

A
PLAIN ACCOUNT
OF
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JOHN WESLEY



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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

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A PLAIN ACCOUNT OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

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A Note from THE EDITOR

A Plain Account of Christian Perfection offers a comprehensive teaching on the doctrine of Christian perfection, as taught by the Rev. John Wesley from 1725 to 1777. In it, he describes the evolution of his own theological reasoning, telling the story of how he came to understand and to preach this doctrine in his own life. In this work that is part autobiography, part spiritual contemplation, and part scriptural exegesis, Wesley shares tracts he wrote on the topic, describes the conflicts that sometimes arose over his ideas, reveals his own developing convictions, and offers probing queries for all believers to consider.

Included at the end is an account of Wesley's personal experience of "entire holiness." It is believed that this was included by the Methodist evangelist Elmer Ellsworth Shelhamer (1869–1940).

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Chapter 1



Early Reflections [1725-1739]

*W*hat I purpose in the following papers is to give a plain and distinct account of the steps by which I was led, during a course of many years, to embrace the doctrine of Christian perfection. This I owe to the serious part of mankind, those who desire to know all “*the truth as it is in Jesus*” (Ephesians 4:21). And these only are concerned in questions of this kind. To these I would nakedly declare the thing as it is, endeavoring all along to show, from one period to another, both what I thought, and why I thought so.

In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor’s *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly

affected; that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced, there was no medium; but that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or myself, that is, in effect, to the devil.

Can any serious person doubt of this, or find a medium between serving God and serving the devil?

In the year 1726, I met with Kempis's *Christian's Pattern*. The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw, that giving even all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this, and go no farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart to Him.

I saw that "simplicity of intention and purity of affection," one design in all we speak or do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed "the wings of the soul," without which she can never ascend to the mount of God.

A year or two after, Mr. Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* were put into my hands. These convinced me, more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian; and I determined, through His grace (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of), to be all devoted to God, to give Him all my soul, my body and my substance.

Will any considerate man say that this is carrying matters too far? Or that anything less is due to Him who has given Himself for us, than to give Him ourselves, all we have, and all we are?

In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to study the Bible as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model

of pure religion. Hence I saw in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having “*the mind which was in Christ*” (Philippians 2:5), and of “*walking as Christ also walked*” (1 John 2:6); even of having, not some part only, but all the mind which was in Him; and of walking as He walked, not only in many or in most respects, but in all things. And this was the light wherein at this time I generally considered religion, as a uniform following of Christ, an entire inward and outward conformity to our Master. Nor was I afraid of anything more, than of bending this rule to the experience of myself or of other men; of allowing myself in any the least disconformity to our grand Exemplar.

On January 1, 1733, I preached before the University, in St. Mary’s Church, on “The Circumcision of the Heart;” an account of which I gave in these words: “It is that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies the being cleansed from sin, ‘*from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit*’ (2 Corinthians 7:1); and, by consequence, the being endued with those virtues which were in Christ Jesus; the being so “renewed in the image of our mind” (see Colossians 3:10 and Romans 12:2), as to be ‘*perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect*’ (Matthew 5:48).”

In the same sermon I observed, “*Love is the fulfilling of the law*’ (Romans 13:10), ‘*the end of the commandment*’ (1 Timothy 1:5). It is not only ‘*the first and great commandment*’ (Matthew 22:38), but all the commandments in one. ‘*Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise*’ (Philippians 4:8), they are all comprised in this one word, love. In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness: the royal law of heaven and earth is this, ‘*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength*’ (Luke 10:27). The one perfect good shall be your

one ultimate end. One thing shall ye desire for its own sake—the fruition of Him who is all in all. One happiness shall ye propose to your souls, even a union with Him that made them, the having ‘*fellowship with the Father and with his Son*’ (1 John 1:3), the being ‘*joined to the Lord in one Spirit*’ (1 Corinthians 6:17). One design you are to pursue to the end of time—the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. Desire other things, so far as they tend to this; love the creature, as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought, and word, and action, be subordinate to this. Whatever ye desire or fear, whatever ye seek or shun, whatever ye think, speak or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole end, as well as source, of your being.”

I concluded in these words: “Here is the sum of the perfect law, the circumcision of the heart. Let the spirit return to God that gave it, with the whole train of its affections. Other sacrifices from us He would not, but the living sacrifice of the heart hath He chosen. Let it be continually offered up to God through Christ, in flames of holy love. And let no creature be suffered to share with Him, for He is a jealous God. His throne will He not divide with another; He will reign without a rival. Be no design, no desire admitted there but what has Him for its ultimate object. This is the way wherein those children of God once walked, who being dead still speak to us: ‘Desire not to live but to praise His name; let all your thoughts, words, and works tend to His glory.’ ‘Let your soul be filled with so entire a love to Him, that you may love nothing but for His sake.’ ‘Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to His glory in all our actions.’ ‘For then, and not till then, is that mind in us, which was also in Christ Jesus, when in every motion of our heart, in

every word of our tongue, in every work of our hands, we pursue nothing but in relation to Him, and in subordination to His pleasure; when we too neither think, nor speak, nor act, to fulfill *'our own will, but the will of Him that sent us'* (John 6:38); when, *'whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we do it all to the glory of God'* (1 Corinthians 10:31)."

It may be observed, this sermon was composed the first of all my writings which have been published. This was the view of religion I then had, which even then I scrupled not to term *perfection*. This is the view I have of it now, without any material addition or diminution. And what is there here, which any man of understanding, who believes the Bible, can object to? What can he deny, without flatly contradicting the Scriptures? What retrench, without taking from the Word of God?

In the same sentiment did my brother and I remain (with all those young gentlemen in derision termed *Methodists*), till we embarked for America in the latter end of 1735. It was the next year, while I was at Savannah, that I wrote the following lines:

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!

In the beginning of the year 1738, as I was returning from thence, the cry of my heart was:

O grant that nothing in my soul
May dwell, but Thy pure love alone!

O may Thy love possess me whole,
 My joy, my treasure, and my crown;
 Strange fires far from my heart remove,
 My every act, word, thought, be love!

I never heard that anyone objected to this. And, indeed, who can object? Is not this the language, not only of every believer, but of everyone that is truly awakened? But what have I written, to this day, which is either stronger or plainer?

In August following, I had a long conversation with Arvid Gradin, in Germany. After he had given me an account of his experience, I desired him to give me, in writing, a definition of “*the full assurance of faith*” (Hebrews 10:22), which he did in the following words:

Requies en sanguine Christi; firma fiducir in Deum et persuasio de gratia Divina; tranquillitas mentis summa, atque serenitas et pax: cum absentia omnis desiderii carnalis, et cessatione peccatorum etiam internorum.

“Repose in the blood of Christ; a firm confidence in God, and persuasion of His favor; the highest tranquility, serenity, and peace of mind, with a deliverance from every fleshly desire, and a cessation of all, even inward sins.”

This was the first account I ever heard from any living man, of what I had before learned myself from the oracles of God, and had been praying for (with the little company of my friends), and expecting, for several years.

In 1739, my brother and I published a volume of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. In many of these we declared our sentiments strongly and explicitly. So, page 24,—

Turn the full stream of nature's tide;
Let all our actions tend
To Thee, their source; Thy love the guide,
Thy glory be the end.

Earth then a scale to heaven shall be;
Sense shall point out the road;
The creatures all shall lead to Thee,
And all we taste be God.

Again,—

Lord, arm me with Thy Spirit's might,
Since I am call'd by Thy great name;
In Thee my wand'ring thoughts unite,
Of all my works be Thou the aim;
Thy love attend me all my days,
And my sole business be Thy praise. (p. 122.)

Again,—

Eager for Thee I ask and pant,
So strong the principle Divine
Carries me out with sweet constraint,
Till all my hallow'd soul be Thine;
Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea,
And lost in Thine immensity! (p. 125.)

Once more,—

Heavenly Adam, life Divine,
Change my nature into Thine;
Move and spread throughout my soul,
Actuate and fill the whole. (p. 153.)

It would be easy to cite many more passages to the same effect. But these are sufficient to show, beyond contradiction, what our sentiments then were.