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“The Words Get in the Way”: Rethinking John Wesley’s Idea of Christian Perfection

“As palavras ficam no caminho”: Repensando a ideia de perfeição cristã em John Wesley

“Las palabras en el camino”: repensar la idea de la perfección cristiana en Juan Wesley

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RESUMO
O artigo explora o significado do conceito da perfeição cristã nas obras de John Wesley (1703-1791), as suas releituras pelo metodismo ao longo do tempo e às suas bases etimológicas. Depois, problematiza seu uso no século 21 e propõe no sentido da sua atualização contemporânea a metáfora da maturidade cristã. 
Palavras-chave: Metodismo; John Wesley; Perfeição cristã; maturidade cristã.

ABSTRACT
The article explores the meaning of the concept of Christian perfection in the works of John Wesley (1703-1791), its reinterpretations over the times by Methodism and its etymological bases. Then it discusses its use in the 21st century and proposes the metaphor of Christian maturity as a contemporary expression. 
Keywords: Methodism; John Wesley; Christian perfection; Christian maturity.

RESUMEN
El artículo explora el significado del concepto de la perfección cristiana en la obra de John Wesley (1703-1791), sus reinterpretaciones por el metodismo en el tiempo y sus bases etimológicas. A continuación se analiza su uso en el siglo 21, y propone a su actualización contemporánea mediante la metáfora de la madurez cristiana. 
Palabras-clave: Metodismo; John Wesley; la perfección cristiana; la madurez cristiana.

The Problem of “Perfection”

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (2012) specifies that all candidates for ordination in the UMC, whether as deacons (¶330, p. 250) or as elders, (¶336, p. 262), are to be asked these questions (among others) by their bishop:

1. Have you faith in Christ?
2. Are you going on to perfection?
3. Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?
4. Are you earnestly striving after perfection in love?
The ordination candidates are of course expected to answer “Yes” to all four of these questions … but what to they really mean when they do give the expected affirmative answer? We have a problem in The United Methodist Church, and perhaps in other parts of the Wesleyan/Methodist family. We have largely lost touch with the meaning of John Wesley’s teaching about Christian perfection.

There is a widespread consensus in modern culture that rejects the very idea of the “perfection” of any individual person as *prima facie* evidence of psychotic delusion. We have learned from modern psychology just how very far from “perfect” all human beings are. Any claim of human “perfection” is usually met with great suspicion and cynical dismissal. We have also learned just how imperfect all our human social, political, and economic systems and institutions are—including our churches. Dishonesty, corruption, and lack of integrity seem almost universal in both public and private life. Consequently the notion of “perfection” of any sort, whether of individuals or of institutions, is a very “hard sell” today.¹

The Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century, first in America and then elsewhere, gave rise to distortions of Wesley’s teachings about Christian perfection. Wesley himself did not like or use the term “sinless perfection.” However that idea, understood simplistically as the power not to commit sinful acts, took root in the Holiness Movement. The result was the reduction of Christian perfection to a kind of behavoristic and legalistic moralism. This gave rise to popular notions that a “perfect” Christian was one who refrained from certain actions that were considered to be sinful. Lists of such actions varied but often included (for example) drinking, smoking, gambling, and having sex outside of marriage. The message was clear: “Good (= holy) people don’t…”—and vice versa.²

The Holiness Movement effectively shifted the emphasis from a notion of *perfecting perfection* [emphasis on the present/future tense] to a notion of *perfected perfection* [emphasis on the past/present tense]. Many “mainstream” Methodists were so alienated by what they regarded as very serious distortions of Wesley’s idea of Christian perfection in the Holiness Movement that they abandoned the doctrine altogether, “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” (as the saying goes). The sad result is that much (most?) modern Methodism, at least in North America and perhaps elsewhere, has largely lost sight of one of the central themes of

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² For an excellent case study of this sort of development in the American Holiness tradition, see (BASSETT, 1993, p. 59-127). Cf. the broader historical account by Dieter (1996). For British Wesleyan traditions, the brief sketches provided by Bebbington (2000), are useful.
Wesley’s theology: “holiness of heart and life.” The question now is whether or not it may be possible to reclaim the theme of “holiness of heart and life” for our lives and our churches today by rethinking and reframing Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection. I believe that it is important for us to at least try to do this, and want to suggest here some ways in which we might begin.

**Christian Perfection in Wesley’s Writings**

The single most consistent theme in John Wesley’s thought over the entire span of his life and ministry was “holy living” and its cognate goal: Christian perfection. His interest in the theme of “holiness of heart and life” is evident in some of his earliest surviving correspondence from 1725. That interest continued through every phase of his life, until his death in 1791. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766) is Wesley’s most important single work on the topic (WESLEY, 2013, p. 136-191). It was published to try to demonstrate the consistency of his teaching across the years. However, one can see in this work evidence of a subtle but significant shift in Wesley’s thinking about the *nature* of Christian perfection.

Through the 1730s and 1740s Wesley used mostly what can be characterized as a *negative* language in talking about perfection, describing it primarily as freedom from, or the absence of, a host of bad things: *freedom from sin; freedom from fear; freedom from doubt; freedom from guilt; freedom from sorrow*; and so on. Beginning in the 1750s, Wesley began to use a more *positive* language, describing Christian perfection as the *presence* of love filling the heart and governing all one’s words and actions. This more positive language about Christian perfection as the presence of love filling the heart is dominant in his later writings.

Two documents dating from about the same time as *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* provide both an important window into and an instructive reflection of this shift in Wesley’s thinking: “Short Propositions on Christian Perfection” (1764), and a letter to his brother Charles Wesley published as “Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection” (1767). These documents come from a period of controversy within Methodism about the nature of Christian perfection (cf. MADDOX, 2001; HEITZENRATER, 1995, p. 209-211; TYSON, 1986, p. 227-301; CHILCOTE, 2013, p. 21-24). Around 1760, John Wesley became convinced that he had been articulating such a high standard for Christian perfection that people were being hindered from experiencing its freedom. He began encouraging people to seek (through God’s grace) the immediate experience of Christian perfection while emphasizing the limits of the deliverance from sin that comes with such perfection.

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Two leaders of the London society, Thomas Maxfield and George Bell, took this to an extreme.

Maxfield and Bell proclaimed a perfection that was instantaneously attained by the simple affirmation "I believe," forfeiting any role for responsible growth prior to this event. And they portrayed this perfection as "angelic" or absolute, such that there was no need for growth after the event, or for the continuing atoning work of Christ (MADDOX, 2001, p. 34).

They also claimed gifts of prophecy and healing, and Bell attempted to cure blind people and raise the dead. John Wesley was slow to act, but finally repudiated them when Bell predicted the end of the world on 28 February 1763. In reaction to these developments, Charles Wesley became progressively more critical of John’s heightened emphasis on the possibility of present attainment and moved toward a more rigorous view of Christian perfection, which he came to believe could be attained only at or very near death. The “perfectionist controversy” lies behind the publication of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection and the related documents to which we now turn.

“Short Propositions on Christian Perfection” (1764)

In 1764, prompted by the misinterpretations of his teachings by extremists such as Bell and Maxfield, which had resulted in the "perfectionist controversy" of the preceding years and the subsequent tensions with his brother Charles, John Wesley undertook “a review of the whole subject” of Christian perfection, and “wrote down the sum of what I had observed in the following short propositions”:

(1) There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.
(2) It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to “go on unto perfection” [Heb. 6:1].
(3) It is not so late as death; for St. Paul speaks of living men that were “perfect” [Phil. 3:15].
(4) It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man—no, nor to angels; but to God alone.
(5) It does not make a man infallible—none is infallible, while he remains in the body.
(6) Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is “salvation from sin.”
(7) It is perfect love [1 John 4:18]. This is the essence of it. Its properties, or inseparable fruits, are “rejoicing evermore,” “praying without ceasing,” and “in everything giving thanks” [1 Thess. 5:16-18].
(8) It is improvable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being
incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.

(9) It is amissible, capable of being lost; of which we have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this, till five or six years ago.

(10) It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work (WESLEY, 2013, p. 187).

One can see John Wesley struggling here to articulate his views clearly. What kind of “perfection” is this, if it is something that can grow or increase? something that can be lost or destroyed? something that happens “in a moment” but is both preceded and followed by a gradual work? something that is not absolute? something that does not produce infallability or sinlessness? This seems to be a very imperfect sort of “perfection”! The paradox is that “perfection” as Wesley understood it could co-exist with “imperfections” or infirmities of various kinds, since its essence is an unbroken relationship of love of God and neighbor (Cf. NOBLE, 2013, p. 73-96).

“Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection” (1767)

In 1767 John Wesley wrote a letter to his brother Charles outlining three main points relating to Christian perfection, seeking to “come to a good understanding” with Charles about them:

Some thoughts occurred to my mind this morning which I believe it may be useful to set down: the rather because it may be a means of our understanding each other clearly; that we may agree as far as we can, and then let all the world know it.

I was thinking on Christian perfection, with regard to the thing, the manner, and the time.

(1) By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man ruling all the tempers, words, and actions, the whole heart by the whole life. I do not include an impossibility of falling from it, either in part or in whole. Therefore I retract several expressions in our Hymns which partly express, partly imply, such an impossibility.

And I do not contend for the term sinless, though I do not object against it. Do we agree or differ here? If we differ, wherein?

(2) As to the manner. I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by faith, by a simple act of faith, consequently in an instant. But I believe in a gradual work both preceding and following that instant. Do we agree or differ here?

(3) As to the time. I believe this instant generally is the instant of death, the moment before the soul leaves the body. But I believe it may be ten, twenty, or forty years before.

The text goes on to consider at some length an 11th proposition about whether or not Christian perfection is “instantaneous”; that section is omitted here.
Do we agree or differ here? I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within five years or five months after it. I know no conclusive argument to the contrary. Do you?
If it must be many years after justification, I would be glad to know how many. Pretium quotus arroget annus? ["What year must claim the reward?"—Horace] And how many days or months or even years can you allow to be between perfection and death? How far from justification must it be? And how near to death?
If it be, let you and I come to a good understanding, both for our own sakes and for the sake of the people.5

The evidence of this letter shows John Wesley as being relatively clear in 1767 about what he understood the nature of Christian perfection to be: “the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man ruling all the tempers, words, and actions, the whole heart by the whole life.” He was also relatively clear about the manner of perfection: like justification and regeneration, entire sanctification or Christian perfection comes to one sola fide, by faith alone, consequently in an instant—but with a “gradual work” both preceding and following that instant. But he does here express some uncertainty about the timing of perfection. How many years must pass between justification and perfection? Since Christian perfection comes through faith, it could come at any moment in a person’s life, and Wesley wants to encourage people to be constantly seeking, hoping, longing, and praying for that moment to come. But generally, he says here, most people probably don’t actually experience this until the moment just before death occurs—echoing the position of his brother Charles on this issue.

There is no surviving evidence that Charles Wesley ever replied to his brother’s letter. In fact, the Wesley brothers never did come to a complete agreement about these issues. One lasting result of the controversy was John’s more careful distinction after the 1760s between “inward sin” and “outward sin” and his conviction that “sin may remain but does not reign” in believers.6

Christian Perfection in Wesley’s Preaching

Wesley first expressed the idea of Christian perfection through his preaching in the sermon “The Circumcision of the Heart,” which was

5 Letter from John Wesley to Charles Wesley, 27 January 1767 (WESLEY, 1931 [vol. 5], p. 38-39). “This letter was later printed in The Arminian Magazine 6 (1783), pp. 156-57, and annexed to later editions of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as “Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection” (WESLEY, 2013, p. 199)."

6 In this regard see in particular his important sermons “On Sin in Believers” (1763), “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765), and “The Repentance of Believers” (1767).
originally written in 1733 though not published until 1748. In 1741 he published his sermon entitled “Christian Perfection.” In 1785 he published “On Perfection,” his last sermon focused on the doctrine. The idea appears in numerous other sermons across more than 50 years. Across these five decades, two scriptural texts are dominant in Wesley’s preaching on this theme: Matt. 5.48 (eighteen times between 1740 and 1785) and Heb. 6.1 (fifty times between 1739 and 1785). Some consideration of the translation traditions of these two texts will help us to understand the difficulties caused for the Methodists of Wesley’s day, and also for modern Christians, by the words “perfect” and “perfection.”

Matthew 5.48

Latin, Vulgate: estote ergo vos perfecti sicut et Pater vester caelestis perfectus est.

English, King James Version (KJV, 1611): Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989) is very similar, also using perfect in both places.

Portuguese, João Ferreira de Almeida Atualizada (AA, 1681): Sede vós, pois, perfeitos, como é perfeito o vosso Pai celestial. Almeida Revista e Atualizada (RA, 1959) is very similar, also using perfeitos / perfeito.


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9 Sermon 76, “On Perfection” (1784), Sermons, 3:70-87.
10 These statistics come from Albert C. Outler’s introductory comments to Sermon 76, “On Perfection”, Sermons, 3:70. See also “Register of John Wesley’s Preaching Texts,” compiled and annotated by Wanda Willard Smith, online at the Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, https://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/research-resources/register (accessed 24 June 2013). The records in this register indicate the importance of Heb. 6:1 to the elderly Wesley: in the last three years of his life, he preached on this text a total of thirty times—eleven times in 1788, eight times in 1789, and eleven times in 1790.
11 It is interesting to note that John Wesley’s own translation of Matthew 5.48 is “There-fore ye shall be perfect; as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.” This converts the imperative of the KVJ (“be ye perfect”) into a promise (“ye shall be perfect”). See his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, 3rd corrected edition (Bristol: Graham and Pine, 1760–62; reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981). Hereafter NT Notes.
Italian, Giovanni Diodati Bible (GDB, 1649): Voi adunque siate *perfetti*, come è *perfetto* il Padre vostro, che è ne’ cieli. Nuova Riveduta Bible (NRB, 1927) is very similar, also using *perfetti* and *perfetto*.

French, Ostervald (1744): Soyez donc *parfaits*, comme votre Père qui est dans les cieux est *parfait*. Louis Segond (LSG, 1927) and La Nouvelle Edition de Genève (NEG, 1979) are very similar, also using *parfaits* and *parfait*.

The following chart highlights the similarity of forms of the key terms in the modern languages to the Latin of the Vulgate:

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<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Portuguese</th>
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<td><em>perfecti</em> / <em>perfectus</em></td>
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<td><em>parfaits</em> / <em>parfait</em></td>
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Hebrews 6.1

Latin, Vulgate: *quapropter intermittentes inchoationis Christi sermonem ad perfectionem* feramur.

English, King James Version (KJV, 1611): Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto *perfection*. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989) is very similar, also using *perfection*.

Portuguese, João Ferreira de Almeida Atualizada (AA, 1681): Pelo que deixando os rudimentos da doutrina de Cristo, prossigamos até a *perfeição*. Almeida Revista e Atualizada (RA, 1959) is very similar, also using *perfeição*.

Spanish, Reina-Valera Antigua (RVA, 1602): Por tanto, dejando la palabra del comienzo en la doctrina de Cristo, vamos adelante á la *perfección*. Reina-Valera Revisado (RVR, 1960) is identical.

Italian, Giovanni Diodati Bible (GDB, 1649): Perciò, lasciata la parola del principio di Cristo, tendiamo alla *perfezione*. Nuova Riveduta Bible (NRB, 1927) uses a different construction: Perciò, lasciando l’insegnamento elementare intorno a Cristo, tendiamo *a quello perfetto*.

French, Ostervald (1744): C’est pourquoi, laissant les premiers principes de la doctrine de Christ, tendons á la *perfection*. Louis Segond (LSG, 1927) is very similar, also using *perfection*. The La Nouvelle Edition de Genève (NEG, 1979) uses a different construction: C’est pourquoi, laissant les éléments de la parole de Christ, tendons á ce qui est *parfait*.

Again, the following chart shows the similarity of forms of the key terms in the modern languages to the Latin of the Vulgate:
Latin: perfectionem  
English: perfection  
Portuguese: perfeição  
Spanish: perfección  
Italian: perfezione / a quello perfetto  
French: perfection / ce qui est parfait

Perfection in Latin and Greek

The influence of the Latin perfectus on the other languages listed here is obvious. The Latin term comes from the verb facere = “to make” or “to do” plus the prefix per = “completely” or “thoroughly.” In the root sense, then, something is “perfect” when it is “thoroughly done” or “completely made”—when it is finished. From this root meaning and the related Latin word fabricar, “to construct, to manufacture, to make,” we get the English words factory (= a place where things are made) and manufacture (= the process of making something, literally by hand—manus + facere – in Spanish, manufactura, and in Portuguese, fabricação). From the same root meaning we also get the English theological terms justification (= being made or declared righteous) and sanctification (= being made holy)—in Portuguese, justificação and santificação, and in Spanish, justificación and santificación.

In the Greek of the New Testament, the words translated into Latin and the cognate languages above as “perfect” and “perfection” and related terms are forms of teleios and teleiosis, as shown by these transliterations of the Greek Textus Receptus:

(Mt 5.48) esesthe oun umeis teleioi, ὃσπερ ὁ πατὴρ ὁμὸν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς teleios estin.  
(Hb 6.1) Dio, aphentes ton tēs archēs tou Christou logon, epi tēn teleiotēta pherōmetha.

Both teleios and teleiosis come from the root telos, which has the basic meaning of end, goal, objective, destination. Depending on context, both terms can also carry the sense of completion, fulfillment, consummation, accomplishment, wholeness, or maturity.12 At the risk of creating an artificially sharp dichotomy between them, the differences of meaning and implication of the Latin perfectus and the Greek teleiosis can be summarized as follows.

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12 See the extensive discussion of telos and related terms in Kittel & Friedrich (1964-76 vol. 8, p. 49-87). See also Schlimm (2003, p. 139-40).
**perfectus**
- static state
- finished action
- passive/receptive
- past/present
- flawless, unchangeable
- fixed, unmovable

**teleiosis**
- dynamic process
- ongoing development
- active/operative
- present/future
- improvable
- can change, increase or decrease

It seems clear that Wesley himself understood “perfection” in the sense of the Greek *teleiosis*—as “perfecting,” as an ongoing process of growth and development in grace. But as Albert Outler has noted, Wesley somehow never quite managed to grasp the point that most people in his time, influenced as they were by the traditions of Latin Christianity, understood “perfection” in the sense of the Latin *perfectus*—as “perfected,” as a final, finished, static, unchanging condition of completed growth (OUTLER, p. 121-22; MADDOX, 1994, p. 187; MANSKAR, HYNSON, SUCHOCKI, 2004, p. 9-10).

**Translating “Perfection”**

The Greek *teleiosis* was translated into the Latin of the Vulgate as *perfectus*, and from there came into English as *perfection* (and the cognate terms in the other languages mentioned above). That is not a mistake: *perfectus* (Latin) or *perfection* (English) is an entirely good and appropriate translation of the Greek term *teleiosis*, at least in certain contexts. However, in other contexts, the Greek terms *teleios* / *teleiosis* can equally well be translated into English as *whole* / *wholeness*, *complete* / *completion*, or *mature* / *maturity*. Several recent English versions of the Bible have chosen to use some of these terms rather than *perfect* / *perfection* in translating Matthew 5.48 and/or Hebrews 6.1.

**New International Version (1973):**
(Mt 5.48) Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect [maintaining the tradition of the KJV and NRSV].
(Hb 6.1) Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.

**Contemporary English Version (1995):**
(Mt 5.48) But you must always act like your Father in heaven. [The actual terms disappear here, but the meaning is the much the same.]
(Hb 6.1) We must try to become mature and start thinking about more than just the basic things we were taught about Christ.

**Bible in Basic English (2011):**
(Mt 5.48) Be then complete in righteousness, even as your Father in heaven is complete.
(Hb 6.1) For this reason let us go on from the first things about Christ to full growth.

**Common English Bible (2011):**
(Mt 5.48) Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.
(Hb 6.1) So let’s press on to maturity, by moving on from the basics about Christ’s word.

Some recent Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and French translations of the Bible have retained the older rendering of Matt. 5:48, using some form of “perfect,” but have chosen different terms for translating Heb. 6:1.  

**Portuguese, Nova Versão Internacional (1999):**
(Mt 5.48) Portanto, sejam perfeitos como perfeito é o Pai celestial de vocês.
(Hb 6.1) Portanto, deixemos os ensinos elementares a respeito de Cristo e avancemos para a maturidade.

**Spanish, La Biblia de las Américas (1997):**
(Mt 5.48) Por tanto, sed vosotros perfectos como vuestro Padre celestial es perfecto.
(Hb 6.1) Por tanto, dejando las enseñanzas elementales acerca de Cristo, avancemos hacia la madurez.

**Italian, Nuova Riveduta (2006):**
(Mt 5.48) Voi dunque siate perfetti, come è perfetto il Padre vostro celeste.
(Hb 6.1) Perciò, lasciando l’insegnamento elementare intorno a Cristo, tendiamo a quello superiore.

**French, La Bible en français courant (1987):**
(Mt 5.48) Soyez donc parfaits, tout comme votre Père qui est au ciel est parfait.
(Hb 6.1) Ainsi, tournons-nous vers un enseignement d’adulte, en laissant derrière nous les premiers éléments du message chrétien.

**Rethinking “Perfection”**

These reflections and observations prompt an important question: Do we face a situation today in which, to quote the 1980s hit song of Gloria Estefan, “the words get in the way”? Has the term “perfection,” even when qualified by the adjective “Christian,” become such a “turn off” that it has become essentially dysfunctional in the life of the church today? Could
we today better express what John Wesley really meant by speaking about “Christian perfection” if we now speak instead about “Christian wholeness” or “Christian maturity”? Randy Maddox has suggested something like this move in his discussion of Christian perfection in Wesley’s thought: “One of Wesley’s most characteristic descriptions of those who have attained Christian perfection was that they are now adult—or mature—Christians” (MADDOX, 1994, p. 137). Scott Jones agrees that the best way to interpret Wesley’s thinking about Christian perfection is “to use the image of maturity” (JONES, 2002, p. 213). And Stephen Rankin explores this trajectory in his recent book Aiming at Maturity: The Goal of the Christian Life, in which he provides what I find to be a profoundly sensible and pastoral reinterpretation of Wesley’s vision of Christian perfection without dwelling on the term:

... grown-up Christians keep growing. Spiritual maturity is never a static state. It is always a maturing maturity. We have the blessed privilege of going from strength to strength as long as we live. As long as we live we can eagerly look forward to new levels of growth (RANKIN, 2011, p. 8).

Wesley himself regularly employs the analogy of physical birth with spiritual re-birth or “new birth” (regeneration). Just as the birth of a child is the beginning of natural life, just so the “new birth” of a Christian is the beginning of spiritual life. What follows in either case is a process of growth and development that moves toward maturity:

As in the natural birth a man is born at once, and then grows larger and stronger by degrees, so in the spiritual birth a man is born at once, then gradually increases in spiritual stature and strength. The new birth, therefore, is the first point of sanctification, which may increase more and more unto the perfect day.14

Wesley makes frequent use throughout his life of the language of 1 Cor. 3 and 1 John 2 about “babes in Christ” or “little children,” “young men,” and “fathers.”15 In his sermon “Christian Perfection” (1740) Wesley says that “there are several stages in Christian life as well as in natural: some of the children of God being but new-born babes, others having

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15 A particularly important example is found in the journal entry for 6 June 1738: see John Wesley, Journal and Diaries, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Vols. 18–24 in The Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988–2006), 1:254. The incident recounted here marks the beginning point of Wesley’s development of the notion of “degrees of faith” and thus “degrees of salvation.”
attained to more maturity."\textsuperscript{16} In his sermon "On Patience" (1783), he comments that "there is as great a difference in the spiritual as in the natural sense between fathers, young men, and babes."\textsuperscript{17} And in his sermon "The Wilderness State" (1760) Wesley admonishes his preachers: "Convince them [the Methodist people] that the whole work of sanctification is not (as they imagined) wrought at once; that when they first believe they are but as new-born babes, who are gradually to grow up, and may expect many storms before they come to the full stature of Christ."\textsuperscript{18}

Wesley also refers frequently to the distinction between milk as (spiritual) "baby food" and meat as food for fully grown adults that is found in (e.g.) 1 Cor. 3, Heb. 5, and 1 Pet. 2. In commenting on Heb. 5:12-14, Wesley distinguishes the "babes in Christ," those "who desire and can digest nothing but the doctrine of justification and imputed righteousness," from those of "full age," who embrace the "sublimer truths relating to 'perfection'."\textsuperscript{19} He characterizes the "milk of the word" in 1 Peter 2:2 as "that word of God which nourishes the soul as milk does the body" and which enables one to grow "unto the full stature of Christ."\textsuperscript{20} In the sermon "Salvation by Faith" (1738) he combines the two sets of images involving the growth and development of Christians:

He who is thus justified or saved by faith is indeed 'born again'. He is 'born again of the Spirit' unto a new 'life which is hid with Christ in God'. And as a 'newborn babe he gladly receives the adolon, the sincere milk of the word, and grows thereby' [1 Pet. 2:2]; 'going on in the might of the Lord his God', 'from faith to faith', 'from grace to grace', 'until at length he comes unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' [Eph. 4:13].\textsuperscript{21}

The process of a Christian's growth and development in grace, or spiritual maturation, is what Wesley calls sanctification. The goal toward which that process moves he calls entire sanctification, which is a synonym for Christian perfection. He put it this way in a letter to Joseph Benson:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{16} Sermon 40, "Christian Perfection" (1740), §II.1 \textit{Sermons}, 2:105.
\textsuperscript{17} Sermon 83, "On Patience" (1783), §10, \textit{Sermons}, 3:175.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{NT Notes}, Heb. 5:12-14.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{NT Notes}, 1 Peter 2:1-2.
\textsuperscript{21} Sermon 1, "Salvation by Faith" (1738), §§II.7, \textit{Sermons}, 1:124-25.
\end{flushleft}
A babe in Christ (of whom I know thousands) has the witness sometimes. A young man (in St. John’s sense) has it continually. I believe one that is perfected in love, or filled with the Holy Ghost, may be properly termed a father. This we must press both babes and young men to aspire after—yea, to expect. And why not now? I wish you would give another reading to the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.22

He said much the same thing in a letter to John Fletcher:

It is certain every babe in Christ has received the Holy Ghost, and the Spirit witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God. But he has not obtained Christian perfection. Perhaps you have not considered St. John’s threefold distinction of Christian believers: little children, young men, and fathers. All of these had received the Holy Ghost; but only the fathers were perfected in love.23

When Wesley speaks about Christian perfection, then, he is not envisioning a “perfect” Christian as exhibiting a kind of frozen, flawless finality; he is instead trying to paint a picture of what he thinks a fully grown-up, adult, fully mature Christian might look like. As Randy Maddox has succinctly put it, “For Wesley, then, Christian perfection was that dynamic level of maturity within the process of sanctification characteristic of ‘adult’ Christian life (MADDOX, 1994, p. 187).

Christian perfection for Wesley involves what might be considered to be a kind of developing sainthood. This is what Wesley thinks it means to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). Recent scholarship has suggested similarities between Wesley’s notion of Christian perfection and the concept of *theosis* of the Eastern Orthodox Church, with its implications of a constantly on-going process. Understood literally, *theosis* means divinization, deification, or making divine. It is the process through which a believer puts into practice the spiritual teachings of Jesus Christ and His gospel and is gradually transformed thereby. In particular, *theosis* refers to the attainment of likeness to God, or union with God, that is the final stage of this process of transformation and is as such the goal of the spiritual life. However, the “union” with God envisioned by *theosis* is never human participation in the divine *substance*, in the very being of God—that would be *apotheosis*, or actually becoming God, and such a claim would certainly be heretical! Instead, *theosis* involves participation in the divine *energies* of God, which are present to the believer in and through the Church and its sacraments and mysteries. The process is necessarily incomplete in this earthly life; it can only be fully consummated through the resurrection of the believer,

when the power of sin and death, having been fully overcome by the atonement of Jesus, will lose hold over the believer forever.\(^{24}\)

Wesley’s position is similar: the Christian in this earthly life really never is perfected, but is always being perfected. The “perfect” Christian never completely attains the fully restored image of God while living in this human life; such a *perfected* perfection is an eschatological reality that Wesley reserves for heaven, after the advent of the “new creation.” In this life, in this world, Wesley’s “perfect” Christians in fact become increasingly aware of their physical, moral, psychological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual weaknesses and imperfections, and thus increasingly conscious of their total dependence upon God’s grace and mercy. As T. A. Noble has helpfully put it,

Wesley constantly struggles, particularly in his later years, to clarify what he meant by this “imperfect perfection” and explains it in terms of two linked areas of imperfection. First there is our physical constitution as fallen creatures, and second there is our consequent liability to involuntary or unintentional transgressions and to faults of character so long as we live in the body. The consequence of this continuing fallen condition and continuing involuntary transgressions is that we are always dependent on forgiveness through the atonement of Christ (NOBLE, 2013, p. 91).

For Wesley, Christian perfection (or real Christian maturity) “is nothing higher and nothing lower than this: the pure love of God and man—the loving God with all our heart and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. It is love governing the heart and life, running through all our tempers, words, and actions” (WESLEY, 2013, p. 170). In Wesley’s view, “Pure love reigning alone in the heart and life ... is the whole of scriptural perfection” (WESLEY, 2013, p. 73). He put it this way in one of the most poetically beautiful images in his writings: “What is the most perfect creature in heaven or earth in thy presence but a void, capable of being filled with thee and by thee?” (WESLEY, 2013, p. 131). Theodore Runyon (1998, p. 225) beautifully captures the point of this powerful Wesleyan language:

The best starting point for reinterpreting and reappropriating Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection ... is the *perfection of God’s love* as we receive it from Christ through the Holy Spirit. But in rethinking this doctrine it is important to focus first of all not on our own perfection but on the perfection of *that which we receive*. God’s love is perfect ... We receive and participate in perfect love.\(^{25}\)

\(^{24}\) On all of this see Maddox (1990, p. 29-53), McCormick (1991, p. 38-103), Christensen (1996, p. 71-94); the collection of papers from the first Consultation on Wesleyan and Orthodox Spirituality edited by Kimbrough (2002); Schlimm (2003, p. 139-42), and Christensen and Jeffery (2008, p. 219-230).

\(^{25}\) Although Runyon has a somewhat different reading of Wesley's soteriology, Collins (2007, p. 302) agrees that in the final analysis “Christian perfection ... is another term for holy love.”
Perhaps if we focus less on our own efforts to become “perfect” and seek to open ourselves more fully to being filled by God’s presence and grace, with God’s perfect (whole, complete) love, we can grow toward greater maturity as Christians. Steve Manskar ably summarizes this conviction: “Christian perfection is the work of divine grace that, through faith in Jesus Christ, restores the human soul, damaged by sin, to wholeness and helps babes in Christ grow up to maturity in faith and love” (MANSKAR, HYNSON, SUCHOCKI, 2004, p. 10). And perhaps if we reframe John Wesley’s teaching about Christian perfection in terms of growth in grace toward real Christian “adulthood,” or maturity, we can reclaim his notion of “holiness of heart and life” in a way that is more useful for our people and our churches and our world today. As Theodore Runyon has put it,

We are called not just to receive but to reflect this perfect love into the world, to share it with our fellow creatures—and to share it perfectly, that is, to share it in such a way that it can be received and appropriate by others as a love whose source is God. . . . Our sanctifying is linked to and directed toward the sanctifying of the world, and as such is an ever-beckoning, never-finished project, even though the love we redirect is complete as it comes from the divine source (RUNYON, 1998, p. 225).

In commenting on the questions noted at the beginning of this article, the questions that are put to all ordination candidates in The United Methodist Church, Scott Jones (now himself one of the bishops who asks those questions) comments that the last question could be phrased in contemporary language as “Are you earnestly trying to grow up?” and observes that in the Wesleyan understanding, “the goal of human life is to allow God’s grace to shape us into the kind of mature human beings God intended us to be” (JONES, 2002, p. 214-215).

May it be so!

A Note on Resources

In addition to the now-standard works on John Wesley and his theology as whole by Colin Williams (1960), Albert Outler (1964, 1966), Randy Maddox (1994), Ted Runyon (1998), Walter Klaiber & Manfred Marquardt (2002), Ken Collins (2007), and Dick Heitzenrater (2013), the classic works exploring Wesley’s idea of Christian perfection, or entire sanctification, include Flew (1934), Lindström (1946/1998); and Greathouse (1979). More recent studies that are particularly relevant to the issues discussed here include Mann (2006); Rankin (2011); and Noble (2013). Given the current theological environment of the Methodist Church in Brazil, readers there may be particularly interested in the exchange of views presented in the article by Wood (1999, p. 24-63); and the response by Maddox (1999, p. 78–110).
Referências bibliográficas


