

FROM ALDERSGATE TO AZUSA STREET
Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal Visions of the New Creation

Contents

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The People Called Methodists

STEPHEN W. RANKIN

THERE IS A PREVALENT bias in the church today that downplays and even tries to avoid doctrine. "Doctrine divides," the saying goes, so we are better off not talking about it and getting people all riled up to no good end. Many think conflict over it is unnecessary because they believe doctrine has nothing to do with real life. It is the stuff of the academy: endless abstractions that only the technically-trained can understand. A bumper sticker says, "My karma ran over my dogma," which is a trendy way to say that life's experiences are much more powerful and relevant than fixed doctrines.

A similar, though more sophisticated, attitude can be found among scholars heavily influenced by certain ideas from Immanuel Kant. Kant was deeply engaged in the Enlightenment project to find a sure foundation for knowledge. Kant proposed two kinds of knowledge. The first was knowledge of the objective world, such as that pursued by scientific inquiry. Here Kant argued that, as beings limited by space and time, we could not know things as they are, but only as they appear to us. The second kind of knowledge was subjective, and included a universal moral imperative. It was this subjective knowledge that provides the foundation for both God and ethics.

After Kant, the tendency has been to understand doctrine not as an "objective" or factual statement about God's nature and activity but as an expression of our subjectivity or experience. Doctrine has been reduced in authority and impact. The tendency has been to shift away from the authority of specific doctrines to religious experience, which purports to

give people a larger degree of latitude in understanding their faith. It has resulted in a general sense of "liberation from" doctrine.

For people in the Wesleyan tradition this move to experience has had a particular appeal. John Kent, a British Methodist theologian, provides a good example in his recent work, *Wesley and the Wesleys*.¹ Kent, in Kantian fashion, distinguishes "primary religion" from "secondary theological explanation." "Primary religion" has to do with experience. It is, in short, the language of religious feelings. It is raw and unsophisticated, but heartfelt and, in that sense "real." "Secondary theological explanation" is the language of formalized doctrine. It originally flows from experience, but in the hands of technically-trained religious leaders, it becomes artificial, abstract and imposed "top-down." "Secondary theological explanation," according to this view can be dangerous to authentic faith or experience.

We therefore live in a context that, for these and other reasons, downplays doctrine. To be sure, anyone who has studied church history knows of the numerous divisions and hostilities within the church. We pray for unity. A spirit of generosity and pragmatism calls for us to minimize doctrinal differences. People in the Wesleyan family, however, should beware of carrying this prejudice too far. We cannot so easily divorce doctrine from life. Ironically, downplaying doctrine has impoverished the life of the Wesleyan family.

In the following essay we will summarize very briefly the core aspects of Wesley's doctrine of the Christian life that was both the most controversial and, according to Wesley, the reason God called Methodists into existence. Wesley understood the scriptures to teach that the Christian life has a goal—a trajectory—that produces maturing disciples who love God without reserve and who love neighbors and enemies in practical, sacrificial, Christ-like ways. Doctrine logically connects with life at this level. The quality of life early Methodists experienced often mirrored this doctrine² that Wesley championed throughout his ministry.

1. John Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleys* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

2. It is easy in our day to identify doctrine with what Wesley calls "religious opinions" and then dismiss doctrine with facile references to Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit." This is a mistake.

METHODISM'S DOCTRINAL "GRAND DEPOSITUM"

John Wesley spent virtually his entire ministry advocating for and defending the doctrine of Christian perfection,³ that "grand depositum," he wrote, "for which Methodists were chiefly raised up."⁴ The term is still a controversial one, because of the implication of flawlessness (which Wesley did not hold), but the doctrine Wesley advanced is deeply rooted in scripture and powerfully useful for envisioning the goal of the Christian life. The fastest way into the topic, therefore, is to focus on two or three of Wesley's sermons, in which the promise and goal of Christian maturity (perfection) are clearly explicated. We will watch for the link Wesley makes between the change that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of believers and the love they demonstrate in practical ways toward their neighbors. That change takes place in the "affections" or "habitual dispositions of the soul," as Wesley termed them. According to Wesley's trajectory of Christian maturity, the fruit of the Spirit in people's lives demonstrates a transformation in what they desire, feel and think. These changes produce a related change in the way people act toward their neighbors and even their enemies. Christians perfected in love so identify with Christ and his kingdom that they find themselves loving people as Jesus loves them and doing the things that Jesus did (does).

In Wesley's sermon, "On Perfection," he states, "This is the sum of Christian perfection: it is all comprised in that one word, love."⁵ That love always includes both God and neighbor. It thus reflects the very mind of Christ. The person who shares the mind of Christ is changed through and through by the gracious action of the Holy Spirit. As Wesley put it, this change "includes the whole disposition of his mind, all his af-

3. There are several terms that Wesley variably used: "being made perfect in love," "sanctification," "full salvation," "holiness." For simplicity's sake, I will stick with "Christian perfection."

4. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley*, 8 volumes (London: Epworth, 1931) 8:237-38.

5. "Affections" is a term much used in Wesley. Affections have emotional qualities but are not identified with emotions, since emotions are transitory feeling states. Affections are more dispositional and, over time, are shaped by the Holy Spirit (through Christian practices) to come in line with the character of Christ. For a detailed explanation of John Wesley's view of religious affections, see Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology*, Peirist and Wesleyan Studies 1 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1989).

6. *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) 3:7-4.

fections, all his tempers, both toward God and man." These qualities are made visible in the believer through the fruit of the Spirit. Wesley argued that, though Galatians 5:22-23 uses a number of terms to describe the fruit of the Spirit, it is, in truth, all of one reality: the "one undivided fruit of the Spirit" is love, so that the "glorious constellation of graces"⁷ (i.e. joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, etc.) are all subsumed in love. This gracious affection necessarily produces a compassionate and loving response toward other people. Acts of sacrificial love for others is the logical (though supernatural) result of the work of God in the believer's heart. The doctrine of Christian perfection, for Wesley, is simply a naming and explanation of what he believed God ultimately intended to produce in Christians.

One of Wesley's favorite Bible verses was Romans 14:17, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." In his sermon, "The Way to the Kingdom," though Wesley uses Mark 1:15 ("The kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel") as the theme verse, he structures the sermon around Romans 14:17. The kingdom of God is found, not in outward things, but in the heart. As with the fruit of the Spirit, since righteousness, peace and joy are all matters of the heart, we are talking about what might be loosely termed in modern language, psychological traits. Romans 14:17 plays an important role in Wesley's thinking precisely because it locates the work of the kingdom of God in the affections. Because the Spirit is at work, one's heart's desire becomes God and God's will rather than self. Furthermore, because God becomes the heart's primary (and eventually, according to the doctrine of Christian perfection, sole) desire, the believer takes on more and more of the qualities that reflect the kingdom of God: "humbleness of mind, gentleness, meekness, long-suffering," as well as the banishment "of doubt, fear and painful uncertainty." In the place of doubt and fear the believer finds true joy. "Wherever [the peace of God] is fixed in the soul, there is also 'joy in the Holy Ghost.'"⁸

From these Spirit-infused dispositions comes the desire to love and serve the neighbor. This desire—in the logic of the divine economy—is a necessary (and utterly inevitable) concomitant to the desire for and love of God. Wesley states: "the second great branch of Christian righ-

7. *Ibid.*, 75.

8. *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) 3:222-24.

teousness is closely and inseparably connected therewith, even 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' 'Thou shalt love'—thou shalt embrace with the most tender goodwill, the most earnest and cordial affection, the most inflamed desires of preventing or removing all evil and of procuring for him every possible good—'thy neighbor . . .'.⁹ This link between love for God and love for neighbor has been easily lost in the controversies surrounding the doctrine of Christian perfection, much to the detriment of Wesleyan and Wesley-related movements. Nonetheless, there are examples from the history of the Wesleyan movement to show the power of this trajectory.

We thus find in this brief survey the inherent link in Wesley's thought between doctrine and life. Wesley believed God had promised Christian perfection to all believers. While the recipient of Christian perfection can literally feel love for God and neighbor, it was not "mere feeling" that God was trying to instill. The empirical evidence of the reality of God's love in the believers' heart was the practical and tangible expression of love for the neighbor (and even the enemy). This is precisely why doctrine does not divide but unites. If we take Wesley at his word, this doctrine both promises and describes the life of God in the human soul.

With these considerations in mind, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand the impact of the Wesleyan tradition without considering how the people called Methodists interacted with Wesleyan doctrine. Doctrine and experience are inextricably, dialectically intertwined. I am tempted to lift the word "perichoresis" from its usual usage in describing the mutual indwelling of persons of the Trinity and employ it to describe the intimate connection in the Wesleyan movement between doctrine and life. We are attempting to gaze on a mystery: the interplay between thoughts, feelings and actions. Each shapes and is shaped by the other. Let us look briefly at an example from early Methodist history that shows the aim Wesley had in mind in promoting Christian perfection.

THOMAS FILDES AND THE STRANGERS' FRIENDS SOCIETY

Thomas Fildes was a grocer in Manchester, England in the late 1700s, and a member of the Methodist society there. He was one of the founding members of a new movement known as the Strangers' Friends Society, formed in Manchester in 1791. The purpose of this organization was

9. *Ibid.*, 221.

to find and tend to the poorest of the poor in Manchester's burgeoning industrial tenement slums. The city had grown steadily throughout the eighteenth century, from a small market town of roughly two thousand to more than one hundred thousand by century's end. People came there to work in the growing cotton industry and wound up living in hastily-built dwellings. The unfortunates living in the basement "apartments" found themselves below the level of the street, with raw sewage running in the ditches outside a solitary window opening with no way to close it. The conditions were appalling as the tenements were hopelessly infested with vermin and all kinds of diseases. The Strangers' Friends Society raised money to provide clean bedding, food, medicine and sometimes larger items like furniture for people suffering these afflictions. They also shared the Gospel with the people they visited, combining attempts to tend to both material and spiritual needs.¹⁰

Thomas Fildes kept a diary of his experiences as a visitor for the Strangers' Friends Society.¹¹ He once found a family of thirteen, for example, living in one room. Nine of them had fevers. He was able to provide them medicine and reported later to his diary that all had recovered. The outcome was not always so happy. On another occasion, he found a woman and her three children living in a basement apartment, imprisoned there with her husband's corpse. He had been ill for half a year and had finally succumbed to the disease. The woman had no way of removing his body from the apartment, so the family simply had been co-existing with it when Fildes found them. He helped to provide a proper burial.

Visitors with the Strangers' Friends Society delved into spiritual matters with their wards as well. Fildes' diary recounts his interaction with a woman named Meriam Heywood. When he first met her she had been ill already three months. He did all he could to care for her medical needs, but went beyond them to the spiritual, counseling with her about the condition of her soul. She seemed to think that her physical affliction would atone for her sins. After explaining God's love and her fallen state, Fildes recorded that she began to cry out for mercy, struggling might-

10. Members of Methodist societies were not eligible to receive help through the Strangers' Friends Society. The societies "took care of their own" through other means. The ministrations of SFS were strictly for people outside Methodism.

11. All references to Thomas Fildes and his experience in the Strangers' Friends Society come from his manuscript diary, housed in the Manchester Central (Public) Library, Misc. 777/1.

ily to "catch one drop of that healing stream and he who never lets any strive in vain washed all her sins away."

From the Fall of 1791 until the end of 1803, the Strangers' Friends Society distributed more than six thousand four hundred pounds in aid to approximately sixty thousand people. In today's figures, it would amount to roughly fourteen thousand dollars. When we take into account that a person could live reasonably well on thirty or forty pounds a year in those days, we can see that it was a healthy sum of money raised by Methodists—for total strangers.¹²

Thomas Fildes was likewise instrumental in the formation of the first Sunday School in Manchester. Space does not permit, but we could tell a similar story about Methodist leadership in the Sunday School movement, which was growing at the same time as the Strangers' Friends Society was operating.¹³ Within a few years there were thousands of children enrolled in Sunday Schools in Manchester. These were the days before child labor laws and Manchester was becoming an industrial city. These children would be condemned to a life of grinding poverty if someone did not care for them. Many of them literally lived on the streets, abandoned by parents who could not feed them. In the Sunday Schools, they learned to read (and eventually to write), but they also learned cleanliness and "social graces" and other skills that would help them improve their lives.

DOCTRINE AND LIFE IN THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS

These efforts of Methodists to serve other people are notable, inspiring and challenging.¹⁴ When one asks about the impetus for such displays of practical love, one must consider the role that Methodism's "grand depositum" played. The difficulty in making this claim—linking doctrine and practice in particular ways—however, is a monumental historiographical challenge. How does one show that a particular teaching

12. The existence of the Strangers' Friends Society in Manchester prompted other similar relief efforts. The Manchester Poor Committee was a parallel effort which some members of the SFS helped to initiate as well.

13. The SFS had groups in other large cities, as well, including London. However, as a sub-group within Methodism, it was never a large society. For example, in Manchester, the society never had more than thirty members at any given time.

14. Thomas Fildes died of typhoid fever, which he contracted while visiting the sick in Manchester. He literally gave his life for the sake of others.

caused the behavior exemplified by people like Thomas Fildes? It would thrill a researcher's heart to find a "paper trail," a statement in Fildes' own hand, for example, saying something like, "I experienced Christian perfection and because of it I felt moved to give my life away in service to others." In Fildes' case, all we have available to us is the scrap of diary to which we have referred. Many of the testimonies to Christian perfection are recorded in published sources such as the *Arminian Magazine*, but they serve an apologetic purpose, which was to defend and uphold the doctrine both to Methodists and to their detractors.¹⁵ They are therefore not as helpful as we might wish.

Still, there are tantalizing glimpses. In Manchester Methodism's history there is chronological proximity between revivals in which a significant number of people gave testimony to having experienced Christian perfection and the organization of efforts to serve the poor. In that sense, the history "matches" what John Wesley envisioned the doctrine of Christian perfection to produce. In the 1780s, for example, Manchester Methodists experienced renewal and the preachers appointed to that station mentioned a significant number of testimonies to Christian perfection. At the same time, Methodists became active in promoting Sunday Schools and joined societies calling for the abolition of slavery.¹⁶ In 1791 they formed the Strangers' Friends Society. There is no way to show direct causation between the revival and the demonstrable, tangible "loving one's neighbor as oneself" exemplified in these activities, yet the logic of Christian perfection and the manner in which John Wesley described it suggest that the practices did follow from the doctrine. It is worth considering or perhaps re-considering, therefore, the power of this "grand depositum" for people in the Wesleyan and related families.

15. The doctrine of Christian perfection brought dissension within the ranks of Methodism as well as outside. Much of the problem lay with the word itself, but there were deeper theological differences that separated Wesleyans from Reformed thinkers.

16. In the American context, a similar case could be made for the connection between Christian perfection and service to others. Douglas Strong has demonstrated a direct link between efforts to abolish slavery in the United States and the doctrine of holiness. See Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions, Religion and Politics Series* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

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PART ONE

Pastoral Response

 RODNEY MCNEALL

DR. RANKIN ASSERTS THAT John Wesley considered the “grand depositum” of the Methodist movement to be the doctrine of Christian Perfection and provides illustrations of how that was exemplified in eighteenth-century British Methodism. Dr. Knight articulates how John and Charles Wesley made the pursuit of Christian Perfection not only a personal quest but an emphasis that would drive the entire movement in the larger context of the eighteenth-century awakenings. And Dr. Thompson shows how John Fletcher’s influence and theological innovations would shape not only the Methodism of his day but provide fertile resources for Holiness and Pentecostal spirituality. Given John Wesley’s assertion of Christian Perfection and its emphasis in early British Methodism as the “grand depositum” to the wider church and world, I wonder though, if somehow the structured, global denominations of today have somehow overdrawn on this original deposit. This is not to make light of either the contribution that Methodism has made to the church as a whole or John Wesley’s assertion, but is more of a statement regarding how the denominations that retain the Methodist name have accounted for this inheritance over time.

As a pastor of the United Methodist church, the language of Christian perfection, entire sanctification, or even the “way of salvation” is mostly foreign to the congregations I have served. Yet it’s not the lack of theological language that is troubling as much as a lack of clarity of purpose that this doctrine could and would provide for the church as inheritors of this grand deposit. Thus, what is at stake is more than

recovering a language and theological terminology for today's church. Rather, I suggest that to recover an emphasis on "the means of grace" that gave shape and vitality to a Methodist movement, might restore the same shape and vitality to the immediate inheritors of that legacy.

Churches build new buildings and employ new technologies in ministry. We appropriately discuss and incorporate the finer points of family systems theory in clergy boundaries and healthy church initiatives. We attend committee meetings, invoke consultants, build mission and vision statements, attend leadership training seminars and read volumes of books all with different methodologies, theological underpinnings, and implications. In itself this is a healthy process, as each innovation in the area of theology, social sciences, business practice, and technology may very well provide fertile ground for the church to bear fruit for God's kingdom. However, as we appropriate from these divergent areas of expertise, are we doing so with a critical eye toward the assumptions that lie beneath?

Unlike the Wesleys, Fletcher, and early Methodism, it is hard to detect an overarching theology at work in today's Methodism (at least United Methodism) that provides coherence in appropriating these resources for the purposes of knowing God and knowing God's purposes for us. Perhaps this is the fruit that results from doctrine being seen as divisive, as discussed by Dr. Rankin. The danger is in allowing these innovations to subtly alter the ends for which the church exists, especially if these methodologies seem helpful in maintaining the church as an institution. To continue the banking metaphor, it may be that today's United Methodism is not bankrupt as much as other deposits have been made along the way such that the original seems less significant, especially in light of a contemporary aversion to matters of doctrine.

As this opening section clearly indicates, Christian Perfection was not merely an abstract concept to be articulated and debated among the intelligentsia of the day. Rather, the Wesleys, Fletcher, and the People called Methodists pursued Christian Perfection as an attainable, practical goal for all Christians. It was what defined who they were as Christians. Striving toward Christian perfection was (and is) a life-giving, life-transforming relationship with the Trinitarian God that not only provided the assurance they sought as forgiven people in Jesus Christ, but the means by which to grow in that faith and love, and to express it towards others. It provided the coherent theo-logic by which other voices

could be heard, evaluated and filtered. Yet the raw materials, so to speak, of Christian perfection lay in the means of God's grace. As Dr. Knight clearly points out, the means of grace as acts of piety and mercy were not what justified the Methodist before God (this was by grace through faith alone). Rather prayer and fasting, searching the Scriptures, participating in Holy Communion, engaging in Christian conversations, as well as works of service and justice are the ways in which God has provided for Christians to keep their "focus on knowing God" through faith. For early British Methodism, the means of grace were central to loving God and loving neighbor, and therefore central to the "way of salvation."

This is significantly more than a utilitarian approach to Christian piety and ministry. This is significantly more than statistics, technology, capital campaigns and committees. However, it is what could give them all Godly purpose and meaning. It moves our acts of piety from sanctifying decisions already made through church political processes towards practicing the presence of God in order to hear God amidst all other voices that demand to be heard. Practicing the means of grace creates the opportunity for Christians to experience God's love and life transforming presence so that love may become the reigning "temper" of their heart. Perhaps the question is not whether we should be engaged in all the other activities the church may engage, but are those activities moving us toward Christian perfection, experiencing God's love, and helping us to love our neighbor? Maybe it is not doctrine that divides us as much as other forces working to influence the church.

The dangers that the means of grace countered in early Methodism were formalism and enthusiasm. Is that so different than what the church faces today cloaked differently?