

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich appears to adopt this view, which, from the standpoint of the history of Christian thought, veers away from the directives of the Bible. See his *Systematic Theology*, II.97-180.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1952).

<sup>8</sup> This has to do with man's native capacity for religious faith and experience which is present as a God-given potentiality within man.

<sup>9</sup> At times Karl Barth seems to involve himself in such a position. Cf. his *The Holy Ghost and Christian Beliefs*, tr. R. Birch Hoyle (London: Frederick Muller, 1938), pp.18, 22, 23, 45. See George S. Hendry's decisive critique of Barth at this point in *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* pp.108-17.

<sup>10</sup> For a statement and critique of this general approach to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, see A. C. Knudson, *The Doctrine of God* (New York: Abingdon, 1930), pp.370-85.

<sup>11</sup> The objections that some theologians, and particularly neo-orthodox theologians, raise against pietism illustrates this point. There is a difference between a genuine and a false pietism. That there is a kind of Christian piety, based upon the New Testament, which transcends a merely imputed righteousness is beyond reasonable question. God saves man not only in his sins but also from his sins. And this is not to be understood in such a manner as to imply that man is ever perfect. The prayer of repentance is relevant in the life of every Christian, and this is all the more true of those who come ever closer to God. Moreover, the surest sign of imperfection is to profess perfection. In a finite being the law of growth is absolute. For a very balanced and historically informed study along this line, see R. N. Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

<sup>12</sup> For a penetrating and judicious analysis of this interpretation see J. E. Fison, op. cit., pp.128-30.

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## PERFECTION

**T**HE WESLEYAN teaching about perfection is less a theological doctrine than an ethic of the Christian life, more a pattern of behaviour for men to follow here on earth than a nice delineation of our relationship to ultimate reality.

Wesley's anthropology, for example, is, with a few minor modifications, thoroughly Augustinian; and his doctrine of God is that of the Thirty-nine Articles, softened and humanized by Laudian and Caroline interpretations. His dependence upon divine grace is as absolute as the Calvinist's, and his exaltation of the atonement in its objective signification is as high and as splendid as Anselm's. To be sure, he practised the presence of the Holy Spirit as strenuously, as exactly, as satisfyingly, even as gloriously as any early saint or martyr; yet I cannot see that he promulgated any new doctrine concerning Him or helped to clarify His peculiar functions in the total economy of the Trinity. Indeed, when we reflect closely upon his teaching of assurance, a belief most precious and salutary to Methodists, the signs he gives by which a person can be assured that he has or has not saving faith and is or is not forgiven his sins are almost entirely ethical—that is to say, moral and spiritual. Does the person

claiming assurance love God with all his heart and delight only in the performance of His will? Does he have daily victory over all temptations to the extent that he does not commit a known sin? Does he love his neighbour as himself? These queries are all in reach of the particular and definite. They are capable of a 'yes' or 'no' answer. They are practical, not theoretical; a person either does or does not practise by thought, word, and deed what they seek to ascertain.

Now the Wesleyan teaching about perfection lies, in my judgement, in the same general area of interest and concern, and is subject to the same procedures. It is not dependent, for example, in its explication upon any peculiar theological interpretation. The resources of saintliness are in the custody of the Lutherans as well as the Roman Catholics, of the free-thinking, informal Quakers as much as the doctrinally exact and liturgically precise Greeks. Indeed, similarity of virtue defies practically all theological dissimilarities, breaks across doctrinal boundaries, and confuses us in all categories of identification apart from that sign of moral purity which is its very own. The good man is never just the Methodist. Perfection seldom has anything whatever to do with a creed.

Consequently the outward contour of holiness was before Wesley as a pattern of behaviour while he was still at Oxford. The Holy Club was a reality before Methodism. Even specific principles of perfection were ascertained by intellectual analysis before ever the reality of attainment was either had or properly and successfully pursued. That is to say, the Christian ethic as a concrete and particular idea, as the design of individual behaviour, grasped Wesley before any great theological conviction took control of his mind and animated his will to effect the revival. He knew, or at least thought he knew, what the life of a saved person was, without being saved himself. And strange enough, once he got saved, that concept—or, perhaps more properly, that blueprint of character—was not altered but remained constant and unchanged. Before Aldersgate Wesley was like the Apostle Paul before his trip to Damascus: the good that he knew he ought to do he did not, while the evil that he despised that he practised. All the same, the ethic of saintliness as an ethic existed for Wesley as something in itself unaffected by either the probability or even the possibility of its realization; for, like Kant's good will, its inherent worth lay in itself and could not be added to or diminished by external considerations.

That is why perfection as such had so little to do with the initiation of the revival and why its effects upon Wesley were such that he could never claim its possession for himself. Like Plato's forms, it was for ever above and beyond its earthly model. At least its prophetic proponent was unwilling to use himself as the example of its realization. Though he insisted that it was possible for men and women to attain holiness on earth and literally to fulfil the commandment, 'Be ye perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect', he turned aside from his usual practical considerations of what he saw in the persons who professed perfection and accepted instead their own testimony that the Spirit had wrought this final miracle of grace in their lives.

The teaching itself is simple enough and, like Anselm's ontological proof of the existence of God, can be cast into a single sentence. Christian Perfection, according to Wesley, is a life every action of which issues from an uncompromised love of God and therefore of all the things of God. As every deed was behind it a motive and every thought is itself purposive—that is, pregnant with

intent—so the single motive, the one purpose of the complete Christian, is unselfish love.

Though the Wesleyan teaching about perfection is simple enough and its economy of elucidation is amazing, debate concerning its relevance, the possibility and impossibility of attaining it, is unending, so that a great deal of the subsequent history of Methodist thought consists of men's reaction, positive or negative, to the doctrine of holiness. There are, on the one hand, those who look upon holiness as a grandiose claim so extravagant that to support it is either to become a hypocrite by professing to have attained the unattainable or else to reduce the sublime to the habitual accomplishments of mundane existence and thereby to make saintliness so ordinary as to be indistinguishable from mere religion. On the other hand, there are those who treasure holiness as the distinctive contribution of Methodism to Protestantism by finding in it the exemplification of free grace in the sphere of human existence, the translation of forgiveness into behaviouristic concreteness, indeed, the equation of moral goodness with the experience of Christianity so that piety and redemption are one.

There cannot be any point of reconciliation between these two parties on this issue, because each of them has introduced an extraneous consideration which it has come to regard as the presupposition of the issue of holiness. That presupposition in both instances is theological. The concept the two groups entertain of God is their unbridgeable chasm of difference, and that, amazingly enough, without affecting the practice of holiness in either group. There are saints among both those who disparage saintliness and those who consider it the *summum bonum* itself. Wesley avoided this situation. He looked upon holiness as an experience, not an issue; he talked about a functioning reality without bothering too much about its ultimate meaning. Indeed (and here, to my mind, was his special genius) he affirmed an end without delineating exactly the means of its accomplishment. For him, moral and spiritual perfection, like faith itself in the initial act of justification, was the free gift of God.

Is sanctification, then, an act or a process? Does perfect love come instantaneously or gradually? Is it emotional experience or moral excellence or perhaps both?

All these really are irrelevant considerations. Human perfection of behaviour that is least compromised by imperfection is uncalculated, effortless, and even without self-conscious realization. It is the mere by-product of a life given over wholly to God and directed entirely by His Spirit. What would be more exasperating than a comparison of one's moral and spiritual state today with that of yesterday? What would be more frustrating than the compulsion to be better and to do better than one was or had done during the preceding phase in the long series of experiences we call life? Who knows whether his love of God is perfect or not, or who can provide a sufficient personal gauge by which to measure it?

But if God is what we believe Him to be, perfect both in power and in love, it is reasonable to suppose that He can and will make us who love Him in disposition and behaviour like Himself. That is enough. Anything more would be too much.

The best use we Methodists can make of any teaching about perfection, at

least as it involves personal claims of attainment from ourselves, is no use at all. It is an ethic of behaviour recommended by example, not by explanation. It is the inward and outward expression in human life of the love of God, which the Father of all mercies alone can confer. We love Him because He first loved us. And we behave like Him, too, not because we are able to strive as an athlete who strains his every nerve to obtain the prize, but precisely because we are not able and trust entirely on His grace to empower us. Only in our weakness can we prove in ourselves the power of God's strength. The life of the Christian man motivated and directed entirely by the love of God is the perennial personification among men in all generations of St Paul's confession: 'It is no longer I who live; it is Christ who liveth in me.' Christian perfection, then, is the norm of behaviour for every converted man here on earth. It is the demonstrative proof of the effective operation of the Holy Ghost. It is the tangible and convincing evidence that grace is more powerful than sin, that redemption has triumphed over depravity, that a God who rescues and delivers is likewise a God who transforms and preserves. Anything less than perfection in human nature is unworthy of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who forgives us our sins and fortifies us by grace also works a marvellous transformation in our nature by doing exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, working in us that which is well pleasing in His sight and enabling us to grow into the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. Men glorify God because of the good works He does through His children. Christian perfection is nothing less than the life of God Himself seen in the character and behaviour of the redeemed man. Entire sanctification is the earthly end of which justification is the beginning, and perfect love expressed in human behaviour is the ultimate effect in time of which convicting and converting grace is the first cause. We are all called by God to be saints and a saint is one whose virtues are worthy of the imitation of all Christendom.

*Ponder anew  
What the Almighty can do,  
If with His love He befriend thee.*

This process, culminating in an act and continuing still as a process, which God alone through the Holy Spirit can initiate, bring to fruition, and perpetually sustain, must of necessity be localized in the individual, for personality as personality is the only entity of creation capable of receiving and exemplifying the divine redemptive power. Yet as an ethic it has far-reaching social implications. It is no less than the offer of God through redeemed men of the transformation of all life. Wesley's quaint notion of the automatic rectification of all creation as the accompaniment of human redemption, though unusable in its outmoded form of expression, none the less contains a powerful ethical truth; it is the witness to his conviction that personal holiness cannot be made perfect in isolation, but needs for its own health the fellowship of holiness created in the Church and sought by the Church for all mankind.

Therefore, though saintliness ceases to be itself when its gauge is turned inward upon the contemplation of its own virtues, none the less it exists in the individual as an eager concern for the righteousness as well as the total welfare of his fellows, even his enemies. Bernard of Clairvaux's willingness to accept

the possibility in love of hatred—that is, of the hatred of what he takes God to hate—is impossible to the Methodist made perfect in love, for the Methodist responds, as did Christ, to what it is possible through grace for all men to become. Consequently the concern in America and elsewhere with the so-called social gospel need not be mere human activism unaided by God. It may be, and in many cases is, the honest exemplification of redemption, for the good man cannot stay good for long unless he is perpetually busy about the welfare, spiritual as well as material, of his fellows. Perfect love means a restless, passionate, heart-breaking, consuming concern for other people. Its corollary of necessity is the Kingdom of God, 'Kingdom' meaning reign or rule, not territory or institution, and that reign starting in the heart and life of an individual and reaching out through all social expressions to the far ends of the earth.

Karl Barth is not unmethodistic when he paraphrases the Apostle Paul in the words, 'Having nothing of himself, the more he received the more he gave, and the more he gave the more he received'. That is Christian perfection when what we've got is the love of God as our only motive, and the love of others in service as God loves and serves us as our only concern, and humble gratitude for all we are and have as the free, undeserved gift of God.

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