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Transformative Dimensions within Wesley’s Understanding of Christian Perfection

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G. K. Chesterton described orthodoxy as a "thrilling romance." His words continue to resonate.

People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It was sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad. It was the equilibrium of a man behind madly rushing horses, seeming to stoop this way and to sway that; yet in every attitude having the grace of statuary and the accuracy of arithmetic. The church in its early days went fierce and fast... [...] It never took the tame course or accepted the conventions [...] To have fallen into any of those open traps of error and exaggeration would indeed have been simple. It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. [...] But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect.

What a picture of orthodoxy and so applicable to the particular orthodoxy of Christian Perfection! There is a dramatic contrast between the wild orthodoxy of true holiness and the "traps," the accepted conventions of misunderstood, tame Christian Perfection. A recent survey among the faculty of a Christian University clearly reflects this. Chesterton's term "dull heresies" is an apt descriptor compared to the truth.

To Wesley Christian Perfection, the real thing, was not merely a doctrine among doctrines. It was integral to and inseparable from the body of Christian truth. It was

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seminal, the “grand depositum which God [had] lodged with the people called Methodists.”

The entire corpus of salvation by faith contained two branches: justification and sanctification. Because justification received much emphasis by Wesley’s contemporaries, he saw his mission to bring awareness to the complete story, God’s power as well as love. Christianity was not just forgiveness; it was the transformed life, and Wesley never relegated this application of God’s power to a secondary place. Williams rightly points out that Christian Perfection was the “climax” of Wesley’s understanding of grace, where “his theology comes to focus.” Perhaps the wild truth, reeling but erect!

So central was this theme to his theology that Wesley used various terms interchangeably when referring to it. He could speak of “holiness,” “perfection,” “sanctification,” “full salvation,” “true religion” or “righteousness” and consistently use the same definition. Even the “altogether Christian,” contrasted to the “almost Christian” was described by the same characteristics. This truth was a dominant theme of his experience and teaching.

But what has happened to the dynamic truth of Christian Perfection? To use Chesterton’s metaphors, instead of a “thrilling romance,” or a person “behind madly rushing horses,” most of Christianity, especially holiness Christianity has acquiesced to something tame and safe, something confined to “correct belief” or proper terminology. In contrast to Wesley, the faculty survey indicated different definitions and greatly differing responses to the key terms (synonyms) used by Wesley. The transforming dynamic has often been lost. Perhaps those who carry Wesley’s legacy have been so focused on the form that we have lost the distinctive content. When that content is in place (understood from Wesley’s perspective), the form (how God does it) is left to God’s sovereignty and perhaps the madly rushing horses will again be unleashed.

Overview: After seeing four of Wesley’s foundational assumptions, we shall look briefly at his description of Christian Perfection and then develop transformative dimensions within Christian Perfection.

A. Wesley saw the process of sanctification beginning at the moment of justification. He states: “...at the same time that we are justified, yea, in that very moment, sanctification begins.” While justification and the new birth are parts of a whole, they are of a “totally different nature,” integrally related although separate and distinct.

B. Sanctification, just like justification is considered a gift of God. It comes only through the “condition and instrument” of faith.

C. Not only is sanctification a gift, but the faith by which it comes is also a gift. Wesley specified, “...sanctifying as well as justifying faith is the free gift of God.” Because it is a gift one cannot earn it, but can only wait for it. However, the waiting is active, involving doing the works of repentance (works of piety and works of mercy) which function as God’s appointed means of grace.

D. “Sanctification by faith” brings an actual moral change in the believer. Wesley disparaged the antinomian teaching that divorced justification from the resulting behavioral change. He might well concur with Quakers in opposing those that “preach up sin to the grave” (that we continue to sin until death), accepting human fallenness as an excuse for lack of moral reform. Authentic salvation includes holiness and he contrasted the result of justification with the result of sanctification using insightful comparative phrases. While justification produces a “relative” change (one’s relationship to God), sanctification pro-
roduces a "real" change (the person's inner being). Justification is what God does "for us, through his Son," and sanctification is what God works "in us by his Spirit." Through justi-
fication Christ's righteousness "entitles" us to heaven, but his power in bringing personal holliness then "qualifies" us for it.1 These contrasts do not minimize justification but iden-
ify the more complete nature of the work of grace. He explains, "the title 'holy,' applied to
the Spirit of God, does not only denote that God is holy in his own nature, but that he
makes us so."2 The consequences are practical. Justification addresses the guilt of sin;
sanctification addresses the power of sin.

TRANSITION: With sanctification (holiness) as an essential component of Wesley's view
of salvation, we turn now to his description of holiness. It is here that we come to terms
with the content of Christian Perfection. In the content we begin to discover the transform-
ative dimensions of Christian Perfection.

Three perspectives occur frequently in his sermons and other writings and are present-
ed clearly in his most comprehensive treatment of the topic, A Plain Account of Christian
Perfection. They include,

a) a reorientation of motivation which he calls purity of intention,
b) the renewed image (moral image) of God and
c) the new and actual ability to love God and neighbor.

In a passage that underscores the similarity, congruity and integral relationship of the three
perspectives of Christian Perfection he states,

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 which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumci-
sion of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a
renewal of the heart in the whole 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.
Now, take it in which of these views you please (for there is no material difference)
and this is the whole and sole perfection...13

Wesley's three views, purity of intention, renewed image and love of God and neigh-
bor, can all be subsumed in the middle one, the renewed image of God in persons. He
believed that humankind were originally created with three dimensions of God's image,
the moral, the political and the natural. For him the greatest tragedy of the fall was that
we completely lost the moral image of God. While the natural and political dimensions of
the imago Dei are partly lost in the fall, likewise, they are only partly restored by preve-
nient grace. But the moral dimension, completely lost in the fall, can be completely
restored in "full salvation." It was not by chance that Wesley chose this term, full salvation,
because he believed that at this level of salvation the moral image could be fully restored.

If his doctrine of human depravity reflects Wesley's very low view of humankind, with-
out dignity, his view of sanctification reflects the opposite end of the continuum: human
kind with nearly unlimited potential. The greatness of human potential lay in the
fact that the image of God could be restored. He even referred to justification restoring us to God’s “favor,” while sanctification restores us to God’s “image.”

When the *imago dei* is restored, the other two perspectives will be concomitant: intention will be pure because it relates to the mind of Christ and we again experience the ability to love God with the whole heart, mind, soul and strength. This was not a theological tangent or hobbyhorse. It meant radical transformation: becoming a new person with a different moral foundation, even new moral abilities. And the dominant characteristic, the most accurate expression of that image was love.

The two concepts, image of God and love, are brought together in Wesley’s statement, “the very image of the invisible God” is love. He goes to great lengths to identify the sanctified life with love:

But what is perfection? The word has various senses: Here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. 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.

Indeed, what is it? Christian Perfection! more or less than humble, gentle, patient love.

Christians should aspire to “nothing more, but more of ... love;” they could go no higher than this. For depraved individuals to again have this ability to love requires nothing less than radical transformation. But, as the image is restored such capacity to love returns.

**DYNAMICS OF TRANSFORMATION**

I. If love was the major demonstration of the renewed image, how does one experience this renewal that produces love? Here we see the interplay of initiation and response. Wesley saw God’s love for us as the foundation of the ability to change morally and conform to holiness. The first spiritual dynamic for transformation: God’s love elicits our response of love to God. Although Peter Abelard’s view of the atonement (Moral Influence) has seemed to many to minimize God’s work because it is not as transactional, it may get at the truth and power of God’s work with more profound insight. Rather than a payoff or satisfaction, something we can easily get our minds around, God’s demonstration of love reaches into the human heart in a way that cannot be formulated. At the deepest levels the heart is changed. Beyond explanation, a person is *tuned* (emphasis on the passive voice) from self-preoccupation to a Love that displaces egocentricity. This is more miraculous (but less specifiable) than an equation. We love because God first loved us. Although the process and outcome are more subtle than in a direct transaction, the “conversion” of the heart is more mysterious, even miraculous. While Wesley would probably have verbally opted for a more transactional model of the atonement, his describing how the love of God restores the *imago dei* resonates more with a relational initiation/response.

Regardless of exactly how grace functions to restore the image, Wesley is unmistakably clear that it is a work of grace by means of God’s love. God’s love, demonstrated in Christ miraculously draws us. It draws us to think and act differently than our normal character
and we discover, amazingly, that we love God! This ability to love is not rooted in our natural abilities, but in the power of God’s love. He was clear: “this love of human kind cannot spring but from the love of God.”19 In another place he specifies, “no true holiness the equates holiness with lovel can exist without that love of God for its foundation.”20 More overtly he states, “We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. We feel ‘the love of God shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.’”21 To expect persons on their own to live this kind of love would be wishful thinking. However, energized by God’s love, it becomes reality. The first transformative dimension of Christian Perfection is that God’s love initiates a response in the human heart. The power and nature of divine love is such that it renders inordinate self love, self interest, as futile by comparison. Therefore, God’s love puts in action the beginning of transformation and makes possible the response of love. People who have been deeply loved often describe the experience as transforming. Wesley is getting at that truth.

II. A second transformative dimension has to do with the means of experiencing faith and its role. Beyond question, Wesley followed the Protestant tradition of giving very high priority to faith. It was the only condition for both justification and sanctification. God works in the human heart by sola fide. Human effort has absolutely no salvific or sanctifying merit because faith is the only condition. It is not some human blend of faith and works that gains God’s favor.

The transformative dynamic of faith lies in the fact that Wesley clearly saw it as God’s gift, not a matter of self-effort. A widespread misunderstanding of faith among evangelicals, especially evangelicals from the holiness tradition, has to do with HOW we experience faith. They are clear that it is only by faith, not human effort that we come into relationship with God. But then their understanding grows fuzzy. They feel that faith is the result of human effort. A recent research project that a psychologist colleague and I collaborated on revealed that while they subscribed to sola fide, when pushed to describe how we experience faith they consistently reverted to words that reflected effort, effort for which they were responsible. The majority of those interviewed had no grasp of faith as God’s gift. The result for them was a nagging sense of not measuring up, especially when they had fears that their faith was inadequate. This often produced feelings of guilt and was usually followed by increased “Christian activity.” Even though they would never consciously associate faith with work, in actuality faith for them had become a work.22

By contrast, Wesley never sees faith as the result of human effort, but as God’s gracious gift. God is the initiator. Wesley’s emphasis is placed clearly on God’s love, not on human effort. There must be a human response to God’s enabling Presence, but that response is experienced in the works of repentance, which God sees as a means of grace in which God gives the gift of faith. This must not be confused with “works;” it is God’s chosen means. As a result the work of transformation is in God’s hands, the only place it can be accomplished. It is the Creator alone who can renew the creature and restore relationship. The means God chooses is faith, which God alone can establish in the human heart. Such a view allows us to be willing receivers of God’s gift, rather than neurotic achievers attempting to please God in building faith. God is the gracious Giver, rather than the Evaluator. When seen in this way we are free to respond and be transformed
and grow. Rather than being compulsively driven "spiritual achievers," we are more likely to experience emotional, spiritual and psychological health as well as transformation. While faith is the condition, it is also (and here is the transformative dimension) God's gift.

III. A third transformative dimension has to do with the relationship of faith to love. Here Wesley is radical. Moving beyond much of Protestantism, Wesley saw the importance of faith not in what it was, but in how it functioned. Its importance lay not in itself, but what it made possible — love. What was lost in the fall was the divine relationship of love. The entire plan of redemption was to restore that relationship, and faith was merely part, albeit the crucial part, of that process. In other words, relationship, loving relationship was the desired end, and faith was the means. Wesley described faith as "the handmaid of love." He explains, "as glorious and honorable as [faith] is, it is not the end of the commandment. God hath given this honour to love alone: Love is the end of all the commandments of God." In a very clear description, he develops this theme:

Faith, then, was originally designed of God to re-establish the law of love. Therefore, in speaking thus, we are not undervaluing it, or robbing it of its due praise; but, on the contrary, showing its real worth, exalting it in its just proportion, and giving it that very place which the wisdom of God assigned it from the beginning. It is the grand means of restoring that holy love wherein man was originally created. It follows, that although faith is of no value in itself ...yet as it leads to that end, the establishing anew the law of love in our hearts; and ... it is the only means under heaven for effecting it....

Seeing faith as a gift, and love as the byproduct of faith takes the focus off so many extraneous concerns. Just as the first commandment, having no other gods than Yahweh, puts the other commandments in perspective, seeing love as our highest calling puts all other Christian concerns and behaviors into proper perspective and frees us to focus on the highest good. When the human spirit is focused on love, the human life is transformed. And seeing faith as a gift and love as a byproduct also removes the stress. Because faith is God's gift, the "ought" is removed. God initiates and facilitates. If faith is not a work, and it is not, then love is also not a work, but the outgrowth and evidence of faith. Wesley's view resonates with Jesus' metaphor of the vine and the branches. The vine initiates and supplies the nutrients; the branches live in and are energized by the vine through relationship. In a similar spirit, Jesus' teaching that we must become like children conveys the image of one freely receiving the love and gifts of a parent, with no sense of trying to earn them. Faith is not the greatest good; it opens the way to love. That focus transforms us.

IV. Commands and Promises

One of Wesley's greatest insights about God's power to transform is captured in his teaching about biblical commands. This is especially relevant in light of the last section, the command to love. It is interesting that we so glibly accept the injunction to love when in reality it is completely unnatural for humans to do, even totally against our nature. Freud believed the commandment to love one's neighbor as one's self was absurd. The com-
mand to love one’s enemies was even more confusing to him because love should be
deserved. He challenged that there is no value in such a command because its fulfill-
ment is not reasonable. He argued, “nothing runs so strongly counter to the original
nature of man.”

Wesley agrees that love is against our fallen nature. However, he believes human
nature can be changed so that love becomes possible, even normative. This is the essence
of his asserting that the moral aspect of the *Imago Dei* can be fully restored. Abilities which
were lost in the fall are restored. Thus, directives which were out of reach under law
become attainable under grace and the higher ethic of love becomes possible and practical.

The dynamic of how this is brought about is one of Wesley’s important contributions.
With great insight he suggests a subtle, but extremely significant change within the person.
It involves the difference between law and grace (if seen separately), and the difference
between aspiring to something beyond one’s reach and being empowered to live into the
abilities aspired to. Deep within the person comes a shift of perspective. It is a result of
God’s work, affecting the person at the foundational level of motivation. This shift is root-
ed not in one’s self, but in God’s view of the restored person. God’s view unveils a com-
pletely new awareness, brings an awakening and new potential within the person. This is
related to the moral image being restored in the dimension of having the mind of Christ.

With the mind of Christ, the thinking of Christ becomes a part of our synaptic process,
God’s view becomes the individual’s view and a radically new sense of self (self in rela-
tionship with God) becomes the locus of new ability. (This is in the same spirit as Luther’s
“Happy Exchange.”) The source of energy for that new ability is God, but God works
through the human’s new self perception which God gives. Simply stated, Wesley’s para-
digm is that God’s commands are transformed into promises. As Wesley asserts, “Thou
shalt love thy neighbour as thyself; is as express a promise as a command.”

Wesley’s most explicit treatment of this issue is in his Sermon on the Mount disc-
course. The dynamic of his thought is that what was viewed as a command, possibly a
threatening command because of fallen humanity’s inability to fulfill it, by grace becomes
God’s promise of human performance. Rather than the command feeling like a threat,
“you had better love your neighbor or there will be consequences to pay,” it becomes a
promise of what a person will actually do: “You will really love your neighbor.” God’s
promise, sustained by God’s power makes this reality, not wishful thinking. Wesley has
captured an amazing shift in thinking. Duties which were commands under the law (and
impossible to fulfill by human effort), become promises under the gospel:

...there is no contrariety at all between the law and the gospel ...there is no need for
the law to pass away, in order to the establishing of the gospel. Indeed neither of
them supersedes the other, but they agree perfectly well together. Yea, the very
same words, considered in different respects, are parts both of the law and of the
gospel: If they are considered as commandments, they are parts of the law; if as
promises, of the gospel. Thus, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,”
when considered as a commandment, is a branch of the law; when regarded as a
promise, is an essential part of the gospel; — the gospel being no other than the
commands of the law, proposed by way of promise ...The law, for instance, requires
us to love God, to love our neighbour... We feel that we are not sufficient for these things, yea, that “with man this is impossible.” But we see a promise of God, to give us that love .... We lay hold of this gospel, of these glad tidings; it is done unto us according to our faith; and “the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us,” through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

This passage shows not only the difference between but the interfacing of law and grace. Wesley's perspective on commands and promises asserts the possibility of a radical spiritual/psychological transformation. What was unreachable is now within our grasp. What we once perceived as unfulfillable laws are now promises to be claimed and enjoyed. Human ability and perception are drastically altered. This is not merely a psychological ploy or “positive thinking.” The difference is the reality of God's Presence. The transforming power of God's Presence constantly brings awareness of the true self as God created it and sees it. With the mind of Christ, the thinking of Christ becomes our perspective. Our sense of self is drastically altered. And with that awareness and Presence come the ability to live accordingly. It is very different from a moral admonition. Because the source is God, these are promises not only made, but fulfilled. Wesley believed that living in such love was simply not possible apart from the energy supplied by God through faith. Only faith could establish “anew the law of love in our hearts;” it was “the only means under heaven for effecting it.” But faith could effect such love.

To deny the ability to experience this promise (the ability to keep the law of love) was to deny the very power of the Gospel. In simple, but colorful terms Wesley stated it was tantamount to giving Christ the kiss of Judas. What could be worse than to acknowledge the presence of Christ while denying his power in one's life? This was the “kiss of Judas.”

But there is another dimension of this transformation, beyond the scope of this paper, but incredibly important. The very nature of the transformation ensures that it reaches beyond the individual. Because one cannot serve or love God in a vacuum, the practical result of loving God included love for one's neighbor: “One of the principle rules of religion is, to lose no occasion of serving God. And, since he is invisible to our eyes, we are to serve him in our neighbour, which he receives as if done to himself in person, standing visibly before us.” This was not an optional response, but the necessary expression of love for God.

And what would the result be? Wesley believed the effect of such loving acts would be so profound that a miracle no less dramatic than that of the first century of Christianity would occur. Want would be ended by voluntary distribution and the powerful example would remove the stumbling-block of Christianity. It would be a new day for evangelism. In such passion we again sense that Christian perfection for Wesley was not an appendage, but the essence of Christianity.

Over the years my work has focused on Wesley's response to slavery. I am convinced that his view of Christian Perfection as love made it impossible for him not to oppose the epitome of human abuse.

Conclusion: Wesley's view of Christian Perfection can be summed up in that we are renewed BY God's love, renewed FOR love, which is demonstrated through service. A close look at Charles Wesley's familiar hymn, Love Divine reveals this very essence:
Love divine, all loves Excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down.
[God equated with love]
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling,
I we are the dwelling of God, i.e. of love! all Thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus Thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation; “salvation” encompasses the full restoration of the ability to love
enter every trembling heart.

Breathe; O breathe Thy loving spirit into every troubled breast!
Let us all in Thee inherit; let us find the promised rest;
Take away the love of sinning; Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, love, the end purpose of faith as its beginning; set our hearts at liberty.

Finish, then, Thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee; restored image of
Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place;
Till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Wesley’s view of Christian Perfection is the restoration of the image of God in
humankind, most fully described as the renewed ability to love God and neighbor. God’s
gracious gifts of love and faith actually transform us into beings capable of love. As we
grasp Wesley’s unique perspective, perhaps we shall rekindle the flame that burned so
brightly in his heart and ignited so many in England and the world. We shall again sense
the thrilling romance of orthodoxy and feel the energy of the madly rushing horses!

NOTES
2. George Fox University, September, 2003.
to the devotional writers he had studied. From Jeremy Taylor came purity of intention, from
Thomas F. Kempeis came the mind of Christ and from William Law came loving God and neighbor
School of Religion, 1963, p. 10). See also John L. Peters, Christian Perfection and Americal Methodism,

14. Wesley, Works, Vol. V, p. 56 (sermon, "Justification By Faith"). As far back as 1730 he had spoken of the image of God being "reprinted" on the soul; Works (Abingdon), Vol. 4, Sermons, IV, sermon 141, "The Image of God."


22. Psychological Implications of the Doctrine of Christian Perfection with Special Reference to John Wesley's View; Irv Breindlinger and Eric Mueller, paper presented at the Society for the Study of Psychology and Wesleyan Theology, March 20, 2003, Lexington, Kentucky. Similar findings are reflected in the recent faculty survey. While 80% believed Christian Perfection is a major and important component of Christian doctrine (# 8), 33% of them had been taught that the major focus of Christian perfection is behavior.


