

john wesley a plain account of christian perfection

john wesley a plain account of christian perfection offers a profound exploration into one of the most enduring and influential theological concepts within Methodism and broader Protestant Christianity. This seminal work by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, lays out a clear and accessible exposition of his understanding of what it means to achieve Christian perfection in this life. The article will delve into the core tenets of Wesley's doctrine, examining its biblical foundations, practical implications, and potential misunderstandings. We will explore how Wesley defined this state, emphasizing its attainment through God's grace and the believer's faithful obedience, and how it differs from notions of sinless perfection. Furthermore, the discussion will cover the relational aspect of Christian perfection, highlighting its connection to perfect love for God and neighbor, and its impact on personal sanctification and community life. Readers will gain a comprehensive understanding of Wesley's vision for a life lived in complete devotion and conformity to God's will, as articulated in his significant treatise, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.

- Understanding John Wesley's Vision of Christian Perfection
- The Biblical Foundations of Wesley's Doctrine
- Defining Christian Perfection: Not Sinlessness
- The Role of Grace and Human Agency
- The Practice of Christian Perfection: Living in Perfect Love
- Addressing Common Misconceptions about Christian Perfection
- The Impact of John Wesley's Plain Account

Understanding John Wesley's Vision of Christian Perfection

John Wesley, in his significant treatise, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, sought to articulate a doctrine that was both biblical and experientially attainable for believers. His primary aim was to present a clear, unvarnished explanation of what he understood to be the goal of the Christian life: a state of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection. This vision was not about achieving an immutable, faultless state, but rather

a transformative experience of God's grace that purifies the heart and directs all one's affections and actions towards God and neighbor. Wesley's emphasis on a "plain account" underscores his desire to make this profound theological concept accessible to the common person, fostering a deeper understanding and practical pursuit of holiness.

The core of Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection is rooted in the belief that believers can be so thoroughly sanctified by the Holy Spirit that they are freed from voluntary sin. This freedom allows them to live a life characterized by perfect love for God and perfect love for their neighbor, fulfilling the Great Commandment. It is a state of complete consecration and a willing surrender of the self to God's will, enabling believers to walk in constant communion with God.

The Biblical Foundations of Wesley's Doctrine

John Wesley meticulously grounded his understanding of Christian perfection in the Holy Scriptures, drawing from a rich tapestry of Old and New Testament passages. He believed that the pursuit of holiness was not an optional add-on to the Christian faith but an essential, God-ordained goal for all believers. His arguments for the possibility of this state in this life are robustly supported by scriptural evidence.

Old Testament Precepts for Purity

Wesley pointed to Old Testament commands for believers to be holy, referencing passages like Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." He saw these as indicative of God's expectation that His people would strive for a high degree of moral and spiritual purity, reflecting His own perfect nature. The sacrificial system itself, while pointing towards a future perfect atonement, also represented a desire for cleansing and a restored relationship with God.

New Testament Teachings on Sanctification

The New Testament provided the most significant textual basis for Wesley's doctrine. He frequently cited Jesus' command in Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." For Wesley, this was not an impossible ideal but a direct instruction and a promise of what God's grace could achieve. He also emphasized the Apostle Paul's prayers for the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This comprehensive sanctification, encompassing the entire person, was central to Wesley's understanding.

Furthermore, Wesley looked to the early church and the experience of the apostles as evidence for the possibility of Christian perfection. He believed that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost empowered believers to live lives of radical love and obedience, mirroring Christ's own perfection.

Defining Christian Perfection: Not Sinlessness

One of the most crucial aspects of John Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection is clarifying what it is not. He was keenly aware of the potential for misunderstanding and vehemently rejected the notion that Christian perfection implied absolute sinlessness, meaning the complete absence of temptation or the inability to make mistakes. This distinction is vital to grasping his doctrine accurately.

Wesley defined Christian perfection as "loving God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength." This is the essence of the Great Commandment. Therefore, perfection, in his view, is about the perfection of love. A person in this state would be entirely free from intentional, voluntary sin. Their will would be wholly aligned with God's will, and their motivations and affections would be pure and directed towards God and the good of others.

However, Wesley acknowledged that individuals on this path could still be tempted, experience wrong thoughts, or make unintentional errors in judgment. These are seen as natural human limitations, not as voluntary acts of sin that break fellowship with God. The key difference lies in the absence of a willing consent to sin. Christian perfection, therefore, is a state of heart, a purity of intention and motive, rather than an immunity from human frailty or the presence of temptation. It is about being perfected in love, not perfected from sinning in all circumstances.

The Role of Grace and Human Agency

John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection intricately balances the sovereign work of God's grace with the active participation and willing cooperation of the believer. It is not a passive reception of perfection but a dynamic process that requires both divine empowerment and human response. Wesley firmly believed that this state of entire sanctification is a gift of God's grace, entirely unmerited and freely given.

Wesley articulated a progression of God's grace in the life of a believer, beginning with prevenient grace, which draws individuals towards God. This is followed by justifying grace, which pardons sin and brings about regeneration. The subsequent stage is sanctifying grace, which progressively purifies the heart and empowers the believer to live a life of perfect love.

Christian perfection is the culmination of this sanctifying process, where the Holy Spirit fully takes residence and transforms the believer's inner life.

However, this divine impartation necessitates human agency. Believers are called to actively seek this state, to continually yield their wills to God, and to practice the means of grace – prayer, scripture reading, fasting, fellowship, and the sacraments. These practices are not the source of perfection but the divinely appointed channels through which God's grace flows and through which believers can mature in their faith. Wesley's emphasis was on a continuous, intentional process of surrender and obedience, allowing God's grace to work ever more deeply within the soul.

The Practice of Christian Perfection: Living in Perfect Love

The practical outworking of Christian perfection, as described by John Wesley, is a life lived in conscious and continuous obedience to God's commands, particularly the command to love. This is not a passive state but an active, vibrant relationship with God and humanity, characterized by unwavering devotion and selfless service.

Wesley identified several key characteristics and practices associated with this state:

- **Perfect Love for God:** This involves an undivided heart, with all affections centered on God. It means desiring God above all else, seeking His glory in all things, and finding complete contentment and joy in Him.
- **Perfect Love for Neighbor:** This translates into active benevolence, compassion, and a genuine concern for the well-being of others. It means treating everyone with fairness, kindness, and respect, seeking to do good to all.
- **Obedience to God's Word:** Believers in this state strive to obey all of God's commandments, not out of obligation but out of a transformed heart that delights in God's law.
- **Reliance on the Holy Spirit:** A deep and constant dependence on the Holy Spirit's guidance and empowerment is essential to maintain this state of grace.
- **Humility:** Despite the attainment of this elevated state, Wesley stressed that true Christian perfection is always accompanied by profound humility, recognizing that all good comes from God.

- **Endurance and Perseverance:** The pursuit and maintenance of Christian perfection require diligent effort, ongoing self-examination, and a commitment to persevere through spiritual challenges.

Wesley saw these principles as the natural fruit of a heart fully surrendered to God. It was a life of joyful obedience, free from the dominion of sin and empowered by the indwelling Spirit to live as Christ lived.

Addressing Common Misconceptions about Christian Perfection

Throughout the history of Christianity, various doctrines have faced scrutiny and misunderstanding, and John Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection is no exception. His clear articulation in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* aimed to preempt and correct several common misinterpretations that often arose.

One significant misconception is the idea that Christian perfection means achieving a state of sinless perfection. As previously discussed, Wesley did not teach that believers would be incapable of temptation or error in judgment. He differentiated between involuntary faults or temptations and voluntary sin, which is an act of conscious rebellion against God. His understanding of perfection was focused on the purity of motive and the absence of willing sin, not an absolute immunity from human fallibility.

Another frequent misunderstanding is that Christian perfection is an endpoint that can be achieved through human effort alone, thereby negating the necessity of God's grace. Wesley consistently maintained that this state is a gift of God, imparted through His grace by faith. While believers are called to strive and utilize the means of grace, it is God's power that ultimately brings about this transformation. It is not a merit-based achievement but a sanctified state of being made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Some have also perceived Wesley's doctrine as leading to spiritual pride or a sense of superiority over other Christians. However, Wesley himself emphasized that true Christian perfection is always accompanied by deep humility, a recognition of one's utter dependence on God, and a profound sense of gratitude for His transformative work. The focus remains on loving God and neighbor, not on personal achievement.

Finally, the idea that Christian perfection is a static state that, once attained, cannot be lost, has also been a point of contention. While Wesley believed in the security of believers through God's power, he also stressed the need for continued vigilance, obedience, and reliance on God to maintain

this state of grace. Backsliding was a possibility if one strayed from the path of obedience and dependence.

The Impact of John Wesley's Plain Account

John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* has had a profound and lasting impact on Christian thought and practice, particularly within the Methodist tradition and movements influenced by it. It provided a theological framework that encouraged believers to aspire to a life of deep holiness and entire devotion to God, making it a foundational text for spiritual formation.

The clarity and accessibility of Wesley's writing made the doctrine of entire sanctification attainable and desirable for ordinary Christians. This empowered individuals to seek a more profound experience of God's purifying grace, leading to a renewed emphasis on practical holiness, social engagement, and the active pursuit of love for God and neighbor. Methodism's historical commitment to missions, social justice, and evangelism can be directly traced to this pursuit of a sanctified life that overflows into compassionate action.

Furthermore, Wesley's articulation of Christian perfection, as perfected love rather than sinless perfection, provided a nuanced understanding that has resonated with countless individuals throughout history. It offered a hope for a transformative relationship with God that could be experienced in this life, fostering a dynamic and ongoing journey of spiritual growth. The teachings continue to inspire believers to live lives that are fully consecrated to God, marked by love, obedience, and the continuous work of the Holy Spirit.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core concept of 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' by John Wesley?

The core concept of 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' is that believers can attain entire sanctification in this life, meaning they can be freed from all voluntary sin through the power of the Holy Spirit, experiencing perfect love for God and neighbor.

How did Wesley define 'perfection' in the context of his book?

Wesley defined perfection not as absolute impeccability or freedom from all

mistakes, but as the eradication of all willful or voluntary sin. It's a state of 'perfect love,' where the believer's will is entirely aligned with God's will, leading to consistent obedience and love.

What is the relationship between faith, grace, and Christian perfection according to Wesley?

Wesley taught that Christian perfection is a gift of God's grace, received by faith. It's not earned through human effort but is made possible through the atoning work of Christ and appropriated by a faith that trusts God for complete deliverance from sin.

What are some common misunderstandings or criticisms of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection?

Common misunderstandings include the idea that perfection means never making a mistake or never sinning unintentionally. Criticisms often arise from fears of spiritual pride or an overemphasis on personal experience, leading to the possibility of a false sense of attainment.

Why is 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' still considered a significant and trending work in Christian theology?

'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' remains significant because it offers a robust vision for Christian living and spiritual growth, emphasizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. It continues to inspire discussions about holiness, the possibility of overcoming sin, and the pursuit of complete love for God and humanity in contemporary Christian thought.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, with descriptions:

1. *The Sanctified Life*

This book delves into the practical application of Christian perfection as taught by John Wesley. It explores how believers can experience God's transformative power in their daily lives, leading to a deeper walk with Christ. The text emphasizes the ongoing process of sanctification and the pursuit of holy love.

2. *Christian Perfection: A Study of John Wesley's Theology of Sanctification*

This scholarly work offers a comprehensive examination of Wesley's core beliefs regarding Christian perfection. It traces the theological development of his ideas and places them within the broader context of Christian thought.

The book highlights the biblical foundations and practical implications of achieving "perfect love."

3. *The Means of Grace: John Wesley's Pathway to Spiritual Growth*

Focusing on Wesley's understanding of spiritual disciplines, this book details the "means of grace" that facilitate growth in holiness. It discusses the importance of prayer, scripture reading, communion, and Christian fellowship. The author argues that these practices are essential for experiencing the perfection of love.

4. *A Plain Account of God's Providence*

While not exclusively on perfection, this title offers a complementary perspective to Wesley's work by exploring God's active involvement in the lives of believers. It examines how understanding divine providence can strengthen faith and encourage trust in God's will. This can be seen as a foundational element for pursuing holiness, relying on God's continuous care.

5. *The Pursuit of Holiness in the Methodist Tradition*

This book examines the historical and theological trajectory of the pursuit of Christian perfection within the Methodist movement, building upon Wesley's foundational text. It showcases how subsequent generations of Methodists have interpreted and lived out Wesley's teachings. The work explores both the triumphs and challenges in embodying perfect love.

6. *Entire Sanctification: The Wesleyan Doctrine Explained*

This accessible explanation breaks down the doctrine of entire sanctification as understood by John Wesley. It clarifies common misunderstandings and provides a clear, biblical rationale for the possibility of loving God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength. The book aims to equip readers for this spiritual pursuit.

7. *Love Made Perfect: The Journey to Christian Holiness*

This title focuses on the outcome and experience of Christian perfection – perfected love. It guides readers through the process of cultivating and expressing unadulterated love for God and neighbor. The book encourages readers to embrace the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in achieving this goal.

8. *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral and Christian Perfection*

This book investigates how Wesley's foundational principles – Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience – inform his doctrine of Christian perfection. It demonstrates how these sources converge to support the possibility of entire sanctification. The work shows the intellectual and spiritual rigor behind Wesley's teaching.

9. *Wesleyan Theology: A Contemporary Introduction*

While a broader introduction, this book includes significant sections on Christian perfection within the context of Wesleyan thought. It explains how Wesley's key doctrines, including entire sanctification, continue to be relevant for contemporary Christians. The book provides a solid grounding in Wesleyan theology, making the pursuit of perfection more understandable.

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