

A
PLAIN ACCOUNT
of
**CHRISTIAN
PERFECTION**

as believed and taught by

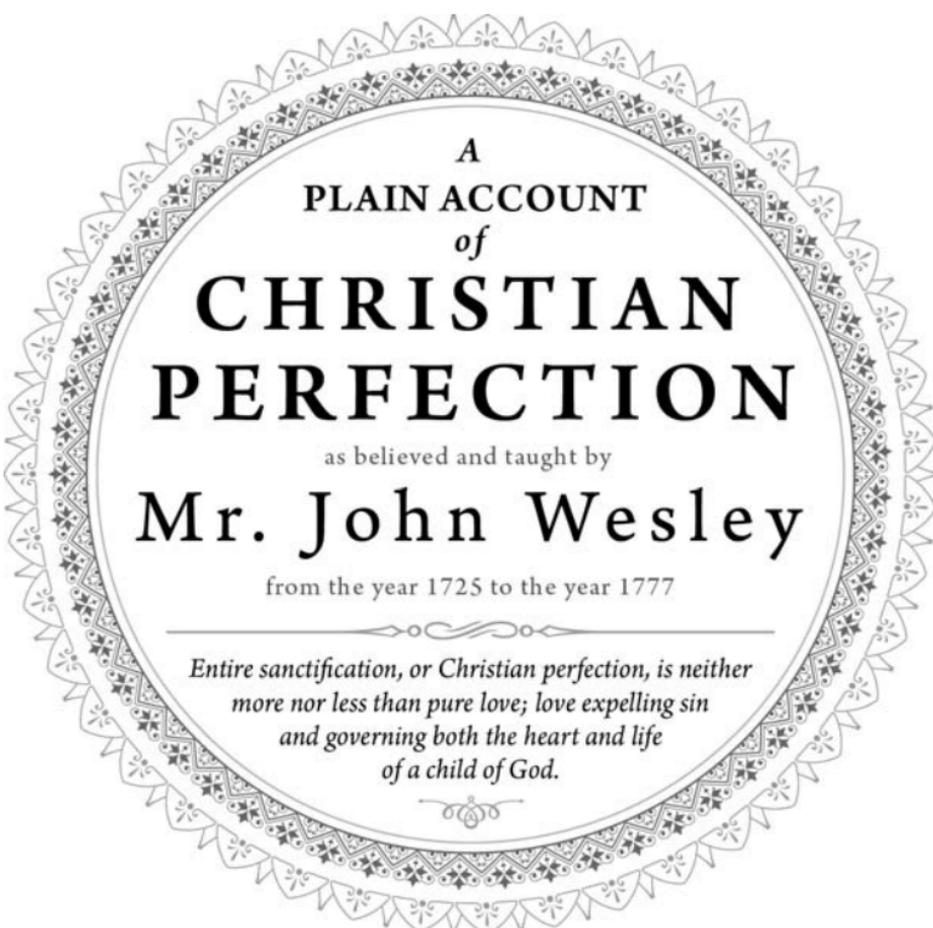
Mr. John Wesley

from the year 1725 to the year 1777

*Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is neither
more nor less than pure love; love expelling sin
and governing both the heart and life
of a child of God.*

The Works of John Wesley
1872 ED. BY THOMAS JACKSON
VOL. II, #29, PP. 366-446

It is not to be understood, that Mr. Wesley's sentiments concerning Christian Perfection were in any measure changed after the year 1777. This tract underwent several revisions and enlargements during his lifetime; and in every successive edition the date of the most recent revision was specified. The last revision appears to have been made in the year 1777; and since that period, this date has been generally continued on the title page of the several editions of the pamphlet. *edit*]



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The John Wesley Collection
Andrew C. Thompson
Executive Editor

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Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version, Cambridge, 1796. The language has been updated throughout to make the text more readable.

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SOWING FOR A GREAT AWAKENING

CONTENTS

Publisher's Foreword: The John Wesley Collection	vii
Introduction	xi
John Wesley's Purpose	3
Wesley's Early Influences	3
The Circumcision of the Heart	5
The Full Assurance of Faith	8
The Character of a Methodist	10
Sermon on Christian Perfection	14
Preface to the Second Volume of Hymns	20
Preface to the Third Volume of Hymns	26
Christian Perfection Reflected in our Hymns	39
Preface to Thoughts on Christian Perfection	43
The Doctrine Defended	60
Further Thoughts on Christian Perfection	71
Advice and Warnings to Seekers of Christian Perfection	89
Reflections on Christian Perfection	100
The Sum of These Propositions	109
Wesley's Concluding Comments	112
Acknowledgments	116

PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD
THE JOHN WESLEY
COLLECTION

John Wesley's profound legacy and impact on world Christianity during and since his lifetime can be viewed through a number of lenses. The revival that arose under his leadership changed the social and political structure of eighteenth-century England as the poor and lost found hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than in revolution against the crown. The influence of Wesley's Spirit-inspired teaching continued unabated as the Methodist movement spread scriptural holiness across the American continent and lands far beyond.

Wesley's influence as a publisher, if considered separately from all other of his extensive accomplishments, represents an astonishing record in its own right. Wesley lived in a time when Gutenberg's invention of movable type, which had immediately preceded Luther's reformation, had coalesced into specialized printing trades in London. Typefounders and printeries were becoming established and were offering exciting new pathways for the spread of the gospel through inexpensive printed text.

Perhaps more than any other figure of his day, Wesley embraced this new technology and issued sermons, tracts, commentaries, abridgments, biographies, and a host of other items that he considered relevant to the spiritual growth of maturing Christians.

Wesley was vitally driven by the reality of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. His teaching on entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is the capstone of his legacy. He worked tirelessly to abridge and republish seminal works by historical figures of previous generations, reaching as far back as the apostolic fathers of the first-century church. He constantly curated voices that communicated the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing believers into the fullness of salvation and lives of holy love.

These writings resourced the early Methodists in their quest to spread the gospel by providing the intellectual and spiritual moorings for the messengers of the movement. Seedbed believes these writings are as relevant to our context today as they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Consequently, we consider it a sacred calling to join with those who are recapturing John Wesley's publishing vision for the twenty-first century.

With great joy we present The John Wesley Collection. In the years ahead Seedbed will reissue selections from this vast collection, which includes his fifty-volume Christian Library, some 150 sermons, countless items from his journals and letters, as well as innumerable tracts, hymns, poems, and other publications, most of which have been out of circulation for decades, if not centuries.

The John Wesley Collection is Seedbed's offering to the ongoing Wesleyan tradition, providing rare insight into the heartbeat of a movement whose greatest days are yet to come.

We encourage you to enter these texts with determination. Readers who persevere will soon find themselves

accustomed to the winsome tenor and tempo of Wesley's voice and vernacular.

Seedbed's editors are constantly examining this extensive collection of more than 250 years of vital spiritual writing by Wesley and successive generations to find the most relevant and helpful messages that will speak to today's body of believers. We commend this old-new publishing work to you as one ready to be transformed by the latent power of these ancient truths. It is our prayer that these timeless words will add fuel to the fire of an awakening ready to ignite once again across the world.

Sola sancta caritas! Amen.

Andrew Miller
Seedbed Publishing

INTRODUCTION

It is with great delight that I invite you, an interested reader, to join me in turning our attention to the enduring wisdom of John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Here we have Wesley as a practical theologian and spiritual guide at his best. If you are a pastor or leader in the church, or perhaps a Christian person who desires to grow more deeply and truthfully into the reality of God's salvation in its fullness, I highly recommend this classic work to you.

Wesley provides us with a plain account of his teaching and understanding of the biblical doctrine of sanctification that he describes in this manner: “. . . to be renewed in the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.” Notice that he writes plainly, which for him means simply, clearly, and truthfully. While this is not an academic treatise, it does represent the fruit of Wesley's Oxford education and many years of serious study in the work of pastoral ministry. His primary concern is that this work be found useful for serving and building up the life and mission of the church, especially those for whom he was pastorally responsible, the eighteenth century evangelical movement called “Methodists.”

What we have is an example of theology written in a pastoral mode, a classic way of communicating that unites doctrine and life, knowledge and love, and the intellect and will. Moreover, we will benefit from this treatise by attending

not only to its content, but to the manner or form in which it is written. Wesley describes it as an “account,” which in a real sense narrates his experience of thinking, teaching, and leading for roughly four decades (approximately 1725–1765). He accomplishes this aim by weaving together a variety of sources, including sermons, historical exemplars, treatises, hymns, pastoral conversations, summary statements, and personal testimony. At the same time, Wesley expresses a clear intention and desire to be guided by what he refers to as the “oracles of God,” which means the Old and New Testaments, or the canon of Holy Scripture. In other words, we are reading an in-depth description that summarizes biblical religion according to its final end in the love of God. For example, the following is Wesley’s fullest description of Christian perfection:

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 that 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 the renewal of the heart in the 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 neighbor as ourselves.

We will therefore benefit in our reading by listening for the profound wisdom conveyed by an experienced pastor, preacher, evangelist, and teacher. On the other hand, Wesley does not offer a program of rules to follow or principles to apply. Nor is what he writes limited to doctrinal explanation or definition. Rather, he engages both the head and heart by

writing in a manner that is congruent with the subject matter of the account—the perfection of God’s holy love in Christian people. Its appeal is to the whole person—the intellect, affections, will, body, and soul in relation to God, one’s fellow Christians, and to the world as God’s good creation.

Wesley draws from a number of sources in compiling his account of Christian perfection. This reflects his commitment to the union of “sound knowledge and vital piety” and makes for a treatise rich in Christian wisdom that orients us to perceive the reality of God’s perfecting work by the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit. In other words, this account is not written so that we will read and admire as detached spectators, but rather as engaged participants summoned by the gospel to the fullness of life in the Triune God who restores humanity to the divine image in Jesus Christ. If a pressing question for you or for those whom you serve in ministry is something like, “How can we live as Christians in the world given the way it is?” or “What kind of life is truly worth living as Christian people?” you will find Wesley’s thorough treatment to be both helpful and challenging, and perhaps even disturbing, which is probably as it should be given the nature and scope of its subject matter.

Remember that you are reading the work of a pastor who cares deeply for the spiritual and moral well-being of his people. Wesley communicates this care by means of a practical wisdom that reflects both patience and humility, which are characteristics of those who aspire to the perfection of love. There is a willingness on Wesley’s part to entrust his readers to the abundance of divine grace which is sufficient to bring about all that God has promised through the work of Christ and the Spirit’s assurance of faith. And so let us read as those called to the perfection of love; sharing Wesley’s desire to know by the illumination of divine grace “all the truth as it is in Jesus.”

An important aspect of Wesley's work entails a commitment to conveying the truth in love. I suspect this may be a primary reason he does not reduce or relax the way that leads to Christian perfection—which by the Spirit's work follows the pattern of Jesus in his death and resurrection—to a kind of self-help spiritual program like those that are popular in our time. Instead, Wesley offers a picture of what the way of Christian perfection looks like as it is realized in human life, while contrasting these depictions with descriptions of what it is not. This is another example of Wesley's pastoral desire to help others be more truthful in discerning the work and will of God in their lives.

This treatise was not received without its share of controversy. On the one hand, Wesley is addressing those Christians who claimed to have attained perfection, but whose experience appeared to be grounded more in spiritual pride and enthusiasm rather than the humility and love of Jesus. On the other hand, Wesley is responding to detractors who did not believe the attainment of such Christian maturity is possible in this life given the pervasiveness of sin and its effects in human creatures. These opponents saw Wesley as teaching a form of spiritual fanaticism.

We may encounter similar challenges in our time, in that some may say the very notion of Christian perfection is a foolish exaggeration of human possibilities and little more than wishful thinking. Others may interpret this teaching as condoning a self-centered spirituality without the discipline of corporate accountability and participation in the means of grace (Scripture, worship, preaching, and the sacraments; the practices of prayer and devotion to God and works of mercy toward the poor and needy). In either case, Wesley's theological and pastoral wisdom provides a larger narrative account which may assist us in discerning our way forward as we seek

to follow the leading of the Spirit into the fullness of God's will revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

A Plain Account of Christian Perfection affords an opportunity to overhear the kind of theological judgment and spiritual discernment exercised by Wesley during the maturing years of the Wesleyan revival. My hope is that we will come to share Wesley's expectancy; that by the Spirit's gracious empowerment we are renewed to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves. And that we also share his belief that for this to occur, God will "cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love him and worthily magnify his holy name."

Dr. Michael Pasquarello III
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JOHN WESLEY'S PURPOSE

1. What I purpose in the following papers is, to give a plain and distinct account of the steps by which I was led, during a course of many years, to embrace the doctrine of Christian perfection. This I owe to the serious part of mankind, those who desire to know all "the truth as it is in Jesus." And these only are concerned in questions of this kind. To these I would nakedly declare the thing as it is, endeavoring all along to show, from one period to another, both what I thought, and why I thought so.

WESLEY'S EARLY INFLUENCES

JEREMY TAYLOR, THOMAS A KEMPIS,
WILLIAM LAW, THE BIBLE

2. In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly affected; that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. 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.

Can any serious person doubt of this, or find a medium between serving God and serving the devil?

3. In the year 1726, I met with Kempis's *Christian's Pattern*. The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw, that giving even all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this, and go no farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart, to him.

I saw, that "simplicity of intention, and purity of affection," one design in all we speak or do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed "the wings of the soul," without which she can never ascend to the mount of God.

4. A year or two after, Mr. Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* were put into my hands. 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?

5. In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to study, the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw, in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having "the mind which was in Christ," and of "walking as Christ also walked"; even of having, 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 respects, but in all things. And this was the light, wherein at this time I generally considered religion, as an uniform following of Christ, an entire inward and outward conformity to our Master. Nor was I afraid of anything more, than of bending this rule to the experience of myself; or of other men; of allowing myself in any the least disconformity to our grand Exemplar.

THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

6. On January 1, 1733, I preached before the University in St. Mary's Church, on "The Circumcision of the Heart"; an account of which I gave in these words: "It is that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, 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 the same sermon I observed, "'Love is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment.' It is not only 'the first and great' command, but all the commandments in one. 'Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise,' they are all comprised in this one word, *love*. In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness. The royal law of heaven and earth is this, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The one perfect good shall be your one ultimate end. One thing shall you desire for its own sake—the fruition of him who is all in all. One happiness shall you propose to your souls, even an union with him that made them, the having 'fellowship with the Father and the Son,' the being 'joined to the Lord in one spirit.' One design you are to pursue to the end of time—the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. Desire other things so far as they tend to this; love the creature, as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought and word, and action, be subordinate to this. Whatever you desire or fear, whatever you seek or shun, whatever you think speak, or do,

be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole end, as well as source, of your being.”

I concluded in these words: “Here is the sum of the perfect law, the circumcision of the heart. Let the spirit return to God that gave it, with the whole train of its affections. Other sacrifices from us he would not, but the living sacrifice of the heart has 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. Be no design, no desire admitted there, but what has him for its ultimate object.

This is the way wherein those children of God once walked, who being dead, still speak to us: ‘Desire not to live but to praise his name; 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 your actions.’

For then, and not till then, is that ‘mind in us, which was also in Christ Jesus,’ when in every motion of our heart, in every word of our tongue, in every work of our hands, we ‘pursue nothing but in relation to him, and in subordination to his pleasure’; when we, too, neither think, nor speak, nor act, to fulfil ‘our own will, but the will of him that sent us’; when, ‘whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do,’ we do it all ‘to the glory of God.’”

It may be observed, this sermon was composed the first of all my writings which have been published. This was the view of religion I then had, which even then I scrupled not to term “perfection”. This is the view I have of it now, without any material addition or diminution. And what is there here, which any man of understanding, who believes the Bible, can object to? What can he deny, without flatly contradicting the

Scripture; what retrench, without taking from the word of God?

7. In the same sentiment did my brother and I remain (with all those young gentlemen in derision termed Methodists) till we embarked for America, in the latter end of 1735. It was the next year, while I was at Savannah, that I wrote the following lines:

*Is there a thing beneath the sun,
That strives with thee my heart to share?
Ah! tear it thence, and reign alone,
The Lord of every motion there!*

In the beginning of the year 1738, as I was returning from thence, the cry of my heart was,

*O grant that nothing in my soul
May dwell, but thy pure love alone!
O may thy love possess me whole,
My joy, my treasure, and my crown!
Strange fires far from my heart remove;
My every act, word, thought, be love!*

I never heard that any one objected to this. And indeed who can object? Is not this the language, not only of every believer, but of every one that is truly awakened? But what have I wrote, to this day, which is either stronger or plainer?

THE FULL ASSURANCE OF FAITH

8. In August following, I had a long conversation with Arvid Gradin, in Germany. After he had given me an account of his experience, I desired him to give me, in writing, a definition of “the full assurance of faith,” which he did in the following words:

Requies in sanguine Christi; firma fiducia in Deum, et persuasio de gratia divina; tranquillitas mentis summa, atque serenitas et pax; cum absentia omnis desiderii carnalis, et cessatione peccatorum etiam internorum.
 [Translation: Repose in the blood of Christ; a firm confidence in God, and persuasion of his favor; the highest tranquility, serenity, and peace of mind, with a deliverance from every fleshly desire, and a cessation of all, even inward sins.]

This was the first account I ever heard from any living man, of what I had before learned myself from the oracles of God, and had been praying for (with the little company of my friends), and expecting, for several years.

9. In 1739, my brother and I published a volume of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. In many of these we declared our sentiments strongly and explicitly.

*Turn the fall stream of nature's tide;
 Let all our actions tend
 To thee, their source; thy love the guide,
 Thy glory be the end.
 Earth then a scale to heaven shall be;
 Sense shall point out the road;
 The creatures all shall lead to thee,
 And all we taste be God.*

Again:

*Lord, arm me with thy Spirit's might,
 Since I am call'd by thy great name;
 In thee my wand'ring thoughts unite,
 Of all my works be thou the aim;
 Thy love attend me all my days,
 And my sole business be thy praise.*

Again:

*Eager for thee I ask and pant,
 So strong the principle divine,
 Carries me out with sweet constraint,
 Till all my hallow'd soul be thine;
 Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea,
 And lost in thine immensity!*

Once more:

*Heavenly Adam, life divine,
 Change my nature into thine;
 Move and spread throughout my soul,
 Actuate and fill the whole.*

It would be easy to cite many more passages to the same effect. But these are sufficient to show, beyond contradiction, what our sentiments then were.

THE CHARACTER OF A METHODIST

10. The first tract I ever wrote expressly on this subject was published in the latter end of this year. That none might be prejudiced before they read it, I gave it the indifferent title of *The Character of a Methodist*. In this I described a perfect Christian, placing in the front, "Not as though I had already attained." Part of it I subjoin without any alteration:

"A Methodist is one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul, which is continually crying, 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is none upon earth whom I desire besides you.' My God and my all! 'You are the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.' He is therefore happy in God; yea, always happy, as having in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life, and over-flowing his soul with peace and joy. Perfect love having now cast out fear, he rejoices evermore. Yea, his joy is full, and all his bones cry out, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to his abundant mercy, has begotten me again unto a living hope of an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, reserved in heaven for me.'

"And he, who has this hope, thus full of immortality, in everything gives thanks, as knowing this (whatsoever it is) is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning him. From him therefore he cheerfully receives all, saying, 'Good is the will of the Lord'; and whether he gives or takes away, equally blessing the name of the Lord. Whether in ease or pain, whether in sickness or health, whether in life or death, he gives thanks from the ground of the heart to him who orders it for good; into whose hands he has wholly committed his body and soul, 'as into the hands of a faithful Creator.' He is therefore

anxiously 'careful for nothing,' as having 'cast all his care on him that cares for him'; and 'in all things' resting on him, after 'making' his 'request known to him with thanksgiving.'

"For indeed he 'prays without ceasing'; at all times the language of his heart is this, 'Unto you is my mouth, though without a voice; and my silence speaks unto you.' His heart is lifted up to God at all times, and in all places. In this he is never hindered, much less interrupted, by any person or thing. In retirement or company, in leisure, business, or conversation, his heart is ever with the Lord. Whether he lie down, or rise up, 'God is in all his thoughts.' He walks with God continually; having the loving eye of his soul fixed on him, and everywhere 'seeing him that is invisible.'

"And loving God, he 'loves his neighbor as himself'; he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies, yea, and the enemies of God. And if it be not in his power to 'do good to them that hate' him, yet he ceases not to 'pray for them,' though they spurn his love, and still 'despitefully use him, and persecute him.'

"For he is 'pure in heart.' Love has purified his heart from envy, malice, wrath, and every unkind temper. It has cleansed him from pride, from which 'only comes contention'; and he has now 'put on a heart of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering.' And indeed all possible ground for contention, on his part, is cut off. For none can take from him what he desires, seeing he 'loves not the world, nor any of the things of the world'; but 'all his desire is unto God, and to the remembrance of his name.'

"Agreeable to this, his one desire, is this one design of his life; namely, 'to do, not his own will, but the will of him that sent him.' His one intention at all times and in all places is, not to please himself, but him whom his soul loves. He has a single eye; and because his 'eye is single, his whole body is full of light. The whole is light, as when the bright shining of a

candle does enlighten the house.' God reigns alone; all that is in the soul is 'holiness to the Lord.' There is not a motion in his heart but is according to his will. Every thought that arises points to him, and is in 'obedience to the law of Christ.'

"And the tree is known by its fruits. For, as he loves God, so he 'keeps his commandments'; not only some, or most of them, but all, from the least to the greatest. He is not content to 'keep the whole law and offend in one point,' but has in all points 'a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards man.' Whatever God has forbidden, he avoids; whatever God has enjoined, he does. 'He runs the way of God's commandments,' now he has set his heart at liberty. It is his glory and joy so to do; it is his daily crown of rejoicing, to 'do the will of God on earth, as it is done in heaven.'

"All the commandments of God he accordingly keeps, and that with all his might; for his obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows. And therefore, loving God with all his heart, he serves him with all his strength; he continually presents his soul and 'body a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God'; entirely and without reserve devoting himself, all he has, all he is, to his glory. All the talents he has, he constantly employs according to his Master's will; every power and faculty of his soul, every member of his body.

"By consequence, 'whatsoever he does, it is all to the glory of God.' In all his employments of every kind, he not only aims at this, which is implied in having a single eye, but actually attains it; his business and his refreshments, as well as his prayers, all serve to this great end. Whether he 'sit in the house, or walk by the way,' whether he lie down, or rise up; he is promoting, in all he speaks or does, the one business of his life. Whether he put on his apparel, or labor, or eat and drink, or divert himself from too wasting labor, it all tends to advance the glory of God, by peace and goodwill among men. His one invariable rule is this: 'Whatsoever you do, in

word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God, even the Father, through him.'

"Nor do the customs of the world at all hinder his 'running the race which is set before him.' He cannot therefore 'lay up treasures upon earth,' no more than he can take fire into his bosom. He cannot speak evil of his neighbor, any more than he can lie either for God or man. He cannot utter an unkind word of any one; for love keeps the door of his lips. He cannot 'speak idle words; no corrupt conversation' ever 'comes out of his mouth'; as is all that is not 'good to the use of edifying,' not fit to 'minister grace to the hearers.' But 'whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are' justly 'of good report,' he thinks, speaks, and acts, 'adorning the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.'"

These are the very words wherein I largely declared, for the first time, my sentiments of Christian perfection. And is it not easy to see, (1) That this is the very point at which I aimed all along from the year 1725; and more determinately from the year 1730, when I began to be *homo unius libri*, "a man of one book," regarding none, comparatively, but the Bible? Is it not easy to see, (2) That this is the very same doctrine which I believe and teach at this day; not adding one point, either to that inward or outward holiness which I maintained eight-and-thirty years ago? And it is the same which, by the grace of God, I have continued to teach from that time till now; as will appear to every impartial person from the extracts subjoined below.

II. I do not know that any writer has made any objection against that tract to this day; and for some time, I did not find much opposition upon the head, at least, not from serious persons. But after a time, a cry arose, and, what a little surprised me, among religious men, who affirmed, not that I stated perfection wrong, but that "there is no perfection on

earth"; nay, and fell vehemently on my brother and me for affirming the contrary. We scarce expected so rough an attack from these; especially as we were clear on justification by faith, and careful to ascribe the whole of salvation to the mere grace of God. But what most surprised us, was, that we were said to "dishonor Christ," by asserting that he "saves to the uttermost"; by maintaining he will reign in our hearts alone, and subdue all things to himself.

SERMON ON CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

12. I think it was in the latter end of the year 1740, that I had a conversation with Dr. Gibson, then Bishop of London, at Whitehall. He asked me what I meant by perfection. I told him without any disguise or reserve. When I ceased speaking, he said, "Mr. Wesley, if this be all you mean, publish it to all the world. If any one then can confute what you say, he may have free leave." I answered, "My Lord, I will"; and accordingly wrote and published the sermon on Christian perfection.

In this I endeavored to show, (1) In what sense Christians are not, (2) In what sense they are, perfect.

"(1) In what sense they are not. They are not perfect in knowledge. They are not free from ignorance, no, nor from mistake. We are no more to expect any living man to be infallible, than to be omniscient. They are not free from infirmities, such as weakness or slowness of understanding, irregular quickness or heaviness of imagination. Such in another kind are impropriety of language, ungracefulness of pronunciation; to which one might add a thousand nameless defects, either in conversation or behavior. From such infirmities as these none are perfectly freed till their spirits return to God; neither can we expect till then to be wholly freed from temptation; for 'the servant is not above his master.' But neither in this sense is

there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no perfection of degrees, none which does not admit of a continual increase.

“(2) In what sense then 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. This St. John affirms expressly; and it cannot be disproved by the examples of the Old Testament. For what, if the holiest of the ancient Jews did sometimes commit sin? We cannot infer from hence, that ‘all Christians do and must commit sin as long as they live.’

“But does not the Scripture say, ‘A just man sins seven times a day?’ It does not. Indeed it says, ‘A just man falls 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*.

“But elsewhere Solomon says, ‘There is no man that sins not.’ Doubtless thus it was in the days of Solomon; yea, and from Solomon to Christ there was then no man that sinned not. But whatever was the case of those under the law, we may safely affirm, with St. John, that, since the gospel was given, ‘he that is born of God sins not.’

“The privileges of Christians are in nowise to be measured by what the Old Testament records concerning those who were under the Jewish dispensation; seeing the fullness of time is now come, the Holy Ghost is now given, and the great salvation of God is now brought to men by the revelation of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of heaven is now set up on earth, concerning which the Spirit of God declared of old time (so far is David from being the pattern or standard of Christian perfection), ‘He that is feeble among them, at that day, shall be as David, and the house of David shall be as the angel of the Lord before them’ (Zech. 12:8).

“But the apostles themselves committed sin; Peter by dissembling, Paul by his sharp contention with Barnabas.

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. No necessity of sin was laid upon them; the grace of God was surely sufficient for them. And it is sufficient for us at this day.

"But St. James says, 'In many things we offend all.' True; but who are the persons here spoken of? Why, those 'many masters' or teachers whom God had not sent; not the apostle himself, nor any real Christian. That in the word *we*, used by a figure of speech, common in all other as well as the inspired writings, the apostle could not possibly include himself, or any other true believer, appears, first, from the ninth verse: 'Therewith bless we God, and therewith curse we men.' Surely not *we* apostles! Not *we* believers! Secondly, from the words preceding the text: 'My brethren, be not many masters,' or teachers, 'knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all.' *We!* Who? Not the apostles nor true believers, but they who were to 'receive the greater condemnation,' because of those many offenses. Nay, thirdly, the verse itself proves, that 'we offend all,' cannot be spoken either of all men or all Christians. For in it immediately follows the mention of a man who 'offends not,' as the *we* first mentioned did; from whom therefore he is professedly contradistinguished, and pronounced a 'perfect man.'

"But St. John himself says, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves'; and, 'If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.'

"I answer, (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 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 cleanses 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.

"This is the glorious privilege of every Christian, yea, though he be but a babe in Christ. But it is only of grown Christians it can be affirmed, they are in such a sense perfect, as, secondly, to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers. First, from evil or sinful thoughts; indeed, whence should they spring? 'Out of the heart of man,' if at all, 'proceed evil thoughts.' If, therefore, the heart be no longer evil, then evil thoughts no longer proceed out of it, for 'a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit.'

"And as they are freed from evil thoughts, so likewise from evil tempers. Every one of these can say, with St. Paul, 'I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me'—words that manifestly describe a deliverance from inward as well as from outward sin. This is expressed both negatively, 'I live not,' my evil nature, the body of sin, is destroyed; and positively, 'Christ lives in me,' and therefore all that is holy, and just, and good. Indeed, both these, 'Christ lives in me,' and, 'I live not,' are inseparably connected. For what communion has light with darkness, or Christ with Belial?

"He, therefore, who lives in these Christians has 'purified their hearts by faith'; insomuch that every one that has Christ

in him, 'the hope of glory, purifies himself even as he is pure.' He is purified from pride, for Christ was lowly in heart. He is pure from desire and self-will, for Christ desired only to do the will of his Father. And he is pure from anger, in the common sense of the word, for Christ was meek and gentle. I say, 'in the common sense of the word,' for he is angry at sin, while he is grieved for the sinner. He feels a displacency at every offense against God, but only tender compassion to the offender.

"Thus does Jesus save his people from their sins, not only from outward sins, but from the sins of their hearts. 'True,' say some, 'but not till death, not in this world.' Nay, St. John says, 'Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because, as he is, so are we in this world.' The apostle here, beyond all contradiction, speaks of himself and other living Christians, of whom he flatly affirms, that, not only at or after death, but 'in this world,' they are 'as their Master.'

"Exactly agreeable to this are his words in the first chapter: 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin.' And again: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

"Now, it is evident, the apostle here speaks of a deliverance wrought in this world; for he says not, 'The blood of Christ *will* cleanse' (at the hour of death, or in the day of judgment), but it 'cleanses,' at the time present, us living Christians 'from all sin.' And it is equally evident, that if any sin remain, we are not cleansed from 'all' sin. If *any* unrighteousness remain in the soul, it is not cleansed from all unrighteousness.

Neither let any say that this relates to justification only, or the cleansing us from the guilt of sin: first, because this is confounding together what the apostle clearly distinguishes,

who mentions, first, 'to forgive us our sins, and then 'to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'; secondly, because this is asserting justification by works, in the strongest sense possible; it is making all inward, as well as all outward, holiness, necessarily previous to justification. For if the cleansing here spoken of is no other than the cleansing us from the guilt of sin, then we are not cleansed from guilt, that is, not justified, unless on condition of walking 'in the light, as he is in the light.' It remains, then, that Christians are saved in this world from all sin, from all unrighteousness; that they are now in such a sense perfect, as not to commit sin, and to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers."

It could not be, but that a discourse of this kind, which directly contradicted the favorite opinion of many, who were esteemed by others, and possibly esteemed themselves, some of the best of Christians (whereas, if these things were so, they were not Christians at all), should give no small offense. Many answers or animadversions, therefore, were expected; but I was agreeably disappointed. I do not know that any appeared, so I went quietly on my way.