

A PLAIN ACCOUNT OF  
CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

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**CHRISTIAN  
PERFECTION**

JOHN WESLEY

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY  
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# CONTENTS

Editors' Preface	9
Signs and Abbreviations	11
Introduction	13
Outline of <i>A Plain Account of Christian Perfection</i>	29
Reproduced Title Page	31
Text	33

## EDITORS' PREFACE

This little volume is intended to fulfill a need that we have sensed since the beginning of our teaching careers, and that was mentioned to us by our teachers—a new edition of John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766). This has long been recognized as the classic presentation of one of Wesley's most central (and most debated) theological emphases. What we longed for was an edition of this treatise based on the best critical text, adapted appropriately for modern readers, with annotations of Wesley's sources, citations, and allusions, and a helpful introduction.

Towards this end, we cooperated in the production of volume 13 of the “Bicentennial Edition” of *The Works of John Wesley*, which was published in fall 2013. One section of this volume gathered Wesley's major treatises on Christian perfection, arranged in chronological order. While this organization was vital for showing the development and context of Wesley's various writings, one result was that *Plain Account* does not appear in its full form in the volume. The longest section of *Plain Account* (§25) reproduces with a few elisions Wesley's earlier *Farther Thoughts upon Christian Perfection* (1763). For reasons of space, this section was not duplicated in the setting of *Plain Account*; rather readers are referred back to the earlier treatise (which annotates the elisions). In addition to this limitation, we believed that many would appreciate access to the best

scholarly text of *Plain Account* in a handy (and cheaper) stand-alone format. Therefore we requested and were granted permission by the Editorial Board of The John Wesley Works Project to produce this separate version.

Thus, this copy of Wesley's *Plain Account* reproduces the critical text of the Bicentennial Edition, revised only to reinstate §25 (and incorporate the adaptations that Wesley made when bringing *Farther Thoughts* into the *Plain Account*). Technically, we present here the text found in Wesley's second, corrected edition of *Plain Account*, published in London in 1766 (for more information on the seven British editions of *Plain Account* during Wesley's life, as well as a list of the few variant readings among these editions, see *Works*, 13:577-78). Wesley's original text is followed closely in the Bicentennial Edition, adapted mainly by updating archaic spellings and following modern capitalization and punctuation guidelines.

One key benefit of the Bicentennial Edition is annotation of Wesley's sources, citations, and allusions. We have retained most of the annotation in volume 13. One key difference in annotation style here is that Wesley's original notes are incorporated (and identified) in editorial footnotes, rather than maintaining the two levels of annotation in volume 13.

Finally, the introduction to this separate version of *Plain Account* also draws heavily on introductory essays in volume 13.

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# INTRODUCTION

John and Charles Wesley directed a movement of spiritual renewal within the Church of England during the eighteenth century. John (1703-91), the older brother, expressed his understanding of the Christian faith primarily through sermons and other prose writings. Charles (1707-88), one of the greatest hymn-writers of all time, blended belief and praise to create a unique lyrical theology of God's love. Both emphasized the value of a life empowered by the Spirit and rooted in God's grace experienced in Jesus Christ. Whether preached or sung, the spiritual discoveries of the Wesley brothers and their Methodist followers revitalized the life of the church in their time. The ultimate goal in life, they believed, was the fullest possible love of God and neighbor—the restoration of the image of Christ in the life of every believer. This restoration is a journey birthed by grace, nurtured by grace, and reaching its ultimate goal through grace: Christian perfection.<sup>1</sup> The Wesley brothers conceived

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1. The terminology that John Wesley employed with regard to this doctrine also included “holiness,” “entire sanctification,” “perfect love,” and “full salvation.” The literature related to this theme in Wesleyan studies is immense. In particular, see William E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection: An Examination and Restatement of John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1943); Harald G. Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1946); and Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994).

the Christian life, therefore, as a pilgrimage of “grace upon grace” leading to perfect love. In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, John Wesley collected excerpts from many of his previous publications on this theme in a single treatise that can be rightfully described as his *magnum opus*.

This quest for restored love and holiness was a continuous theme throughout John Wesley’s life and thought, and one of the most important distinguishing marks of the Methodist movement. He once referred to Christian perfection as “the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up.”<sup>2</sup> It was certainly Wesley’s most distinctive and misunderstood teaching. He found it necessary to guard the teaching from fanatical misinterpretation on one hand, and misplaced skepticism on the other. For readers of John Wesley’s *Plain Account*, therefore, it will be helpful to locate the doctrine of Christian perfection within his larger understanding of salvation, to survey the sources of his vision, to trace transitions in his thought, and to summarize his mature understanding of the doctrine.

## CHRISTIAN PERFECTION AS THE GOAL OF SALVATION

John Wesley consistently described the goal of the way of salvation as “holiness of heart and life.”<sup>3</sup> His vision of the Christian life as an organic synthesis of faith and holiness—his concern for the fullness of faith (perfect love) as well as its foundation (trusting faith)—is quite distinctive and, perhaps, his most remarkable theological achievement. The 1765 sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation” is his most successful summary of the doctrine of salvation.

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2. Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, Sept. 15, 1790; John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 8:238.

3. See *The Character of a Methodist*, §4, *Works*, 9:35; and *Advice to the People called Methodists*, §2, *Works*, 9:123.



There he speaks of justification by grace through faith as a *relative change* in our status before God. But he adds an equal emphasis on the *real change* that takes place in our hearts, lives, and loves as we become new creatures in Christ. Rather than viewing salvation as a static act of God at some point in the past, he interprets salvation as a therapeutic process. It begins with justification and new birth (through faith/trust in Christ) and continues as the transformed person grows in grace toward entire sanctification (active love in every thought, word, and action). The purpose of a life reclaimed by faith alone, in other words, is the restoration of God's image, namely love, in the life of the believer.

Wesley oriented his conception of salvation toward the goal of fully restored love. "The great end of religion," he observed, "is to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parents."<sup>4</sup> He insisted that *entire* sanctification, or Christian perfection, was possible *in this life*. Unlike some theologians, he was reluctant to set limits on what God's grace was able to accomplish in the life of a believer on this side of death. When pressed to define and defend what he meant by Christian perfection, his first recourse was most typically to the twin commands of Jesus (love of God and neighbor), which he interpreted as veiled promises of what God makes possible now—though always with some recognition of the constraints of our human nature.

One of Wesley's most succinct definitions of Christian perfection appears in "The Scripture Way of Salvation": "It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love 'rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in everything giving thanks.'"<sup>5</sup> This definition conjoins two dimensions: 1) an ability to

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4. Sermon 84, "Original Sin," III.5, *Works*, 2:185.

5. Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," I.9, *Works*, 2:160.

love God and others wholeheartedly and 2) an exclusion of sin from the life of the believer. Wesley believed and taught that both dimensions can be realized in this life—in an instant, and by a simple act of faith. But, consistent with his characteristic emphasis on the dynamic nature of the way of salvation, he also insisted that the gracious gift of God that can be received in a moment through trusting faith is never a static or finished state.

## THE WELLSPRINGS OF WESLEY'S COMMITMENT TO CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

Wesley was firmly convinced that he drew his emphasis on conformity in both heart and life to the model of Christ from Scripture. His initial defenses of this view were often collations of biblical passages. A number of the texts stand out as particularly foundational. He preached well over fifty times during his active ministry from Heb. 6:1, “Let us go on to perfection,” the text for his 1784 sermon “On Perfection.” While he published no sermon with the text, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48), his records demonstrate that he preached on this command of Jesus at least twenty-five times in the early years of the revival. He frequently invoked the depiction in 1 Thess. 5:16-18 of one who rejoices always, prays without ceasing, and gives thanks in all circumstances to describe one who is “sanctified wholly.” The only text that he seems to utilize consistently from the Old Testament is Ezek. 36:25-29, quoted at least four times in his *Plain Account* to sustain his argument. It also served as the text for the long hymn by his brother Charles entitled “The Promise of Sanctification” that John appended to a 1741 sermon on “Christian Perfection.”<sup>6</sup> William Sangster identified ten texts from Paul that figured prominently in John Wesley’s articulation of the doctrine, the most important of

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6. See *Works*, 2:122-24.

which include Rom. 2:29 and Phil. 3:12, both texts for sermons on perfection, and Phil. 3:15 which he quotes no fewer than ten times in the *Plain Account*. But the biblical book that Wesley prized most for its affirmation of the ideal of perfect love was 1 John.<sup>7</sup>

As a faithful Anglican, Wesley was shaped by elements of his beloved *Book of Common Prayer*, particularly prayers like this one from the Eucharistic liturgy: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name.”<sup>8</sup> His frequent mention of “scriptural, primitive religion” calls to mind the particular authority he ascribed to Early Christian writers with their typical emphasis on purity of heart and perfect love. Among his favorites in this regard were the *Spiritual Homilies* of the fourth-century monk now called pseudo-Macarius and Ephraem Syrus, whose singular theme was the full restoration of the lost *imago dei* in each human being. He identified Clement of Alexandria’s portrait of the perfect Christian (in *Stromateis*, Book VII) as the model for *The Character of a Methodist*, which Wesley describes in the *Plain Account* as his first tract on perfection. These early voices taught him to understand perfection in terms of “perfect love”—connoting not a finished state but a dynamic notion of the biblical term *τελειότης*—perhaps best translated “maturity.”<sup>9</sup>

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7. Sangster observed that “a full third of the texts on which Wesley chiefly relies for his doctrine of Christian Perfection are taken from the First Epistle of John” (*Path to Perfection*, 48). Cf. Robert W. Wall, “Wesley as Biblical Interpreter,” in R. L. Maddox & J. E. Vickers, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113-28.

8. Wesley appeals twice to this collect in the *Plain Account*, §23 and §28.

9. See Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975), 73. Outler’s insistence on the dynamic nature of “perfection” in Wesley is broadly supported, as well as his highlighting of the role of Early Christian writers in this. But the near dichotomy he draws between Eastern and Western Christian writers on this point has

In the retrospective reflections that open the *Plain Account* (§§2-4), Wesley identifies three sources as particularly foundational to his concern for holy living. He specifically resonated with Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Holy Dying* (1650-51) and its emphasis on "purity of intention."<sup>10</sup> In reading Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* he was forever captured by its ideal of an inward heart religion grounded in total dedication to God.<sup>11</sup> William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729) called Christians to adopt regular practices of devotion and prayer as the means of developing the virtues of temperance, humility, and self-denial—all to the glory of God.<sup>12</sup> Wesley also read Law's earlier work, *A Practical Treatise upon Christian Perfection* (1726), which stressed the importance of regaining the divine likeness.

Beyond these writers highlighted in the *Plain Account*, some other modern writers deserve mention as formative influences on Wesley's view of Christian perfection. Richard Lucas's three-volume *Enquiry after Happiness* maintained that one can attain true happi-

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been challenged. See Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric, *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), esp. 2-3.

10. Jeremy Taylor (1613-67), Bishop of Down and Connor from 1660, whose *Rules* were characteristic expressions of Anglican spirituality in their balanced sobriety, disciplined piety, and emphasis on moderation in all things.

11. Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380-1471) is the reputed author of *Imitatio Christi*. Probably written between 1420 and 1427, the *Imitatio* is, next to the Bible, the most popular of Christian devotional classics. This was one of the first works that Wesley chose to abridge and republish, reprinting it throughout his life and commending it to his followers. The version he chose to abridge was *The Christian's Pattern; or, A Divine Treatise of the Imitation of Christ*, translated by John Worthington (London: J. Williams, 1677). Wesley issued a large edition of this work in 1735, and a more abridged form in 1741, the shorter version being reprinted at least 20 times before Wesley's death.

12. William Law (1686-1761), a celebrated non-juror and mystic, was educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

ness or perfection in this life as a mature habit of holiness.<sup>13</sup> Both the equation of holiness with happiness and Lucas's distinction between sin and infirmities became mainstays of Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection. Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, a favorite of John's mother, Susanna, described true religion as "a union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul."<sup>14</sup> Lorenzo Scupoli's *The Spiritual Combat* represented a Catholic tradition of perfection through education—a will mysticism—the goal of which was total resignation to God.<sup>15</sup> The primary insight that Wesley garnered from his study of these works was that the Christian life is a *via devotio* (way of devotion) that finds its richest and fullest completion in God's love.

Wesley appreciated the doctrine of pure love and aspirations of union with God that he found in French and Spanish mystics

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13. Richard Lucas (1648–1715), *An Enquiry after Happiness*, 3 vols. (London: Samuel Smith, 1685–96). Wesley began reading Lucas on Mar. 25, 1730 and started to "collect" the work on May 22.

14. Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man . . . with Nine Other Discourses* (London: Printed for J. Downing and G. Strahan, 1726), 4–5. Scougal (1650–78) was a Scottish theologian and mystic. Wesley published an abridged edition of his book in 1744.

15. Lorenzo Scupoli (c. 1536–99) was a Spanish Benedictine monk. His highly esteemed treatise *De pugna spiritualis* was falsely attributed to Juan de Castañiza in Wesley's day.

like Francis de Sales,<sup>16</sup> Miguel de Molinos,<sup>17</sup> Madame Guyon,<sup>18</sup> and François Fénelon,<sup>19</sup> although he criticized many elements of their teaching. Two other Catholic figures influenced Wesley's vision of perfection by their saintly lives. He grouped them together with à Kempis as examples of "real, inward Christians."<sup>20</sup> He encountered the *Life* of Gregory Lopez (1542-96) as he embarked for the colony of Georgia in 1735.<sup>21</sup> Lopez modeled a number of Wesley's most critical emphases—holy living as a lifelong quest, self-denial and contempt for the world, tranquility of soul, solidarity with the poor, perfection as purity of intention in this life, and the equation of holiness and happiness. The *Life* of Gaston Jean Baptiste de Renty (1611-49), an affluent French Catholic who resolved to become a Carthusian hermit after reading the *Imitation of Christ*, appealed to Wesley because of its unswerving synthesis of ascetic mysticism and practical service.<sup>22</sup>

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16. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) was Bishop of Geneva from 1602 and a leader of the Counter-Reformation. His most famous writings, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609) and the *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), had a profound influence on later spiritual writings.

17. Miguel de Molinos (c. 1640-97) was a Spanish Quietist. A celebrated confessor and spiritual director, he presented perfection as attained by the total annihilation of the will in *Spiritual Guide* (1675) and his letters of direction. While his teachings were condemned by the Roman Church, they had a great influence on Pietists.

18. Jeanne Marie Bouvier de La Motte Guyon (1648-1717) was a French Quietist. Her vision of Christian life was one of total indifference, even to eternal salvation.

19. François Fénelon (1651-1715) was a French Quietist and disciple of Guyon. Drawn to the concept of pure love in the Quietist tradition, in 1697 he published *Explication des maximes des saints*, in which he described true and false mysticism, providing a defense of mystical spirituality.

20. See Sermon 55, "On the Trinity," §1, *Works*, 2:374-75.

21. Francisco de Losa, *The Holy Life of Gregory Lopez* (London, 1675).

22. Wesley read Jean Baptiste de Saint Juré, *The Holy Life of Monsieur de Renty* (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1684) in 1729 while a student at Oxford.

From this broad and diverse range of sources Wesley drew such varying emphases as the importance of spiritual disciplines, the primacy of pure intentions, the role of the affections, and the necessity of participation in God in the quest for holiness of heart and life. He was also grounded in a dynamic conception of perfection as ever-increasing maturity. The enduring stress of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, drawn from these various sources, was the potential triumph of God's grace and the power of a wholehearted love of God and neighbor to displace all lesser loves and to overcome the remains of sin.

## TRANSITIONS IN WESLEY'S EMPHASES CONCERNING CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

While the primary contours of Wesley's view of Christian perfection remained remarkably consistent throughout his life, careful reading reveals some transitions in his emphases as this theme matured in his life and ministry.<sup>23</sup> During the earliest phase of his teaching, Wesley emphasized restoration to true righteousness—to the holy virtues epitomized in love of God and neighbor—through regular use of the spiritual disciplines.<sup>24</sup> This emphasis is particularly prominent in his 1733 sermon, "The Circumcision of the Heart," which he abridged in the *Plain Account*. Here Wesley defined holiness as a "habitual disposition of the soul" that is cleansed from all sin and endued with all the virtues of Christ—particularly humility,

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23. For attention to (and some debate about) these transitions, see D. Marselle Moore, "Development in Wesley's Thought on Sanctification and Perfection," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20.2 (1985), 29-53; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 180-86; and Mark K. Olson, *John Wesley's Theology of Christian Perfection: Developments in Doctrine and Theological System* (Fenwick, Mich.: TruthInHeart, 2007).

24. See especially Sermon 134, "Seek First the Kingdom," §§6-7, *Works*, 4:219-20.

faith, hope, and charity (or love of God and neighbor).<sup>25</sup> These early sermons frequently echo the biblical language that we are to be perfect as God is perfect. But they can also insist that holiness is never perfect in this life. The most characteristic theme in Wesley's early view was encouragement to *press toward* perfection.

A second phase emerged in light of Wesley's experience of assurance of God's pardoning love in 1738. In his preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), for example, he rejected any suggestion that labor brings holiness, grounding salvation clearly in God's gracious initiative and empowerment.<sup>26</sup> His preface to a second volume of *Hymns and Sacred Poems* the following year introduced a distinction between the "new birth" and a subsequent event when Christians are born of God "in the full sense." In this second advent of God's grace, the believer, he taught, would be instantaneously freed from all sin—not only sinful actions, but also corrupt tempers, evil thoughts, and even temptation!<sup>27</sup> Criticism of this preface was immediate and vigorous, prompting Wesley to publish the didactic sermon "Christian Perfection" in 1741.<sup>28</sup> He sought to clarify ambiguity about the meaning of perfection, insisting that transformation into Christlikeness did not include the absolute perfections of omniscience, infallibility, or omnipotence. He also insisted that Christian holiness is open to continual increase in this life, rejecting any notion of a static or absolute perfection.

Wesley increasingly became a strong proponent of the possibility of attainment in this life. In works like the preface to his third collection of *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742) and *The Character of a*

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25. Sermon 17, "The Circumcision of the Heart," 1:1-2, 11-12, *Works*, 1:398-414.

26. See *Works*, 13:36-40.

27. See *Works*, 13:42-48.

28. Sermon 40, "Christian Perfection," *Works*, 2:99-121. The major points of this sermon were repeated in *The Principles of a Methodist*, §12, *Works*, 9:53-55.



*Methodist* of the same year, he sought to remove prejudice against the present possibility of Christian perfection and to offer a positive and winsome account of the ideal.<sup>29</sup> What Wesley typically did *not* do at this time was encourage the expectation that one's passage from new birth to Christian perfection would be brief or effortless. His characteristic pastoral advice was to "buy up every opportunity of growing in grace" while waiting for God's good time in providing the full deliverance from sinful inclinations.<sup>30</sup> In public debate he rejected the accusation that the Methodists viewed gradual growth in grace as a low or imperfect way of Christian conversion, insisting that any form of Christian experience that leads to true renewal was to be highly valued.

The decade between 1757 and 1767 was the most tumultuous in early Methodism concerning the notion of Christian perfection. This period also witnessed some subtle but significant changes in Wesley's mature teaching on the subject. The clearest change was the reversal of his earlier suggestion that one who was entirely sanctified could not fall again into sin. In addition, he defined sin in relation to perfection more clearly. The distinction between sin and infirmities had been present in Wesley's theology ever since Aldersgate. It now became more central. For example, *Thoughts on Christian Perfection* (1760) devoted Question 6 to clarifying the nature of "sin properly so called" from which the perfect are delivered, restricting it to "a voluntary transgression of a known law."<sup>31</sup> This stress on a *known* law, in particular, was significant, because it allowed that those who are perfect might still lack knowledge of some points of obedience that God expects of them. From 1760 on, Wesley's affirmations of the possibility of Christian perfection frequently specify

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29. Preface, *HSP* (1742), *Works*, 13:50-53; and *Character of a Methodist*, *Works*, 9:32-42.

30. Sermon 42, "On Satan's Devices," II.7, *Works*, 2:151.

31. *Works*, 13:61-62.

that it bestows freedom only from voluntary violations of *known* laws of God.

Given these shifting emphases, Wesley increasingly qualified discussions of gradual growth in holiness with an insistence that God could give perfection *now*, and this heightened sense of urgency had its desired effect. Many of his preachers took up the theme, and by the early 1760s there was an increase of followers claiming Christian perfection. These developments understandably spawned controversy and multiplied the possibilities of self-deception and abuse. Wesley crafted many of his subsequent treatises on the subject in response to these concerns. He published *Cautions and Directions Given to the Greatest Professors in the Methodist Societies* in early 1762, emphasizing the virtue of humility, warning against antinomianism, and stressing continuous growth nurtured in the means of grace.<sup>32</sup> In the midst of a controversy stirred up in London by Thomas Maxfield and George Bell,<sup>33</sup> Wesley sensed the need to provide a balanced account of Christian perfection. In early 1763 he issued *Farther Thoughts upon Christian Perfection*, providing his mature perspective on the debated issues and offering seasoned pastoral advice.<sup>34</sup> His sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765) affords the best single presentation of his mature vision of Christian perfection.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, he continued to insist that entire sanctification was a present possibility because it was God’s gift, not a human accomplishment. On the other hand, he emphasized that the way to wait for this gift was by repentance and growth through the means of grace, so that there would be no danger of antinomianism or enthusiasm should the gift not come immediately.

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32. See *Works*, 13:83-91.

33. For details on Maxfield and Bell and their claims, see the Introductory Comment to *Farther Thoughts upon Christian Perfection*, *Works*, 13:92-93.

34. See *Works*, 13:95-131.

35. See *Works*, 2:155-69.

While he had intended *Farther Thoughts* to be his last treatise devoted to Christian perfection, several developments, including increasing divergence with his brother over these issues, suggested that a definitive and more apologetic treatment was required. Questions were also being raised, not only about Wesley's doctrine per se but whether he had changed his stance in recent publications and whether there were inconsistencies in his various accounts. Wesley was deeply involved in this project the summer of 1765, as a firsthand account of Mark Davis to Charles Wesley of the opening day of John Wesley's annual Conference with his preachers demonstrates:

On Tuesday [August 20] your brother read to us his latest thoughts on Christian Perfection, a manuscript which he intends to publish. One proposed to have seriously and calmly considered the doctrine itself, the character of its professors, and the circumstances of receiving the glorious grace. But this your brother would not at all permit, because: 1) we have not *now* all things to learn; 2) several young preachers might be unsettled and bewildered by hearing such debates.<sup>36</sup>

In February 1766 John received a letter from his devoted colleague in ministry, John Fletcher, revealing perhaps another apologetic impetus for this publication: "I think we must define exactly what we mean by the *perfection* which is attainable here. In so doing, we may, through mercy, obviate the scoffs of the carnal, and the misapprehension of the spiritual world, at least, in part."<sup>37</sup> Wesley responded on February 28 from Lewisham, "Unity and holiness are the two

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36. Mark Davis, letter to Charles Wesley, August 25, 1765, in the Methodist Archives and Research Centre, the John Rylands Library, the University of Manchester, DDWes 2/63.

37. John Fletcher to John Wesley, Feb. 17, 1766; quoted in Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 2:563.

things I want among the Methodists. Who will rise up with me against all open or secret opposers of one or the other?"<sup>38</sup> His intention to stem debate was clear, and he published this final apologetic for his doctrine, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as Believed and Taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, from the Year 1725 to the Year 1765*, about the same time as this letter. Wesley kept the *Plain Account* in print as his standard defense of Christian perfection through the remaining twenty-five years of his ministry.

## WESLEY'S ABIDING AND MATURE EMPHASES

It would be surprising, indeed, had Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection never changed in any way over the course of nearly three quarters of a century. What deserves most attention, however, is the remarkable consistency exhibited in his central conception of this doctrine—God's desire and provision for believers to attain true holiness and happiness in this life. His greatest emphasis focused on the heart, the citadel of the deepest dispositions of the person, from which their actions flow. Accordingly, his most succinct definition of Christian perfection was "the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbour, ruling our tempers, words, and actions."<sup>39</sup> The corollary of this presence of holy dispositions, Wesley contended, was the expelling of unholy or sinful tempers. Christian perfection entailed a heart (as he had learned early from a Kempis) characterized by simplicity or singleness.

But Wesley was quick to add in his mature writings that, in this life, we have this treasure in earthen vessels. Christian perfection does not bestow omniscience or infallibility, so there is no guarantee that our holy character will invariably find expression in holy actions. This is why Wesley refused to call it "sinless perfection,"

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38. Quoted in *ibid*, 2:564.

39. *Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, §1, *Works*, 13:199.

contending only that those who are entirely sanctified are graciously free from sin “properly-so-called.” It is why he dismissed any suggestion that the perfect have no needs for the merits of Christ. And it is why he emphasized that Christian perfection was an essentially dynamic reality—ever open to richer development in grace *and* always capable of being lost if it is not nurtured.

In his mature writings Wesley affirmed that attainment of Christian perfection was ultimately an *instantaneous* gift of God’s grace, received in faith. But he also emphasized growth in grace, nurtured through the means of grace, both preceding and following this attainment. Indeed, he defined the adjective “entire” applied to sanctification as enjoying “as high a degree of holiness as is consistent with [one’s] present state of pilgrimage.”<sup>40</sup> While Wesley allowed that most Christians attain Christian perfection only at or near death, he insisted that God graciously makes it available much sooner. And he encouraged all to seek it sooner, for “the best end which any creature can pursue is happiness in God,” and such happiness is grounded and sustained in holiness of heart and life.<sup>41</sup>

## COMPOSITE NATURE OF THE *PLAIN ACCOUNT*

The longest of his treatments on this subject, the *Plain Account* is an extremely complex composite document, including no fewer than eight of John Wesley’s previous separate publications on the theme of Christian perfection (several of them substantial in nature), a number of Charles Wesley’s hymns, and John’s hymn translations from German collections. In the opening five paragraphs Wesley introduces the theme and purpose of the treatise, including a narrative of his unique pedigree in the “holiness” traditions of the Christian faith. A series of extracts follows, providing a history of his thoughts and writings

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40. Sermon 83, “On Patience,” §14, *Works*, 3:179.

41. Sermon 6, “The Righteousness of Faith,” II.8, *Works*, 1:213.

on the subject in rough chronological order up to 1760 (§§6-19). In four subsequent sections (§§20-23), Wesley reflects on and evaluates the surge of claims to Christian perfection in London that peaked in 1762. Excerpts from the memoirs and letters of Jane Cooper—whom Wesley frequently identified as an exemplar of true holiness—come next, providing “a living and a dying witness of Christian perfection” (§24). Section 25, by far the most lengthy in the treatise, reproduces *Farther Thoughts upon Christian Perfection* in nearly its entirety. The final three sections, all new material (§§26-28), provide a summary of Wesley’s distinctive emphases, an argument demonstrating the consistency of his teachings, and a typical rhetorical appeal for tolerance and understanding.