

John Wesley's Legacy – Perfectionism and Women Preachers

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(This is the second article based on the latter part of a paper given at the 2003 Free Presbyterian Theological Conference on The Life and Legacy of John Wesley. The first dealt with Wesley's contribution to the formation of an evangelical version of Arminianism.)

Christian Perfection

A second strand of Wesley's legacy that has penetrated into some sections of evangelicalism is his doctrine of Christian Perfection. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield of Princeton Theological Seminary has written, 'The historical source from which the main streams of perfectionist doctrine that have invaded modern Protestantism take their origin is the teaching of John Wesley'.¹ Warfield's analysis is unquestionably correct. From 1766, Wesley issued and repeatedly revised his tract, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*². This brief document has served as a manifesto for all the Holiness Groups that have grown out of worldwide Methodism in the last two hundred years.

In consequence of Wesley's doctrine the Methodist societies placed their theological emphasis after justification and made the focal point of their theology the doctrine of Christian Perfection. The experience of Christian Perfection they variously designated by the terms, heart purity, perfect love, entire sanctification or full salvation. In a letter written just before his death, Wesley observed, 'This doctrine (perfection) is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up'.³

The concept of Christian Perfection had been growing in Wesley's mind for over a 'decade before his conversion experience on 24 May 1738 at the Moravian Society meeting in Aldersgate Street, London. He gives explicit credit for the development of these views to authors that came from either a High Anglican or popish background. In his *Journal* Wesley identified the reading of Thomas a' Kempis as one of the landmarks of his spiritual experience. It was, he believed, the providence of God that directed him to a' Kempis.⁴

¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2 Vols. New York, 1931, Vol. 1, p. 3.

² The tract is contained in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, London, 1872, Vol. XI, pp. 366-446 (cited afterwards as *Wesley's Works*). The more available edition is the often re-issued Epworth reprint - 1952 onwards. Afterwards cited as *Plain Account*- Epworth reprint.

³ *Letters of John Wesley*, (Edited by John Telford), London, 1931, (cited afterwards as *Wesley's Letters (Telford)*) Vol. 8, p. 238. The letter is to Robert Carr, Brackenburg and is dated 15 September 1790.

⁴ *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, (Editor Nehemiah Curnock), London, 1938, (cited afterwards as *Wesley's Journal (Curnock)*) Vol. 1, p. 466. Wesley details the sources of his thinking at the beginning of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, in *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI p. 366-367, *Plain Account*-Epworth reprint, p. 1-2. See also A Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart*, Exeter, 1967, pp. 45-46. Wesley was reading a' Kempis as early as 1725 (when he was in his early twenties) as is clear from his letters to his Mother dated 28 May and 18 June 1725 in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 25 Letters I, 1721-1739 (Editor Frank Baker), Oxford, 1980, p. 162, 168; V H H Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley*, London, 1961, p. 306, Appendix 1.

Following Wesley's perception of the semi-failure of his Aldersgate conversion experience, he believed he needed some further work of grace. In his *Journal* eight months after Aldersgate, Wesley wrote, 'My friends affirm that I am mad because I said I was not a Christian a year ago. I affirm I am not a Christian now. Indeed, what I might have been I know not, had I been faithful to the grace then given, when, expecting nothing less, I received such a sense of forgiveness of sins as till then I never knew. But that I am not a Christian at this day I as assuredly know as that Jesus is the Christ. For a Christian is one who has the fruits of the spirit of Christ, which (to mention no more) are love, peace, joy. But these I have not. I have not any love to God. I do not love either the Father or the Son. Do you ask how do I know whether I love God? I answer by another question, "How do you know whether you love me?" Why, as you know whether you are hot or cold. You *feel* this moment that you do or do not love me. And I *feel* this moment I do not love God; which therefore I *know* because I *feel* it'.⁵

In the Moravian circles in which Wesley was moving he heard testimonies that could be interpreted as claiming a state of sinlessness. He began to ask 'If there be grace for entire sanctification at the moment of death, why is the same grace not available in life?'⁶ His answer to the question was that the Bible commanded believers to be perfect, therefore, perfection must be attainable. Hence, he preached Perfection, wrote about it and claimed in his own lifetime to have found those whom he considered to be the genuine recipients of this grace. Howell Harris records several instances of meeting people who professed sinless experience. He writes, '[I was] with one Mr Wesley says is Perfect. I examined her...she was so cunning and unwise and unsimple as ever an Attorney could be at the bar. When I asked her one question she would answer with another or an evasion. Though Mr Charles Wesley sets her out as perfect she denied she was not perfect but on the imputed righteousness of Christ'.⁷

One of Harris' correspondents wrote of the effects of perfectionist teaching: '...ye consequences of that notion have been only sad divisions among many thousands...who were alarmed by ye late loud call, and wanted to be led to Jesus for pardon...and to be taught that in Him was a fullness for all grace...for Justification and Sanctification. But instead of that, ye poor souls are directed to look to themselves for comfort, and to receive none till (as they are vainly taught) they have an *Absolutely Clean Heart*. Ye consequences have been that many have been drove to despair and many vainly puffed up'.⁸

⁵ *Wesley's Journal (Curnock)*, Vol. 2, p. 125-126 (The emphasis is Wesley's). On the broader questions surrounding Wesley's conversion see, A Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, London, 1970, Vol. 1, pp. 179-198.

⁶ Cited in, Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century*, Metuchen, 1980, p. 132.

⁷ (*Bathafarn – The Journal of the Historical Society of the Methodist Church of Wales*, Vol.9, 1954, p. 34, cited in Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Edinburgh, Vol. 2, 1980, p. 32)

⁸ *The Journal of the Historical Society of the Presbyterian Church in Wales*, XXXV, No 2, p. 17, cited in Dallimore, op. cit. Vol. 2, p. 32.

A prerequisite for Wesley's concept of Christian Perfection was the modification of the Reformed definition of 'What is sin?' Instead of defining sin, as the *Shorter Catechism* does, as 'any want of conformity unto, or transgression of the law of God' he taught that nothing is strictly sin, but the voluntary transgression of a known law. Wesley expressed it in this way, 'Not only sin properly so called (that is, voluntary transgression of a known law) but sin, improperly so called, (that is, involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown), needs atoning blood... I believe a person filled with love to God is still liable to those involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not!'⁹

Moreover, according to Wesley, a believer could by God's grace be freed not only from sinful acts but also from the desire of sinful motives and from the power of sin. This state of entire sanctification usually involved both a growth in grace and a distinct second work of grace. Perfection once attained had, in his view, to be maintained at all times, as it was a condition from which Christians might fall.

In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* Wesley asks several questions:

Q. When may a person judge himself to have attained this [i.e. entire sanctification]?

A. When, after having been fully convinced of inbred sin, by a far deeper and clearer conviction than that we experienced before justification, and after having experienced a gradual mortification of it, he experiences a total death to sin, and an entire renewal in the love and image of God, so as to rejoice evermore and to pray without ceasing and in everything to give thanks.¹⁰

Q. What is implied in being a perfect Christian?

A. The loving God with all our heart and mind and soul (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Q. Does this imply that all inward sin is taken away?

A. Undoubtedly, or how can we be said to be saved from all our uncleanness (Ezekiel 36:29).¹¹

In concise summary this was Wesley's doctrine.¹² It was the source of the teaching of the American Holiness Movement. It was out of this American Movement that twentieth century Pentecostalism came. Wesley's doctrine was also the intellectual basis of the teaching of the British Holiness Movement which includes such bodies as

⁹ *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p 396. *Plain Account*- Epworth reprint, p. 45.

¹⁰ *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p 401, *Plain Account*-Epworth reprint, p. 52.

¹¹ *Wesley's Works*, Vol. XI, p 387, *Plain Account*-Epworth reprint, p. 33.

¹² Detailed expositions of Wesley's perfectionist theology will be found in: W E Sangster, *The Path to Perfection: An examination and restatement of John Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection*, London, 1943, A Skevington Wood, *Love Excluding Sin: Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification*, Ilkeston, nd, H Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, London, 1950, C W Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, London, 1960, pp. 167-190, J L Peters, *Christian Perfection & American Methodism*, Grand Rapids, 1985, C E Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867-1936*, Metuchen, 1974, T L Smith, 'George Whitefield and Wesleyan Perfectionism' in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 19:1, Spring 1984.

the Salvation Army, (General Booth began his career as a Methodist), the Church of the Nazarene and the Faith Mission.¹³ These movements did not always adopt Wesley's position without modification. William Booth is an example of this. His biographer describes his position in the following terms, 'The doctrine he held on this subject was a variant of the doctrine known as Entire Sanctification. This doctrine, as the extremists hold it, teaches that a converted man can so grow in grace, can so open the doors of his volition to the will of God, that sin ceases to have the least power over him; that he is cleansed of all evil, and becomes perfectly pure, perfectly holy, even in the sight of God. William Booth never held this doctrine, but he did seek perfection in love after conversion, and taught men to aspire after entire sanctification of the will'.¹⁴

Other significant groupings that inherited this aspect of Wesley's legacy are the Oberlin Perfectionism of Charles Finney, the Victorious Life Movement and the Higher Life Movement. The originators of the Keswick Convention derived their doctrine from John Wesley.¹⁵

Women Preachers

A third strand of Wesley's legacy is the public preaching of women. Rupert Davies, a modern Methodist advocate of women preachers has written, 'of all the Christian denominations, only the Quakers have an unblemished record in the treatment of women as equals to men. John Wesley, however, comes a reasonably close second. The high intelligence and pastoral gifts of his mother pre-disposed him to accept the ministry of women and he has no difficulty about giving responsible tasks to women and appointing them as leaders of "classes"'.¹⁶ During one of Samuel Wesley's

¹³ For early Salvation Army teaching see Harold Begbie, *Life of William Booth*, London, 1926, Vol. 1, pp.338-347. These pages give a description of Salvationist holiness meetings.

On the Faith Mission see, I R Govan, *Spirit of Revival: The story of J G Govan and the Faith Mission*, Edinburgh, 1960, esp. pp. 31-35, which link Govan's preaching of 'Full Salvation' to the Salvation Army, and to the perfectionists Charles Finney and Asa Mahan.

The histories of the Church of the Nazarene in both its United Kingdom and American sections link its holiness teaching to Wesley and Methodism. The title of the history of the British branch details this link, J Ford, *In the Steps of John Wesley: The Church of the Nazarene in Britain*, Kansas City, nd. The first volume of the American history is, T L Smith, *Called unto Holiness: The story of the Nazarenes – The formative years*, Kansas City, 1962.

¹⁴ Begbie, op. cit. pp. 341-342.

¹⁵ For a devastating critique of these movements see B B Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2 Vols. New York, 1931. Men from a Wesleyan holiness background influenced the early history of the Keswick Convention. The literature on the history and theology of the Keswick Convention is very extensive. For the background see, S Barabas, *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention*, London, 1957, C Price and I Randall, *Transforming Keswick*, Carlisle, 2000, D Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England*, Carlisle, 2000, pp. 51-90. The Keswick version of holiness teaching drifted away from the Wesleyan approach in the early 1900s. A Wesleyan critique of Keswick is A M Hills, *Scriptural Holiness & Keswick Teaching compared*, Salem-Ohio, nd.

¹⁶ Rupert E Davies, 'The Ordination of Women in Methodism: A personal account', in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, (Cited afterwards as *PWHS*) Vol.48, p. 105.

absences in London his wife supplied the deficiencies of his curate. She did this by reading prayers and a sermon on the Sabbath evening at the rectory to her family and around two hundred of her neighbours.¹⁷

It was, however, by gradual steps that John Wesley came to approve of the ministry of women. In 1761 he received a letter from Sarah Crosby, one of his favourite followers, who incidentally, was one of the main causes why John Wesley's wife left him in a fit of jealousy.¹⁸ Crosby records in her diary that she had conducted a class meeting, given out a hymn, prayed, told the congregation what the Lord had done for her and then persuaded them to flee from sin. Her diary entry is as follows, 'I found an awful, loving sense of the Lord's presence, and much love to the people: but was much affected both in body and mind. I was not sure whether it was right for me to exhort in so public a manner, and yet I saw it impracticable to meet all these people by way of speaking particularly to each individual. I therefore gave out a hymn, and prayed, and told them part of what the Lord had done for myself, persuading them to flee from all sin'.¹⁹ Immediately she wrote to Wesley asking for his ruling on this unorthodox procedure. His response to her was as follows:

'My Dear Sister

...Hitherto, I think you have not gone too far. You could not well do less. I apprehend all you can do more is when you meet again, to tell them simply, "You lay me under great difficulty. The Methodists do not allow of women preachers; neither do I take upon me any such character. But I will just nakedly tell you what is in my heart". This will in a great measure obviate the grand objection... I do not see that you have broken any law. Go on calmly and steadily. If you have time you may read them the *Notes* (i.e. Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament*) on any chapter, before you speak a few words, or one of the most awakening sermons as other women have done long ago'.²⁰

Ten years later, in 1771, he was encouraging Crosby to intermix short exhortations with her prayers. In a letter to her he writes, 'Even in public you may properly enough intermix *short exhortations* with prayer; but keep as far from what is called preaching as you can: therefore never take a text; never speak in a continued discourse without some break, about four or five minutes. Tell the people, "We shall have another *prayer meeting* at such a time and place (emphasis Wesley)"'.²¹ Then at last, in 1777, he becomes explicit, even in the face of what seemed, even to him, the clear ruling of scripture against women preaching in I Corinthians 14: 34-35. He writes to Crosby, 'The difference between us and Quakers in this respect is manifest, they flatly deny

¹⁷ Article by Alexander Gordon on Samuel Wesley in *Dictionary of National Biography*, Editors: Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, London, 1937-1938, Vol. XX, p. 1227.

¹⁸ Frank Baker, 'John Wesley and Sarah Crosby', in *PWHS*, Vol.27, p.76-77. Crosby's autobiography 'contains hints of some estrangement from her husband, and on 2 February 1757 he seems to have deserted her'. Shortly after this she claims to have received the 'second blessing' of holiness or perfect love.

¹⁹ *Methodist Magazine*, 1806, pp. 517-518, cited in Baker, *PWHS*, Vol. 27, p.78.

²⁰ *Wesley's Letters*, (Telford) Vol. 4, p. 133.

²¹ *Wesley's Letters*, (Telford) Vol. 5, p. 130.

the rule itself (of I Corinthians 14) though it stands clear in the Bible. We allow the rule: only we believe it admits of some exceptions'.²²

The exception was that women, like male lay-preachers, could have an extra-ordinary call to preach. When Wesley was asked why he encouraged certain females in preaching he answered, 'Because God owns them in the conversion of sinners, and who am I that I should withstand God'.²³ It was because Wesley was faced with so many instances of what he considered the useful ministry of women that he felt obliged to alter his views.

In a letter written to another woman preacher, Sarah Mallet, less than two years before his death, he gives her advice on preaching, 'Never continue the service above an hour at once, singing, preaching, prayer, and all. You are not to judge by your own feelings, but by the Word of God. Never scream. Never speak above the natural pitch of your voice; it is disgusting to the hearers. It gives them pain not pleasure. And it is destroying yourself. It is offering God murder for sacrifice'.²⁴ This letter according to Leslie Church, a leading Methodist historian, is probably the most complete approval of a woman preacher that Wesley ever gave.²⁵ In 1787, he wrote a note explicitly authorising her to preach. It read, 'We give the right hand of fellowship to Sarah Mallet and have no objection to her being a preacher in our connection so long as she preaches the Methodist doctrines and attends to our discipline'.²⁶

Mary Bosanquet (1739-1815)²⁷ was another female Methodist preacher. In 1781, she married Wesley's close associate, John Fletcher of Madeley, and had her own preaching room built near the Vicarage. She is said to have shared in Fletcher's ministry. She wrote of her preaching, 'For some years I was led to speak from a text, of late I feel greater approbation in what we call expounding, taking a part or whole of a chapter and speaking on it. We have lately found the Lord very present and many souls have been blest'.²⁸

²² *Wesley's Letters*, (Telford) Vol. 6, p. 290-291.

²³ Leslie F Church, *More about the Early Methodist People*, London, 1949, p. 137. Chapter 6 of this volume is titled 'Women Preachers' and is most instructive on the development of Wesley's thinking.

²⁴ *Wesley's Letters*, (Telford) Vol. 8, p. 190.

²⁵ Church, *op.cit.*, p. 141

²⁶ Zechariah Taft, *Biographical Sketches of the Lives and Public Ministry of Various Holy Women*, London, 1825, 1828, Vol. 1, p. 84, cited in Church, *op.cit.*, p. 170.

²⁷ For Bosanquet, see John A Vickers (Editor), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, Peterborough, 2000, p. 37. See also the standard biographies of her husband John Fletcher - Luke Tyerman, *Wesley's Designated Successor – The Life, Letters, and Literary Labours of the Rev. John William Fletcher*, Stoke on Trent, 2001, (Tentmaker Publication Reprint), Patrick Streiff, *Reluctant Saint? – A Theological Biography of Fletcher of Madeley*, Peterborough, 2001. After her husband's death, she continued her work at Madeley, acting as an unofficial curate to his successor.

²⁸ Bosanquet's account of her work at Madeley is contained in a letter written by her on 28 November 1803 to Mrs. Taft. See Taft, *op.cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 20. Cited in Church, *op.cit.*, p. 146.

Though contrary to scripture, at the centre of Wesley's legacy is the public ministry of women. It was a feature of Methodism long before it was even considered in most other Protestant denominations.²⁹ Not all the Methodists, however, approved of this. Forty-four years after his death the main Methodist conference prohibited women preaching.³⁰ It continued, however, in some of the Methodist secessions such as the Primitive Methodists and the Bible Christians. These were groups that grew into distinct denominations, which broke away from the main Wesleyan body as a protest against the larger body abandoning Wesley's testimony.

One Methodist preacher, whilst conducting the funeral service of a brother preacher, voiced his opposition to the public preaching of women, 'God often works by strange instruments. Baalam was converted by the braying of an ass, Peter by the crowing of a cock and our lamented brother by the preaching of a woman on Good Friday morning'.³¹

²⁹ For a recent discussion of the place of women in Methodism see, John Kent, *Wesley and Wesleyanism: Religion in Eighteenth Century Britain*, Cambridge, 2002. Especially chapter 4 'Women in Wesleyanism' pp. 104-139.

³⁰ 'In 1835 the (Methodist) Conference expressed its strong disapproval of "female preaching" and it was discouraged and deprecated for many years afterwards' Leslie F Church, op.cit. p. 137.

³¹ The preacher was William Atherton in his funeral sermon on the death of Joseph Taylor. The woman was Mary Taft – then Mary Barritt. See, Wesley F Swift, 'The Women Itinerant Preachers of Early Methodism' in *PWHS*, Vol. 28. p. 92 note 8.