Chapter 14

Christian Perfection and Australian Methodism

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John Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection has the rather dubious status of being the most distinctive Methodist doctrine and at the same time its most sorely neglected. The term is open to much misunderstanding and did not, in Wesley’s teaching, refer to perfection in any absolute sense. His Plain Account of Christian Perfection went to great lengths to show that there is no state attainable in this life that delivers believers from the human frailties and imperfections that require a continued dependence on the grace of God. “I believe,” he wrote, “there is no such perfection in this life as excludes... involuntary transgressions, which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorances and mistakes inseparable from mortality. Therefore sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself.”

For such reasons the Wesleyan theological tradition has usually qualified the word “perfection” by the use of terms such as “Christian” perfection, “evangelical” perfection, or even “relative” perfection. Wesley and his fellow Methodists taught that a definite experience of “entire sanctification” should be sought by believers. This “second work of grace” subsequent to conversion was understood to cleanse the heart from the remains of sin and fill the recipient with perfect love for God and neighbour. Though Wesley was impressed by a large number of professions to entire sanctification among Methodists in the 1760s and 1770s, he never testified to the experience and in fact denied that he himself lived up to the picture that he drew of the entirely sanctified believer.

This essay will examine the place of the doctrine of Christian perfection in Australian Methodism, demonstrating that it was an important part of Australian Methodist discourse from the Church’s struggling colonial beginnings through to its growth and consolidation in the late nineteenth century. From the mid-twentieth century until the time of the formation of the Uniting Church in 1977, interest in the doctrine declined, except among some theologians and a few holiness diehards, until it became a matter of purely academic and historic interest. In the closing section of the paper some preliminary suggestions will be made about the possibility of a fresh articulation of the doctrine in keeping with contemporary theological concerns.

Christian Perfection in Colonial Methodism

Testimonies to an experience of entire sanctification were not infrequent among Australian Methodists of the nineteenth century. Certainly the doctrine was reinforced at a later stage by representatives of the American holiness movement, but its true trajectory is in a straight line from John Wesley to the earliest preachers in the colony of NSW. The Methodist preacher William Schofield rode from his Windsor circuit to Sydney in January of 1835 to attend a Love Feast, presided over by the Rev. Joseph Orton. The meeting continued till midnight, during which time Schofield testified that he, along with a certain “Brother Simpson”, had been “wholly sanctified.” Referring to an even earlier experience Schofield, recorded in his journal on 26 November 1825, “...the Lord took full possession of my heart

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by cleansing it from all sin...and in the same precise moment I was divinely assured that I was sanctified throughout body, soul and spirit.”

In 1865 the popular visiting revivalist William “California” Taylor testified to entire sanctification saying that he had received it twenty years prior and had openly testified to it seventeen years before. In NSW, William G. Taylor, John Watsford, J. S. Austin, and J. A. Bowring all preached perfection and some testified to a present enjoyment of the experience. John Cowley Coles, who visited and prayed with Ned Kelly at the Melbourne Gaol while the latter awaited execution, included in his memoirs a chapter on “The Doctrine of Entire Sanctification by Faith.”

It is doubtful, however, that entire sanctification was ever the everyday concern of colonial Methodists. Rather it seems to have featured prominently in certain revivals at irregular intervals. A revival in 1835 saw many testify to “the blessing” and a Holiness Association was formed in Sydney in 1885, which met monthly after an initial meeting drew a crowd of 1200 people. York Street was the headquarters of holiness concern in Sydney but its influence spread as far abroad as Wagga Wagga, the Hunter Valley and Kempsey.

In both the British and American Methodism of this period certain features of Wesley’s teaching on entire sanctification were left behind in a process of over-simplification, yet key insights were retained such as the theme of empowering grace and of holiness as perfect love. The tendency in the nineteenth century was to make the experience of entire sanctification readily available to any serious Christian ready to perform the requisite act of consecration. In contrast, Wesley, at least in his more mature thought, had thought of it as something experienced by only a very few individuals and then usually quite late in life. Nineteenth-century Methodists tended to equate consistent obedience to Jesus Christ with entire sanctification whereas Wesley saw such consistent obedience as a mark of the new birth, and entire sanctification as something much more radical. It was more like the ecstatic union of perfect love between the soul and God that is found in the Catholic mystical writers. As such it was something that, while it was to be the Christian’s daily pursuit, was nonetheless quite rare.

The influence of New York socialite Phoebe Palmer and her “shorter way” to holiness was a significant factor in the lowering of the bar. Instead of expecting the blessing after perhaps many years of seeking and growth in grace, an immediate and present consecration was held out as the accepted method of obtainment. This approach proved particularly popular in the American context as it linked revivalism with “an impatient American pragmatism that always seeks to make a reality at the moment whatever is considered at all possible in the future.” The “shorter way” was successfully imported to Britain through visits from Phoebe Palmer and fellow American

7. J. C. Coles, *The Life and Christian Experience of John Cowley Coles Giving the History of Twenty-seven Years of Evangelistic Work in the Colony of Victoria, Australia, and elsewhere, principally in connection with the Wesleyan Methodist Church; also Chapters on the Doctrine of Entire Sanctification by Faith, and the Enduement of Power; and an Account of the Social Condition and Mode of Life of the Diggers, in the early days of Gold Digging, in the same Colony; written (at the request of many friends) by Himself* (London: Marshall Brothers / Melbourne: M. L. Hutchinson, 1893).
revivalist James Caughey, the latter crossing the Atlantic four times between 1841 and the mid-1860s.12

According to R.B. Walker, “Open profession of Christian perfection was apt to arouse feelings of repulsion and rejection among mere sinners, who perceived serious flaws in the possessors of perfect love. Most Wesleyans were content to believe in the doctrine and not to enjoy it and claim it for themselves.”13 Nonetheless, perfectionism must be seen as a distinguishing feature of early Australian Methodism, apart from which its ethics were “almost indistinguishable from the values of other Protestant denominations.”14 It was an expression of Methodist confidence in grace-enabled relationships of Christlike love both within and beyond the church. It drew its optimism and pragmatism from Enlightenment ideas of progress, and was at the same time a religious expression of Romanticism with its stress on an intensely personal experience of transformation.15

Christian Perfection in Early Twentieth Century Methodism

Interest in the doctrine and experience of sanctification continued well into the twentieth century. In 1928, the Master of Queen’s College, Edward Sugden, was able to include “entire sanctification” as one of “the doctrines emphasised by John Wesley” at a lunch-time address given to ministers entitled Our Doctrines.16 In his annotated edition of Wesley’s Sermons he supported the doctrine on biblical, logical, and psychological grounds, insisting that “we have in the New Testament, an ideal set before us, to which

we can more and more approximate, until we are perfected in love, but which is not at once attained when we are born again.”17

The most significant forum for the preaching of a distinctive holiness message in the Victoria and Tasmania Conference was the Annual Holiness Convention of The Methodist Local Preachers’ Association. The 1928 Convention was held at the Brunswick Street Methodist Mission in Fitzroy. Attendance at the Saturday night meeting was 450 and fourteen to fifteen hundred people sat down to the free meal provided at the Fitzroy Town Hall. “Our convention stands for holiness,” read the report on the proceedings, understood as “instantaneous deliverance from depravity.”18

On 11 March of that same year, the British holiness evangelist Norman Dunning opened his Australian campaign in Perth. Dunning came from England with the warm recommendation of Samuel Chadwick of Cliff College.19 His visit serves as a sample case of the type of ministry Australian Methodists of the 1920s enjoyed. They favoured a type of ministry that was clear, rational, and intellectually, rather than emotionally, persuasive, and Dunning fit the bill admirably.20 His meetings drew considerable crowds, the final meeting of the Adelaide campaign at the Exhibition Hall on 3 July drawing 3,200 people. Meetings were held to support the campaign in over fifty churches. On the first Wednesday night of his Perth campaign,

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15. Bebbington maintains, however, that the Romantic impulse had difficulty making headway in British Methodism, being more fully expressed in the “Higher Life” teaching of the Keswick Convention movement, Bebbington, Holiness, 60–61, 68–72.
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Dunning preached on the topic, “Assurance of the Possibility of Christian Perfection,” and on the same topic in Bendigo. Of course there were also notes of caution about going to extremes. In the year of Dunning’s visit, The Spectator published an article on entire sanctification by the respected British Methodist, H. Maldwyn Hughes. After reminding readers that “perfect love” was John Wesley’s favourite term for “entire sanctification,” he went on to complain of some abuses. “It is very unfortunate that this doctrine has so often been perverted by well-meaning people. It cannot be stated more clearly that neither in the New Testament nor in Wesley’s exposition of it is it ever taught or implied that Christians can attain to a state of absolute perfection in this present life.” He recounts how once, while a probationer, he had preached on the help that Christ gives in temptation. A man approached him afterwards and declared that he had no need of such help as he had already been made perfect. “I told him,” quipped Hughes, “that I should like to hear what his wife had to say on the question.”

The most important theological treatment of the doctrine of Christian perfection in the first half of the twentieth century was Robert Newton Flew’s *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, first published in 1934. A classic of its type, it provides a comprehensive historical survey and in its nineteenth chapter deals with the Methodist doctrine, providing, according to David J. Carter, “a valuable restatement of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition in modern terms.” Interestingly one of the sources Flew relied upon was E. H. Sugden’s treatment in his edition of Wesley’s Standard Sermons. The fact that Flew, the English Methodist, drew on the writings of the Master of Queen’s College and was read and appreciated by Australian Methodists is a reminder of the close community that existed in the Methodism of “Greater Britain,” where waves of influence could extend from the metropole to the dominions and back again. This phenomenon of mutual exchange had a parallel in the economic sphere, as demonstrated by James Belich in his book on what he calls “the Settler Revolution,” *Replenishing the Earth.* The dominions saw great prosperity and through the mass exchange of export, trade and ideas with the mother country, the wider British world was strengthened. Nineteenth-century Wesleyan Methodism was much stronger in the dominions than it was at “home.” English Wesleyans suffered from something of an inferiority complex in their relations to the Established Church, but in the religious free market economy of the Australian colonies Wesleyan Methodists suffered no such restrictions and became an ecclesiastical success story.

**Christian Perfection in the Post-War Years**

The preceding description of a relatively healthy degree of interest in Christian perfection in the early twentieth century contrasts with the received tradition in the later “Wesleyan Methodist Church” founded in 1945 by RAAF Chaplain Kingsley Ridgway. Ridgway came out of Gippsland in the 1920s to offer himself as a candidate for the Methodist ministry. After passing through a profound religious crisis, under the influence of visiting Canadian

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holiness evangelist, Alfred Benson Carson, he withdrew from Queen's College and from the Methodist Church. For Ridgway, Methodism was entirely devoid of the original emphases of John Wesley. His autobiographical account, In Search of God, gives the impression of Methodism as an apostate church that could offer him no spiritual help, as he sought the assurance of salvation. In his own account, Ridgway's Methodist Church of Australasia was Wesley's Church of England, closed even to the message of the new birth, and considering Christian perfection an enthusiast’s delusion.

The primary sources do not support this view. The Methodism of this period was still open to the old style revivalism, yet beginning to be somewhat apologetic, or even embarrassed about its revivalist past, and feeling the impact of theological modernism in its academies. The American Holiness evangelist E. E. Shellhamer came to Australia from Cincinnati, Ohio in 1936 and declared that he had found, “a sincere and hungry set of people. Already I have more calls than I can fill. O, that some of our holiness evangelists would come this way, instead of huddling together and trying to create a blaze on burnt-over territory. This is a beautiful virgin country ready for a revival of Bible Holiness.” As things turned out, this “beautiful virgin country” was not quite ready to be ravished. When the American Holiness movement churches cast their eyes on the antipodes, their representatives would not be warmly received and would have to negotiate difficult and unfriendly territory. By the time Wesleyan-Holiness denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene and the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia were officially organized in the mid-1940s, the religious landscape had changed considerably and entire sanctification was considered a vestigial relic of Methodism.

That Australian Methodist discourse about perfection had significantly cooled off during the second half of the century may be evidenced by examining the 29th Annual Holiness Convention held at South Richmond Methodist Church in 1944. Advertised as a time for “withdrawal from the incessant strain of modern life, and for heart searching and prayer in a congenial environment,” the description is certainly a tame one, lacking the distinctiveness and energy of earlier conventions. The lead article in The Spectator for 22 July 1944 speaks of “the essential need of holiness,” as one of the “notes” of Methodism. However, holiness is defined rather vaguely as “a man’s faith issuing in good works and pure life” and as involving a “moral” and “disciplined” life. There is certainly no second blessing holiness on offer here.

In 1945 The Spectator published a commentary on Charles Wesley’s hymn All Things Are Possible, in which the term “Christian progress” is suggested as a replacement for “Christian perfection.” Using a series of rhetorical questions the author suggests that the doctrine of holiness is not very often sung about, spoken about, or taught, and that the older language connected with it is “outworn…not understood and not appreciated.” A correspondent to The Spectator known only as “Brother Dan’l set out to “clarify the distinction between justification and entire sanctification” by means of early Methodist testimonies to the experience. It is notable that, while these historic examples are given, there are no current testimonies, such as would be found in Wesleyan-Holiness magazines of the period such as The Australian Nazarene, The Australian Wesleyan or The Wesleyan Messenger.

Apart from conventions and newspaper articles, the doctrine of Christian perfection continued to receive some degree of attention in print. In 1943,
the British Methodist, William E. Sangster in _The Path to Perfection_, a book widely read and appreciated in Australia, issued a challenge to his fellow Methodists to overcome the sorry neglect of Wesley’s perfectionist views among them, and provided his own sympathetic critique of Wesley.\(^{37}\) His work serves something of a diagnostic purpose, rather than issuing any original proposal of its own. His criticisms of Wesley seem at points to be criticisms of holiness movement renditions of Wesley rather than of Wesley’s own teaching, his own negative exposure to certain holiness movement advocates seeming to have coloured his evaluation somewhat.\(^{38}\) Sangster also delivered the 6th Cato lecture, published in 1954 as _The Pure in Heart: A Study in Christian Sanctity_, a comprehensive historical overview of the concept of sainthood in the church.\(^{39}\)

The most extensive mid-century treatment of the doctrine is that of Colin Williams, who preceded Norman Young as Professor of Systematic Theology at Queen’s College. In _John Wesley’s Theology Today_, Williams urged Methodists to take more seriously Wesley’s “optimism of grace” by stressing “sanctification by faith, emphasizing the promises of transformation available to the believer now” while at the same time holding in dialectical relationship the experience of freedom from sin and the ongoing sin that the “perfect” still carry with them “when judged by the perfect law.”\(^{40}\) The transforming power of the gift of love must be applied to the social order more adequately than it had been. While Williams concedes that Wesley was animated by social concern, he quite rightly points out that these concerns “were inadequately related to his doctrine of holiness.”\(^{41}\) Since the “problem of this doctrine is now vastly more complicated [it] requires from Methodists a much more concentrated effort to relate it to [the] contemporary situation.”\(^{42}\) There is little evidence that this effort was made.

By 1945, only a handful of enthusiasts, such as Walter Betts and Gilbert McLaren, were continuing to teach holiness in the old fashioned Methodist way. Australian Methodists did not give rise to the kind of interdenominational holiness revival that emerged out of the Methodist Episcopal Church in mid-nineteenth-century America. There were holiness conventions, holiness sermons, and holiness articles in the Spectator, but nothing like the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness to launch an American-style holiness movement. Instead many of those nurtured by the holiness tradition in Methodism became part of the newly emerging Pentecostal movement. Pentecostal pioneers such as Janet Lancaster, Arch Newton, and Robert Horne had all been Methodists, lending support to the argument that it was from the matrix of Wesleyan revivalism that Australian Pentecostalism was born.\(^{43}\)

The immediate post-war years saw the emergence in Australia of two Wesleyan-Holiness denominations whose origins were in the United States, the Church of the Nazarene and the Wesleyan Methodist Church.\(^{44}\)

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38. Sangster, 137-39.
41. Williams, _John Wesley’s Theology_, 189.
42. Williams, _John Wesley’s Theology_, 189.
Kingsley Ridgway perceived a need for an alternative Methodist church in Australia in the post-war years, seeing the growth of theological modernism in the Methodist Church of Australasia as an opportunity to capitalize upon the dissent of more conservative members of that body. His evaluation of the situation was to prove to be inaccurate. Only a very few would break ranks with Methodism to join the new groups and the following years would prove to be extremely difficult for both Wesleyan Methodist and Nazarene pioneering. A few holiness diehards would join up. Gilbert McLaren was briefly President of the Wesleyan Conference and A.C. Chesson became a Nazarene pastor. Others formed their own independent churches, such as Walter Betts’ Melbourne Evangelical Fellowship, soon renamed, “The People’s Church, Kew” in 1954. Disaffected Methodists did not always prove the best kind of people upon which to build a movement and a “whispering campaign” against the Wesleyans as “sinless perfectionists” kept other evangelicals cool and distant. Coupled with this was resentment on the part of some toward a perceived American control of these new churches, though they were in fact clearly in the hands of Australian leadership. If the Wesleyan-Holiness churches could have established a strong denominational presence in Australia in the 1920s they may have been able to capitalise on what was left of the Methodist interest in holiness. The fact that they emerged in the 1940s, at a time when such interest had significantly waned, meant for them a lost opportunity.

As far as the Methodist Church of Australasia was concerned, the expectation of any advanced degree of sanctifying grace had begun its trajectory toward vanishing point.

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Christian Perfection Today

In this final section of the paper, I would like to indulge in some theological reflection. I hope this will be fitting at a Conference established to honour as astute a systematic theologian as Professor Norman Young.

The doctrine of sanctification is not some quaint, antique Methodist hobby-horse but a major New Testament doctrine. As such it is open to a contemporary theological formulation. Those in the Wesleyan theological tradition may continue to speak of believers entering into the fullness of life in God, but they must leave behind any concept of a “second blessing” that adds something substantive to the Christian experience that is not incipiently present in baptism.

However the retention of the idea of “subsequence” still makes sense, since sanctification must be seen as more than simply positional or forensic. The initiatory stages of Christian life, by definition, form a beginning point, rather than a culminating point in the believer’s journey. In progressive sanctification there is an increasing openness to God, and to the fullness of divine grace. Perfecting grace involves the restoration of the human person to the divine intention; full and unhindered love toward God, toward other persons, and indeed toward all creation.

Perfecting grace cannot of course be limited to the personal sphere. The holiness of God and of the saints provides a model for contemporary political theology and its critique of entrenched power. The witness of the saints to the triumph of the Lamb is a prophetic denunciation of all idolatrous systems of earthly governments making the holiness of the saints something dangerously political. The church looks forward, along with all creation, to a universal cosmic renewal. Ben Witherington III sees Revelation’s symbol

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of the New Jerusalem as prefiguring “the invasion of earth by heaven, thereby finally entirely sanctifying the earthly realm.”

John Wesley certainly held such a theology of hope, believing that God would accomplish a global renovation, restoring the world and all its inhabitants to the condition originally designed for them. He placed the revival taking place in his own time in this context of cosmic renewal, seeing it as the birth pangs of a universal renovation. In his sermon no. 64 on “The New Creation,” Wesley looks forward to remarkable changes in the galaxies above and in the earth’s own atmosphere and elements. The plant and animal kingdom will share in this cosmic renewal. The greatest change of all will be “an unmixed state of holiness and happiness far superior to that which Adam enjoyed in paradise.” There is here no sitting around on clouds playing golden harps in some disembodied state. The bodily resurrection will be matched by a cosmic renewal of all creation, issuing from an “immense, unfathomed, unconfined” degree of perfecting grace.

The Basis of Union calls upon the Uniting Church to “listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Standard Sermons.” It cannot do this without coming up against his ideas about perfecting grace. Paragraph 6 confesses that Christ, by the gift of the Spirit, “awakens, purifies, and advances in [us] that faith and hope in which alone [the] benefits [of new life and freedom] can be accepted.” In what way might this confession be informed by a deeper appreciation of Wesley’s perfectionism? If the heirs of Australian Methodism in the Uniting Church in Australia were to recover a doctrine of Christian perfection, informed by Wesley and by their Methodist ancestors, but open to contemporary theological discourse and fresh articulation, Professor Norman Young would, I am sure, be well pleased.

53. Basis of Union, Paragraph 6, in Owen, 28.