

**Witnesses of Perfect Love:
Narratives of Christian Perfection in Early Methodism**
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In the eighteenth century, narratives of spiritual experiences were circulating among British Methodists to express what God had done in their lives. Narratives of Christian Perfection conveyed an experience that could not fully be explained using theological arguments about the doctrine. My book examines how the idea of Christian Perfection was transmitted through the use of story. Furthermore, it explores the content which was transmitted — that is the specific expression of Christian maturity as seen in the Wesleyan Methodist doctrine of Christian Perfection.

My book is primarily the work I completed for my Master's thesis at Regent College. I didn't set out to write on narrative, or even about the lesser known early Methodist people. I began with questions about the Methodist doctrine of Christian Perfection. Questions about what exactly John Wesley taught, and why his teaching seemed so foreign today, even in churches who claim the Wesleyan tradition. As I began to read the theology and history I became more confused. Wesley said many things, in many different context over several decades about the doctrine of Christian Perfection, and his comments do not appear to be consistent. There must be more going on during this time than I was grasping. Then one question led me out of the fog. If Wesley himself did not claim to have experienced Christian Perfection, did anyone else claim the experience? What do *they* have to say about the experience, rather than the theology? This question led me to the narrative of William Hunter, then his intriguing story led me to seek out others. I fully intended to address my original questions, but as I dug deeper and talked to others about what I was finding (or rather the people I was discovering) it became clear that the *stories* of early Methodist Perfection were central to understanding the ideas. The people who held to these beliefs were essential to understanding the ideas themselves. I see now that my attempt to take the idea of Christian Perfection out of its eighteenth-century context of the narratives of those who experienced Perfection, led to my confusion when faced with Wesley's theology alone.

The doctrine of Christian Perfection has always been controversial, and John Wesley was particularly protective of those who he deemed to be genuine in their experience of Christian Perfection. The title of this book, comes from a journal entry by Sarah Crosby on May 1, 1774, noting this attitude in Wesley. She writes, "He told the Society, that whosoever spake against *those* who were *simple witnesses of perfect love*, spake against those, who were as *dear to him* as the *apple of his eye*."¹

My main argument in the book is that when I discovered the narratives of perfection I also discovered that the narratives themselves were a significant vehicle for transmitting the

¹ Sarah Crosby, *Biographical Sketches of the Lives and Public Ministry of Various Holy Women, whose eminent usefulness and successful labours in the Church of Christ, have entitled them to be enrolled among the great benefactors of mankind: In which are included several letters from the Rev. J. Wesley never before published*, ed. Z. Taft (London, 1825), 2:65. Emphasis in original.

doctrine of Perfection throughout the Methodist connexion. For more on the narrative transmission you will have to buy a copy of the book. Today I want to focus in on a few of the elements of the doctrine that are uniquely understood through the narratives. First, I will give you a map of the historical territory in which these narratives reside, then I will explore the wide spectrum of language used to refer to Perfection in the narratives themselves. Finally, I would like to hear from you, about how the Wesleyan idea of holiness has been preserved, lost or shifted in your contexts in Wesleyan tradition churches.

The story of early Methodist Christian Perfection starts at the beginning of the eighteenth century, during the rise of Methodism.² Before the revival began, before Charles and John Wesley's experiences of assurance, they were already teaching holiness publicly, and seeking it personally. Charles sought holiness through the structured discipline of the Holy Club during his time at Oxford, and John soon joined him. John Wesley's personal crusade for holiness is seen when he made a declaration giving his whole life to God in 1725.³ The next episode in the history of Perfection is the events surrounding Charles and John Wesley's experiences of assurance of pardon in 1738. The providential encounter of John and Charles Wesley with Moravian-Christians informed their expectation of an assurance experience. John already longed for assurance of pardon, and the Moravians became teachers of his heart by affirming his expectation, and promising sanctification along with the assurance.

As anticipated, Charles Wesley (and John a few days later) experienced the transformative assurance of pardon to which their Moravian brothers and sisters testified. Yet the accompanying sanctification was lacking. Instead of discarding either his desire for holiness or the experience of pardon, John Wesley detached the experience of justification from the experience of sanctification. He now saw that an experience of justification and sanctification could be separated by time in the spiritual lifespan of the believer.⁴ In this development, it is seen how the ideal of holiness (discovered in his study of Scripture) is set alongside his experience of the transforming power of God's grace. The two essential elements of ideal and experience are now present in John Wesley's life which is foundational for his later defence of an experience of holiness, particularly found in his sermons.

² For a more extensive history of John Wesley's writing on Christian Perfection, see D. Marselle Moore, "Development in Wesley's Thought on Sanctification and Perfection," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 2 no 2 (1985): 29-53.

³ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, from the year 1725 to the year 1777*, 6th ed., §2 (London, 1789), 3. Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 36.

⁴ For a nuanced read of the famous events of May 1738, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood, 1990), 49-91.

The next episode in the history of Methodism is the outbreak of revival in England in the late 1730s. Much has been said about the period of Methodism as the revival begins.⁵ Spiritual awakening occurred and the crowds gathered in Methodist societies to find out how to flee the wrath of God. Conversion narratives from this period are numerous.⁶

Alongside conversion, Methodists were also seeking Perfection. Early in the revival, testimony arose about an experience beyond conversion; the feeling of being freed from sin (or being entirely sanctified) began to emerge. As early as May 1741, John and Charles Wesley each record in their journals the deathbed scene of faithful saints that include claims of being freed from all sin. The Wesleys interpreted these stories as possible experiences of Christian Perfection.⁷ Interestingly, historian Thomas Albin notes the correlation of these deathbed accounts with the first recorded meeting of the select society on May 20, 1741. The select society is a specialized small group with the express purpose of seeking Christian Perfection.⁸ These events show that some in the Methodist community were seeking Perfection even as the revival began.

Twenty years later, the 1760s brought an increase in claims of the experience of Perfection, which in turn brought about the Perfectionist controversy in London. In London, controversy arose surrounding claims to Perfection as these claims grew more extravagant. Some claimed angelic Perfection, or the inability to sin after their Perfection experience. In addition, a group claiming Perfection withdrew from fellowship with the London Methodists. They asserted that those perfected could only be taught by others who also had the experience.⁹ These excessive claims were connected to two preachers in particular, Thomas

⁶ For more on conversion narratives, see Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Phyllis Mack, "'Out of the paw of the lion': first conversion," in *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 60-82.

⁷ Charles reports the faithful death of sister Hooper on May 6, 1741 and from her expression of devotion to Christ he interprets, "this is that holiness, or absolution, or Christian Perfection!" Charles Wesley, *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. ST Kimbrough, Jr. and Kenneth G. C. Newport (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2008) 1:304. John Wesley visited a very ill friend, Nancy Morris, and her testimony on May 15, 1741 of being cleansed prompted Wesley to discuss the possibility of being cleansed from all sin with Moravian, Peter Böhler the next day. John Wesley, May 15, 1741, *Journal and Diaries II: 1738-1743*, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater, vol. 19 of *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 194-195.

⁸ Thomas R. Albin, "'Inwardly Persuaded': Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism," in *"Heart Religion" in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele (Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 39. John Wesley, *Journal and Diaries II*, 19:461.

⁹ Clark, "Journal," *Arminian Magazine*, 6 (1783) 299. Compare this group to the group of professors of Perfection that John Wesley met with in 1760: "Fri. [January]18 [1760]. I desired those who believed they were saved from sin (sixteen or seventeen in number) to meet me at noon, to whom I gave such cautions and instructions as I judged needful. Nor did any of *these* pretend to be above man's teaching but received it with all thankfulness." Wesley, *Journal & Diaries IV*, 21:239.

Maxfield and George Bell. The height of the controversy occurred when Bell publicly prophesied the end of the world would occur on February 28, 1763. These prophetic claims prompted Wesley to publicly reject Bell with clear statements that Bell was no longer connected to the Methodist fellowship.¹⁰ Wesley has been criticized for his slow response to the controversy. In hindsight, the risk to not quench the work of God did produce some increased revival activity in this period, but this gain was held alongside the result of long-lasting skepticism about the doctrine of Christian Perfection in the London Methodist societies.¹¹

During the final stage of early Methodism another controversy arose as the transition began in preparation for the death of the elderly John Wesley. Following the Perfectionist controversy and continuing into the 1770s, the doctrine of Perfection became a key distinctive of the Wesleyan Methodist movement. This period is marked by the Minutes Controversy (beginning in 1770), in which Wesleyan Methodists found themselves in a very public battle with Calvinist Methodists. During this season the Wesleyan Methodists defined themselves using the doctrine of Perfection over against other theological positions.¹² In addition, in 1778, John Wesley began to publish the *Arminian Magazine*, and narratives of Perfection were prominent in the Wesleyan Methodist identity formed by this monthly publication.¹³ Thus, the *Arminian Magazine* is a key source for published narratives of Christian Perfection.

Keeping in mind my study's historical limitation to early Methodism, we should remind ourselves that many current-day readers of eighteenth-century texts regarding Christian Perfection are influenced by the history of the doctrine since that time. The nineteenth-century holiness movement in North America, and pentecostalism (birthed from

¹⁰ John Wesley wrote a brief letter to the London Chronicle newspaper declaring publicly the split with Bell. It reads, "I take this opportunity of informing all whom it may concern (1) that Mr. Bell is not a member of our Society; (2) that I do not believe either the end of the world or any signal calamity will be on the 28th instant; and (3) that not one in fifty, perhaps not one in five hundred, of the people called Methodists believe any more than I do either this or any other of his prophecies." John Wesley to the Editor of the London Chronicle, February 9, 1763, in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* ed. John Telford. 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 4:202-203.

¹¹ George Clark notes in his journal that the controversy caused all Perfection claims to be doubted, not only by critics, but also by Methodists. He laments the losses for God's work of holiness as a result. Clark, *Arminian Magazine*, 6 (1783), 302. See also Mr. G. Clark to John Wesley, London, July 29, 1774, in *Arminian Magazine*, 10 (1787)104. John Pawson wrote in 1796 that in London, especially among the older Methodists, the excesses of Bell's teaching still lingered in the skepticism toward the doctrine of Christian Perfection: MS letter cited in Gunter, *Love Divine*, 225-226. For more examples of skepticism beyond London, see Charles H. Goodwin, "Setting Perfection too High: John Wesley's Changing Attitudes Toward the 'London Blessing'," *Methodist History* 36, no. 2 (January 1998): 92.

¹² In the debate with the Calvinists, Wesley called for holiness in response to antinomianism. Rack notes, "[Wesley's] perfectionism was his favourite antidote to [antinomianism] and equally a prime cause of offense to Calvinists." Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 450. Ironically, the Calvinists accused those who supported Christian Perfection of antinomianism for claiming perfection and allowing for infirmities. *Idem.*, 457.

¹³ John Wesley was the editor of the *Arminian Magazine* from 1778 until his death. John Wesley, ed. *The Arminian Magazine: Consisting of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption* (London, 1778-1791).

the holiness movement) in the twentieth century, each developed their own interpretation of the doctrine of Perfection which shifted the popular understanding of the term. My examination is focused on the early Methodist understanding of Christian Perfection in an attempt to reconstruct the historical terrain without the aid of today's hindsight of where the nineteenth and twentieth-century interpretations of the doctrine would lead. Therefore, the historical limitation of this study intentionally predates the significant theological shift in the doctrine seen in the nineteenth century.¹⁴

A number of aspects of Christian Perfection are seen in the teaching of John and Charles Wesley, I explore in more detail where these ideas can be found in the writing of the Wesleys in my book. Four things stand out: *first*, John Wesley defined Perfection from biblical sources. Wesley reiterated the biblical command to be perfect, as our Heavenly Father is perfect; as well, the biblical vision of holiness included not only Perfection but also purity, love and restoration. *Second*, John Wesley delineates that Christian Perfection is not sinless perfection. The Perfection of early Methodism allows for mistakes, and calls for continued growth in grace. *Third*, Perfection is both gradual and instantaneous. Furthermore, the evidence of that gradual growth toward holiness in a believer is not the presence of an instantaneous experience; rather, the *fruit* of holiness is the test for the one who experienced Perfection. *Finally*, Christian Perfection is the goal of the Christian life seen in Charles Wesley's emphasis on aspiring for Christian Perfection, something for which all believers continue to long.

The teaching of John and Charles Wesley on the topic of Christian Perfection provides a bit of a definition of the term Christian Perfection. Yet, this attempt to define the term raises the question of how the Methodist people themselves described Perfection. This is the subject to which I will now turn through a survey of the language used in relation to the experience of Christian Perfection as found in a sample of Methodist Perfection narratives.

First, a few quotes:

It is no wonder you should many times be at a loss how to express what you feel. The language of men is too weak to describe the deep things of God.

— John Wesley to Ann Bolton, 1773¹⁵

It was then that Jesus appeared more glorious than the sun at noon-day: giving me power to believe and to receive him for my All, with such a weight of love as pen cannot describe. He spoke into my heart, *Be thou holy: and I have sprinkled thee with clean water and thou shalt be clean.* The scripture I was before delivered by, was now again sealed upon my heart: and he united me to

¹⁴ For more on the shift in Christian Perfection during the holiness movement, see Randy L. Maddox, "Reconnecting the Means to the End: A Wesleyan Prescription for the Holiness Movement," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33 no. 2 (1998): 29-66.

¹⁵ John Wesley to Ann Bolton, May 2, 1773, in *Letters*, 6:25.

himself with those words, *I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee*. I found his Spirit bearing witness in the clearest manner, that the work was done.¹⁶

The second quote from a letter to John Wesley, and it is just one example of the flood of language that crowds into an account of the experience of Christian Perfection. The Methodist people themselves, in addition to the leaders of the movement, can illuminate the doctrine of Perfection as understood in the eighteenth century through the language they used to describe their experiences.

In reading numerous accounts of Christian Perfection it becomes apparent to me that there is no consistent term used in regards to this experience in the early Methodist communities. The term “Christian Perfection” is rare in the narratives themselves; yet, no other singular term is significantly used to name these similar experiences. The early Methodist people did not use the same words to describe either the process of sanctification, or the instantaneous event that some experienced. I looked for patterns because a unified linguistic pattern might have pointed to dominant teaching coming down from leaders (such as John and Charles Wesley) or a consolidated theological idea that had already formed in Methodist circles. Instead, I found the diversity of terms suggests that a multiplicity of theological ideas of Christian Perfection marked the movement, and that Methodists themselves were still searching for words to describe this experience. The diversity notwithstanding, the narratives often reflect the assumption that the reader is familiar with the theological idea behind the experience; rarely is the Perfection experience explained theologically to the reader.

Instead of a single term I sought, the language I found in the narratives is descriptive rather than dogmatic, but clustered around four themes: *love, salvation, God’s presence, and transformation*. These themes account for most of the references to Perfection. In a few cases the term “Perfection” itself is used, although these cases usually refer to the doctrine rather than the experience of the individual.¹⁷

Before surveying the narratives, it is worth noting that John Wesley, in his use of language regarding Perfection, is equally diverse as the Methodist people. He uses the term “Perfection” more often than the narratives do, which reflect that he speaks more often about the doctrine itself. However, all four of the above mentioned themes can be found in Wesley’s journal, sermons and letters. Language of love, salvation, God’s presence and

¹⁶ Mrs. E. M—n to John Wesley, Potto, March 11, 1762, in *Arminian Magazine*, 4 (1781) 395.

¹⁷ For examples of occurrences of the doctrine referred to as “Perfection” or “Christian Perfection,” see Hunter to Wesley, in *Early Methodist Preachers*, 2:248. Crosby, *Holy Women*, 29 (there is a problem with the pagination in *Holy Women*; this citation is for the second page 29). Clark, *Arminian Magazine*, 6:302. Matthias Joyce, “The Life of Mr. Matthias Joyce”, in *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers Chiefly Written by Themselves*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 6 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1878), 4:270.

transformation are all used in contexts clearly equated with Perfection and sanctification.¹⁸ John Wesley did not claim to have experienced Perfection; therefore, his vocabulary as he described his own experience cannot be set alongside these narratives. Nevertheless, the language seen in the narratives of the people is also used by John Wesley as he describes the experiences of others and exhorts the people to seek holiness. Additionally, examining Wesley's writing in *search* of the variety of terms used in the narratives reveals that John Wesley did refer to Christian Perfection using the same diversity of language as the Methodist people. This larger lexicon of Perfection increases the references to both the doctrine and of experience of Perfection found in Wesley's works. By observing the terms used by the Methodist people also found in Wesley's works, it is clear that the language used by Wesley is consistent with the narratives in both variety of the terms and themes.

Love is the first theme we will examine. Love appears in each of the four central narratives examined in my book, as well as in many other Perfection narratives. When describing the affective experience of Christian Perfection, the language of love is most often used. These narratives are the story of an individual's experience, rarely a philosophical or theological explanation for that experience. These experiences are marked by a palpable sensation interpreted by the subject to be love.

The love described in the narratives is God's love experienced in people's own hearts. This love is described using superlatives such as perfect, pure, full or holy.¹⁹ Moreover, this love is active: it showers down, fills an ocean, redeems, perfects, sanctifies, fills the heart and is like fire.²⁰ Sarah Crosby evokes a rich image as she describes her encounter with God saying that her "soul seemed all love," as if any sin or fear was crowded out by God's love.²¹

The love experienced and expressed in these Perfection narratives was from God and was effortlessly imparted to the believer. There was no work on the part of the subject to earn the love bestowed. Furthermore, love transformed the person whom it filled and multiplied itself as it caused the believer to show love to others, which can be particularly seen in the

¹⁸ For examples of these various images, see Wesley, Sermon 43, "Scripture Way of Salvation", §§III. 12-14, 2:167. "Constant communion with God the Father and Son fills their hearts with humble love. Now this is what I always did and do now mean by 'perfection'," Wesley, March 6, 1760, *Journal V*, in *Works*, 21:245. See also Wesley, Dec 29, 1766, *Journal V*, in *Works*, 22:68. Wesley, June 2, 1768, *Journal V*, in *Works*, 22:147. For a brief discussion on Wesley's diversity of terms, see Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 127. For a discussion of Charles Wesley's use of salvation language surrounding sanctification, see Tyson, *Charles Wesley*, 56.

¹⁹ Hall, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:96, 197. Clark, *Arminian Magazine*, 6:20, 21, 22, 188, 245, 300. Crosby, *Holy Women*, 29 (second 29), 65. Thomas Walsh, "The Life and Death of Mr. Thomas Walsh," in *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers Chiefly Written by Themselves*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 6 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1878), 3:220. Mary Fletcher, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, ed. Henry Moore (New York: Soule & Mason, 1818), 45. Hester Ann Rogers, *An Account of the Experience of Mrs. H. A. Rogers* (London: T. Cordeux, 1818), 44.

²⁰ Hall, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:195, 310. Clark, *Arminian Magazine*, 6:245. Hunter to Wesley in *Early Methodist Preachers*, 2:248, 250. Joyce, "Life," in *Early Methodist Preachers*, 4:271.

²¹ Crosby, *Holy Women*, 2:33. The hymn lines "Christ was all in all to me; and all my heart was love" is quoted in two Perfection narratives, sounding the same image of love overwhelming. An unnamed writer to John Wesley, June 4, 1761, in *Arminian Magazine*, 4:164. Rogers, *Account*, 47.

narrative of Bathsheba Hall (chapter nine).²² The lexicon of love used in the narratives illuminates Christian Perfection because an experience primarily based in *love* challenges any sense of striving or selfish perfectionism which might be found in the concept of Christian Perfection.

In addition to love, **salvation** language is used in reference to Christian Perfection. The early Methodists were seeking salvation that is full, complete, inward — a greater salvation, even “the Great Salvation.”²³ These references in the Perfection narratives about salvation are not references to conversion, or justification because the longing for salvation is coming from those who have already had a significant conversion experience.

The language of salvation is often paired with reference to sin. The salvation is both greater and inward because it saves the believer from sin experienced after conversion.²⁴ The anxiety created when sin is discovered after conversion requires a deeper or fuller salvation. Yet, it must be noted that conversion or justification was indeed enough to assure the believer of their eternal salvation, Christian Perfection was desired, but not necessary for the Christian life.²⁵ The salvation language of the narratives is evocative and expresses a strong sense of the release and the freedom experienced by the storyteller.

Third, there is language attributing the experience of Christian Perfection to **God’s presence**. God’s presence signals the divine source of the encounter, and His abiding presence is part of the result of the divine experience. For example, Ann Gilbert is “filled with the divine presence”, George Clark’s “soul partakes of the divine nature” and William Hunter’s soul is united with Christ.²⁶ Each narrative uses language that intensifies the subjects experience of God’s presence, an experience more significant than their previous encounters with God. Furthermore, the presence of God evokes transformation in believers: Clark longs to be holy as God is holy, Sarah Crosby describes a season of pure love as the ability “to walk in the light of his countenance” and Bathsheba Hall tells of a friend who was

²² See chapter nine of the book.

²³ Hall, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:36, 96, 311. Miss M. B. to John Wesley, February 1761, in *Arminian Magazine*, 4 (1781) 51. Letter from an unnamed man to John Wesley, June 4, 1761, in *Arminian Magazine*, 4 (1781) 164. Clark, *Arminian Magazine*, 6:299. Hunter to Wesley, *Early Methodist Preachers* 2:246, 248. Thomas Rankin, “The Life of Mr. Thomas Rankin,” in *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers Chiefly Written by Themselves*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 6 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1878), 5:169. Crosby, *Holy Women*, 2:59. Fletcher, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 44.

²⁴ Hall, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:310. Clark, *Arminian Magazine*, 6:300. Hunter to Wesley, *Early Methodist Preachers*, 2:246, 249.

²⁵ See chapter two (page 22, note 28) for John Wesley’s assurance of the sufficiency of justification.

²⁶ Ann Gilbert, “The Experience of Mrs. Ann Gilbert, of Gwinear in Cornwall,” in *Arminian Magazine*, 18(1795) 44. Clark, *Arminian Magazine*, 6:407. Compare also where Bathsheba Hall’s suggestion of partaking in the divine nature is remedy for the pollutions of the world: Hall, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:150. Hunter to Wesley, *Early Methodist Preachers*, 2:249.

transformed so that “self is gone; and God is all in all.”²⁷ The positive and lasting change is evoked by *God’s presence* in a new way.

The witness to the divine presence reinforces that the source of Christian Perfection is from God, not earned or achieved by human effort. In addition, God’s presence is both the means and motivation for believers to live a holy life. The presence of unitive language when describing Perfection shifts the doctrine away from moral obedience attempting to earn the favour of God, and proclaims instead the enjoyment of God’s presence.

Lastly, when referring to their experience of Christian Perfection, the early Methodists describe the **transformation** that took place. The language used is quite poetic, evoking the emotions of the transformation even more than communicating theological principles. The most common transformation image is that of cleansing from sin. For the unnamed man’s whose story was told through his letter to John Wesley printed in the *Arminian Magazine*, the desire for transformation was expressed as a longing to be cleansed from “all sin.”²⁸ For Bathsheba Hall, her longing was for complete deliverance from sin. In her perfection account, her assurance comes through the scripture words: “Thou art all fair, there is no spot in thee” (a reference to Song of Songs 4:7)²⁹ The longing for deliverance from sin led to the transformative experience of being cleansed from inward sin.³⁰

The transformation images also include changes that bring about restoration: Bathsheba Hall notes, “The Lord lifted up my head,” and William Hunter received “new vigour to [his] spirit.”³¹ In all of these phrases the language of the Perfection experience is active — change is actively taking place — which shows the transformative power of these experiences for the early Methodists.

The variety of language used for Perfection offers insight into the nuances of the idea, while at the same time causes the dilemma of how to use language when speaking of these experiences. The term “Christian Perfection” is not sufficient to communicate the nuances of love, full salvation, divine union and transformation that are expressed in the linguistic variety of the narratives. In addition, the term *perfection* can erroneously communicate a moral infallibility or completeness which is inconsistent with what was being experienced. Nevertheless, for clarity, in my book I use the term “Christian Perfection,” while also attempting to use the language that appears in that narratives.

So the four themes again were: love, salvation, God’s presence and transformation. Listen to this account I referenced before from an unnamed man in his letter of spiritual experience that he wrote to John Wesley in 1761. The letter opens with the date of his

²⁷ Clark, *Arminian Magazine*, 6:20. Crosby, *Holy Women*, 2:33. Hall, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:196.

²⁸ Unnamed Man to Wesley, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:162.

²⁹ Hall, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:38.

³⁰ For more examples of cleansing from sin see also Thomas Rankin to John Wesley, Rye, March 8, 1762, in *Arminian Magazine*, 4:218; Rankin, “Life,” in *Early Methodist Preachers*, 5:169. Fletcher, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 45.

³¹ Hall, *Arminian Magazine*, 4:37. Hunter to Wesley, *Early Methodist Preachers*, 2:248.

salvation, on August 27, 1757 he experience God's pardoning love. The letter goes on to tell that he met and married his wife and they regularly heard Methodist preaching at the Foundry in London. They both struggled with a increasing awareness of the wickedness in their hearts and were seeking relief from their increasing distress. While he was on a journey, his wife wrote to him of the events at home in London: "adding, that one of my acquaintance had got a *clean heart*."³² He was encouraged by this account after interviewing the witness in person and sought after this blessings for himself. This is where I will pick up the story in his own words, listen for the four themes:

The next day I was asked to go to *Joseph Guildford's*. While we talked together, the Lord gave me such a sight of his holiness and his love, that I knew he was willing, for Christ's sake, to make *me* also holy. Yet I felt myself so helpless, I said, "I know not if all my desires will not be gone in five minutes." He began praying, and the Lord quickly said to my soul, "I am thy salvation." I held this near an hour with a trembling hand, while several were wrestling with God for me. Mean time Satan was ready to tear me in pieces, till as I was on the point of letting go my hold, I cried vehemently "Lord! Wouldst thou have me believe thee?" As soon as I spoke, he answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." My soul fell upon him" I *did* believe, and peace sprung up like a river in my soul. I cannot tell you, what a glorious liberty I was now brought into. I hanged upon him, and felt him my salvation: I loved him with all my heart. Satan roared against me; but the Lord was as a wall of fire round about me. He told me, he would be with me even to the end. Blessed be God for such a precious Savior! Now, "Christ was all in all to me, and all my heart was love."³³

Now is the time for audience participation, where do you see the theme of love in this quote? ... Salvation? ... God's presence? ... Transformation? ...

Discussion:

As I started my research I wanted to make a connection for today's Christians to the goodness of Wesley's teaching, but as I discovered more I saw how distant we are from that context and there needs to be some translation to make the connections. I was hoping that today you can help me a bit by sharing about your contexts so we can work together to bring some of our Methodist history alive today.

The first question I have is: what do you find inspiring about the eighteenth century perfection narratives?

The second question is what barriers do you see that would keep people from embracing these ideas?

Third part is can we brainstorm together how to make the connections with people.

For example, I have been very inspired by the transformation I see in the lives of the early Methodists I have had the chance to get to know. But, I see a major barrier in the

³² Unnamed Man to Wesley, June 4, 1761, *Arminian Magazine*, March 1781, 4:162.

³³ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

Christian culture (and probably Western culture in general) that people either don't feel a need for transformation, or they don't believe it is possible.

One of the things I think would help people make the connection is to learn from the early Methodist understanding of the spiritual life span. That conversion is just the beginning, and that following conversion a growing awareness of the sin in our lives, increasingly inward sins like anger and pride, is a normal part of Christian discipleship, and that God is powerful enough to extend His grace and transformation to that increasing awareness of sin.

So, in the four themes in the language of the narratives: love, salvation, God's presence and transformation; or in the history of the doctrine of perfection in the eighteenth century what do you see that is inspiring?

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