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Matt Friedeman

Wesley Biblical Seminary

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A Plain Account of Christian Perfection

Matt Friedeman
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John Wesley's classic, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, was penned as the Wesleyan Revival of the eighteenth century matured and its premier doctrine – perfection or full salvation – required clarification. *A Plain Account* provides an apology for Wesley's perfection doctrine. After several minor revisions during his lifetime, it stands as a comprehensive and representative display of the Wesleyan understanding of full salvation.

Wesley's works provide a substantial corpus on the matter of sanctification, of course. But this masterpiece offers a more concise explanation for those inquisitive about the general direction of Wesley's thoughts on the matter, developed over decades of writing, preaching, singing, and instruction.

Some consider Wesley's writing style in this classic problematic; it is not presented in the form of a systematic theology, as many modern readers might prefer. I propose that his technique has endured over time precisely because of this style, which resonates today more than ever: a series of concise entries ideal for those with short attention spans. Wesley's use of varied, usually brief and multi-dimensional theological, practical, biographical and spiritual data, coupled with his biblical arguments, created a classic that has resonated with readers for well over 200 years.

The diaristic style of *A Plain Account*, reminiscent of Pascal's *Pensées*, includes hymns, lists, testimonies, Wesley's characteristic question-and-answer format, and his powerful prose – all intended to usher Methodists toward inward holiness and prove to doubters that he had maintained a consistent position on this matter from his Oxford days to 1763. Addressing a topic that was controversial even during his ministry, Wesley continues the debate on the issue of holiness and counsels readers to experience perfect love both spiritually and behaviorally. Indeed, according to Thomas Oden, the crux of the matter was that

He thought he had consistently held to the expectation that the Holy Spirit intends to transform our behavior, not partially but completely, and if not now, in due time when we become more fully responsive....Wesley urged that all preachers in his connection of spiritual formation make a point of teaching the way of holiness to believers “constantly, strongly and explicitly,” and that all class leaders should be attentive to this doctrine and “continually agonize” for its experiential appropriation.¹

¹ Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings*, Vol. 2: Christ and Salvation (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 9.

A year or two later, Wesley, was deeply impacted by William Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

These convinced me, 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.

Will any considerate man say, that this is carrying matters too far? Or that anything less is due to Him who has given Himself for us, than to give Him ourselves, all we have, and all we are?

When Wesley, in 1729, began a thorough study of Scripture on this issue, he uncovered the "indispensable necessity of having 'the mind which was in Christ,' and of 'walking as Christ also walked.'" He notes the fundamental convictions that influenced his Christian perfection journey: "...not some part only, but *all* the mind which was in Him; and of walking as He walked, not only in many or in most respect, but in *all* things."⁶ The case could certainly be made that it wasn't just Taylor, a Kempis and Law that introduced these thoughts. Thomas Oden avers that "The rest of Wesley's long life expressed the embodiment of this teaching that he had deeply appropriated so early, first at home under the instruction of his mother, Susannah, and in his early twenties at Oxford before the time of his ordination."⁷

Wesley then synthesizes a sermon given in 1733, titled "The Circumcision of the Heart," which detailed several overarching precepts: that man can be cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and that the first great commandment – Love God with all your heart – unifies the personality of the believer around the one great emphasis of love. "Let every affection, and thought, and word, and action, be subordinate to this."⁸ Wesley, in the conclusion of his sermon, reiterates the all-ness language.

[God] will reign without a rival.

Be no design, no desire admitted there, but what has Him for its ultimate object.

Let all your thoughts, words, and works tend to His glory.

Let your soul be filled with so entire a love to Him that you may love nothing but for His sake.

Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to His glory in all our actions.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Oden, 239.

⁸ John Wesley, 138.

brother were said to “dishonor Christ” by asserting that God “saveth to the uttermost” by maintaining that He might reign in hearts alone and that all things could be subdued to Himself.¹⁴

Defense mode

Wesley masterfully uses a variety of means to refute the supposed error that there is no way to be “all” or “entire” or “saved to the uttermost” or “possessed whole.” First, he is compelled to clarify in what sense Christians are, and are not, perfect. He does so in an essay that lasts some sixteen paragraphs. Briefly, perfect Christians are not perfect in knowledge, not free from ignorance, nor from mistake. They are not free from infirmities, such as weakness or tardiness of understanding, or impropriety of language or lack of grace in conversation or behavior. In this sense, all people of reason can concur; there will be no absolute perfection on earth. Wesley wrestles with a number of Scriptures and biblical arguments put forth by his opponents¹⁵:

- “A just man falleth seven times.” (Prov. 24:16) – No mention of falling into sin. The meaning is falling into temporal affliction.
- “There is no man that sinneth not.” (1 Kings 8:46) – Thus it was in the days of Solomon and then from Solomon to Christ. But with John’s gospel we can now say that “he that is born of God sinneth not.” (1 John 5:18)
- “But the apostles themselves committed sin, Peter by dissembling (Gal. 2:11-14) and Paul by his sharp contention with Barnabas (Acts 15:39). Says Wesley, Suppose they did, will you argue thus, ‘If two of the apostles once committed sin, then all other Christians in all ages do and must commit sin as long as they live’? Nay, God forbid we should thus speak.”
- But St. John himself says, ‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves’ and ‘If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.’ (1 Jn. 1:18, 1 Jn. 1:10). Wesley: “1) the tenth verse fixes the sense of the eighth: ‘If we say we have no sin’ in the former being explain by ‘if we say we have not sinned’ in the latter verse. 2) The point under consideration is not whether we have or have not sinned heretofore, and neither of these verses asserts that we do sin or commit sin now. 3) The ninth verse explains both the eighth and the tenth: ‘If we confess our sins, he is faith and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’”

soul.” Letter to JW from Whitefield, Nov. 9, 1740: “O that we were of one mind; for I am yet persuaded, you greatly err. You have set a mark you will never arrive at, till you come to glory. I think few enjoy such continued manifestations of God’s presence as I do, and have done for some years; but I dare not pretend to say I shall be absolutely perfect.”

¹⁴ John Wesley, 146.

¹⁵ John Wesley, 147-150.

Descend, and make me pure from sin.

Purge me from every sinful blot:
My idols all be cast aside:
Cleanse me from every evil thought,
From all the filth of self and pride.

John Wesley proposed that these and other hymns laid down a metrical case for the people called Methodists, affirming that a full and high salvation is possible, that it is hindered only by unbelief, that this faith can be given in an instant, that instant means...now. This faith is so biblically-rooted that anybody who speaks otherwise advocates a new and divisive doctrine. Further, Christian perfection is fundamentally love of God and neighbor and the deliverance from all sin, received merely by faith, given instantaneously in a moment, and “we are to expect it, not at death, but every moment; that now is the accepted time, now is the day of this salvation.”¹⁶

Questions on the offense

Part of Wesley’s defense posture was inquisitive offense. He poses twenty-two questions to those who “deny that Christian perfection is attainable in this life.” Included are these “Queries, humble proposed...:

- 3) Has God anywhere in Scripture commanded us more than He has promised to us?
- 4) Are the promises of God respecting holiness to be fulfilled in this life, or only in the next?
- 7) Is it impossible for any one in this life to ‘love God with all his heart, and mind, and soul, and strength’? And is the Christian under any law which is not fulfilled in this love?
- 13) Has Christ anywhere taught us to pray for what He never designs to give?
- 14) Has He not taught us to pray, ‘Thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven?’ And is it not done perfectly in heaven?
- 15) If so, has He not taught us to pray for perfection on earth? Does He not then design to give it?
- 17) Do you sincerely desire to be freed from indwelling sin in this life?
- 19) If so, did He not give it you (the desire to be free) to mock you, since it is impossible it should ever be fulfilled?¹⁷

The challenge of question 17 was especially poignant to Wesley: *Do you sincerely desire to be freed from indwelling sin in this life?* Wesley considered this a serious drawback to many who might otherwise have been disposed to accept the notion of God’s perfecting grace.

¹⁶ John Wesley, 167.

¹⁷ Wesley, 181-182.

A Plain Account didn't, as one might imagine, include these *gradual* hymns.

Plain Enough?

An academic acquaintance recently wrote profoundly for an upcoming volume on Wesley and sanctification but decided not to include *A Plain Account* as a suggestion for further reading. The reason given for this omission was that *A Plain Account* was “not plain enough.” There may be some merit in that critique, given that Wesley's sermons and writings are frequently more practical on the measures to adopt when seeking a certain Christian experience. In *A Plain Account*, Wesley noted that the experience of full salvation can happen now, with the caveat that the moment when grace is given for either initial salvation or sanctification is divinely determined. But he does not detail specific steps the believer should take in seeking that experience.

The volume was penned because brother Charles and others had begun to doubt the possibility of an immediate experience and to opt for the longer view, that entire consecration and subsequent sanctification will not occur until very late in life. In the vast majority of his writings on the subject, John Wesley eschewed both the shorter way and the longer way and counseled a middle way. Inclusion of that perspective could have added practical value to Wesley's explanation of sanctification in *A Plain Account*. An overview of the three views of sanctification is as follows:¹⁹

Shorter

The shorter view of sanctification suggests that entire sanctification is a synergism in which the Christian's work of consecration and faith is met immediately by the Holy Spirit's work of deliverance from the inner propensity to sin and empowerment to walk obediently in the love of God and neighbor. This view is frequently associated in the modern era with figures such as Phoebe Palmer. The shorter way is the position expressed in the Articles of Religion of The Wesleyan Church and the Church of the Nazarene.²⁰

Middle Way

Wesley taught that God's grace is required for the work of salvation, even for saving faith. At each level of progression, more grace is needed. Prevenient grace enables a person to respond to God's offer of salvation, but more is needed for the new birth. This grace comes through the various means – the works of piety and of mercy such as prayer, Scripture, fasting, Lord's supper and compassionate ministry. Through participation in the means of grace, saving faith is made possible by God, to be accepted or rejected by the individual. Hence, once saved, ongoing grace will be necessary to maintain salvation as well

¹⁹ Matt Friedeman, *Discipleship: Essays in Honor of Dr. Allan Coppedge*, “Discipleship and Personal Holiness”/Christopher Bounds (Teleios Press/Francis Asbury Press: 2017) 28-32.

²⁰ See also Keith Drury, *Holiness for Ordinary People* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1983; reprint 1994), 71-88; Allan P. Brown, “How to be Entirely Sanctified:,” *God's Revivalist and Bible Advocate* 124, no. 6 (September, 2012), 1-4; and “Article of Religion VIII: Personal Choice” in *The Discipline of the Wesleyan Church 2000* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House), ¶ 224.

as "Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection."²⁵ This is the dominant understanding of entire sanctification in the Wesleyan tradition today, which would include the United Methodists inasmuch as they believe in sanctification at all.

What Wesley Could Have Included

Readers may be disappointed if they seek from *A Plain Account* more than simply an historical explanation of the development of the doctrine of sanctification or Christian perfection within the early Wesleyan movement. This particular document might be lacking the necessary explication for next steps, but Wesley's practice with the middle way in mind was plain in his approach to ministry:

- awaken people through preaching,
- engage them in groups where the means of grace were seriously pursued,
- talk about God's grace for coming salvation in the moment of His choosing,
- once they were saved equip them for an even more ardent approach to works of piety and mercy and then
- encourage them to expect God's movement in their lives for entire sanctification and further spiritual growth.

A Plain Account is a classic, still being read two-and-a-half centuries after it was penned. Even so, Wesleyans seemed to have significantly abandoned an ardent pursuit of any approach to entire sanctification with few talking about it and even fewer proportionally experiencing the fullness of God in the life of their souls. Perhaps a persistent drumming of Wesley's clearer practical path, as described above, might have prevented the departures. Perhaps, not. Even so, this seminal work clearly states the argument in various ways that entire sanctification is possible and that an emphasis thereon is beneficial for all believers and essential for Methodists to remain congruent with their biblical heritage. On that account, plain enough.

²⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit (Systematic Theology, Vol. 3)* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, Reprint Edition, 1994), 226-257; Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books - An Imprint of Abingdon Press, 1994), 176-190, 201-215; and John Wesley, "Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection," *The Works of John Wesley*, XI: 446. Wesley: "As to the time, I believe this instant generally is the instant of death, the moment before the soul leaves the body. But I believe it may be ten, twenty, or forty years before. I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within five years or five months after it, I know no conclusive argument to the contrary."