wesley has done valuable service by calling attention to the distinction between justification, which is a change of relation between God and man, and on the other hand the new birth and sanctification, which are inward changes; and to the indissoluble connection between the relative and the inward change. He guarded from immoral abuse his doctrine of justification, by teaching again and again that any fancied pardon of sins which is not followed by increasing victory over sin is worthless. He also did great service by teaching that God claims from all His servants the unreserved devotion of all their powers, possessions, time, opportunities, *i.e.* of all they are and have, for the advancement of His Kingdom. This doctrine, he appropriately calls "Entire Sanctification." It is the sanctification of the entire man. A correlative doctrine is that whatever God claims from us He is ready to work in us by His infinite power, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. A third correlative doctrine is that this divine inworking is conditioned only by faith, that He is ready here and now to work, in all who accept His promise so to do, this full salvation. These doctrines have been held in all ages by the greatest and holiest teachers of all Churches. But no one has put them before the English people, of all classes, so fully and so forcibly as Wesley has done. This teaching did much to create the Evangelical revival of the last century, and its influence is felt to-day in the whole religious life of the English people.

Wesley's teaching that this full salvation is sometimes gradual and at other times instantaneous, or rather that it is always instantaneous but that sometimes we are unconscious of it, need cause no difficulty. For, in reference both to justification and sanctification, faith is in some cases instantaneous, in others gradual. And the conditional blessing must vary with the condition. Sometimes

the way of salvation is put before a man, after long search possibly, for the first time clearly and fully: and in a never-to-be-forgotten moment he embraces the promise and lays hold of the blessing promised. Such was the moment in which Wesley himself, while listening to the words of Luther read, passed into the full light of the pardoning grace of God. In other cases, the surrender of faith is gradual; and the light and power of the new life are gradual also. There may also be successive crises, as fresh elements of Gospel truth are successively grasped and appropriated.

We need not object to Wesley's teaching that there is a sort of repentance following justification and preceding entire sanctification. Naturally we think of sin first as involving penalty; and from this penalty we seek escape by pardon. This we obtain by accepting the Gospel pardon for all who believe. This Gospel of forgiveness is a revelation of God, and of the infinite love manifested in the death of Christ. In the light of this revelation we see the evil of sin as never before. We become conscious of inward defilement and bondage, and we cry earnestly for deliverance. Surely this may be described as a higher or deeper kind of repentance. And without it we can no more accept the promise of full salvation than at an earlier stage we could accept the promise of pardon without an earnest resolve to forsake sin. This clearly-stated and valuable parallel, we owe to Wesley.

Some will repudiate Wesley's strong preference for a conscious and sudden transition to full salvation. "It is infinitely desirable, were it the will of God, that it should be done instantaneously; that the Lord should destroy sin 'by the breath of His mouth' in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. And so He generally does; a plain fact of which there is evidence enough to satisfy any unprejudiced person." For this last statement, Wesley had



no sufficient ground. He judged simply from the cases which came under his own observation. But his own day and his own surroundings were exceptional. When, after long spiritual torpor, a free and full salvation is first preached, we may expect many cases of sudden illumination. But as Christian teaching spreads and is taught from childhood onwards and the young are trained in the light of the Gospel, sudden transitions will become more rare. Moreover, a spiritual crisis in the past is a most unsafe ground for present faith and hope. Whatever we have done or experienced in the past, God promises us to-day the fulness of the new life in Christ. This promise, not our past experience, is the rock on which we stand securely.

Probably Wesley's preference for instantaneous salvation was prompted by his own experience. This reminds us that the more closely theological teaching bears on spiritual life the more liable it is to be moulded and warped by subjective influences.

Wesley teaches that this full salvation may be lost. This implies that it is conditioned by continuance in faith. But he admits that for twenty years after he found peace with God he was "not thoroughly convinced of this." This admission reveals the gradual development of Wesley's thought on the great subject before us. And that for long years he did not know that full salvation might be lost, reveals the unchanging constancy of his own faith and loyalty to Christ. He teaches also that "it is constantly preceded and followed by a gradual work." It was, to him, not a resting-point attained, but a starting-point for fresh progress.

In one important point which has recently been matter of dispute, Wesley's teaching was indefinite and incomplete. He teaches frequently that they who put faith in Christ are saved from evil thoughts; and he explains

clearly what thoughts are evil. He argues that, since their hearts are no longer evil, evil thoughts cannot proceed from them. This suggests that there are in them no evil tendencies, and that temptation can come to them only from without. This teaching needs to be carefully guarded.

Every sinful act or thought tends to form a sinful habit of action or thought; and these habits, which are the accumulated force of all our past sins, are a hostile power in us to-day, drawing, or sometimes apparently forcing, us along the path we have trodden in the past. In not a few cases, sinful tendencies are evidently inherited from ancestors. And the whole race inherits from its first father moral bondage. These habits and tendencies are in many cases closely connected with the bodily form received from our ancestors and from Adam. Their force is sometimes almost irresistible. Yet without complete victory over them we cannot give to God the devotion He claims. Of these evil tendencies, the appetite for intoxicating drink is a good example. It is embedded in the drunkard's bodily and mental and moral constitution; and in some cases is inherited from others. It is driving him to ruin.

What salvation does the Gospel offer in this case? It will rescue the drunkard completely from the otherwise irresistible and terrible power of the habit which he has formed by repeated indulgence in excessive drinking. Christ will give him by His own mighty power working in him through the Holy Spirit complete victory day by day over his besetting sin; and he who was once a helpless sot will become henceforth a strictly sober man. If so, he is saved fully, and cleansed, from his sin.

But I venture to suggest that even in this case, however complete his faith in Christ and his abhorrence of his own sin, the reformed drunkard will or may be still conscious of his old habit as a present hostile force, a force which his

own unaided power cannot overcome. But, if he abide in faith, he will be daily conscious of a Hand from above overcoming this hostile power within. And each day's victory will weaken the old habit of intemperance and go to form a habit of sobriety. The old habit is a present peril; and demands constant watchfulness. But he who puts faith in Christ knows that in this conflict he does not stand alone: and his life is a song of thanks to Him who gives the victory. Thus does Jesus save us from our sins.

My reason for the above suggestion is that in the case supposed the promises of the Gospel are already fulfilled. For temptation, even though it be from within as a result of previous indulgence in sin, does not defile or weaken until yielded to. Consequently the promise to cleanse from all sin does not necessarily involve annihilation of all inward tendencies towards sin. They are conquerors over sin who have complete victory over each temptation as it arises. So long as they abide in faith, the cross of Christ stands as an impassable barrier between them and sin. In this sense, while still striving against it, they are dead to sin.

For the above teaching, I cannot claim definitely the authority of Wesley. But, so far as I know, he has not written anything which contradicts it. This aspect of the subject lay apparently outside his mental horizon. In the presence of his unswerving loyalty to God and simple faith, temptation to known sin seems to have had little or no power. And this somewhat unfitted him to analyse the temptations which to weaker natures are so real and so dangerous.

We must guard against two errors. On the one hand, we may claim here and now full deliverance from all stain or bondage of sin: but on the other hand we cannot gain at once by faith the position we should have had if neither we nor our first father had ever sinned. From some of

Wesley's remarks we might infer that in those who put full faith in Christ the curse of original sin is removed. This was not his real meaning. Carefully taken as a whole, his teaching, so far as it goes, is good and most valuable. But each part of it must be read in the light of the whole. Others seem to teach that while life lasts our victory over sin can be only partial. But Paul bids us reckon ourselves to be dead to sin in Christ. Unless by faith we are completely saved from sin, this reckoning would be incorrect. And John teaches that the blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin.

Wesley appeals, in proof of his teaching, to certain persons who professed to enjoy this full salvation. Such appeals must be received with extreme caution. Those who have witnessed the lives of saintly Christians will listen with respect to whatever they say about their inward experience. But such experience is seldom a secure basis for broad theological inferences. Wesley describes as very unsatisfactory some who in his day professed to enjoy perfect love.

One more criticism. The words *perfect* and *perfection* and the term *perfect love* as used by Wesley seem to me inappropriate. They do not correctly reproduce in English the meaning of the Greek original. No one would speak, as the Greeks did, of a full-grown man as *perfect*. The words *mature* or *full-grown* are much better equivalents. Moreover, if we use the term *perfection*, it must be carefully guarded. And it is a great drawback to any term that, unless carefully guarded, it is liable to serious misunderstanding. The best terms for describing Wesley's doctrine are Full Salvation, or Entire Sanctification, or better still, Sanctification through Faith.

It is very remarkable that in the chronological account given in the treatise on *Christian Perfection* Wesley does not refer, even while quoting a conversation three months

later, to the great crisis of May, 1738. For this omission I can give no satisfactory explanation, except possibly lapse of time.

From the above will appear how great is the debt of all English-speaking churches to the teaching of Wesley. We need not wonder that here and there it is open to trifling criticism. His treatise on *Christian Perfection* bears witness to the immaturity of his own thought. For he does not hesitate to correct some of his earlier statements, and he admits, in one important point, the development of his own opinion. Amid his ceaseless activity he had no time to give to his teaching scientific precision. And what he left incomplete no one has been found to complete. His doctrine of Entire Sanctification remains now as he left it. We have good devotional books of a desultory kind. But we greatly need a scientific exposition, an offspring of the mature and consecrated thought of the age in which we live, of the great salvation which Christ purchased for us by His death and left as a legacy to His Church.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.

### THE PROLOGUE TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN.

IT is one of the accepted results of New Testament interpretation that the Gospel of John is constructed on a somewhat elaborate plan. Commentators have for the most part regarded the first eighteen verses as an introduction, the design of which is to set forth the Gospel in miniature. There is however diversity of judgment as to the lines on which the Gospel develops, a common opinion being that it displays the progress of faith and unbelief, the former strengthening into assured victory, while the obstinacy of the latter grows more tragic as the story of the life of Jesus advances. If this be the main theme of the Gospel, there is