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Mass Study Notes for Sunday 5-17-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-17-2015**. This week Marla shares the study of the readings beginning with Acts 1 where Peter explains how God's plan unfolds just as the Scriptures said. Next we move to 1 John 4, where the apostle John tells us that those who abide in God, love as He loved. Finally we conclude with John 17:11-19 where St. John records Jesus' prayer for His disciples just before He sends them out to minister in His name.

Read Online:http://www.christiansforchrist.org/articles/weekly-study-notes-for-the-sunday-mass/5-17-2015

Introduction to the First Reading:

If you were a fan of the 80s show *The A-Team,* you will remember the iconic phrase spoken at the end of nearly every episode, "I love it when a plan comes together." In a make-believe story the plan always comes together—the writers make it so. Real-life human plans are not so reliable and can be thwarted. God's plan, however, always comes together exactly as God says. No one is strong enough to thwart His plan.

Before Jesus was taken up into heaven, He told His apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they received the baptism of the Holy Spirit which would give them power to be Christ's witnesses to the world. (The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit indwelling believers, enabling them to understand the truth and empowering them to do the work God has for them.) It was during this period of waiting that Peter spoke to the apostles and over 100 believers gathered with them. Here Peter reminds them that God's plan was being fulfilled just as the Scriptures said.

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First Reading

Acts 1:15-26 NAS95 15 At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, 16 "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. 17 For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. 19 And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'LET HIS HOMESTEAD BE MADE DESOLATE, AND LET NO ONE DWELL IN IT'; and, 'LET ANOTHER MAN TAKE HIS OFFICE.' 21 Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us– 22 beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us–one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." 23 So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen 25 to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." 26 And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Judas, one of the original twelve apostles, walked intimately with Jesus during the three years of His ministry. He heard Jesus' powerful words, witnessed His healing touch, and participated in His miraculous acts. Yet by a decision of his own evil heart, Judas betrayed his Lord and turned Him over to the Roman authorities to be crucified. It did not catch Jesus by surprise but was, with all its tragic detail, just as the Scriptures foretold. Judas' betrayal, as sinful as it was, did not thwart God's ultimate plan for man's salvation but rather was a step in its fulfillment.

When Judas, consumed by guilt, took his own life, a new apostle had to be chosen from the men who had been with Jesus from the beginning. Only two men qualified, Joseph and Matthias. The apostles prayed for God guidance and cast lots to discover God's choice. In that day, lots were cast by writing each eligible person's name on a piece of stone or wood, putting the pieces in an urn, and drawing out a name. * God's plan was fulfilled when Matthias' name was chosen.

We can be confident that God has a plan for us, too, and He will make it come together for our ultimate good and His glory. I love it when His plan comes together!

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the six verses of our Second Reading, the word *love* and its derivatives are used eight times. God is the author and source of true love. If God did not exist, love would not exist for God is love. He powerfully demonstrated it by sending Jesus to fulfill the greatest act of love known to mankind—a substitutionary death on a cross. Romans 5:8 says, *"God demonstrated his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* Jesus didn't die for a good cause or a good man. He died for you and me, not after we cleaned up our life, but while we were still lost in our sin. His death for us was the Innocent dying for the guilty, the Perfect dying for the broken, the Holy dying for the sinful. Can there be any greater demonstration of love?

Is it any wonder then, that love is a hallmark of one who abides in God? *Abide* is a word that means "to stay in a given place, continue, dwell, remain" (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, # 3306). St. John tells us we come to abide in God by confessing Jesus is the Son of God and believing the love God has for us as demonstrated through Christ's death. And when we abide in Him we will love as He loved. It is important to understand, however, that we don't love *in order* to abide. We love *because* we abide in Him. When we receive God's love and extend it to others, we prove that we abide in the One who is love.

Second Reading

1 John 4:11-16 NAS95 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. 14 We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

When I left my son at college for the first time, I knew I would not see him again for six months. On the 12-hour ride, his father and I reminded him of the important precepts we had taught him about God and living the Christian life. We were hoping he would continue to walk the path of faith and not stray from the truth of the Scriptures. After settling him into his dorm and expressing our love through hugs and tears, we prayed and released him into the Father's care.

For three years, Jesus had lived and ministered with the ones he chose to be his disciples. He loved them, revealed himself to them, and taught them what was to come. Though they heard him and were witnesses of His miraculous works, they didn't fully understand that He would die for sin, rise

from the dead, and return to God the Father. It was now time for Jesus to fulfill His Father's will and to set in motion all the prophesies spoken about Him in the Old Testament. And it was time to say goodbye. The disciples would have to face a world of opposition and persecution without him, and they were understandably bewildered and sad.

In Ch. 13 of the Gospel of St. John, Jesus begins an extended, heart-felt goodbye. He would shortly send them out to serve others so He gave them a powerful demonstration of servanthood by washing the disciples' feet, an act typically done by the servants of the household. Jesus said, *"… I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you* (John 13: 15). In Ch. 14, He comforts them by explaining that He is building a home for them in heaven and someday will come again to take them there. In the meantime, they are to get their nourishment and power by abiding (remaining) in Him as branches get their life by remaining in the vine (Ch. 15). In Ch. 16, He promises the Holy Spirit will empower them (and every believer) to carry on His ministry and to lead them into all truth. Now in Ch. 17, on the night He was betrayed, Jesus prays for the disciples as he sends them out to minister in His name.

Gospel Reading

John 17:11-19 NAS95 11 "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. 12 "While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled. 13 "But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. 14 "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 15 "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. 16 "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 17 "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. 18 "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 "For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus makes three requests of the Father:

1). Jesus prays that the Father would keep the disciples in His name.

What is Jesus asking for when He says to the Father, *keep them in your name*? His *name* refers to all that God is and all that Jesus revealed Him to be. Jesus and the Father are one. As Christians, we are united to them and carry the same name. To live in God's name is to live in a way that reflects his character. While Jesus was with His disciples, He kept them in God's name and none of them were lost except Judas. Did Jesus fail to keep Judas in God's name? D.A. Carson in his commentary on The Gospel of John explains, "The defection of Judas is foreseen in Scripture [Ps.

41:10], and therefore no evidence of failure on Jesus' part." Jesus had kept His disciples and now that He was leaving, He asks the Father to keep His disciples faithful to His name.

2). Jesus prays that the Father would keep them from the evil one.

The forces of evil are real and oppose all God wants to accomplish in the world. Satan himself prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). God could have taken His disciples out of the world, but left them here as ministers of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is also why we are here. Jesus doesn't ask for them to be removed from the world but that they might be protected from the evil one while they do His work.

3). Jesus prays that the Father would sanctify them by truth.

Sanctify means *to make holy* and has the idea of being set apart for holy use or a holy purpose. (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, # 37, 40). Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is holy in his being but was also set apart for a holy purpose—to be the sacrifice for sin. As God the Son, He is separate from the evil world system, but He willingly entered into the world to save it through His death on a cross. As the disciples came to believe in Jesus, they also were sanctified for a holy work—to take the truth of the gospel to a lost world. Everyone who believed the disciples message would also be sanctified in truth for the words they bring are God's words. And we also are sanctified when we believe the Bible, God's written word of truth.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. If we abide in God we will love others as God loved us. What can you do this week to demonstrate God's love to those around you?

2. Like the disciples, you have been sanctified (set apart) by God for a holy purpose—to take the truth of the gospel to a lost world. What can you do this week to begin fulfilling God's purpose for your life?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/051715.cfm

First Reading ACTS 1:15-17, 20A, 20C-26

Second Reading 1 JN 4:11-16

Gospel Reading JN 17:11B-19

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Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

*casting lots, http://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/1-26.htm , accessed 5/9/15

Keywords: baptism of the Holy Spirit, betrayal, love, abide, sanctify, truth

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The Role of Weakness in Spiritual Formation



The Role of Weakness in Spiritual Formation

Reflections by Christy Hill, Ph.D.

Who wants to feel weak? Who enjoys bumping up against one's own inadequacies? Why would I desire to get in touch with the many times (a day) I don't live up to my own standards, let alone God's? Isn't the Christian life supposed to make me feel better?

The Apostle Paul may have resisted feeling weak, at first, too. He was a very successful

Jew—even of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of heresy. If you go by strict religious standards, his resume was impressive. But after his conversion to Christ, those things no longer mattered. In fact, he considered them rubbish.[i] But I wonder how long it took him to gain this perspective.

He gives us a glimpse of his journey toward recognizing the value of weakness in his life, modeling a mature Christian perspective of the ongoing struggle we have with the flesh and its falleness. He wrestled with God over this topic. Three times he prayed for God to relieve him of a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan. We don't know what this messenger of Satan was, but we do know it "tormented" him and made him feel weak.[ii] But God, who has infinite power and wisdom, ordained that weakness could actually be something good for His children. He said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."[iii]

So what is the value of weakness for spiritual formation? Could it be that we, like Paul, have a tendency to put confidence in ourselves to live the Christian life? Could it be that I have a deeply ingrained success mentality that desires to use Christianity and the spiritual disciplines to help me feel better about myself, without deepening my relationship and dependence on my Savior? So instead of allowing us to live in the delusion that we are better off on our own (autonomy) and that we really need to get our act together in order to be loved by God (work's righteousness), God breaks us of these ingrained beliefs by giving us the gift of weakness and inadequacy. So then when I bump up against my weakness, I can be reminded of my need for a Savior, even as a mature Christian. I can continue to fall in love with my Rescuer, when I realize that His blood covers my sin. I can turn to Him in dependence, not as a last resort, but as a welcomed reminder of my true state of dependence. It would be cruel of God to allow us to live in the lies of autonomy and work's righteousness, which is our natural tendency.

Maturity starts to look a little bit different than the "victorious Christian living" model that feeds our success mentality. Growth in sanctification means recognizing and internalizing the truth of who I am in Christ and relating to God in deeper, more intimate ways. If a thorn in the flesh helps

me to recognize my continual need for a Savior and to turn often to God throughout my day, then it accomplishes a noble purpose. And we can say with Paul, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."[iv]

I have to admit, I'm not there yet. But I do have to ask the question: Does our doctrine of sanctification address and have room for the daily experience of weakness, inadequacy and failure? Do we teach those we disciple and have influence over the value of recognizing our moments of weakness that come to us throughout the day and allowing it to remind us to turn to God and not depend on self? Do I model a life that is comfortable with my own messiness, so that others may see that God's love is not based on our performance, but on His desire to love us? It is going to take a lot of weakness, failure and inadequacy to undo the false beliefs that we are better off on our own (autonomy) and we have to work hard to gain God's favor (work's righteousness). The message of the Gospel still speaks to us in the ongoing journey of spiritual formation as we embrace weakness and let it do God's noble purposes.

End Notes

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[i] Philippians 3:4b-11 (all Scripture quotations from NIV).

[ii] 2 Corinthians 12:7, 10.

[iii] 2 Corinthians 12:9a.

[iv] 2 Corinthians 12:9b-10.

The Role of Weakness in Personal Spiritual Formation.pdfDownload

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John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection



John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection

By James M. Hill

The Problem: Can Justified Christians Achieve Perfection Through a Sudden Working of the HOly Spirit in Their Lifetimes and Subsequently Live in Sinless Perfection?

Because God is perfectly holy, he cannot have fellowship with unrighteous, fallen people who

descended from the seed of Adam after the Fall (Gen 3:6). Humans, as image bearers of God, lost fellowship with God, but God provided for their salvation by condescending in the form of the God-Man to atone for their sin. God gave new spiritual life to all that repent of their sin and trust in the finished work of the Son of God on the cross at Calvary. Through this spiritual rebirth, God imputed the righteousness of Christ and declared them justified before Him.[1] This treatise examines whether or not God, who declared believers positionally righteous (justified), also provided the means of grace to be instantaneously holy or sanctified. This is what came to be known as John Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection. Is God's grace a discrete, stair step affair, with justification as the first measure of grace in the lives of believers, Christian perfection the second, and sanctification everything upwards after the first step? Or is sanctification a lifelong process unable to be totally completed in a believer's lifetime? Does the Holy Spirit impart a second, sudden working of grace such that believers are entirely sanctified, thus eliminating their sinful natures in their natural lifetimes? Are there three levels of people, the lost, the justified, and the entirely sanctified, or just the first two? Can accurate theology be developed or even validated upon the basis of personal experience, or is it a purely scholarly affair?

INTERPETATIONS THROUGHOUT THE CHURCH

Most Reformers and Evangelicals on Sanctification

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) states, "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die until sin, and live unto righteousness."[2] This view of gradually increasing holiness is typical of the Reformers and evangelicals, except for the traditions that arose out of the Wesleyan movement, including the Methodist, Holiness, and Nazarene traditions. Unlike the Roman Catholic doctrine that posits sanctification as the increase of justification, the tradition of the Reformers and evangelicals abides by a solid distinction between the two concepts, "while affirming that the two are inextricably related." [3] Lewis and Demarest summarize this theological position by stating:

In terms of differences, justification is a legal declaration of right standing before God (imputed righteousness), whereas sanctification makes the believer existentially holy (inherent righteousness). Moreover, justification is an instantaneous event, whereas sanctification is a lifelong process. Finally, justification allows for no degrees, whereas sanctification admits of degrees.[4]

One of the keystones of this position is the dual nature of the Christian. On one hand, believers are purified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Corin 6:11). They are accounted positionally righteous before God through faith in Jesus and his sacrificial death (Eph 2:8-9, Heb

10:10). On the other hand they still possess a sinful nature inherited from Adam as a result of the Fall, and don't always do the things that God calls them to.[5] Paul said in Romans 7:18, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not."[6] "Christians realize entire sanctification or moral perfection not in this life but in the life to come when they behold Christ (1 John 3:2)."[7] Calvin believed in a lifelong process of sanctification. Demarest and Lewis quoted Calvin as stating, "We teach that in the saints, until they are divested of mortal bodies, there is always sin; for in their flesh there resides that depravity of inordinate desiring which contends against righteousness."[8] Luther held a similar view and made the following statement in *Table-Talk* No. CCLVI:

Original sin, after regeneration, is like a wound that begins to heal; though it be a wound, yet it is in course of healing, though it still runs and is sore. So original sin remains in Christians until they die, yet itself is mortified and continually dying. Its head is crushed in pieces, so that it cannot condemn us.

Both Calvin and Luther denied "any perfection other than imputed perfection." Later Reformers, including the Anabaptists, reacted against an "under-emphasis on holy living." [9] This was likely one of the factors that led to John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, along with his dislike of Calvin's position on eternal security.

John Wesley on Christian Perfection

John Wesley was the seventeenth century founder of Methodism who formulated the doctrine of entire sanctification from 1739 to 1760. "In public address he used the terms "Christian Perfection," "Perfect Love," and "Holiness," as synonymous, though there are differences between them when examined critically."[10] The basis of his theory was that after a Christian become a believer by being spiritually reborn and indwelled by the power of the Holy Spirit, at some point after a period of growth in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ there was an instantaneous act of sanctification. Therefore, even though there was gradual growth in sanctification after the believer was justified by God, after a "final, all-surrendering act of faith in Christ, it reaches an instantaneous completion through the act of the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier."[11] According to Greathouse, the teaching of John Wesley was that this initial work of gradual sanctification may be "cut short in a moment, by faith, when the heart is cleansed from the inward root of sin – pride, self-will, atheism, or idolatry – and perfected in the love of God. As a consequence of this deeper cleansing of the heart the Christian is enabled to grow more normally toward perfected Christ-likeness."[12]

Greathouse's definition of Christian perfection is:

. . . the glorious teaching that through the provisions of the sacrifice of Christ and the personal agency of the Holy Spirit, and on the condition of simple faith, those who savingly trust in Christ may be cleansed from original sin, or depravity, and brought into a state of entire devotement to God and unselfish love for their fellowman.[13]

One would likely never find such a concise definition of Christian perfection among John Wesley's writings. Rather, John Wesley's normally accepted view as rendered by Greathouse developed gradually over the life of his ministry. Wesley said that he developed his unique view on sanctification because he "thought it was scriptural." In the same quote, John Wesley went on to say, "But I still think that perfection is only another term for holiness, or the image of God in man."[14] Wesley's doctrine seems to have very much been driven by his concept of holiness as Christians living out their lives in God's perfect image through his Son Jesus Christ.

John Wesley left some small amounts of room for interpretation of what he meant by perfection. In his sermon and subsequent tract *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he defined Christian perfection by stating, "By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions." Wesley went on to excuse slight misdeeds by "perfected" Christians by saying, "there is no such perfection in this life, as implies an entire deliverance, either from ignorance, or mistake, in things not essential to salvation, or from manifold temptations, or from numberless infirmities, wherewith the corruptible body more or less presses down the soul." With the leeway given, Wesley went on to say, "I do not contend for the term *sinless*, though I do not object against it.[15] In the same tract, Wesley spoke about what he called the "Circumcision of the Heart."

It is the habitual disposition of the soul which, in the sacred writing, 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 in Christ Jesus the being so renewed in the image of our mind as to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. . . . In what sense are they perfect? Observe, we are not now speaking of babes in Christ, but adult Christians. ***But even babes in Christ are so far perfect as not to commit sin*** (emphasis added).[16]

How then did Wesley define sin? In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley stated, "But does not the Scripture say, 'A just man sinneth seven times a day?' It does not. Indeed it says, 'A just man falleth seven times.' But this is quite another thing' for, first the words, a day, are not in the text. Secondly, here is no mention of falling into sin at all. What is here mentioned is, falling into *temporal affliction* (emphasis added)." Wesley admits that the apostles sinned, but because they sinned does not mean that all Christians have to sin. [17] Wesley's definition of active or overt sin was so telling of his whole theology that it was quoted completely from Carter as follows.

Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a ***voluntary transgression of a known law of God***. Therefore, every voluntary breach of the law of live is sin; and nothing else, if we speak properly. To strain the matter farther is only to make way for Calvinism. There may be ten thousand wandering thoughts and forgetful intervals without any breach of love, though not without transgressing the Adamic law. But Calvinists would fain confound these together. Let love fill your heart, and it is enough (emphasis added).[18] This is not far from what 1 John 3:4 says, minus the attacks on Calvin, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness."

Did Wesley agree that believers can be tempted, yet without sin? John Wesley made it clear that he

believed so. In the questions and answers section in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he stated a variety of answers to various hypothetical questions. Question 14 was, "But can one that is saved from sin be tempted?" His answer was, "Yes; for Christ was tempted." In response to question 15 regarding the difference between temptation and corruption of the heart, he said, ""A woman solicits me. Here is a temptation to lust. But in the instant I shrink back. And I feel no desire or lust at all; of which I can be as sure, as that my hand is cold or hot."[19]

Wesley found scriptural support for his position on sanctification in various New Testament passages. He interpreted the seventh chapter of Romans not as a description of the experience of an advanced believer as has been taught throughout the centuries, but as that of an unregenerate man. He posited that "entire sanctification" occurred by the eighth chapter and therefore described the experience of a wholly sanctified believer. [20] Orr, et. al., regarding Wesley's position stated, "Thus sanctification is gradual, but entire sanctification is instantaneous . . ."[21] Wesley also looked to 2 Corinthians 7:1, "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." Other Epistles were quoted by Wesley, such as Ephesians 4:13, "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Even though Wesley posited that the context of Romans 7 was that of an unregenerate man, he quoted just a few verses earlier in the previous chapter for support, "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin (Rom 6:6)." One wonders if Wesley understood that the translators added the paragraph breaks that were not in the original text. He also looked to Galatians 2:20(a), "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live," and sought support in 1 Thess. 5:23, "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly . . . ." In this passage "the word *sanctify* is a Greek aorist tense, signifying an act and not a process, as also in John 17:19, 'that they . . . may be sanctified in truth,' or truly."[22] The reasoning is that if Paul didn't think that God was able to accomplish these things during the natural lives of Christians, he wouldn't have written it. In the same light, Wesley also appealed to verses such as Matt. 5:48, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect," with Hebrews 10:14, "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified," along with 1 John 4:18, "perfect love casting out (all) fear. Finally, Wesley made frequent appeals to 1 John 3:9, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."[23]

In the same treatise, Wesley defended his position in light of the writings of St. John in 1 John 1:8-10, the latter which states, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (v. 10)." Again, his reasoning regarding this text was particularly telling of his whole theology. His entire response to the critics was as follows.[24]

(1.) The tenth verse fixes the sense of the eighth: "If we say we have no sin," in the former, being explained 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 faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." As

if he had said, "I have before affirmed, the blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin. And no man can say, 'I need it not; I have no sin to be cleansed from.' If we say we have no sin, that we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves and make God a liar. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, not only to forgive us our sins, but also to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, that we may go and sin no more. 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* (emphasis added).[25]

Wesley found proof of the attainment of the second working of grace in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." Wesley said that additional proof came from the testimony of the Holy Spirit, per 1 Corinthians 2:12, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God."[26] In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley clarified the spiritual evidence for the achievement of Christian perfection. In question he was asked, hypothetically, "But how do you know, that you are sanctified, saved from your inbred corruption?" In response, Wesley stated:

We know it by the witness and by the fruit of the Spirit. And, First, by the witness. As, when we were justified, the Spirit bore witness with our spirit, that our sins were forgiven; so, when we were sanctified, he bore witness, that they were taken away. Indeed, the witness of sanctification is not always clear at first; (as neither is that of justification;) neither is it afterward always the same, but, like that of justification, sometimes stronger and sometimes fainter. Yea, and sometimes it is withdrawn. Yet, in general, the latter testimony of the Spirit is both as clear and as steady as the former.[27]

The Early Church on Sanctification

Augustine believed that even though the Christian was accounted positionally righteous before God through justification, their sanctification gradually conformed them to the image of Christ.[28] Greathouse, who seemed to stress the extent to which he thought (wrongly) that Augustine espoused the view, stated:

While Augustine can be cited as an advocate of this truth (Christian perfection), his pessimistic doctrine of Original Sin with its notion of ineradicable concupiscence has been the single greatest foe of the doctrine, especially in Protestantism. Developed in his controversy with Pelagius, this latter idea upstaged Augustine's earlier confidence in the possibilities of grace and became the standard view of most Reformed and Lutheran theologies. ***The permanent residue of Augustine's doctrine in the view that human nature is irretrievable sinful this side of the resurrection*** (emphasis added)**.**"[29]

Augustine seemed to dismiss the possibility of Christian perfection during the natural life. Demarest and Lewis quoted Augustine as saying, "There is not a man living in the present life who is not absolutely free from sin."[30]

Several church fathers held a view similar to John Wesley. Friesen quoted Ignatius as writing, "No man truly making a profession of faith sinneth; nor does he that possesses love hate anyone." "Irenaeus and the Shepherd of Hermas also believed that perfection was possible while Tertullian did not expect perfection until after death." [31]

BIBLICAL TEACHING AND THEOLOGICAL INTERACTION

Old Testament

In the OT the call of the prophets was a "demand for personal righteousness and social justice." This was evident in such passages as Psalm 18:30 stating God is perfect, but with Psalm 18:32, "It is God that girdeth me with strength, and maketh my way perfect." God instructed Abraham to be perfect, "And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect (Gen 17:1)." Greathouse tied God's requirement "And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might (Deut 6:5)" with a call to personal holiness. [32] The word translated "perfect" from the Hebrew is *tamiym*. According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, even though the root *tamam* indicates "a move towards that which is ethically sound," the fundamental idea is that of completeness. The *Wordbook* goes on to tie NT Pharisaism to the root word, something that the followers of Wesley should take careful note. "Those who make them (claims of perfection) do not profess to be absolutely sinless, but they do disclaim all fellowship with the wicked." It goes on to say, "other than (the) passages referring to God himself, the OT resists claims to ultimate perfection."[33]

The OT contains an important theological construct in the Pentateuch, that of unintentional sin, closely related to the sin of omission. In Leviticus 4 the Lord gave to Moses the process for the sin offering. Verse two states, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: Say to the Israelites: 'When anyone sins *unintentionally* and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD's commands' (NIV, emphasis added)."[34] The concept of unintentional sin is prevalent throughout the Pentateuch. In Leviticus applies the requirement for a sin offering to individual people (4:27, 5:15), leaders (4:22), the whole community (4:13), and the Gentiles alike (15:29). The concept of the sin of omission is also clearly found in the NT (James 2:15-16).

Gospels

In the Gospels and the rest of the NT, the key concept of perfection revolves around variations of the Greek word *teleioi*. In Matthew 5:48 Jesus said, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The word in the original is the Greek is *teleioi*, and as in to OT, means "complete." Friesen said, "In almost every case where the word 'perfect' is used in reference to people in the New Testament it is a translation of this word *teleios*." He went on to analyze the verse

and concluded that in order to be perfect, the universal call to believers is that they must come follow Jesus.[35] In several of Wesley's sermons he argued how God could command perfection if man were unable to achieve it. In light of a more accurate translation of the Greek, perhaps Wesley should have looked to the concept of completion of God's promises to humanity in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us." Or, Phil 1:6, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Other New Testament Literature

Paul provided on interesting insight into his own sinfulness in the seventh chapter of Romans. Paul said, "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin (7:14)." As stated earlier, Wesley interpreted the seventh chapter of Romans not as a description of the experience of an advanced believer as has been taught throughout the centuries, but as that of an unregenerate man. He posited that "entire sanctification" occurred by the eighth chapter and therefore described the experience of a wholly sanctified believer. An exegetical study of Romans shows that this was not Paul's intention. In 7:22 Paul stated, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law (NIV)." This hardly sounds like Paul reflecting on his sinful past prior to his conversion on the Damascus road.

In 1 Corinthians 2:6, the KJV uses the word "perfect" whereas the NIV renders *teleios* as "mature." This is similar to the NIV rendering of *teleios* in Luke 6:40 as "fully trained." The NIV is a much more accurate translation of the word, since in the longer context of the passage from 2:6 – 3:3 Paul describes the characteristics of mature people, the *teleioi*. "The *teleioi* are involved in a growing process. They are different from natural men and also from immature Christians and these differences are demonstrated by their behavior." In 1 Corinthians 14:20 Paul instructed the people to be adults (*teleios*) in their understanding (from the NIV). Friesen comments, "The *teleioi* are gifted and use their gifts to build up others in the Church. . . . Their concern is for the growth of those within the community and for those who have not yet experienced new life."[36] It is evident from the passages that the idea of perfection from the KJV translation is much more accurately reflected in the concept of spiritual obedience and maturity than sinless perfection.

The prison epistles speak to the concept of *teleioi* in Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. In Ephesians 4:13 Paul states, "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect (*teleios*) man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The NIV substitutes the word "mature." "The verses preceding 4:13 describe a process whereby maturity or perfection may be reached. God has given apostles . . . to the Church so that these person may equip all the saints for the building up of the Church."[37] The KJV rendering of "perfect" in Phil 3:12 illustrates the point even more: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect (*teleioo*) . . ." Here Paul states that he has not yet been made perfect, but is in the process of being perfected, pressing on towards "the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (v. 14)." In Colossians 1:28 Paul says, "Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect (*teleios*) in Christ Jesus." "Paul believes that he has done a part in bringing others to perfection. He does this by admonishing

and teaching."[38] Clearly, Paul's goal is to utilize his spiritual gifts to so "that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ (2 Corin 11:2c)."

Perhaps the most prominent verse in the Epistles that speaks regarding Wesley's view of Christian perfection is 1 John 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Commenting on the verse, Adam Clarke (1760-1832), a prominent Wesleyan minister, theologian, and scholar born in Londonderry, Ireland said the following.

This is tantamount to 1Jo 1:10: If we say that we have not sinned. All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; and therefore every man needs a Savior (sic), such as Christ is. It is very likely that the heretics, against whose evil doctrines the apostle writes, denied that they had any sin, or needed any Savoir (sic). In deed, the Gnostics even denied that Christ suffered: the AEon, or Divine Being that dwelt in the man Christ Jesus, according to them, left him when he was taken by the Jews; and he, being but a common man, his sufferings and death had neither merit nor efficacy.[39]

Clarke's straw man argument that the passage was written to confront the Gnostic heretics is not justified in light of the historical context of this section of the text. Clark stated the overall purpose of 1 John by, "I therefore consider that which is commonly called the First Epistle of St. John as a book or treatise, in which the apostle declared to the whole world his disapprobation of the doctrines maintained by Cerinthus and the Gnostics."[40] Such a statement is true, except even a cursory examination of the first chapter reveals that the content of this section is more regarding "the fundamental tests of genuine fellowship," and the pericope containing verse nine is concerning "a biblical view of sin."[41] To say that verse nine speaks specifically to the Gnostic heresy is faulty logic from a straw man argument. Albert Barnes, holding to the opposite view, said, "he meant to say that if a man should claim to be perfect, or to be wholly sanctified, it would demonstrate that he deceived himself; and the two statements go to prove that neither in reference to the past nor the present can any one lay claim to perfection."[42] Spurgeon, commenting on the passage in 1 John 5 said, "We understand by this not that believers are perfectly free from sinning, but that they do not sin habitually, willfully, and openly as the unregenerate do."[43]

Wesley often quoted 1 John 3:9 regarding the ability for perfected believers to sin, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.." The word sin in this text is the Greek verb *hamartanein* in the present active infinitive tense. This indicates a continuing action of sin rather than discrete events. The passage literally means, "Born again Christians don't persistently sin in an ongoing manner." Barnes agrees, "If it can be used as referring to the doctrine of absolute perfection at all, it proves, not that Christians may be perfect, or that a portion of them are, but that all are. But who can maintain this? Who can believe that John meant to affirm this? Nothing can be clearer than that the passage has not this meaning." Rather, Barnes says, "This passage must (mean that) they who are born of God, that is, who are true Christians, do not sin habitually and characteristically." [44]

Wesley had a tendency of selectively applying verses to prove his doctrine of perfection. The Book of Hebrews declares in chapter 12, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man

shall see the Lord" (v. 14). Wesley declined to apply this verse to Christians in general, those justified and entirely sanctified. According to the ISBE speaking about Wesley, "The declaration 'without sanctification no man shall see the Lord' (Heb 12:14), does not apply to the saints, 'the holy ones.'"[45] Again we saw Wesley picking and choosing which verses, or portions of verses apply in order to create his doctrine of entire sanctification.

Friesen did an analysis of the concept of *teleioi* in all of the NT uses, including Hebrews. He made an excellent summary in Hebrews regarding his derivation of the meaning of perfection as meaning spiritual maturity and obedience. As we leave the scriptural study section, he note the following summation in his section on Hebrews:

In this letter we see that the *teleioi* are people who are able to move beyond the discussion of elementary doctrines and accept and even teach solid food from God's Word. They are holy people, but they are also in the process of being made holy. This progress is not merely passive growth – the *teleioi* are actively involved in the process of growth. (They) are able to discern good and evil because they constantly practice obedience.

The author couldn't state it any better than that. The concept of perfection in the Bible is that of believers constantly growing and being obedient to the commandments and image of Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest difficulties of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is found in James regarding the sin of omission. "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? (2:15-16)." Even if the Christian was perfect in outward behavior and somehow avoid sins of commission, they are often guilty of sins of omission as was shown by God's need to include deliverance for this sin in Leviticus.

CONCLUSION

Spiritual Perfection: A Theology of Experience

We concur with Lindstrom that Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is a "theology of experience."[46] What role does experience play in the development of any theological doctrine? Bett looked at in an interesting way and found that Wesley "founded religion and theology in the fact of experience."[47] Wesley objected to such criticisms, saying "if man is not to go astray it (theology) must be checked by the Bible.[48] It seems logical that theology could be evaluated on the basis of personal experience, but what role does bringing a "pre-understanding" to the biblical text have in developing doctrine in the first place? It is evident that every theologian brings along a certain level of pre-understanding, and Wesley was not different in that regard. Also, unless the theologian remains teachable, an overactive experiential pre-understanding brought to bear upon the text will produce alternative views from an otherwise plain exegesis. Perhaps a red flag for this type of theological development is their mandating of sudden contextual shifts within discrete areas of the

biblical text. Such contextual deviations are evident in Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. It is evident that Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is indeed a doctrine of experience. More careful exegesis of the relevant verses would have revealed to Mr. Wesley that the central concepts of Christian perfection were that of spiritual growth and obedience, not sinless perfection. Friesen, in his concluding remarks stated, "The *teleioi* are not portrayed as those who have attained absolute perfection. They always strive toward perfection and are not content to settle for less."[49] Perhaps this is the greatest risk of following Wesley's doctrine, that one may cease growing in knowledge and maturity to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Relevance to Life and Ministry

It is very important in ministry to have a clear understanding of the nature and process of sanctification, as well as how the various Christian churches understand the doctrine. First, it is crucial to be able to explain the various sects and denominations of the Christian faith to new believers such that they are not put off by the appearance of divisions in the body of Christ. Even if groups of believers believe in the doctrine of Christian perfection, for the purposes of unity in the body of Christ a certain measure of tolerance must be expressed. It is extremely important to recognize John Wesley's huge contributions to the Christian church in America. This is not to say that we should tolerate false teachings, which Scripture warns about extensively, but Christians must come as a united force against the powers of darkness. In the case of Christian perfection, the belief of this doctrine is nicely balanced by the same denomination's belief in Arminianism. This keeps them continually resisting temptations and striving towards their salvation anyway. Albeit that this comes at the risk of becoming prideful – something which many Christians struggle with regardless of their denomination. Second, as the Wesleyan churches well know, eternal security is a closely related concept. This related doctrine should be preached to proclaim the truth of 1 John 5:13, but along with the warning verses. This will help believers maintain a healthy humility and respect for the power, sovereignty, and grace of God. Believers need to be given an assurance of their salvation in a world filled without almost no certainty in many other areas of their lives. They should be shown that God expects them to persevere under His power, not their own. Believers need assurance that God has gifted them with every resource that they need to accomplish His purposes in their lives. This striving includes a continuous growth towards perfection, but this is not something that will be accomplished until after they die.

END NOTES

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[1] Bruce A. Demarest and Gordon R. Lewis, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), Vol. III, 173.

[2] Ibid., 177.

[3] Ibid., 175, 184.

[4] Ibid., 184.

[5] Ibid.

[6] All verse quotations are KJV unless otherwise indicated. This is necessary to facilitate comparisons to John Wesley's writings.

[7] Demarest, 185.

[8] Ibid., 186.

[9] Robert Friesen, "Christian Perfection," *Direction* 13 (July 1984): 25-32.

[10] James Orr and others, eds., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), s.v. "Sanctification."

[11] Ibid.

[12] William M. Greathouse, *From the Apostles to Wesley: Christian Perfection in Historical Perspective* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 15.

[13] Ibid., 12-13.

[14] Charles W. Carter, *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 521.

[15] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, London: [1777], n.p.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Carter, 270-271.

[19] Ibid.

[20] John C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001, orig. 1879), xxii.

[21] Orr.

[22] Orr.

[23] Wesley.

[24] N.B. A Prize will be awarded for any student that can follow this quotation!

[25] Wesley.

[26] Orr.

[27] Wesley.

[28] Demarest and Lewis, 185.

[29] Greathouse, 9.

[30] Demarest and Lewis, 185.

[31] Friesen, 25.

[32] Greathouse, 23.

[33] *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), #8552.

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[35] Friesen, 26.

[36] Ibid., 27.

[37] Ibid., 28.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*, abridged [CD-ROM], 1 John 1:8.

[40] Ibid., 1 John 1:1.

[41] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible,* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 1962.

[42] Albert Barnes, *Albert Barnes' NT Commentary* [CD-ROM].

[43] *Spurgeon Devotional Commentary*, on 1 John 3:1-6.

[44] Barnes, 1 John 3:9.

[45] Orr.

[46] Harold Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification.* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Asbury Publishing, 1981), 2.

[47] Ibid., 3.

[48] Ibid., 5.

[49] Friesen, 30.

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