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John Wesley and Sanctification

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It could often be noted that in speaking about the life of a believer theological language is neglected for the sake of so called “practical considerations”, thus denying the encompassing nature of theology. This tendency emerges and becomes even more obvious when speaking about sanctification as a reality in the life of believers. Is sanctification to be observed and interpreted only from a “lived-out” perspective – the way we see it expressed through the believer’s behavior and attitude, or is it to be considered also theologically, and thus made even more complicated? While the former is clearly a more attractive and easy, the latter approach provides the individual with a broader understanding of the issue, as well as defends the claim that theology properly understood is practical at all times. This latter approach is also the one which will be used in the following pages as the reader will be taken on the bumpy road of understanding John Wesley’s words on that matter – his doctrine of sanctification. Thus, the reader will be presented with the essence of Wesley’s doctrine, its relationship with other doctrines that are crucial, as well as the implications of all this. Finally, a biblical and experiential critique of the doctrine of sanctification will be presented.

The Doctrine of Sanctification According to John Wesley

Before we move on to the details of the doctrine, I would like to turn to the context in which Wesley places it. For him it is crucial that one has this understood properly, because it can lead to further non-biblical beliefs. In his sermon “Justification by Faith” Wesley argues that sanctification is “the immediate fruit of justification”⁽¹⁾. This in essence means that sanctification begins at the moment of justification. Later on in the same sermon Wesley makes even a bigger argument against those who claim that one needs to be sanctified before justified. He points out that Scripture refers to those who need justification as sinners, which he would say does not apply to those who are sanctified – “for it is not a saint but a sinner that is forgiven... God justifieth not the godly, but the ungodly; not those that are holy already, but the unholy”⁽²⁾

Wesley’s strong position on the sequence of justification followed by sanctification is important, because by this one is able to agree that faith alone is the condition for justification. Having said that faith is the sole condition for justification and that sanctification comes after justification, then faith also becomes the crucial requirement for sanctification.

From a Wesleyan point it is also important that one sees sanctification as an integral part of salvation. As quoted from the minutes of the Second Conference from 1745 in his book *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, inward sanctification begins “in the moment a man is justified... From that time a believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace” (Wesley ch17).

Although Wesley does not completely deny the fact that one might be sanctified instantaneously he would argue that for the most people this happens as a process – it happens gradually. Both sides of this can be argued pro and con from testimonies of people’s experience. The view of sanctification as a process, however, involves the recognition of the presence of sin in saved and sanctified people, although not so strongly as in those who are not sanctified. All Wesley attempts to say is that “sin is only suspended in them (*those who have an instantaneous experience*); it is not destroyed... They are all love today; and take no thought for the morrow” (Wesley ch26, italics mine). Translated in today’s common language this would mean that although a person might be entirely sanctified the chance that they will “lose it” is present. Then they will have to begin the process again – and through this the believer grows in grace, understanding, and practice. In addition to this, Wesley points out that even within a process the transition happens in a certain moment – whether recognized or not, it is there.

So what does this lead to? To a conviction that just as salvation, sanctification is not once-and-for-all – it can be lost, and therefore has to be maintained. This profound connection automatically denies any practice of antinomianism as a part of the life of a saved Christian, for all who are justified are to “press on to maturity (or perfection)” (Hebrews 6:1, NASB, also see Wesley ch26).

There is one more valuable observation to be made concerning Wesley’s understanding – concerning this of perfection. Earlier in the paper it was mentioned that sin is still present in the believer’s life, no matter how far they are in the sanctification process. Wesley argues on account of Scripture that because mankind is bound to live a life currently in a fallen world and live a life currently in and from a fallen body, we all are prone to temptation, and therefore to sin. In addition, in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* Wesley remarks that there is no account of “any general state described in Scripture, from which a man cannot draw back to sin” (Wesley ch25). He speaks of perfection as sinlessness only available in heaven. This, the presence of sin cannot and should not be used as a valid measurement for the presence of sanctification. This, consequently leads to asking the question What then is a valid measurement? Or in other words – what is the essence of sanctification according to John Wesley?

“It is ‘perfect love’ (1 John 4:18). This is the essence of it” (Wesley ch26). Truly, this is as simple as it can be. Although some of today’s theologians have complicated this simple truth, Wesley would call back to Scripture’s Old and New Testament commandment expressed in fullness by the answer to the question of Jesus in Luke 10:27 – “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself” (KJV). Even more – Wesley would go that far to suggest that this is “the end of the commandment... all the commandments in one.”⁽³⁾

However, just as in any other relationship, love can be a tricky thing. One might love for the wrong reason, one might love the wrong thing, and certainly all people love certain things more than others. On multiple occasions Scripture addresses these issues as well – one might need to recall the first of the ten commandments given through Moses, or the parable of Jesus in Luke 16:13. In a sense Wesley does a good interpretation for us by incorporating in his doctrine the truth that one should strive for the things which lead to “the enjoyment of God in time and in

eternity” (*Wesley* ch10). One should “love the creature, as it leads to the Creator”(Wesley ch10). In the same chapter of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* he goes on also to emphasize how important it is that one keeps God at first place. A verse he wrote expresses well what he meant:

“Is there a thing beneath the sun,
That strives with thee my heart to share?
Ah! tear it thence, and reign alone,
The Lord of every motion there!”

However, one should be cautious against interpreting this in an extreme form – for the Bible calls for a balanced love for God first, but also for humanity, as well as for the created world in which we are placed.

To continue with the quote from Wesley on sanctification being perfect love – “its properties, or inseparable fruits, are, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks (1 Thessalonians 5:16ff)” (*Wesley* ch26). Yes, the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification does provide at least some means for recognition of the fulfillment of it, this is – how to know the sanctified from the non-sanctified. For John Wesley the Spirit is the strongest testimony of our sanctification. However, he also adds that one may or may not recognize sanctification at first. He relates it very well to the experience of justification, where the testimony of the Spirit with our own spirit differs from one person to another (*Wesley* ch25). Sooner or later, however, the fruits of that love for and of God will be outwardly evident, and then is sanctification realized

Critique and Analysis of the Wesleyan Doctrine of Sanctification

Having covered the basics of the doctrine of sanctification it is due now to turn to Scripture and experience, and evaluate how realistic this doctrine actually is. In consent with Wesley I will turn firstly to the Bible, and attempt to support the essence of the doctrine, as well as its practice.

Wesley’s understanding of sanctified life is strongly tied to the biblical understanding of love. And if one might argue on the biblical view on any other topic, I would dare to suggest that it is love that nobody within the orthodox Christian world would raise against. In fact, even in this moment I believe a pastor’s voice somewhere echoes the words of the expert of the law from Luke 10:27. Often, however, the hermeneutics of this passage is preoccupied with the parable following these words, thus missing the preceding question “what must I do to inherit eternal life”, as well as Jesus’ reply “Do this and you will live.” Love is also pointed out as the distinguishing mark of those who follow Christ in John 13:35 – certainly, then is love the mark of those who follow Christ today. I simply find it not necessary to elaborate more on this, as it is clear that love must be present in the life of a new born believer. The scriptural evidence is so strong that whoever disagrees certainly has more serious problems than the proper understanding of sanctification. What I believe is more important to address is the connection of this love with sanctification, and this is what we turn to now.

The doctrine of Christian perfection, as Wesley calls it, is an entirely relational doctrine – as is the doctrine of justification, as well as any other Christian orthodox doctrine. This is to say that Christian perfection can only exist in a relationship with God. The restoration of the image of God can only be attained if there was a God with an image we can possibly be restored to. Thus,

I come to conclude that one needs to relate with God, in order that any progress is made. This is where love comes in. One cannot be in a relationship without love. Moreover, one cannot be in a relationship with God without a love for God, and subsequently for humanity, as well as for the remaining of creation. Scripture continually calls humanity towards holiness and this in integrity. Some examples of this are Hosea 6:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23. The testimonies of this love are often found in apostle Paul's introductions of his letters to the churches of Christ.

Thus, what sanctification ends up being is a process of becoming better in loving. This is why it seems so natural for Wesley to come to his conclusions concerning sanctification's nature and expression – love inevitably involves a choice, therefore one might choose to not live a life of perfection – sanctification can be lost. Secondly, love is never static, as it involves interaction, which in itself is dynamic – thus, one either grows up towards loving more, or does not. Thirdly, love is not legalistic. Thus, it is clearly no contradiction for Wesley that one that is entirely sanctified is still prone to sin (although not regular, usual, or repetitive). And finally, love is to be maintained, therefore the Christian life is to be lived with a maintenance mentality, as opposed to once-attained – attained-forever. This is also why Wesley is so strongly opposed to antinomianism.

Yet, one might still consider asking “How realistic is this doctrine?” It is fully realistic. In addition to the Bible Wesley also turns to experience for confirmation of Christian perfection, and namely to the testimonies of people. One of these testimonies closer to our day is of C.W. Butler which reads:

“I confessed to him my need and my heart hunger. We parted company in Lansing, and I boarded the train for Perry, a distance of perhaps thirty-five miles. On board that Grand Trunk train the thing happened. I truly crossed Jordan and entered Canaan without a spoken word or any outward manifestation; but I stepped off the train in Perry, Michigan, with the blessing. ... The atmosphere of my soul was all love” (*Smith* 22).

This, as well as many other testimonies confirm the understanding of the process of sanctification as the transformation of being, or renewing in the image of Christ, through love (*Dunning* 465). Experience, however, remains also a valid reason to believe the attributes of sanctification as well.

Communicating the Doctrine of Sanctification Today

After discussing the various aspects of the doctrine itself, as well as the implications of it, what remains to address is the manner in which it is being communicated today. John Wesley lived and taught this conviction in the 18th century, which involved a certain socio-economic and philosophic environment. Today, this environment has changed, but we are still to teach the same concept. This, is how the Christian message meets contextualization – re-phrasing the same content for a group of people of a specific time and place.

Having focused mainly on the love aspect of the various detailed aspects of the doctrine, I would suggest that today's post-modern individualized community demands a relational explanation of the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification. Inspired by Jesus' words in John 15:13 I would suggest that friendship can serve for a good practical explanation of the doctrine. And this is because friendship demands a relationship, which consequently awakens the individualized post-modern

mind and heart to the necessity of one. Friendship also requires love as a condition for acceptance, understanding, and development. Friendship is not to be taken for granted, just as Christian perfection – one needs to maintain it. Friendship, in fact, is an integral part of the life of a person – whether it is realized or not – in the same sense as sanctification is an integral part of the life of a believer – whether recognized or not. These are simply some of the reasons why I suggest that friendship is used as a metaphor for explaining Wesley’s understanding of Christian life.

Conclusion

A discussion on the topic of Christian perfection should have only one essential goal – to bring people to the experience of it. Be it through explaining it, and thus providing understanding, or through resembling it – this is, providing an example. As it has become clear from the current discussion, Christian perfection also has one essential goal – to lead to the Creator. This is, to utilize God’s grace and mercy for the sake of one’s heart, mind, and life being shaped as this of Christ. In other words, the sole purpose of sanctification is to enable people to live out the reality of God’s love, testify of it to others, and consequently expand God’s kingdom.

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Footnotes

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1. John Wesley – Justification by Faith, John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology, ed. Outler, Heitzenrater, p114 [Go back.](#)
 2. Justification by Faith, p116 [Go back.](#)
 3. John Wesley – The Circumcision of the Heart, John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology, ed. Outler, Heitzenrater, p114 [Go back.](#)