

I want to talk about John Wesley and what he has to say about sanctification. The four guiding rubrics will be his historical position, his major thrust, a critique, and the implications for us. Before we get into that I would like to share with you a word from this colleague of the 18th century.

I would consider, first, who is a Christian indeed? What does that term properly imply? It has been so long abused, I fear, not only to mean nothing at all, but what was far worse than nothing, to be a cloak for the vilest hypocrisy, for the grossest abominations and immoralities of every kind, that it is high time to rescue it out of the hands of wretches that are a reproach to human nature, to show determinately what manner of man he is to whom this name of right belongs. . . .

Above all, remembering that God is love, he is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbour: of universal love, not confined to one sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, or in outward modes of worship, or to those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those only that love him, or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of him whose mercy is over all his works (cf. PS. 145:9, B.C.P.). It soars above all these scanty grounds, embracing neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies; yea, not only the good and gentle but also the froward, the evil and unthankful. For he loves every soul that God has made, every child of man, of whatever place or nation. And yet this universal benevolence does in nowise interfere with a peculiar regard for his relations; friends and benefactors, a fervent love for his country and the most endeared affection to all men of integrity, of clear and generous virtue.

His love to these, so to all mankind, is in itself generous and disinterested, springing from no view of advantage to himself, from no regard to profit or praise; no, nor even the pleasure of loving. This is the daughter, not the parent, of his affection. By experience he knows that social love (if it mean the love of our neighbour) is absolutely, essentially different from self-love, even of the most allowable kind, just as different as the objects at which they point. And yet it is sure that, if they are under due regulations, each will give additional force to the other, 'till they mix together never to be divided.

---John Wesley

H. Richard Niebuhr gives us a pattern for understanding the situation of the church and the future. He talks about it as alternating between periods of

penetration into culture as the social pioneer, and then periods of withdrawal from its pioneering activities to re-group and revitalize its spirit. In such a division, Wesley's eighteenth century would have to be spoken of as a time of a drawing back and regrouping. In the seventeenth century the church had been shoved out of culture. You had the wars of religion in which, in the name of holiness, Christians of different persuasions alternately marched back and forth all over Europe, decimating the civilization. It finally came to the point where men of good sense said, "What we need here is to construct human community all over again. Let those churchmen go off in a corner and do their thing but be out of society." That was the plight of the church as it went into the eighteenth century, into a period of revitalization. In the nineteenth century the church re-entered society. That was a century of great mission, in which obviously the motivity or revitalization was done, because Christianity literally got spread all over the globe.

One of the key figures in the midst of the church renewal that went on in the eighteenth century was John Wesley, Oxford-educated Anglican priest, who for the first thirty-five years of his life was a rank failure by whatever standards you would like to use. The popular image of Wesley is that of Susanna's boy who got prayed with once a week, had a "heart-warming" experience, preached and rode horses a lot, and founded the Methodist church. That is the popular stereotype. But I think that we need to see John Wesley as the originator, organizer, and, for fifty-three years, guru of a renewal movement that saw itself as a religious order within the Church of England. This is a man we need to listen to.

A quick word about the person. He was a religious seeker for the first part of his life, serious about his religion. While he was at Oxford, he formed a club, that came to be known derisively as the "Holy Club". It met daily, early in the morning for prayer, meditation, and Scripture reading, and then whenever it was out to do good works. That is where the name "Methodist" was given to them. But before long, Wesley found that very dissatisfying. It did not do anything but hold up a form of behavior; it did not have spirit to it. So he and a couple of his friends went to Georgia to be missionaries to the Indians. Picture this Oxford-educated scholar conducting liturgical reform and using Eastern Orthodox materials in the wild backlands of Georgia. The whole operation was a disaster. But Wesley went on seeking --and while travelling back across the Atlantic, there were stormy seas and he was terrified. A group of German Moravian pietists were having hymn-sings and being very tranquil in the face of the raging sea. That struck him deeply as a possibility for humanness that he had not achieved.

He became a revival preacher--reluctantly. He read Jonathan Edward's description of the religious revivals that had taken place in the U.S. It sounded as though something was going on. George Whitefield and some others in the Holy Club decided to try it. The idea was to preach out in the field. Nobody wanted to do it, so they cast lots and it fell to Wesley, after he had argued quite profoundly against it. But he went and preached outside the gates to a bunch of coal miners. The amazing thing to him was what happened as a result. People heard the Word in the midst of his preaching! He began to sense some of the same manifestations that Edwards had reported. And that started a great revival.

It should be noted that this man was a practical genius. While conducting the revival, he formed a core of lay preachers, set up religious houses (called "meeting houses") and all across England organized ecclesiolas and teams --which he called general societies and banns. With each one of those he set up a rigid accountability structure, an agenda, and rules for joining and for staying in. He was organized to the hilt. Yearly, he would pull in his priors and have a re-contexting session, record the minutes, pass them out to everybody, reassign them, and go back about the business of renewal again.

The other thing he did was steadfastly to resist the temptation to pull away and become still another sect. The notion that John Wesley founded the Methodist Church is false. It was literally founded over his dead body. His was a renewal movement within the church of England. He would not allow his lay preachers to give sacraments to anybody, yet he insisted on all the rules that you had to be a regular participant in the sacraments. He directed people into, not away from, the local church.

We want to look now at Wesley's understanding of sanctification. No renewal movement has every gotten off the ground and done anything significant that did not have a clearly articulated vision of humanness. The keynote of Wesley's ideal of humanness is in that passage I read at the beginning. The Christian is one who in his total consciousness is actively directed to loving God and neighbor. The key to Wesley and what makes him different and gripping here is that he says, "That is perfection, and furthermore every Christian has a rightful expectation to be made perfect in this life." The ideal that he is holding up is not something abstract; it is a possible dream. You have a rightful expectation of fulfillment. Every United Methodist clergyman, as he comes up to his ordination is faced with two questions: "Are you going on to perfection?", and, "Do you expect to be made perfect in this life?" The answer to both of them is "Yes." And many are the men who have made forty flips before they could deal with that question. A colleague was telling yesterday of a friend of his who refused and dropped out of the clergy over that very question. But you understand the depths of it: if you say "No," then the answer that gets thrown back at you is, "All right, what are you going on to and what do you expect out of this life?" You begin to get a sense that there is something deeply at stake in this. Wesley's Christian perfection is a key concept for him and something that we can learn from.

I want first to say what it is not, then what it is, and then how you get it. Perfection for John Wesley has nothing to do with the absence of error, ignorance, infirmity, or temptation. The perfected Christian is not perfect in that sense. He is just as subject as always to harmful error, to ignorance and to temptation. Wesley would have liked Tillich's image of the battlefield between the demonic and the divine. I think he would have differed with Tillich in suggesting that the battle can be won, but still, life is a perpetual battlefield and the sanctified life is a battle field.

Secondly, it is not static. The way we use the word "perfect" usually means "that than which you can not go any higher." Wesley used it differently. It was being on the journey--being at the right place for this moment, and thus seeing this moment fulfilled--or, in accordance with all of your present consciousness

having your thoughts and actions all directed toward the love of God and neighbor. There was no notion of any kind of an Omega point that you could not move beyond. Life is a journey; Wesley is very clear about that.

But what is Christian perfection? First it is growth in grace. The Christian life begins with the hearing of the Word, which declares the sinner justified, though still a sinner. The rest of life is a process of growth in grace, and at every moment along the journey there is a distinct possibility of falling all the way back. Yet as you move along the journey your struggles are different, your temptations are different. There is a kind of development and growth there; it is not static.

The second thing is that it is being without sin. That is probably the most offensive to most people. Every Christian has a rightful expectation of being without sin in this life. It is possible in a given moment to be totally directed toward the love of God and neighbor, to be acting out of the Word. The next moment he may know more, and have the decision to make all over again. However at this moment he is without sin. What Wesley is talking about as sin has to do with a conscious decision to go contrary to the way you know life is. We will come back and discuss that in a minute.

Next is leading the disciplined life. Christian perfection has to do with leading the disciplined life very actively. The rules Wesley set up for his societies and banns are incredible. Read them sometime. Basically, there were three for the societies: to do no evil; do good; and attend the sacraments. But then, he spells them out in great detail: do no evil, such as using the Lord's name in vain, wearing much jewelry, or talking at great length. The whole gamut of common human foibles to be avoided is laid out there. He also has a sermon on the right use of money--likewise, very practical. The way the Christian uses money is to get all he can. It would be ridiculous to waste your opportunities. Then he saves all he can; there is no squandering. Third, and here's the stickler, he gives all he can. Christian perfection has to do with leading the disciplined life; it is an active sort of engagement.

The next thing it has to do with is receiving an assurance of your own salvation. Wesley is often accused of being a pietist and coming down hard on the pole of religious experience or the mystical pole. That element was in his thought. He was very clear that there is a dimension of life that has to do with being assured or receiving confidence or attaining some kind of tranquility.

But how do you receive sanctification? Wesley might ask how do you become perfect? You take RS-1, join a cadre, take pedagogy, recruit courses, budget your time and money, take Academies, Odysseys, summer programs, sojourn, go to the sacraments daily--and that still won't do it! But that is evidence that you want sanctification. That is different from sitting waiting for grace to strike and saying, "I'd like to be a perfected Christian." Wesley's wisdom is that you actively put yourself in the midst of those situations where grace is likely to strike, even though that does not guarantee it. Grace is for him a gift as much as for any of the Reformers. It comes as a free gift and allows of no pride. It either happens or it does not happen, and when it happens one has no grounds for pride.

Wesley had two classes of critics, one made up of his opponents and the other of his friends. His opponents hit him on the side of being legalistic. He was very particular in his rules for the society. He said that not every Christian had to obey these rules, just those who decided to be in these societies. Then he gave the rationale for them as evidence of desiring grace. Today the criticism is that he doesn't take sin radically enough as total estrangement. I suggest that he took sin radically enough, but he uses another name for it. He calls it error, or infirmity and reserves the name "sin" for those conscious decisional acts of rejection of the way life is. The other criticism from his enemies is that he is an enthusiast or one who puts experience above discipline. but if you look at his rules for his society that is not the case. He refused to be devisive within the church. That was never his intention nor the function of the Methodist movement when it was a movement of the eighteenth century. The friends that were his enemies were those who took that notion of perfection and perverted it. It might be those who professed to have received perfection and thereby became first-class citizens while everybody else was a second-class citizen, inferior and unable to receive grace. It has resulted in split-off sects from the Wesleyan movement in this country with emphasis on second blessings or particular complete holiness that once received is always yours to contain. The friends who were his enemies took that position and pushed it way out beyond the limits of reason.

A word about some possible implications for us. First, his notion of perfection as achievable in this life, is a great protection against spirit laziness. Once you and I get it said to ourselves that the Word comes in the midst of brokenness, then it surely is tempting to sit back and be broken all the time. Second, Wesley shows us what it is like to hold up a concrete possibility of fulfillment. Look at the seminaries in this country. The ones that were once bastions of the theological renewal movement are now silent. The seminaries speaking to people now are the theologically more conservative ones that dare to hold up a vision of what is possible for man and dare to proclaim that it is achievable. A study of Wesley suggests that the ideal we need to be holding up is that which is possible.

Beyond these, he shows us something about the dynamics of resurgence. The way this movement operated is incredible. When they held up an ideal of what was possible, what man in the pew would say, "Lord, I'm not there"? It convicted him, and drove him to justification, which moved him into sanctification. We talked about those who are asleep. Well, what awakens those who are asleep is this picture. You know that it is possible, and when you see that you are here and not where you could be, you are driven to repentance. This is the first step under the Word, which allows you to be declared whole in your brokenness. The implications of that for LENS is phenomenal. The picture of the resurgent man that we need to hold up is that which is possible. That impacts people.

One other thing is a possible implication for us. Wesley helps us to talk very concretely about what we are doing here. People from the neighborhood came through the other day and asked "Why do you work so hard? This is the most highly motivated group I have every seen." I have been tempted after stewing with Wesley for awhile, to think that an answer might be, "Because I'm going on to perfection."

