

## Revisiting Perfection: A Constructive Approach to the Wesleyan Doctrine of Sanctification

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### Abstract

For Wesleyan evangelicals seeking inspiration from their theological roots, entire sanctification presents a significant challenge. Christian perfection faces neglect in Wesleyan circles, and among the most pressing problems for Wesleyans is how believers know that they have achieved the state of perfection, since Wesley originally rooted the knowledge of one's entire sanctification in the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Rather than dispensing with perfection, these challenges indicate the need for a constructive approach. The current study engages in this task using the theology of Karl Barth, arguing that a fresh articulation of the doctrine of Christian perfection, faithful to Wesley's intent, can be found in the christological doctrine of sanctification in the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth offers an alternative explanation of sanctification in *CD IV* that locates the believer's holiness concretely in the person and work of Jesus Christ, overturning the move to the subject and removing the problem of subjectivity in Wesley. Although Barth himself must be amended in the way he pictures the practical unfolding of the Christian life, Wesleyan theology in its traditional formulation possesses the necessary resources for overcoming these deficiencies and making beneficial use of Barth's dogmatic insights.

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For Wesleyan-Methodist evangelicals seeking inspiration from their Wesleyan roots, the doctrine of Christian perfection presents a significant challenge. Perfection faces such neglect in Wesleyan circles that theologians such as William Abraham have pronounced Wesley's cardinal teaching on holiness as effectively dead.<sup>1</sup> The problems with Wesleyan holiness teachings, he claims, are many. Historically,

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1 William J. Abraham, "The End of Wesleyan Theology," *WTS* 40 (2005): 17–18; William J. Abraham, "Christian Perfection," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. James E. Kirby and William J. Abraham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 587.

the loss of Christian perfection occurred after holiness groups began emphasizing the role of religious experience in attaining entire sanctification, leading to unhealthy extremes among revival movements in America. Mainstream Methodism responded by either abandoning the concept altogether or reinterpreting holiness under the influence of social gospel theology, giving it a much different focus than Wesley's original teachings.<sup>2</sup> What is more, debates within contemporary Wesleyan theology about how Christian perfection works, whether gradual or instantaneous, have added to the crisis.<sup>3</sup> If Wesleyans cannot agree on a basic interpretation of their own distinctive doctrine, then it appears to be of little use for their theological identity.

One of the most widely-accepted reasons for why perfection has been neglected in Wesleyan circles is a lack of adequate theological foundations. Christian perfection after Wesley needed to be integrated into robust theological reflection. Historically, however, Methodists largely failed to take up this task, and those who did engage in theological work made fatal mistakes that need to be addressed. Part of the problem, Abraham argues, was a radically anthropocentric turn in Wesleyan theology due to what he understands as a misconstruing of Wesley's focus on inner attitudes and heart motivations.<sup>4</sup> Abraham is correct in his diagnosis, but the problem was not simply with the theology of the later Methodists. Some of Wesley's original assertions contain problematic elements that plagued the tradition after him. His theology was in many ways captive to the modern turn to the subject, primarily through his doctrine of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Few studies have pinpointed the problem of entire sanctification in Wesley's doctrine of assurance, but if believers' knowledge of their holiness is grounded in subjectivity through an inner witness of the Spirit, as Wesley himself argued, it is impossible to know with any certainty that a person has achieved perfection. This is the central problem of Wesleyan theology that drove the excesses of the Holiness Movement and the mainstream Methodist reactions against perfection.

But there is hope in the current situation. If the problem was a lack of

2 Abraham, "Christian Perfection," 592.

3 The works of Randy Maddox and Kenneth Collins capture both sides of this passionate debate. Whereas Maddox argues that entire sanctification is a gradual work of "responsible grace," involving the give and take of human relationship with the divine, Collins says that entire sanctification for Wesley was an instantaneous work of God's free grace, accomplished in an instant by the sole activity of God. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007). The contrast is whether Wesley held to a type of synergism in soteriology (Maddox), or whether his teachings on holiness reflect a monergistic perspective (Collins). Comments on this debate will be made from time to time in this study, but at the outset, we may say that both of these polarities are present in Wesley's teachings, and is a conflict that neither he nor Wesleyans after him resolved. Unravelling these questions is beyond the scope of this study, but by clearing away some of the other difficulties in Wesleyan theology of sanctification, it is possible that new avenues of inquiry may be unearthed.

4 Abraham, "Christian Perfection," 593–94, 598–99.

theological reflection on holiness, resources exist for Wesleyan theologians to reconstruct perfection today. Towards this end, the current study recommends the theology of Karl Barth as a potential resource for Wesleyan theologians. Barth's doctrine of sanctification and the Christian life in *CD IV/2* and *CD IV/4* fragments provide theological resources for a fresh articulation of entire sanctification, overcoming the problem of subjectivity using a christological interpretation of holiness. This new understanding of Christian perfection is faithful to Wesley's original intent and concerns, especially his desire for a practical holiness of heart and life, as demonstrated by Barth's vision of the Christian life in his reconciliation ethics. Such a recommendation of Barth for Wesleyans may strike some as odd, as Barth is often seen as neglecting human agency. Nevertheless, while Barth may be critiqued at certain points, this study maintains that Wesleyan theology contains the necessary safeguards for overcoming Barth's own deficiencies, making his contributions invaluable for Wesleyan theologians.

### **The Problem of Christian Perfection in Wesleyan Theology**

The heart of Wesleyan theology exists in the two primary doctrines of Wesley's ministry: assurance and entire sanctification (Christian perfection). Wesley based the first doctrine, Christian assurance, on what he called the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, which he defined as that event occurring in the believer's heart when the witness of the Holy Spirit and the witness of the believer's own spirit coincide and testify together to an individual's salvation. Many scholars speak of the inner witness as it applies to the initial stages of the Christian life, but this inner witness of the Spirit occurred not only at justification and conversion according to Wesley, but also at the event of entire sanctification. Basing perfection in the inner witness meant that holiness could only be known through a modern turn to the subject, a theological decision that had detrimental consequences for the Christian experience of holiness.

The doctrine of the Spirit's witness was the result of Wesley's long quest for spiritual certainty. He struggled throughout his early life and career with doubts about his salvation, which led him to seek certainty through ascetic discipline and rigorous moral examination. Through the frustrations of his own efforts, Wesley concluded that assurance is not gained by one's moral strivings, but by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, declaring to the believer that he or she is saved. According to the doctrine of the inner witness, the believer could be assured of salvation through "an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly 'witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God.'"<sup>5</sup> When the Holy Spirit's

5 John Wesley, Sermon 10, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," in *Sermons I*, 1–33, ed. Albert C. Outler; vol. 1 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 274. Wesley is unclear on how important this inner witness is for the believer's own salvation. At times he appears

testimony coincides with the believer's own inner conviction, one may have absolute certainty of one's redeemed state.

The inner witness according to Wesley is the person's own "spiritual senses" that have been enlivened by the Spirit of God after the new birth, a theme that Wesley develops through his adaptation of Lockean epistemology.<sup>6</sup> When believers' intuitions concerning their spiritual state are correctly ordered by the Spirit, believers could have full certainty that they are saved, since God's own testimony would confirm the convictions of believers. Assurance through the inner witness was so important to Wesley's theology and ministry that he claimed it was the divinely-ordained mission of the Methodists to proclaim this hope to the church.

The Spirit's witness was a subjective reality for Wesley, occurring as it did within the believer's interiority. While evidence of salvation always involved the external fruits of the Spirit, love and good works, these works were only the "indirect" witness. Perhaps to avoid the tiring moralism he escaped from, Wesley made the inward impression of divine love upon the soul the primary witness of the Holy Spirit, and evidences external to the self only secondary.

Wesley correctly saw the need to avoid basing assurance in human moral efforts, but locating assurance in the subjectivity of the inner witness brought its own challenges. According to Thomas Oden, "the central problem is how one discerns the Spirit of God working within one's own spirit without denying either the finitude of one's own perception or the transcendence of God's own Spirit."<sup>7</sup> If the work of the Holy Spirit is a subjective impression upon the soul, it is difficult to determine how exactly the Spirit of God is working in the heart of the believer. The movements of the Spirit can very easily be mistaken for human psychological experiences, and telling the difference can be confusing. Locating the doctrine of assurance in the subjective inner witness of the Spirit therefore leaves Wesley open to the charge of psychologism—defining the Spirit's work by

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to say that the Spirit's testimony is necessary for salvation, and at other times that it is not necessary to always have the inward conviction of one's own salvation, though it is desirable. John Wesley, Sermon 8, "The First Fruits of the Spirit," in *Sermons I, 1–33*, ed. Albert C. Outler; vol. 1 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 238; John Wesley, Sermon 11, "The Witness of the Spirit, II," in *Sermons I, 1–33*, ed. Albert C. Outler; vol. 1 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 287.

6 Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," 282–83; John Wesley, "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion (1743)," in *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion*, ed. Gerald R. Cragg; vol. 11 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 56–57. For in-depth studies of Wesley's indebtedness to Locke and his unique adaptation of Lockean philosophy, see Kevin Twain Lowery, *Salvaging Wesley's Agenda: A New Paradigm for Wesleyan Virtue Ethics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008); Richard E. Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1984).

7 Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 230.

the psychological movements of the human mind, compromising the transcendence of the divine Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

The inner witness as normally described in accounts of Wesley's theology applies to the knowledge of one's justification. However, few treatments of the inner witness of the Spirit look closely at its application to entire sanctification. To follow through consistently on the Reformation theme of the *duplex gratia* (twofold grace), Wesley felt that justification and sanctification must function in similar ways: what applies to one must apply to the other.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when it comes to the inner witness, if the Holy Spirit gives testimony of salvation in its initial step, then the twofold grace dictates that the Spirit must also testify when the believer has been perfected in grace.

Wesley found problematic the Lutheran and Reformed claims that entire sanctification could not be attained in the present life and awaited the believer only after death.<sup>10</sup> He sought a different way of thinking of holiness that not only

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8 Whether or not Wesley's use of Locke for the purpose of spiritual assurance is a consistent outworking of Locke's thought could be debated. Greg Forster notes that Locke was suspicious of the "enthusiasts" who claimed direct divine inspiration apart from reason, as he felt that their claims to inspiration created division and a false, circular sense of certainty. To be sure, Locke did not think immediate inspiration was impossible. However, he imposed stringent conditions for any such claims, and even Wesley's use of external works as indirect, corroborating evidence did not meet Locke's standards of authenticating spiritual claims. And yet, Forster also argues that Locke's religious epistemology emphasizing personal communication with God opened the door to easier claims of direct inspiration. In this case, Wesley's application of Locke would not be too far afield. Greg Forster, *John Locke's Politics of Moral Consensus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 122–123, 126.

9 In this sense, this study agrees with Kenneth Collins' argument that entire sanctification is an attempt at a doctrine of "sanctification by faith alone." Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 187–88. Forging similarities between these two aspects of soteriology was an insightful development in Wesley, but as the study of Barth will demonstrate, the inner witness of the Spirit applied to sanctification obscured the christological unity between justification and sanctification. But positively, Wesley recognized the need for a deeper connection between the initial stage of salvation and the sanctified end of the Christian life.

10 Wesley held to a gradual view of sanctification, as did Calvin, but Wesley sought to make room for the actual completion of this process within the believer's lifetime. Wesley held more against Luther regarding soteriology. Implicitly within his sermon on "Justification by Faith," he appears to deny the Lutheran *simul iustus et peccator* when he states that "Least of all does justification imply, that God is deceived in those whom he justifies; that he thinks them to be what, in fact, they are not; that he accounts them to be otherwise than they are." John Wesley, Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith," in *Sermons*, 1–33, ed. Albert C. Outler; vol. 1 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 188. For Wesley, the Lutherans erred in thinking that a person could be simultaneously righteous and yet still a sinner; the two states are mutually exclusive. If one was justified and received initial sanctification (however imperfectly), then the person is no longer a sinner, but is in fact made actually righteous. Lutheranism, however, at least as Wesley understood it, taught that a person was declared righteous but remained a sinner for the rest of their earthly lives, never in themselves becoming righteous. Such a thought could only be antithetical to Wesley's insistence that the eschatological reality of full sanctification was available before death.

Insofar as Wesley was combatting antinomian tendencies within later Lutheranism, his objection against the *simul iustus et peccator* is correct. As an interpretation of Luther himself, however, Wesley's teaching is questionable. Finnish Luther interpretations have argued that Luther's doctrine of justification by faith involves drawing the believer into the life of God himself, functioning

admitted of some progress in the Christian life but gave the believer hope and certainty that this holiness could actually be achieved.<sup>11</sup> According to Wesley, sanctification begins in the believer's life at conversion and increases gradually as the believer cooperates with the grace of God.<sup>12</sup> However, he felt compelled by Scripture to say that there was a temporal moment in the believer's life when this purification was accomplished. After all, Jesus had commanded his followers to be "perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," reflecting the Levitical command for holiness (Matt 5:48). For Wesley, Christ's command for believers to be perfect implied that perfection is achievable by believers in their lifetime. The NT letters from Paul, Peter, and John likewise state that those who are justified have ceased from sin and cannot continue any longer in sin, and Wesley found no other explanation for these texts than the simple reality that one can and should strive for perfection in the here and now.<sup>13</sup>

Christian perfection was a heavily qualified term for Wesley. At its core, perfection was another term for holiness and so did not eliminate the possibility of either falling from perfection or progressing in it.<sup>14</sup> Further, perfection has an external and internal component to it. On the one hand, believers become holy when they have ceased from all outward sin, meaning that they simply do not commit sinful actions. Here Wesley is not referring to a cessation of only willful or habitual sin, but a complete cessation from all outward forms of sin.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, perfection also includes an internal component, which is the freedom

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as a type of *theosis* or deification. Thus, the imputation of righteousness does not rule out being made righteous in oneself; both realities accompany one another for Luther. Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 16–19, 55–58. If there is any accuracy in this reading of Luther, then perhaps there are more similarities between Luther and Wesley than Wesley himself recognized. Even so, the question of when this full sanctification may be experienced remained a dividing factor between himself and the reformers.

11 Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*, 334.

12 Hence Maddox's insistence on "responsible grace." Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 177–78. That there are synergistic elements in Wesley is undeniable. The debate between Maddox and Collins, however, is whether gradual sanctification naturally leads into the state of perfection, or if entire sanctification is a result of an instantaneous work of God's free grace. Again, without attempting to resolve the dilemma, the assumption of this paper is that the debate is not due to either side's negligence of the material, but an ambiguity within Wesley himself.

13 John Wesley, Sermon 40, "Christian Perfection," in *Sermons II*, 34–70, ed. Albert C. Outler; vol. 2 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 106.

14 John Wesley, "Christian Perfection," 104–105; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 187. Wesley attributes this to a shift from a Western view of perfection as static and unchanging to a more Eastern view of perfection as connoting progress after the experience of sanctification. Here is part of the great promise of Wesley's theology, as he tries to speak of perfection from a biblical perspective that shakes off Greek definitions of perfection, wrapped up as they are in the notions of timelessness. The result is that perfection is not a Stoic distancing of oneself from the world, somehow rising above the cares of earthly life, but a holiness that engages the creaturely and bodily nature of believers.

15 Wesley, "Christian Perfection," 107.

from all evil thoughts or tempers.<sup>16</sup> Christians may still suffer from lack of knowledge, error, and physical or mental infirmities, and are susceptible to temptations of varying degrees, but in a perfected state they are completely released of all sin, both in their minds and in their actions.<sup>17</sup>

Wesley's concepts of the inner witness and entire sanctification cannot be considered as separate, unrelated ideas; they possess a fundamental continuity with one another. Since the goal of Wesley's theology was to give people certainty that progress towards holiness was occurring in their lives, he made the inner witness part of the experience of entire sanctification, just as he did with justification. In "Thoughts on Christian Perfection," Wesley makes this connection clear:

When, after having been fully convicted 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 the feeling *all love* and *no sin* is a sufficient proof. Several have experienced this for a considerable time, and yet were afterwards convinced that their souls were not entirely 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.<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, the inner witness of the Spirit to the first act is a separate witness from the second, and the two witnesses are distinguished by the fact that entire sanctification requires visible works as the lead-up to this second work of grace. But the two testimonies function in similar ways. Although works are necessary leading up to perfection, these works are only an indirect witness to one's entire sanctification. Someone could exhibit perfect love and cease from sin and still be deceived, but if to the mortification of sin be added "a clear, direct witness of the

16 Wesley, "Christian Perfection," 118.

17 Wesley, "Christian Perfection," 100–104.

18 John Wesley, "Thoughts On Christian Perfection," in *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins; vol. 13 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 73; emphasis original. Wesley reaffirms this in his major treatise on the same subject. John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins; vol. 13 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 174. As with the witness to justification, Wesley is unclear if the believer must experience the inner witness to lay claim to entire sanctification. Nevertheless, it was one of the central ways of knowing one's entire sanctification, and Wesley taught that it could be expected. John Wesley, "Farther Thoughts upon Christian Perfection," in *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins; vol. 13 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 102.



renewal,” Wesley says, “I judge it as impossible this man should be deceived therein as that God should lie.”<sup>19</sup> Entire sanctification, at least in its epistemological foundation, is based on the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Applying the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to entire sanctification, however, also brings with it the same problem of subjectivity. Wesley wanted to make Christian perfection a work of the sovereign grace of God, but grounding it in an inner testimony of the Spirit makes it dependent upon the interiority of the believer and subject to the psychological movements of the soul. This foundation makes Christian perfection hard to pinpoint. If the works of love and cessation from sin, even without an inner conviction of one’s own holiness, are not sure indicators that God’s sanctifying work has taken place, it is impossible to know for certain if one has achieved perfection or not. It is even more difficult to see if, as Wesley said, the believer grows in grace even after this event takes place. How a person tells the difference between the witness of the Holy Spirit and the believer’s own psychological state is not altogether clear, and therefore, the inner witness fails as an epistemological ground for entire sanctification.

Wesley’s concern, however, was twofold: to accurately give voice to the perfective aspect of sanctification as described in the Scriptures, and to be consistent in applying the Reformation concept of the twofold grace by making justification and sanctification parallel acts of God. The main problem with Wesley’s understanding of perfection, however, is that it required him to posit a subjective inner witness to sanctification. Knowledge of sanctification requires a stronger basis outside of the believer’s own self and consciousness for it to function in the way Wesley desired. Creatively weaving together an understanding of divine initiative in sanctification can help Wesleyans to build more theological foundations into the doctrine of Christian perfection, guarding it against tendencies towards psychologism. Twentieth-century developments provide new ways of reconstructing some of Wesley’s concerns in this fashion, and for these new theological foundations, we turn to examine Karl Barth.

### **Reconstructing Christian Perfection**

Barth dealt thoroughly with the topic of the Holy Spirit and sanctification in a 1938 lecture on *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, where he addresses the relation between finite human experiences and the transcendence of God’s Spirit. Already in these early lectures, Barth began with the foundational insight that the Christian life must begin with the divine act. The Spirit’s divinity requires a complete distinction between the Holy Spirit and our spirit, meaning that “none of the external or internal ‘urges’ of our existence, as creatures that we know of, can be taken

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19 Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” 175.



by us in themselves and as they are already as the Creator's word."<sup>20</sup> While Barth never directly references Wesley, here he reiterates what I have claimed is the real problem behind Wesley's theology: there is no way of telling what is simply an "internal urge of our existence" and what is the event of the Word's sanctifying power. The result is that the human aspect of the Christian life obscures the divine action. A stronger sense of God's work in sanctification is needed for believers to know with certainty that they are sanctified entirely.<sup>21</sup>

Barth's formal doctrine of sanctification in *CD IV/2* provides the emphasis on God's work by centering the believer's holiness upon the salvific work of Jesus Christ. The covenant of grace secures the believer's sanctification through the exaltation of humanity in the Son of Man. Locating sanctification in the covenant of grace means that it is not we ourselves, but Jesus Christ, who is the sanctified human being—entirely sanctified and perfected as the exalted one:

The sanctification of man which has taken place in this One is their sanctification. But originally and properly it is the sanctification of Him and not of them. Their sanctification is originally and properly His and not theirs. For it was in the existence of this One, in Jesus Christ, that it really came about, and is and will be, that God Himself became man, that the Son of God became also the Son of Man, in order to accomplish in His own person the conversion of man to Himself.<sup>22</sup>

In this way, the purification of the sinner is made certain in the person and work of Jesus Christ, in his act of atonement and his resurrection from the dead, and it is by participation in the holy humanity of Jesus Christ that the believer comes to partake in Christ's holiness. To assert a more objective sense of sanctification, it is important to emphasize that holiness is proper first and foremost to the triune God, and secondarily and derivatively to his people. Knowledge of our entire sanctification is not found through analyzing the psychological movements of our souls, but by gazing upon the sanctified person of Jesus Christ, by whom we ourselves become holy through union with his body and participation in his righteousness.

Based on this christological restatement, the sanctification of humanity can even be spoken of as an "entire" sanctification or as "Christian perfection."<sup>23</sup>

20 Karl Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics*, ed. Robin W. Lovin (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 9.

21 Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, 7.

22 Karl Barth, "The Doctrine of Reconciliation," in *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), §66.2, 514.

23 Bruce McCormack makes a similar amendment to Wesley's theology. He argues that Barth and Wesley both attempt to articulate the temporal realization of sanctification's eschatological reality, but that Barth's method is decidedly more christocentric. For McCormack, the problem is that Wesley operates with an "essentialist" ontology, whereas Barth's ontology is "actualistic" and

Wesley and Barth both creatively make room for the perfective aspect of holiness, an insight often obscured in other Protestant understandings of the Christian life. Yet, Wesley's overblown pneumatology prevented him from making the christological move of linking entire sanctification to the atonement.<sup>24</sup> Barth grants this perfective aspect a christological basis in the covenant of grace, which makes knowledge of sanctification more reliable than it is in Wesley's inner witness. Human beings become entirely sanctified by the Christ event, and they become holy in their lives and hearts through receiving Christ by faith and continued participation in his holiness. Believers can affirm that they are perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect—not subjectively in themselves, but by participation in the reality accomplished in Christ. Barth's theology focuses sanctification in the Christ event rather than a subjective inner witness, thereby providing a secure theological foundation for the Wesleyan idea of perfection. For this reason, he is a valuable resource for Wesleyan theologians.

Using Barth as a resource for Wesleyan theology might seem to be an awkward

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“nonmetaphysical.” Bruce L. McCormack, “Sanctification After Metaphysics,” in *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), 121–22. McCormack's assessment is important and insightful, but we have diverged from him at crucial points. While an essentialist versus an actualistic ontology is central for McCormack's evaluation, applying the essentialist category to Wesley misses the way that Wesley eschewed Greek understandings of perfection as a perfection of being. Although McCormack might be correct that the Eastern (that is, non-essentialist) elements of Wesley have been exaggerated, at the very least we can say that Wesley was sufficiently critical of a metaphysics of being when he taught a dynamic perfection; he is explicit in his divergence from Greek thought at this point. Thus, although McCormack and I have both used Barth's christocentric doctrine to modify Wesley, our understandings of the problem appear to be different, as it has been my main contention that the inner witness of the Holy Spirit in Wesley represents a modern turn to the subject that prevented him from making the christological move. As a man of his age, Wesley was still captive to the shortcomings of the Enlightenment, and Christian theology more broadly would have to wait another century after Wesley before this turn began to be seriously questioned from within.

- 24 Noted earlier was Wesley's attempt to define justification and sanctification as fundamentally similar acts. Here is another point where we may affirm Wesley in his basic insights, if not in his final articulation. His impulses were not wrong, and it was consistent with his Reformation heritage to emphasize their similarity, even in their perfective aspect. The problem, however, was twofold: first, Wesley introduced an unhealthy amount of introspection and subjectivity into these doctrines using his inner witness of the Holy Spirit as their unifying basis. Secondly, Wesley temporally separated these two events and attributed their likeness to a similarity of function. Instead of proceeding from a general likeness, however, Wesley should have unified the twofold grace in Christ's salvific work, as found in Barth's theology. Barth strengthens the connection to the atonement by making justification and sanctification two distinct but inseparable moments of the one divine act of reconciliation, centered in the history of Jesus Christ. George Hunsinger, “A Tale of Two Simultaneities: Justification and Sanctification in Calvin and Barth,” *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 18, no. 3 (2002): 317, 324. Barth, *CD IV/2*, §66.1, 505. Wesley would not have distinguished the grace of entire sanctification from the grace of God in the atonement. He would have claimed that the grace of God operative in the cross is the same as the grace that perfects the believer, but one of the weaknesses of his theology is that he offered little conceptual basis for this claim, failing as he did to root sanctification in the Christ event. Thus, we may affirm Wesley in the goal of making justification and sanctification parallel acts of God, but opt for the Barthian method of making this assertion on the grounds of the Son's reconciling work.

fit, especially since Barth has a reputation for emphasizing divine initiative in ways that at times can seem to obscure human agency. In his now classic book, *Character and the Christian Life*, Stanley Hauerwas articulates one of the central critiques of Barth's theological ethics, which is the problem of the seeming lack of visible ethics in the Christian life.<sup>25</sup> Particularly in the realm of Wesleyan theology, it is not difficult to see some Wesleyans asking, given Wesley's own concern for practical holiness, how Barth's ethical theory becomes manifest in the life of the Christian. Barth's reconciliation ethics in *CD IV/4* and the lecture fragments, published in *The Christian Life*, display the strengths as well as the challenge of Barth for the task of constructive Wesleyan theology.

In his study of the final volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, John Webster observes that Barth's mature theology is through and through a work of moral theology, and therefore, ethics is never far throughout his dogmatics.<sup>26</sup> In the reconciliation ethics, Barth makes room for the visibility of theological ethics through the category of "invocation." Prayer is the central theme of Barth's account of the Christian life; it is, after all, a human action, but one that is by nature directed to the divine action and dialogically related to it. God is the decisive force of the Christian life, but rather than eliminating the possibility of human activity, God's action frees the human being to respond with gratitude and faithfulness.<sup>27</sup>

As Barth moves through the various petitions of the Lord's prayer, he mentions the divine action invoked as the basis of the Christian life, as well as the human response that participates in this divine act. Believers pray for the hallowing of God's name, but even as they pray they hallow the name of God by giving precedence to the Word of God in all areas of life, above all other gods, ideologies, and loyalties.<sup>28</sup> They pray, "Thy kingdom come," all the while seeking to conform their human righteousness and justice, however flawed they may be, to the righteousness of God.<sup>29</sup> Divine agency does not rule out human action in the Christian life but rather enables it to function freely.

Despite the attention that Barth gives to human action in *The Christian Life*, however, Barth's later theology tends to divide divine and human actions into separate events, undermining the participatory aspect of the Christian life so prominent in *CD IV/2*. The separation of Spirit baptism and water baptism in the baptism fragment as distinct divine and human actions reveals that human action

25 Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975), 169–71.

26 John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.

27 Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV, 4 Lecture Fragments*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), §76.3, 86–89.

28 Barth, *The Christian Life*, §77, 111–204.

29 Barth, *The Christian Life*, §78, 205–71.

and God's action can tend to be elided in Barth's reconciliation ethics. Each of their respective agencies is placed in different spheres, with no overlap. However, if Barth places sanctification in the divine category, he undermines human participation in Christ's holiness, since the human acts that correspond to Christ's work of sanctification must belong to an altogether different sphere. Sanctification may apply to Christ, but the way that it applies to believers becomes strained if the divine and human actions are pulled too far apart.

In part, this problem for Barth is related to his loss of sacramentality. John Yocum's in-depth study on ecclesial mediation argues that as he reached his mature theology, Barth slowly drained the church of its sacramental area as divine and human actions became viewed as mutually exclusive realms.<sup>30</sup> With the loss of a sacramental understanding of reality, it became harder for Barth to avoid overemphasizing God's action, since the human being was increasingly understood as being unable to mediate divine actions. In the context of our discussion, this tendency undermines the participatory nature of sanctification, since human actions become incapable of manifesting the holiness of God. Holiness applies to Jesus Christ, but it is difficult to establish a conceptual basis for holiness in believers without a robust sacramentality that allows the human to mediate divine actions.

The loss of agency given to the Holy Spirit and the human agent in sanctification, I would argue, is a side effect of Barth's dismissal of sacramental reality. Wesleyan theology, however, is not lacking in this area, at least in its classical articulation. Wesley retained a strong sacramentology from Anglicanism and continued to make it evident in his discussions of the means of grace. These means of grace are "outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace." These continued to serve as visible, instituted practices where God's work and human actions came together.<sup>31</sup> Here, human actions serve as channels of the divine action, and God conveys grace to the believer through these actions. The means of grace, in other words, are where sanctification is communicated from the divine to the human and becomes visible.

Through these sacramental actions, human beings receive God's grace and enact their discipleship in tangible means, both in works of piety (Scripture reading, prayer, fasting, meditation) and in acts of mercy (feeding for the poor, caring for the sick, hospitality). Such a concept makes the Christian life concrete by

30 John Yocum, *Ecclesial Mediation in Karl Barth* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), xi–xv.

31 John Wesley, Sermon 16, "Means of Grace," in *Sermons I, 1–33*, ed. Albert C. Outler; vol. 1 in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 381.

retaining a sacramental view of reality that tends to be obscured in the later Barth, allowing for human manifestation of God's holiness.

Thus, if Barth's theology is to be of any use to Wesleyan theologians, they must repudiate the tendency to adopt the anemic sacramental views common in evangelicalism and return to the rich sacramentality that Wesley himself valued. Anglican sacramentalism was a crucial part of Wesley's vision for the Christian life, and no recovery or development of his insights on Christian perfection can occur if Wesleyans continue to neglect the importance of sacraments in their ecclesiological practice. A reconstructed doctrine of Christian perfection must not only draw on Barth's Christ-centered view of sanctification but must also reassert a sacramental understanding of the world and God's relationship to humanity. Doing so unlocks the potential of Wesley and Barth's theology for a fresh understanding of sanctification in contemporary Wesleyan theology.

### **A Revival in Wesleyan Sanctification**

Perhaps it is as William Abraham has said: Christian perfection is dead, and Wesleyan theology with it. This study has been an exploration of whether we might resurrect Christian perfection. The answer I have given is a yes and a no. Christian perfection can live again—that is, there is worth in examining John Wesley's theology and engaging in the same questions that he asked. He offers plenty of valid insights on sanctification that not only are resonant with the church's tradition but also add significant depth to our understanding of the Christian life. However, Wesleyan evangelicals must not become adherents to a dead tradition. They must amend and develop Wesley's thought as part of a living tradition, most importantly by reversing the turn to the subject embodied in the inner witness and exploring different theological foundations for some of their most core convictions.

Doubtless, some Wesleyans will not be convinced by these proposals. Nevertheless, Barth challenges us to ask deep questions regarding the theological foundations of sanctification and the Christian life. His christological understanding of sanctification is a promising way of developing Christian perfection in such a way that reverses the subjective elements of the doctrine while also maintaining Wesley's core teaching that holiness is not hopelessly out of reach but is available for believers today, if they will only gaze upon their crucified and risen Lord and reach out to him in faith. Barth is not the savior of Wesleyan Christianity, and there are times when Barth's theology itself falls short. Where he is less helpful, Wesleyans can fall back on the riches of their own tradition and recover resources for the renewal of their theology.

Finally, these proposals offer a way of reinterpreting Wesleyan theology that bolsters the work of theological reflection within the tradition. One of William Abraham's keys for retrieving Christian perfection is serious endeavors of

systematic and historical theology that not only focus on post-Wesley Methodist dogmatics but also attempt to heal the tradition of its anthropocentric turn through immersion into the great themes of the Christian faith.<sup>32</sup> This study is an effort to engage in this ongoing task. Regardless, whether Barth answers all of our questions and concerns or not, he asks the question all Wesleyans must answer: whether there is not a more rigorous critique that is first needed before Wesleyans can reclaim Christian perfection.

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32 Abraham, "Christian Perfection," 598–99.