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HOLINESS AND THE HOLY TRINITY

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Our Wesleyan tradition has a particular interest in Christian Holiness. John Wesley formulated his understanding of what the New Testament calls Christian ‘perfection’. That is often misunderstood and caricatured, but Wesley insisted that that is a biblical term, and so we must understand what ‘perfection’ means in the Old and New Testament.

What our tradition has not considered so often or so deeply is the Christian doctrine of God the Holy Trinity. But must there not be some connection there? What is the connection between Christian *holiness* and our doctrine of God the *Holy* Trinity? Can we put our doctrine of Christian holiness in a fully Trinitarian context? That is what I want to begin to explore in this lecture and it will mean taking a wide-angled lens.

1. HOLINESS AND THE HOLY GOD

We begin with the God of Israel. This is the God celebrated by the Jewish people of Jesus’ day in the five great Mosaic festivals.

The first of these was the festival of *pesach* or Passover in March or April in which Israel’s God was revealed as a God of *Redemption*. He had demonstrated his almighty power by rescuing his people Israel from slavery in Egypt and so demonstrating his great compassion. But he also demonstrated his judgment. In the Passover, the people of Israel too were under the judgment of God and only delivered through the blood of the lamb. God was separate from sinners who came under his judgment. Separation and compassion come together in the Passover.

The second great festival was *Shavu’ot* or Pentecost, usually in May, when Israel remembered the God of *Covenant* who was also the God of *Torah*, of *Law*. Walter Brueggemann draws attention here to the words of the Lord in Exodus 34:6-7:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children’s children to the third and fourth generation.

And Brueggemann asks: is there not a disjunction in these words – a contradiction? Which is it? How can God say on the one hand, ‘I will forgive iniquity and transgression and sin,’ and yet say on the other hand, ‘I will by no means clear the guilty?’ Which is it? And Brueggemann raised the question: is there an internal contradiction in God between holy *separation* on the one hand and holy *compassion* on the other?

The third great Mosaic festival in Israel was *rosh hashana*, the Jewish New Year in August, when among other things, Israel celebrated their God as *the Creator God*. That was also celebrated each Sabbath day, and without this, the God of Israel was merely a nationalistic deity. But in this festival Israel celebrated the God who was revealed as the God of all nations, the Creator of heaven and earth. There could be no greater note of separation, yet this is the One who created us in love.

The fourth great Mosaic festival for ancient Israel came a little later – *Yom Kippur* – the Day of Atonement. This revealed the *Holiness of God*. This was the festival where the design of the tabernacle or temple became central. Because of the sin of Israel, atonement had to be offered. The Hebrew word is *kipper*. Much debate has taken place on how to translate that. Does it mean ‘propitiation’, the wiping out of God’s wrath, or does it mean ‘expiation’, the wiping out of our sin? In fact, these are not alternatives, but two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other. And here again are two sides – the *holiness* of God is his *separation* from sin, and the *holiness* of God is his infinite *compassion*.

Finally, the fifth great Mosaic festival was *Succoth* or Tabernacles, the Feast of Booths, when Israel celebrated God as the *faithful God of Pilgrimage* who had led Israel through the wilderness and still went before her into the future with the promise of his coming kingdom.

To summarize, from the great Mosaic festivals, we see there two groups of characteristics revealed. First, there is separation, and that is the root meaning of the Hebrew word ‘holy’. There is separation from creation. While God is immanent in his world, he is also transcendent over it. There is also separation from the profane and the sinful and that takes the form of judgment. But in tension with that there is another group of characteristics – steadfast love, compassion, commitment to his people by the one who is like a ‘father’ to Israel. Is this, as Brueggemann argues, a disjunction – an instability in the God of Israel?

That brings us to the New Testament and to our second main section:

2. THE HOLY FATHER OF JESUS

Here we begin with Jesus’ characteristic word for God, ‘Abba! Father.’ Right at the heart of Jesus’ revelation of God is the saying, ‘No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom he will reveal him’ (Luke 10:22//Matt. 11:27). Here Jesus reveals this *reciprocal* and *exclusive* relationship between *equals*. All three words are crucial. Whereas ‘Father’ is one of the minor words for God in the Old Testament, with Jesus, the word ‘Father’ becomes central to the doctrine of God.

This is vitally important. Many people think that we approach the doctrine of God through his creation. So cosmology becomes the root and foundation for theology with great debates about how God relates to the world. Athanasius, the great bishop of Alexandria whose theology underlies the Nicene Creed, put it this way: ‘It would be more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call him ‘Father’ than to name God from his works alone and call him ‘Unoriginate’. We may debate at our leisure whether God is known from creation.

But the key point for Christians is that he known in his inner nature only as the Spirit reveals to him us in the Incarnation of the Son.

Where then does that bring us in answering the question we posed from the Old Testament? How do we hold together these two sets of characteristics of God?

Is God primarily the God of separation, of power, of judgment, of transcendence? Is that what we mean by the holiness of God? Or is God the God of love and compassion, revealed in his internal relationships? The truth is that both are true.

And yet we have to add this. That holiness did not begin as the antidote to sin. While the root meaning of the Hebrew word ‘holy’ is ‘separate’, God was holy before there was ever any sin to be separate from. While holiness includes separation from sin, God’s eternal holiness is to be seen in those eternal relationships of love within the Holy Trinity.

I John 4:16 therefore reveals that in himself, God is love. Before there ever were creatures, before there ever was sin to be separate from, God was holy in his inner life – the love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Son for the Father within the unity of the Holy Spirit. These three Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit – are eternally constituted by their relationships of eternal love.

On the other hand, however, we must not jump to the conclusion, like the Ritschlian liberals of the nineteenth century, that holiness may be reduced to love and that we can dispense with separation and judgment. No: when we say, ‘God is love,’ we must make it clear that is not a sentimental love. With P.T. Forsyth, we must insist that the love of God is *holy* love and that we cannot dispense with judgment.

3. THE HOLINESS OF JESUS: HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw New Testament scholarship engaged in debates about the so-called, ‘historical Jesus.’ With the Enlightenment and the consequent rise of the discipline of history, that was perhaps inevitable. But now, early in the twenty-first century, as the result of the work of scholars such as N.T. Wright, Larry Hurtado, Richard Bauckham, Ben Witherington and many others, we have solid scholarship which affirms the historicity of the Gospel narratives. The focus has shifted from history to hermeneutics – how the New Testament is to be interpreted.

At the centre of the New Testament there is the figure of Jesus, a prophet engaged in preaching the good news of the kingdom and in preaching and healing (Mt. 4:23: 9:35). He proclaimed the ‘already but not yet kingdom’, giving the story of Israel a new ending. He thus straddles the two ages. He dies in the suffering of the old age and rises in the glory of the new. So that the already/not yet gospel of Jesus becomes through his death and resurrection the already/not yet gospel of the apostles. It is first proclaimed on the day of Pentecost: ‘This Jesus whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ.’

That same basic shape of the gospel – one narrative with two episodes – crucifixion and resurrection – is what we find in the earliest documentary evidence for the apostolic gospel in I Corinthians 15:3-5. There Paul summarizes the gospel of his Son, ‘that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,’ and appeared to witnesses. One narrative with two episodes – crucifixion and resurrection. And out of that comes the faith of the Church – the confession of Christ whose *true humanity* was revealed in his birth and ministry and especially in his sacrificial death on the cross, and whose *true deity* was revealed in his glorious resurrection. So the orthodox Christology of Chalcedon is rooted in the apostolic gospel.

But that calls for further explanation. Are we saying that the one who was crucified on the cross was God – God Incarnate? The Church wrestled for centuries with the paradox of the cross. How can it be? How can it be that the God Himself bore all our sins in his human body and soul on the cross? And particularly, how does that produce Christian *holiness* in us?

We have passed the time when it is appropriate to speak of ‘theories’ of the cross. There is no theoretical explanation for the Atonement. Particularly foolish was the text-book notion that the student is to sort through various theories and choose which one she or he will accept! Rather, what we have been given is a series of biblical models, and they are all valid. To simplify, these may be historically grouped under three headings, the three traditional ‘offices’ of Christ as they are called – that Christ is our King, our Priest, and our Prophet.

Since he is our victorious King, we may speak of his victory on the cross over the powers of evil and therefore we must understand our sanctification as sharing in his victory. Secondly, since he is our great High Priest, we have to understand his work on the cross as the perfect atonement for sin, both propitiation and expiation. You cannot have one without the other. The Western tradition of Anselm includes a series of great theologians – Anselm himself, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, the Protestant scholastics, John Wesley and such more recent theologians such as Forsyth, Brunner, Barth, von Balthasar and Torrance. The deviation of some in this tradition in developing a view of penal substitution that leads to limited atonement does not invalidate the tradition as a whole, but one critique that we may make as Wesleyans is that the focus on *propitiation* has led the West to focus on *justification*. Without invalidating that at all, what is needed is an equal emphasis on *expiation*, leading to a more profound understanding of our *sanctification*. We shall examine that more fully when we come to speak of the work of the Spirit in conforming us to Christ.

Thirdly, however, there is the third office – that Christ is not only our victorious King, and our justifying, sanctifying Priest, but that he is our one great Prophet. And what he proclaims in his life and death is indeed the love of God. There is a place therefore for the so-called ‘exemplarist’ or ‘moral influence’ view of the Atonement, but only because of the priestly and kingly work of Christ. It cannot stand on its own.

So what does the cross reveal to us about the *holiness* of God? You remember the dilemma posed by Brueggemann? Is God’s holiness his separation from sin and sinners? Is God’s holiness revealed in his judgment on sin? Or is God’s holiness revealed in his infinite love

and compassion to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness? Is there a deep disjunction in the heart of God?

This is what Luther called the *theologia crucis* – the theology of the cross, that ultimately our doctrine of God is to be taken from the cross. And what the theology of the cross reveals to us is not that there is a deep disjunction in God between his love and his justice. Our perception of such a deep disjunction in God is rather like our mistaken perception when we think we see a stick broken in two when it is inserted into a glass of water. This is not a disjunction in God. This is only an apparent disjunction because God has taken into himself and into the very inner Trinitarian relation between the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit, that disjunction, that judgment which separates us in our sin from God in his love and holiness. The resurrection of Jesus is the declaration that the Last Judgment has taken place in the cross of Christ and that all who believe in him have passed from death to life.

So far in this lecture we have considered:

- Holiness and the Holy God in the Old Testament
- The ‘Holy Father’ of Jesus
- The holiness of Jesus in his death and resurrection.

So we come to our fourth theme:

4. THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE AND DEATH OF JESUS

The title, ‘Holy Spirit’ only appears twice in the Old Testament. The first is in Ps. 51:11, ‘Take not your Holy Spirit from me.’ The second is in Isaiah 63:10 where the prophet says of the house of Israel, ‘They rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit.’ The normal usage on the Old Testament is ‘the Spirit of God’ (as in Gen. 1:2) or ‘the Spirit of the Lord’. The Hebrew word is *ruach*, referring for example to the storm wind which divided the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21). It also is used to mean ‘breath’, so that ‘the breath of the Lord’ appears to be parallel to ‘the hand of the Lord,’ ‘the eye of the Lord,’ ‘the arm of the Lord’, all ways of referring to the Lord himself rather than to a distinct person. We should note that the antithesis between ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ in the Old Testament is quite different to the antithesis in our Greek heritage between the active flesh – waxing and waning, growing and declining – and the static, Platonic world of the spiritual or intellectual forms.

Rather in the Old Testament, the Spirit comes as the anointing oil of God, anointing prophets, priests and kings so that they are endowed with ‘power from on high’. Another metaphor is of the Spirit as refreshing, regenerating water bringing life to the desert (Isa. 39:15-16). The Spirit is also the source of gifts of insight, wisdom and personality (Isaiah 11:2f.). The Spirit is associated with future hope, but also with eschatological judgment, particularly in Joel. Peter’s quotation from Joel on the Day of Pentecost makes it clear that the Last Days have come, and yet, as in the proclamation of Jesus, this is paradoxical. There is a sense in which the Last Day has not yet come: we are still in our fallen bodies in this present evil age. And yet there is a sense in which the Spirit has already come: the Spirit has been poured out upon us in all his fullness.

But the focus of the work of the Spirit in the New Testament is in the birth, life, ministry and resurrection of Jesus. First, we must see the work of the Spirit in the birth of Jesus. Jesus is born not at human initiative, but at God's initiative. But he is born physically of Mary. That is of cardinal importance. When the Son of God became human, his humanity was not taken, like that of Adam, from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7), but was formed in the womb of his mother, Mary, a member of Adam's fallen race. He is therefore flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone. Human nature is not an individual reality, but a common, corporate reality. He is not born in a resurrection body, but shares our common human nature, subject to death. But here is the difference, that right from conception and birth, our human nature is sanctified by his Holy Spirit, so that he is the sinless Son of God.

That is not the end of the matter, however. Secondly, we must see the work of the Spirit in the life of Jesus. It is not that he is to sail through life exempt from temptation. Rather, he is subject to the same physical and physiological and mental temptations that we are subject to – on every point, as Hebrews makes clear (Heb. 4:15) – and so 'able to help those who are being tested' (Heb. 2:18). It was in this way then that he 'grew' in wisdom and in holy character (Luke 2:52). His perfect life, therefore, lived in the power of the Spirit, is sanctified within and without in such a way that there is in him no 'mind set on the flesh', no self-centred mind-set (cf. Rom. 7:17, 8:6), but an inner mind and intention constantly dedicated to the Father's will.

Thirdly, the Spirit brings him to the initiation of his ministry. At his baptism, the Father declares him to be his beloved Son, and he receives the Spirit in a new way to impel him into ministry. The Spirit impels him into the wilderness to face temptation. Then he comes into Galilee 'full of the Spirit' (Luke 4:1) to begin his ministry of teaching, preaching and healing, a ministry which from first to last was a battle against the powers of evil.

Fourthly and finally, not only his birth, not only his personal battle against temptation, not only in his battle against evil in his ministry, but in his obedient self-dedication to the will of the Father, he goes all the way to the cross. His death to self-interest, his complete dedication to the will of the Father in the power of the Spirit, is carried through all the way to offering himself on the cross.

There as Paul makes clear, the old Adamic humanity dies definitively in the death of Christ. 'For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the law but according to the Spirit' (Rom. 8:3f.).

Thus in his birth, life, ministry and death, the sanctification of our human nature has been completed in Jesus in the power of the Spirit. We need to emphasize here that his obedience was *in the power of the sanctifying Spirit*. So as a human being—a *free* human being—it is *in the power of the Spirit* that he goes obediently to the cross to perfect his self-sacrifice, his offering of himself to the Father in love and obedience. Thus the writer to the Hebrews writes of Christ 'who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God' (Heb. 9:14).

The whole movement from conception and birth, through his life of selfless service to his sacrifice on the cross is a sanctifying of human flesh and human life. It is a sanctifying of *our* humanity. Indeed it is *our* sanctifying. He does it to sanctify *us* as the pioneer of faith (Heb. 2:10: 12:2), the first (and in one sense, the *only*) entirely sanctified human being. But he does it as a free human being *in the power of the Spirit*.

But what we want to stress here is that the inner secret of this life, entirely sanctified from conception to death, is not his victory over evil. That is the consequence. The inner secret is his relationship *with the Father*, and that relationship is a relationship *in the Spirit*. The relationship of Jesus to God is a relationship characterized by a total devotion, a whole-hearted zeal *in the Spirit* for *the glory of the Father* and a whole-hearted consecration to *the will of the Father*. The sanctifying life of Jesus has to be seen in Trinitarian context as the concerted work of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

Here indeed in this man there is no double-mindedness and no sign of a ‘carnal mind’ (Rom. 8:5-8, KJV), a ‘mind set on the flesh’ (Rom. 8: 5-8, NRSV), what we may call a self-centred mind-set, a motivation set on merely human goals and values. But in Jesus it is not the automatic compliance of an automaton, for there is a counting of the cost and a natural shrinking from self-sacrifice: ‘Abba Father, all things are possible to you, let this cup pass from me.’¹ But at the level of conscious ethical choice, there is *purity of intention, a single eye*, that *purity of heart* which is to will one thing: ‘Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done’ (Mark 14:36). And this ‘entire sanctification’ is at its heart *relational*: it is pure love, perfect love *in the Spirit for the Father*. And it is because of this ‘perfect love’ for the Father that there is purity of heart, singleness of purpose and no place for the self-centred mind-set in the human being, Jesus.

5. THE SANCTIFYING SPIRIT IN THE APOSTLES

Finally then in this attempt to see our doctrine of Christian holiness in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity, we come to the final section – the work of the Spirit in the apostles and in us.

The apostles must be recognized as a unique generation spanning the ages. We must be very careful therefore about the way we extrapolate from their experience to ours. They were born into the old age, ‘this present evil age’. As good Jews of that era, they expected ‘the age to come’, the kingdom or kingly rule of God, but as yet, it had not come in any sense as far as they were aware. Then they met Jesus and became aware that the Spirit of God had descended on him and rested or remained upon him uniquely. They also became aware of his intimate relationship with God, whom he called ‘Father’. Insofar as the disciples entered into a relationship with Jesus therefore, we must say that they entered into a relationship with the Spirit, for the Spirit rested upon him. All his relationships were relationships in the Spirit.

But the Spirit did not yet rest upon them. The Spirit was ‘not yet given’ (John 7:39). He was not yet ‘in’ them, although he was ‘with’ them (John 14:17) in that they were in relationship

¹ See the exposition of this by Athanasius in *Contra Arianos*, IV, 57 (NPNF² 4:424).

with Jesus. But the presence of the Spirit with them was therefore limited and provisional. It was physically limited by the number of people who could meet and know this one personally.

Then Jesus went to the cross, crucified the old dying humanity, and was raised in the new glorified humanity. He is already the first fruits of the new creation: he is already in the new age, the age of the Spirit. Then, having ascended in the resurrection body into the very presence and glory of the Father, he sends upon his *disciples the same Holy Spirit in whose power he had lived a life of holiness*, baptizing his Church ‘with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (Luke 3:16). John emphasizes that the whole point of his baptism in the Spirit was that he might become the one who baptizes with the Spirit (John 1:33).

Pentecost must therefore be seen as primarily a once-for-all unrepeatable event. It is the final event in the series of the mighty acts of God in Jesus. In that sense it is as unique and unrepeatable as the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension. And what it means is that now that the Work of Christ has been completed on the cross, it is possible for the first time for men and women to receive the benefits of his atonement.

Only now that Jesus had died could they fully receive the benefits of his atonement. Only now that Jesus was risen and exalted could they receive his resurrection life, life in the Spirit. Only now when the Spirit was given, poured out once and for all upon ‘all flesh,’ could they each receive the Spirit, be born of the Spirit, and, indeed, be filled with the Spirit. Because the ascended Lord sent down his Spirit once for all on that day upon the apostles, and because the Spirit has never since been withdrawn, so ever since it has been possible for ‘all flesh’, that is, all humankind, to receive the Spirit, to be born of the Spirit and, as they are enabled by his leading and enlightening, to be filled with the Spirit.

But in order to understand what is true for ‘all flesh’, which includes ourselves, it is necessary to make one important clarification about the apostles. It is this: that although at Pentecost they received the resurrection life of the Spirit, and indeed received the Spirit in all his fullness, they were not yet in their resurrection bodies. Clearly then, although the Spirit had been poured out, the age to come had not yet fully come, for the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead was still awaited. Even after Pentecost therefore the apostles and all the New Testament Church lived in this paradox we described earlier, the tension in New Testament eschatology between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’. The *not yet* aspect was that they were not yet in their resurrection bodies. Final salvation of the whole human being—body, soul and spirit—still lay in the future.

6. THE SANCTIFYING SPIRIT IN US

What then are we to say about the Spirit who works among us and in us today? The first point to clarify is that we are to understand the Holy Spirit to be as fully personal as the Father and the Son. United to Father and Son in the unity of the Holy Trinity, the Spirit is also to be worshipped and glorified. The Fathers concluded that we are not only to give glory to the Father *through* the Son *by* the Holy Spirit. That is true, but an Arian could go that far! We are to go further and say in the *Gloria*, ‘Glory to the Father *and* the Son *and* the Holy Spirit.’ It

saying that, we confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be one God in the unity of the Holy Trinity.²

When we speak of the Spirit as a ‘Person’ along with the Father and the Son, the word we use is not a biblical word. Where the equivalent Greek word, *prosōpon*, occurs in the New Testament (or its Hebrew equivalent, *panim*, in the Old Testament), it means ‘face’. But beginning with Tertullian, the Latin Church used the word *persona*, originally referring to the mask the actor wore in classical drama. The word had come to mean the rôle in the drama, the *dramatis persona* (*personae* in the plural), and so the concept of the person developed out of Christian Trinitarian theology. But was the Spirit a distinct *persona*? If so, the Spirit appeared to remain mysterious: one might say to hide himself – or herself, or itself. I deliberately use all three genders, since while *ruach* was feminine, the Greek *pneuma* is neuter, while the Johannine term *paraklētos* is masculine.

It was perhaps the Johannine usage which did most to settle the matter that the Advocate or Comforter (*paraklētos*) was a distinct Person. It is quite clear in the Farewell Discourses in John that the Paraclete is an active agent who will teach the apostles (John 14: 25), who will testify on behalf of the Son (15:26), who will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (16:8). Perhaps most significantly, the Paraclete will glorify the Son (16:14). There the Spirit acts *towards* the Son, an action which we have to understand as indicating that there is not only interpersonal relationship between the Father and the Son, but also between the Son and the Spirit. And yet the Spirit remains self-effacing. His whole Person and work is to enable us to focus on the Son. A very helpful modern illustration is that the Spirit’s relation to Christ is rather like the spotlight behind the heads of the audience without which they could not see the actor on the stage.³ But the Spirit not only illuminates Christ for us: the Spirit also *unites* us to Christ.

Given that background, which could of course receive much fuller treatment, we can concentrate specifically now finally on what this means for the *sanctification* of the believer. To sanctify means literally to ‘make holy’ (*sanctum facere*), but down the long history of the Church, another biblical word has been used, *teleoō* or *teleioō*, to complete or perfect, along with the noun *teleiōsis*, perfection, and the adjective *teleos* or *teleios*, perfect. Irenaeus quotes Paul, ‘We speak wisdom among those who are perfect (*en tois teleiois*),’ adding that the perfect are those who have received the Spirit of God.⁴ Clement of Alexandria writes of the baptism of the Christian as a ‘perfecting’, but also of a more advanced perfection of the pure in heart.⁵ We cannot trace here writings on Christian perfection down through two millennia, but the tradition includes, Hippolytus and Tertullian, Antony, who was challenged by the words of Jesus, ‘If you would be perfect...,’ and initiated the monastic movement. It also includes the Cappadocians. Augustine focused Western spirituality on the dynamic of love, and Bernard of Clairvaux (among many others) developed that in terms of a ladder (*scala*) of perfection *in love*.

² See Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8, 1-50)

³ J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, Leicester: IVP, 1984, 66; Tom Smail, *The Giving Gift*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988, 31.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, v, 6, 1. See R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1934, 124-123; also Paul M. Bassett and William M. Greathouse, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, Vol. 2, *The Historical Development*, Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1985, 44-50.

⁵ Newton Flew (1938), 138-151; Bassett and Greathouse (1985), 50-58; T.A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People*, Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013, 47-49

John Wesley stood in this tradition.⁶ He did not teach ‘sinless perfection’ any more than Clement, Bernard or Aquinas. But he did believe that at the new birth, sanctification was initiated as the Spirit breathed into the new-born Christian giving a new love for God, and that the regenerate Christian ceased intentional sin. On that point, he was trying to be faithful to I John 3: 6 and 9: ‘The one born of God does not sin.’ Wesley softened this very challenging verse by interpreting ‘sin’ here as ‘a *voluntary* transgression of a *known* [written] law of God’.

Like all Christian theologians in the Augustinian tradition, he believed that ‘inbred sin’ remained in the Christian after regeneration. This was understood as ‘the carnal mind’ (Rom. 8: 5-8, KJV), better expressed in a modern translation as ‘the mind set on the flesh’ (NRSV) and interpreted as ‘the mind set on human goals and values’ or ‘the self-centred mind-set’. Using a model which the Western Church owes to Augustine, that *concupiscentia* can only be countered by *caritas*, Wesley believed and taught that the only way in which this distorted form of self-centred love could be nullified was when God’s love was ‘poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom. 5:5). Being filled with God’s ‘perfect love’ (I John 4: 7-21) resulted in what Wesley called ‘entire sanctification’ (drawing on I Thess. 3: 11-13 and 5:23-24). He summed this up in the phrase, ‘Love excluding sin.’

But this sanctification was ‘entire’ in the sense of being holistic, a fullness of the Spirit. It was not ‘entire’ in the sense that it implied a *sinless* perfection or implied that the work of sanctification was finished. The Christian still had to grow in grace and richer, deeper love. We are still in our fallen bodies, and therefore, Wesley taught, ‘for the want of better bodily organs’, particularly our ‘disordered brains’, we still failed to produce perfect performance.⁷ Even the holiest of saints is liable to fail and err and still has faults to confess.

What was true of the apostles even after Pentecost has been true of all believers ever since, and is true of us. The general resurrection is not yet past: it has still to come. Therefore, until that day, we shall always be fallen men and women living in the old mortal bodies, the old fallen flesh, subject to disease and death, subject to disorientation of the physically-based, physiological desires of the flesh, seeing the weakness and decay at work in our human *physis*, our nature.

The Christian never gets beyond the Apostle Paul, who had to buffet his body (1 Cor 9:27) and bring every thought into captivity to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). The very fact that we are fallen makes sin, even conscious, deliberate sin, sins of the flesh or sins of the spirit, a daily, hourly possibility. To go further than that: to the extent that we do not fully know ourselves and our motivation, and may do things with mixed motives, and since we have a great capacity for self-deception, we may err daily unconsciously or semi-consciously, on the borderline of our awareness. Even when we are aware of our motives and consciously reject the wrong and

⁶ See ‘A Plain Account of Christian Perfection’, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 13, Nashville: Abingdon, 2013, 132-191: also in various other editions. See the introductory chapter in Noble (2013), 73-96 and the attempt to re-express Wesley’s doctrine in contemporary terms, 97-127. For a fuller account of Wesley’s theology, see Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, Nashville: Kingswood, 1994 and Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, Nashville: Abingdon, 2007.

⁷ See particularly Sermon 129, ‘Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels’, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 4, Nashville: Abingdon, 1987, 161-167.

choose the right, we do not do it as perfectly as we could, and therefore must always fall short of that absolute perfection. We are conscious that no matter how well we do, we could always do better, and we could always do more. And therefore, although we no longer live in condemnation but rejoice in the forgiveness of our sins, and although we do not deliberately and flagrantly transgress the laws of God, yet at the same time we need a life-long attitude of confession and penitence towards God, not only for what we used to be, but also for our present short-comings and faults.

There indeed is the paradox, with the *not yet* aspect fully recognized. We are not yet in the resurrection body: we are still fallen creatures living in mortal bodies with fallen minds weakened by sin and subject to decay. We still fall short of absolute perfection, and so the *not yet* aspect must be put as strongly as that. The Lutheran and Reformed theologians have a full grasp of that in the *simul iustus et peccator*.

But, having said all that, the strength of the Wesleyan understanding of Christian holiness is surely that, in line with the Eastern Fathers, Bernard and Aquinas, it does justice to the paradox by emphasizing the other side of the eschatological tension: the *already*, the ‘optimism of grace’.⁸ *Already* Christ is risen and sits at the right hand of the Father as the New Man, the Second Adam, the prototype of the redeemed race, ‘perfected through suffering’ (Heb. 2:10). He is not only perfect in love towards the Father, but now also perfected in body: no longer in the fallen, mortal body, but in the resurrection body, the Head of the redeemed race, perfected, incorruptible and immortal.

That is what we shall one day be in the age to come when we shall be like him and see him as he is (1 John 3:2). But *already*, because Christ is our Brother and the new Head of the race, we are raised up with him and made to ‘sit with him in the heavenly places’ (Eph. 2:6). Every Christian has received his Spirit, and so is incorporated into the Church, the body of Christ. Every Christian, being baptized into Christ and being ‘in Christ,’ is therefore given to share by the Spirit in the perfected humanity of Christ. In one sense therefore, since all Christians are ‘in Christ’ and have received his Spirit, they are ‘sanctified.’ Wesleyan theologians have sometimes called that ‘initial sanctification’ and rightly insisted against antinomian tendencies, that there is therefore a sense in which even the newly born-again Christian is *not* a sinner and does *not* deliberately transgress God’s laws. But in another sense, sanctification cannot be automatic and immediate. We are not puppets: we are thinking, growing, choosing, developing, human beings, living in the real world of time and history. Therefore there must be an ethical, developmental aspect to sanctification. It is as Christians wrestle with the ethical choices of every day that we each realize what allegiance to Christ implies in practice. Before setting out to follow Christ, it is impossible to know experientially from the inside what consecration actually implies. But it does not take long to discover that although she has given her life to Christ, there is within the new Christian a motivational pattern, a *self-centred mind-set* which resists the Spirit.

This disposition toward ‘the flesh,’ or ‘mind set on human goals and values,’ wrestles against the Spirit and the Spirit, as it were, against it. The Christian had never been so aware of it before, for it had never been challenged so radically. Only now, when she tries to live for

⁸ Rupp, *Principalities*, 90.

Christ, does she become aware of this self-centred mind-set which now makes ‘the flesh’ appear as a dominating power within. Whenever and however that may happen, the Christian then faces the need to deal with this, if the determination to follow Christ is to continue to be a reality. But we discover that we cannot deal with it by a re-consecration, or a deeper consecration, or even total consecration. *We* cannot deal with it at all. Only Christ can deal with it, the High Priest who is ‘touched with the feelings of our infirmities’ (Heb. 4:15). For Christ, living exactly where we do, lived in total consecration to the *Father* by the *Spirit* throughout his earthly life so that the self-centred mind-set was never even formed in Him.

So it is that when the double-minded Christian, aware of this inner struggle, comes to him for rest, Christ will fill him or her with his Spirit, his full and whole-hearted love for the Father. To speak of being ‘filled’ with the Spirit is of course a metaphor. The Spirit is not literally water: that is simply one of the significant biblical metaphors for the Spirit, indicating the cleansing and life-giving role of this divine Person. Nor is this the Christian’s first reception of the Spirit, for, as baptism signifies, the Spirit’s cleansing and life-giving work of sanctification begins right from the new birth, if not before.⁹ But the consecration made at the beginning of each believer’s pilgrimage is now brought to a ‘fullness’ or a level of completion in such a way that the total commitment made in principle at the beginning may now be fully actualized. At this point in his or her spiritual development then, the Christian is able, not merely by effort or moral energy or discipline alone, but by the grace or gift of God, to make his or her consecration fully actual, and to love God and his perfect will wholeheartedly.

While still in the fallen body as part of a fallen human race (‘flesh’) and liable therefore to daily temptation, this mature Christian is no longer of a divided mind or heart. The whole thought-life is then ‘integrated,’ that is to say, has *integrity* or *unity*, around this one dominating desire: to please God. This is not final ‘perfection,’ but it is a new level in the believer’s ‘perfecting.’ It may be called ‘perfect love,’ not in the sense that it is the kind of perfect love we shall know hereafter (Aquinas and Bernard can help us here), but in the sense that it is all-consuming love for God and neighbour with an undivided heart. And it is surely characteristic, not merely of those who affirm the historic Patristic and Wesleyan doctrine of ‘perfect love,’ but, whether they realize it or not, of mature Christians in every branch of the Christian Church.

It is true that other desires, other motives, remain. Some, such as the desire to eat well, or to take exercise or relax, are directly based in our physiology. Others are more complex, such as the legitimate and appropriate desire to have fulfilling work to do. Or they may be more complex still: for example, the motive, or desire, or need to have an attractive, intelligent, loving marriage partner. Such motives and desires as these do not disappear; but neither are they *automatically* integrated into the one dominant motive of serving God. There is still the need for discernment and discipline, and room for growth. There is still temptation to be faced, and the Christian needs to work at the ethical choices of every day, and may not always be sure what the right choice is. She may not even know herself well enough to know what her real motives are, while he may frequently appear a pretty imperfect fellow to those around him! But one thing is clear: the Christian filled with the Spirit of Christ is not a person

⁹ On the relation between baptism and ‘baptism of the Spirit,’ see Deasley, ‘Entire Sanctification.’

torn in two. Being filled with the Spirit of Christ the Son, the ‘Spirit of sonship,’ and loving the Father whole-heartedly, the Spirit-filled Christian daily works at the business of reconciling every other desire and motive to the one dominating, over-riding, all-embracing passion of life, to serve our Triune God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength.

Charles Wesley expresses for us the constant daily prayer that Christ, who is Love Incarnate, crucified and ascended, may breathe into us too his own Spirit that we may be filled with his love:

Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation!
Enter every trembling heart’

Breathe, oh, breathe thy loving Spirit
Into every troubled breast!
Let us all in thee inherit;
Let us find that second rest:
Take away the bent to sinning,
Alpha and Omega be,
End of faith as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Come, almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy grace receive;
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as they hosts above,
Pray and praise thee without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till be cast our crown before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.¹⁰

¹⁰ Originally published as Hymn 9 in *Redemption Hymns* (1747), the second verse was omitted by John when he included it in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, *Works* (BE) 7:545, because he thought that the line which originally read, ‘Take away the power of sinning,’ was too strong.