

# THEOLOGY OF JOHN WESLEY



## ONGOING REPENTANCE AND CHRISTIAN PERFECTION





- ❖ Do believers need to repent?
- ❖ If so, and if repentance is part of the way of salvation, then is this repentance salvific?
- ❖ What is sanctification? How is it linked to justification?
- ❖ What do you think when you here Christian Perfection?

# SANCTIFICATION

- ❖ Inseparable from justification
- ❖ Present deliverance by God from the plague of sin, not just its penalty
- ❖ Sanctification = entire process of transformation of believer's lives

# NEW BIRTH

- ❖ New birth is the foundation of sanctification, answering how we have ability to recover any holiness in our sin-distorted lives
- ❖ Answer: ability is graciously restored so we can respond to God's grace
- ❖ New birth is just that, birth. We need to move onto sanctification.

# GROWTH IN GRACE

- ❖ Sanctification = our gradual spiritual recovery of the likeness of God following new birth
- ❖ Scripture language, “growth in grace” “going on from grace to grace”
- ❖ Model of human maturation: birth, childhood, adulthood



- ❖ Wesley rejects Moravian idea that sanctification is instantaneous with justification - that would undercut need which is prerequisite to growth in sanctifying grace
- ❖ Anglican focus very external: doing good, avoiding evil
- ❖ Wesley: “the life of God in the [human] soul, a participation of the divine nature, the mind that was in Christ, or the renewal of our heart after the image of [God who] created us.” i.e. inward

- ❖ Wesley's conviction that inward led to outward transformation - true religion the recovery of holy tempers
- ❖ These tempers would enable Methodists to: do no harm, do all the good one could, and attend the ordinances of grace
- ❖ So, love is the sum of Christian sanctification

“From the true love of God and [other humans] directly flows every Christian grace, every holy temper. And from these springs uniform holiness of conversation.”



- ❖ Holiness must become the disposition of our heart if it is to be manifest in our lives
- ❖ So, holy tempers not simply infused by God but developing realities coming from our participation with the empowering presence of God, i.e. gradual growth is essential to sanctification
- ❖ This is in distinction of places where Wesley seems to be putting for a more instant sanctification

# CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

- ❖ “How much deliverance from the plague of sin can we hope for in this life?”
- ❖ Answer: *entire* sanctification or Christian Perfection, in this life!



# CHRONOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

- ❖ Perfection: 1) a dynamic conception of perfection as ever-increasing maturity (Greek: teleiomas) and 2) a static conception as unsurpassable attainment (Latin: perfectus)
- ❖ 1738 convinced Wesley that sanctification follows from justification

- ❖ Also, believed justification would bring moral perfection (leaving involuntary infirmities)
- ❖ Personal experience changed his mind
- ❖ Looking forward to a second experience of God's grace which would free us from all sin: actions, tempers, thoughts, and temptations



- ❖ Criticism led to affirming ways in which Christians can never be perfect in this life and in which they may be
- ❖ Understanding stays limited, judgement subject to error (in matters not essential to salvation), actions limited by nonmoral infirmities of present human condition
- ❖ Altered that Christians are not free from temptation in this life
- ❖ Perfection is open to continual increase - rejecting absolute perfection

- ❖ New born Christians are perfect in the sense of being free from the necessity of committing any outward sin, while mature Christians are perfect in the sense of being free from evil thoughts and tempters.
- ❖ Wesley affirmed that the deliverance of inward and outward sin was possible in this life - while being leery of those who claimed it and never claiming it for himself



- ❖ Middle Wesley advised for his people to press on in grace seeking perfection before death
- ❖ Late Wesley maintained it was uncommon for God to withhold perfect love until death and advised his people to seek earnestly to find it speedily
- ❖ Reasons for shift?: Maturation of doctrine, apocalyptic expectation of second coming, responding to charge of setting bar too high

- ❖ Modification of assumption: entire sanctification did not mean one could not fall back into sin
- ❖ sin = voluntary transgressions of known law & infirmities = involuntary transgressions of a divine law, known or unknown (see Victor Shepherd for criticism)
- ❖ Because of limiting of sin to voluntary or wilful more people claiming perfection

- ❖ Maxfield and Bell claimed instantaneous perfection by simple affirmation based on affirmation “I believe” and it was absolute - no need for growth or ongoing merits of Christ
- ❖ Finally, only those entirely sanctified could be eschatologically saved - denying justification
- ❖ Wesley rejected their teaching and put them out when they would not be corrected



- ❖ Brought Wesley to balance present attainment of Christian perfection with growing in grace
- ❖ Charles did not agree with John's definition of Christian Perfection and present attainment

# CENTRAL THEMES

- ❖ Perfection = mature (dynamic vs. static)
- ❖ Growth will continue in Christian Perfection
- ❖ C.P. = “the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbour, ruling our tempers, words and actions.”

- ❖ Love not merely present but ruling
- ❖ Wesley has used language of rooting out or destruction - problematic (c.f. Victor Shepherd)
- ❖ Inward tempers determine outward actions
- ❖ V.S. Alcoholic - real promise of deliverance from desire (actual change of temper)
- ❖ Knowledge of perfection: 2-3 years & witness of Spirit



# ONGOING REPENTANCE

- ❖ Ongoing repentance essential to Christian life
- ❖ Repentance is acknowledgement of sin and helplessness to change
- ❖ This repentance retains confidence of renewed pardoning relationship with God

- ❖ Even with entire sanctification, Wesley maintained the need for repentance even for our infirmities
- ❖ Proper sin was still a possibility so repentance was necessary for restored relationship
- ❖ So, Christian Perfection does not preclude the possibility of slipping away from God