

Christian Perfection as Interpreted by John Wesley

by Samuel Chadwick

Samuel Chadwick explores John Wesley's interpretation of Christian Perfection, emphasizing its practical application and the necessity of faith for spiritual transformation.

Scripture: Matthew 5:48, Romans 6:18, Philippians 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 1 John 2:6

Topics: "Christian Perfection", "Sanctification"

Description

Samuel Chadwick preaches about John Wesley's experimental theology, emphasizing his continual growth and willingness to correct his theological views. Wesley, a practical theologian, focused on spreading the doctrine of scriptural holiness, insisting on full salvation through faith and the eradication of inbred sin. Despite facing opposition for his teaching of Christian Perfection, Wesley maintained a high standard of obedience to all of God's commandments, advocating for a life where the love of God reigns supreme. His doctrine faced criticism from both those who thought the standard was too high and those who believed it was too low, but Wesley's teachings emphasized the importance of salvation from sin and the fulfillment of the law through love.

Transcript

Wesley's theology was experimental. His statements were formulated from experience. He had no stereotyped forms, no rigid creed, no sense of finality. His message enlarged with years, and to the end he did not hesitate to correct his theological views. Less capacious minds stereotype their opinions, and are careful only to maintain them. Such can never be charged with inconsistency. Progress involves correction, and it is easy to quote the man who grows against himself. Further, Wesley was a practical theologian. His life was lived in a perpetual hurricane of controversy and incessant activity. He had no leisure for abstract speculation. Like the Apostle Paul, he was an evangelist first, and only incidentally a philosopher and a theologian. His wine-skins were always bursting. One after another the boundaries of creed and ecclesiasticism were swept away. He formulated no creed; elaborated no system. The standards of doctrine he left are embedded in sermons and expository notes. His system of Church government is embodied in a legal document, designed to secure the property to his people and the fellowship of his spiritual children. The completeness and consistency of his doctrine and discipline are due to the simplicity and transparency of the man. His principles were well and truly laid; and he had learned to distinguish between principles and opinions, things eternal and unchanging, and those which

are temporary and provisional. For half a century he was stating, restating, and defending the doctrine of scriptural holiness. He examined thousands who professed to have entered into the experience.

He himself testified to its possession, and for years contended that the Methodist people were raised up to be its exponents and witnesses, and to spread it through the land.

WESLEY'S INSISTENT PREACHING OF THE DOCTRINE

He preached it as an immediate, instantaneous, assured work of grace through faith. By it the believer is delivered from inbred sin. "Not by a slow and insensible growth in grace, but by the power of the Highest overshadowing you, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, so as utterly to abolish sin, and to renew you in His whole image! If you are simple of heart, if you are willing to receive the heavenly gift as a little child, without reasoning, why may you not receive it now?" The seal of many witnesses confirmed his teaching. The plain fact is this: he was able to say, "I know many who love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength. He is their one desire, their one delight, and they are continually happy in Him. They love their neighbor as themselves. They rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks. This is plain, sound, scriptural experience; and of this we have more and more living witnesses." These were the seals to his preaching and the crown of his rejoicing. "I declared to all, 'We are saved from sin, we are made holy by faith.' This I testified in private, in public, in print; and God confirmed it by a thousand witnesses."

Wesley insisted on all his preachers expounding, and explicitly urging, this doctrine of Full Salvation. Writing to Adam Clarke on November 26, 1790, on the doctrine, he says:

"If we can prove that any of our local preachers, or leaders, either directly or indirectly, speak against it, let him be a local preacher or leader no longer. I doubt whether he should continue in society. Because he that could speak thus in our congregation cannot be an honest man."

There were declensions and periods of stagnation in his day. To what did he trace them, and what was his remedy? Of one society he says:

"I was surprised to find fifty members fewer than I left in October last. One reason is, Christian Perfection has been little insisted on; and where this is not done, be the preachers ever so eloquent, there is little increase, either in the number or grace of the hearers."

He testifies again and again that, where Christian Perfection is not strongly, clearly, explicitly, and earnestly preached, the work of God declines. The devil hates the doctrine, but God, in a remarkable way, crowns it with blessing. "Only do not forget," he says, "strongly and explicitly to urge believers to 'go on to perfection.' When this is constantly and earnestly done, the Word is always clothed with power ... Till you press the believers to expect full salvation now, you must not look for any revival."

THE CHARGE OF PERFECTIONISM

In nothing was Wesley so bitterly assailed as for his teaching of Christian Perfection. It cost him some of his most valued friends, and exposed him to all sorts of calumny and misrepresentation. His doctrine was attacked from opposite sides. Some objected that he placed the standard too high. The Calvinists charged him with making void the gospel of faith, because he insisted upon inward cleansing from all sin and a life in which the love of God reigns supreme. He demanded nothing less than obedience to all the commandments of God -- not only some of them, or most of them, but all of them -- from the least to the

greatest. "Whatever God has forbidden, he avoids; whatever God has enjoined, he does. It is his glory and joy to run in the way of God's commandments; it is his daily crown of rejoicing to do the will of God on earth, as it is done in heaven." This is Wesley's standard of perfection. To this day the attack is maintained by the representatives of the Calvinistic faith. There are some conventions for the promotion of godliness where it is always in the background of their teaching. Eradication of inward sin is held to be impossible in this life. Subjugation is all we may hope for. Perfectionism is assailed as deadly heresy. The old questions of Wesley's day reappear in modern form. If salvation from sin means that Christians live without sin, what need will the sanctified have of the atoning blood? Such objections seem to regard the death of Christ as making up the balance of human merit before God, and to regard some sin in the heart as necessary to secure the peculiar value of the atoning blood. To make the death of Christ an occasion of release from perfect obedience comes very near to making the Cross the minister of sin.

THE CHARGE OF ANTINOMIANISM

Opposition comes also from the other extreme. While some charge him with putting the standard too high, others contend he puts it too low, because he says that "no man is able to perform the service which the Adamic law requires," that "no man is obliged to perform it," that "we are not under the angelic or the Adamic law." On this subject there is certainly some ambiguity in Wesley's teaching. He declines to call Christian Perfection "sinless," and yet he insists that it is salvation from all sin. At one time he classes "errors resulting from unavoidable ignorance and weakness" as sins; and at another time he speaks of them as sins improperly so-called. Theoretically he contends that while man is in a corruptible body he can never attain to Adamic or angelic perfection, while practically he tells us we can keep all the commandments and do the will of God as it is done in heaven.

There is need for elucidation and co-ordination of his teaching. The explanation will probably be found in an exaggerated view of Adam's original perfection; and, if one dare say it, a somewhat lax and popular use of the word "sin." Whatever the explanation, no one familiar with Wesley's teaching will charge him with making void the law. He never spoke of the law as having passed away, in any sense, but as ceremonial ordinance and a condition of justification. Salvation is by faith and not by the works of the law, but the perfect law remains in force as the standard of life and obedience. The law is immutable, universal, and eternal -- "a transcript of the divine nature." The law of love is not new. It is no lowering of the standard. It is the fulfilling of the law. Grace does not release from obedience; it empowers it.

A CHARGE UPON ALL

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The seat of sin is in the soul. It is neither in the physical nor intellectual powers. Christian Perfection is salvation from sin. A higher meaning than this it cannot have; a lower meaning it must not have. Sin defaced God's image in man, and turned his love to enmity. Jesus restores the image, and turns enmity to love. By Him provision is made that "the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us." The law is not a system of statutes to be mechanically observed, but a principle of love possible alike to angels and men: love filling the heart and reigning in the life is as possible to those of the highest intellectual attainments as to those of the lowest. The same commandment is laid upon all, and the same privilege of grace is open to all. If any man would know more of this subject, let him read John Wesley's Plain Account of Christian Perfection, and above all, let him search the Scriptures that he may know the fullness of God's saving grace.

What! never speak one evil word,

Or rash, or idle, or unkind!
O how shall I, most gracious Lord,
This mark of true perfection find?
Thy sinless mind in me reveal,
Thy Spirit's plenitude impart;
And all my spotless life shall tell
The abundance of a loving heart.
Saviour, I long to testify
The fullness of Thy saving grace;
O might Thy Spirit the blood apply,
Which bought for me the sacred peace!
Forgive, and make my nature whole,
My inbred malady remove;
To perfect health restore my soul,
To perfect holiness and love.

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