A Plain Account Of Christian Perfection

(As believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley from the year 1725 to the year 1777.)

Selected Questions and Answers:

"Q. In what manner should we preach sanctification?

"A. Scarce at all to those who are not pressing forward: To those who are, always by way of promise; always drawing, rather than driving."

"Q. Is there any clear Scripture promise of this, -- that God will save us from all sin?

"A. There is: 'He shall redeem Israel from all his sins.' (Psalm 130:8.)

"This is more largely expressed in the prophecy of Ezekiel: 'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you: I will also save you from all your uncleannesses.' (Ezek. 36:25, 29.) No promise can be more clear. And to this the Apostle plainly refers in that exhortation: 'Having these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.' (2 Cor. 7:1.) Equally clear and express is that ancient promise: 'The Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul.' (Deut. 30:6.)

"Q. But does any assertion answerable to this occur in the New Testament?

"A. There does, and that laid down in the plainest terms. So 1 John 3:8: 'For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil; the works of the devil, without any limitation or restriction; but all sin is the work of the devil. Parallel to which is the assertion of St. Paul: 'Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for it, that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it might be holy and without blemish.' (Eph. 5:25-27.)

"And to the same effect is his assertion in the eighth of the Romans, verses 3, 4: 'God sent his Son, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit.' [Rom. 8:3, 4]

"Q. Does the New Testament afford any farther ground for expecting to be saved from all sin?

"A. Undoubtedly it does; both in those prayers and commands, which are equivalent to the strongest assertions.
"Q. What prayers do you mean?"

"A. Prayers for entire sanctification; which, were there no such thing, would be mere mockery of God. Such in particular are, (1.) 'Deliver us from evil.' Now, when this is done, when we are delivered from all evil, there can be no sin remaining. (2.) 'Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also who shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.' (John 17:20-23.) (3.) 'I bow my knees unto the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he would grant you, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend, with all saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge; that ye may be filled with all the fulness of God.' (Eph. 3:14, &c.) (4.) 'The very God of peace sanctify you wholly. And I pray God, your whole spirit, soul, and body, may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (1 Thess. 5:23.)

"Q. What command is there to the same effect?"

"A. (1.) 'Be ye perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.' (Matt. 5:48.) (2.) 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.' (Matt. 12:37.) But if the love of God fill all the heart, there can be no sin therein.

"Q. Is there any example in Scripture of persons who had attained to this?"

"A. Yes; St. John, and all those of whom he says, 'Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because, as he is, so are we in this world.' (1 John 4:17.)

"Q. Can you show one such example now? Where is he that is thus perfect?"

"A. To some that make this inquiry one might answer, If I knew one here, I would not tell you; for you do not inquire out of love. You are like Herod; you only seek the young child to slay it.

But more directly we answer: There are many reasons why there should be few, if any, indisputable examples. What inconveniences would this bring on the person himself, set as a mark for all to shoot at! And how unprofitable would it be to gainsayers! 'For if they hear not Moses and the Prophets,' Christ and his Apostles, 'neither would they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.'

"Q. Are we not apt to have a secret distaste to any who say they are saved from all sin?"

"A. It is very possible we may, and that upon several grounds; partly from a concern for the good of souls, who may be hurt if these are not what they profess; partly from a kind of implicit envy at those who speak of higher attainments than our own; and partly from our natural slowness and unreadiness of heart to believe the works of God.
"Q. Do you affirm, that this perfection excludes all infirmities, ignorance, and mistake?

"A. I continually affirm quite the contrary, and always have done so.

"Q. But how can every thought, word, and work, be governed by pure love, and the man be subject at the same time to ignorance and mistake?

"A. I see no contradiction here: 'A man may be filled with pure love, and still be liable to mistake.' Indeed I do not expect to be freed from actual mistakes, till this mortal puts on immortality. I believe this to be a natural consequence of the soul's dwelling in flesh and blood. For we cannot now think at all, but by the mediation of those bodily organs which have suffered equally with the rest of our frame. And hence we cannot avoid sometimes thinking wrong, till this corruptible shall have put on incorruption.

"But we may carry this thought farther yet. A mistake in judgment may possibly occasion a mistake in practice. For instance: Mr. De Renty's mistake touching the nature of mortification, arising from prejudice of education, occasioned that practical mistake, his wearing an iron girdle. And a thousand such instances there may be, even in those who are in the highest state of grace. Yet, Where every word and action springs from love, such a mistake is not properly a sin. However, it cannot bear the rigour of God's justice, but needs the atoning blood.

"Q. What was the judgment of all our brethren who met at Bristol in August, 1758, on this head?

"A. It was expressed in these words: (1.) Every one may mistake as long as he lives. (2.) A mistake in opinion may occasion a mistake in practice. (3.) Every such mistake is a transgression of the perfect law. Therefore, (4.) Every such mistake, were it not for the blood of atonement, would expose to eternal damnation. (5.) It follows, that the most perfect have continual need of the merits of Christ, even for their actual transgressions, and may say for themselves, as well as for their brethren, 'Forgive us our trespasses.'

"This easily accounts for what might otherwise seem to be utterly unaccountable; namely, that those who are not offended when We speak of the highest degree of love, yet will not hear of living without sin. The reason is, they know all men are liable to mistake, and that in practice as well as in judgment. But they do not know, or do not observe, that this is not sin, if love is the sole principle of action.

"Q. Suppose one had attained to this, would you advise him to speak of it?

"A. At first perhaps he would scarce be able to refrain, the fire would be so hot within him; his desire to declare the loving-kindness of the Lord carrying him away like a torrent. But afterwards he might; and then it would be advisable, not to speak of it to them that know not God; (it is most likely, it would only provoke them to contradict and blaspheme;) nor to others, without some particular reason, without some good in view. And then he should have especial care to avoid all appearance of boasting; to speak with the deepest humility and reverence, giving all the glory to God.
"Q. But would it not be better to be entirely silent, not to speak of it at all?"

"A. By silence, he might avoid many crosses, which will naturally and necessarily ensue, if he simply declare, even among believers, what God has wrought in his soul. If, therefore, such a one were to confer with flesh and blood he would be entirely silent. But this could not be done with a clear conscience; for undoubtedly he ought to speak. **Men do not light a candle to put it under a bushel;** much less does the all-wise God. He does not raise such a monument of his power and love, to hide it from all mankind. Rather, he **intends it as a general blessing to those who are simple of heart.** He designs thereby, not barely the happiness of that individual person, but the animating and encouraging others to follow after the same blessing. His will is, 'that many shall see it' and rejoice, 'and put their trust in the Lord.' Nor does anything under heaven more quicken the desires of those Who are justified, than to converse with those whom they believe to have experienced a still higher salvation. **This places that salvation full in their view, and increases their hunger and thirst after it;** an advantage which must have been entirely lost, had the person so saved buried himself in silence.

"Q. But is there no way to prevent these crosses which usually fall on those who speak of being thus saved?"

"A. It seems they cannot be prevented altogether, while so much of nature remains even in believers. But something might be done, if the Preacher in every place would, (1.) Talk freely with all who speak thus; and, (2.) Labour to prevent the unjust or unkind treatment of those in favour of whom there is reasonable proof.

"Q. What is reasonable proof? How may we certainly know one that is saved from all sin?"

"A. We **cannot infallibly know one that is thus saved,** (no, nor even one that is justified,) unless it should please God to endow us with the miraculous discernment of spirits. But we apprehend those would be sufficient proofs to any reasonable man, and such as would leave little room to doubt either the truth or depth of the work: (1.) If we had clear evidence of his exemplary behaviour for some time before this supposed change. This would give us reason to believe, he would not 'lie for God,' but speak neither more nor less than he felt; (2.) If he **gave a distinct account of the time and manner wherein the change was wrought,** with sound speech which could not be reproved; and, (3.) If it appeared that all his subsequent words and actions were **holy and unblamable.**

The short of the matter is this: (1.) I have abundant reason to believe, this person will not lie; (2.) He testifies before God, 'I feel no sin, but all love; I pray, rejoice, and give thanks without ceasing; and I have as clear an inward witness, that I am fully renewed, as that I am justified.' Now, if I have nothing to oppose to this plain testimony, I ought in reason to believe it.

It avails nothing to object, 'But I know several things wherein he is quite mistaken.' For it has been allowed, that all who are in the body are liable to mistake; and that a mistake in judgment may sometimes occasion a mistake in practice; though great care is to be taken that no ill use be made of this concession. For instance: Even one that is perfected in love may mistake with regard to another person, and may think him, in a particular case, to be more or less faulty than he really is. And hence he may speak to him with more or less severity than the truth requires. And in this sense, (though that be not the primary meaning of St. James,) **in many things we offend all.** This therefore is no proof at all, that the person so speaking is not perfect.
"Q. But is it not a proof, if he is surprised or fluttered by a noise, a fall, or some sudden danger?

"A. It is not; for one may start, tremble, change colour, or be otherwise disordered in body, while the soul is calmly stayed on God, and remains in perfect peace. Nay, the mind itself may be deeply distressed, may be exceeding sorrowful, may be perplexed and pressed down by heaviness and anguish, even to agony, while the heart cleaves to God by perfect love, and the will is wholly resigned to him. Was it not so with the Son of God himself? Does any child of man endure the distress, the anguish, the agony, which he sustained? And yet he knew no sin.

"Q. When may a person judge himself to have attained this?

"A. When, after having been fully convinced of inbred sin, by a far deeper and clearer conviction than that he experienced before justification, and after having experienced a gradual mortification of it, he experiences a total death to sin, and an entire renewal in the love and image of God, so as to rejoice evermore, to pray without ceasing, and in everything to give thanks. Not that 'to feel all love and no sin' is a sufficient proof. Several have experienced this for a time, before their souls were fully renewed. None therefore ought to believe that the work is done, till there is added the testimony of the Spirit, witnessing his entire sanctification, as clearly as his justification.

"Q. How are we to wait for this change?

"A. Not in careless indifference, or indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God. And if any man dream of attaining it any other way, (yea, or of keeping it when it is attained, when he has received it even in the largest measure,) he deceive his own soul. It is true, we receive it by simple faith: But God does not, will not, give that faith, unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which he hath ordained.

"This consideration may satisfy those who inquire, why so few have received the blessing. Inquire, how many are seeking it in this way; and you have a sufficient answer.

"Prayer especially is wanting. Who continues instant therein? Who wrestles with God for this very thing? So, ye have not, because ye ask not; or because ye ask amiss,' namely, that you may be renewed before you die. Before you die! Will that content you? Nay, but ask that it may be done now; to-day, while it is called to-day. Do not call this 'setting God a time.' Certainly, to-day is his time as well as to-morrow. Make haste, man, make haste! Let Thy soul break out in strong desire The perfect bliss to prove; Thy longing heart be all on fire To be dissolved in love!

The year 1762

In the year 1762, there was a great increase of the work of God in London. Many, who had hitherto cared for none of these things, were deeply convinced of their lost estate; many found redemption in the blood of Christ; not a few backsliders were healed; and a considerable number of persons believed that God had saved them from all sin. Easily foreseeing that Satan would be endeavouring to sow tares among the wheat, I took much pains to apprize them of the danger, particularly with regard to pride and enthusiasm. And while I stayed in town, I had reason to hope they continued both humble and sober-minded. But almost as soon as I was gone enthusiasm broke in. Two or three began to take their own imaginations for impressions from God, and thence to suppose that they should never die; and these, labouring to bring others into the same opinion, occasioned much noise and confusion. Soon after, the same persons, with a few more, ran into other extravagances; fancying they could not be tempted; that they should feel no more pain; and that they had the gift of prophecy, and of discerning of spirits. At my return to London, in autumn, some of them
stood reproved; but others were got above instruction. Meantime, a flood of reproach came upon me almost from every quarter; from themselves, because I was checking them on all occasions; and from others, because, they said, I did not check them. However, the hand of the Lord was not stayed, but more and more sinners were convinced; while some were almost daily converted to God, and others enabled to love him with all their heart.

To clear this point a little farther: I know many that love God with all their heart. He is their one desire, their one delight, and they are continually happy in him. They love their neighbour as themselves. They feel as sincere, fervent, constant a desire for the happiness of every man, good or bad, friend or enemy, as for their own. They rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks. Their souls are continually streaming up to God, in holy joy, prayer, and praise. This is a point of fact; and this is plain, sound, scriptural experience.

But even these souls dwell in a shattered body, and are so pressed down thereby, that they cannot always exert themselves as they would, by thinking, speaking, and acting precisely right. For want of better bodily organs, they must times think, speak, or act wrong; not indeed through a defect of love, but through a defect of knowledge. And while this is the case, notwithstanding that defect, and its consequences, they fulfil the law of love.

Yet as, even in this case, there is not a full conformity to the perfect law, so the most perfect do, on this very account, need the blood of atonement, and may properly for themselves, as well as for their brethren, say, 'Forgive us our trespasses.'

"Q. 14. **But can one that is saved from sin be tempted?**

"A. Yes; for Christ was tempted.

"Q. 15. **However, what you call temptation, I call the corruption of my heart. And how will you distinguish one from the other?**

"A. In some cases it is impossible to distinguish, without the direct witness of the Spirit. But in general one may distinguish thus: --

One commends me. Here is a temptation to pride. But instantly my soul is humbled before God. And I feel no pride; of which I am as sure, as that pride is not humility.

A man strikes me. Here is a temptation to anger. But my heart overflows with love. And I feel no anger at all; of which I can be as sure, as that love and anger are not the same.

A woman solicits me. Here is a temptation to lust. But in the instant I shrink back. And I feel no desire or lust at all; of which I can be as sure, as that my hand is cold or hot.

Thus it is, if I am tempted by a present object; and it is just the same, if; when it is absent, the devil recalls a commendation, an injury, or a woman, to my mind. In the instant the soul repels the temptation, and remains filled with pure love."

And the difference is still plainer, when I compare my present state with my past, wherein I felt temptation and corruption too.

"Q. 23. **But what great matter is there in this? Have we not all this when we are justified?**
"A. What, total resignation to the will of God, without any mixture of self-will? gentleness, without any touch of anger, even the moment we are provoked? love to God, without the least love to the creature, but in and for God, excluding all pride? love to man, excluding all envy, all jealousy, and rash judging? meekness, keeping the whole soul inviolably calm? and temperance in all things? Deny that any ever came up to this, if you please; but do not say, all who are justified do.

"Q. 29. Can those who are perfect grow in grace?
"A. Undoubtedly they can; and that not only while they are in the body, but to all eternity.

"Q. 30. Can they fall from it?
"A. I am well assured they can; matter of fact puts this beyond dispute. Formerly we thought, one saved from sin could not fall; now we know the contrary. We are surrounded with instances of those who lately experienced all that I mean by perfection. They had both the fruit of the Spirit, and the witness; but they have now lost both. Neither does any one stand by virtue of anything that is implied in the nature of the state. There is no such height or strength of holiness as it is impossible to fall from. If there be any that cannot fall, this wholly depends on the promise of God.

"Q. 31. Can those who fall from this state recover it?
"A. Why not? We have many instances of this also. Nay, it is an exceeding common thing for persons to lose it more than once, before they are established therein.

It is therefore to guard them who are saved from sin, from every occasion of stumbling, that I give the following advices. But first I shall speak plainly concerning the work itself.

I esteem this late work to be of God; probably the greatest now upon earth. Yet, like all others, this also is mixed with much human frailty. But these weaknesses are far less than might have been expected; and ought to have been joyfully borne by all that loved and followed after righteousness. That there have been a few weak, warm-headed men, is no reproach to the work itself, no just ground for accusing a multitude of sober-minded men, who are patterns of strict holiness. Yet (just the contrary to what ought to have been) the opposition is great; the helps few. Hereby many are hindered from seeking faith and holiness by the false zeal of others; and some who at first began to run well are turned out of the way.

This state is improveable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.

They never before had so deep, so unspeakable, a conviction of the need of Christ in all his offices as they have now. "Therefore, all our Preachers should make a point of preaching perfection to believers constantly, strongly, and explicitly; and all believers should mind this one thing, and continually agonize for it."

LONDON, Jan. 27, 1767.