

john wesley a plain account of christian perfection

****John Wesley: A Plain Account of Christian Perfection****

john wesley a plain account of christian perfection stands as one of the most influential works in the history of Methodism and Christian spirituality. Written by John Wesley himself, this treatise explores the concept of entire sanctification or Christian perfection—a spiritual state that Wesley believed believers could attain in this life. Far from being a complex theological dissertation, Wesley's account is straightforward, heartfelt, and designed to be accessible to everyday Christians seeking a deeper, more authentic walk with God.

In this article, we will delve into the essence of John Wesley's "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," unpack its theological significance, and explore why it continues to inspire believers today. Along the way, we'll touch on related themes such as sanctification, holiness, and the practical implications of striving for perfection in Christian life.

Understanding the Context of John Wesley's Work

To truly appreciate "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," it helps to understand the historical and spiritual context in which John Wesley wrote it. Wesley, an 18th-century Anglican cleric, was the founder of the Methodist movement, which emphasized personal holiness and social justice. His teachings on Christian perfection were groundbreaking at the time because they challenged the notion that sanctification was a lifelong struggle with no attainable peak.

Wesley's primary goal was to encourage believers that through God's grace, faith, and the work of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to live a life free from willful sin. This was not about human achievement but a divine transformation that purifies the heart and aligns it fully with God's love.

The Purpose Behind "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection"

Wesley wrote this treatise in response to misunderstandings and criticisms about his teachings on holiness. Some critics accused him of promoting an unrealistic and dangerous standard. To clarify, Wesley sought to present his doctrine plainly and scripturally, hence the title. His aim was to show that Christian perfection is:

- Attainable in this life, not just a future hope.
- Grounded in love—the love of God and neighbor.
- Not sinless perfection in a flawless sense, but freedom from intentional sin.

This clear and compassionate approach made the work accessible and reassuring to many believers struggling with the demands of spiritual growth.

The Core Teachings of Christian Perfection in Wesley's Account

At the heart of John Wesley's "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" lies a profound yet simple message about what it means to be perfect in a Christian sense.

What Wesley Means by Christian Perfection

Christian perfection, according to Wesley, is primarily about perfect love. He described it as a heart "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor" that is so powerful it excludes all sinful motives and actions. This does not mean believers become omniscient or flawless in every human aspect but that their intentions are pure and their lives marked by holiness.

Sanctification and Entire Sanctification

Wesley distinguished between justification—or being made right with God—and sanctification, the process of becoming holy. Entire sanctification represents a second work of grace after justification, where the believer's heart is cleansed from inbred sin and filled with perfect love. This is sometimes called the "second blessing" or "second work of grace" in Methodist theology.

This experience is not an end but a new beginning, empowering Christians to live a life characterized by:

- Humility
- Patience
- Peace
- Joy in the Holy Spirit

How Christian Perfection Impacts Daily Life

One of the most practical aspects of Wesley's teaching is how Christian perfection affects everyday living. It transforms relationships, work ethics, and personal habits. Wesley emphasized that such holiness is visible in actions—kindness, honesty, forgiveness, and social responsibility.

He believed that truly perfected Christians would be powerful agents of change in their communities, reflecting Christ's love in tangible ways.

The Relevance of John Wesley's Account in Modern Christian Life

Even centuries after its publication, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" remains highly relevant for believers seeking a deeper spiritual walk and practical holiness.

Applying Wesley's Teachings Today

Many modern Christians struggle with the idea of perfection because of misconceptions or unrealistic standards. Wesley's plain account offers a balanced view that encourages believers to pursue holiness without falling into despair or legalism.

Tips for applying these teachings include:

- **Focus on love:** Make love for God and others the primary goal of your spiritual journey.
- **Seek ongoing sanctification:** Recognize that growth in holiness is a continuous process empowered by grace.
- **Practice self-examination:** Regularly reflect on your motives and actions to align them more closely with God's will.
- **Engage in community:** Join groups or churches that support spiritual growth and accountability.

Impact on Methodist and Holiness Movements

Wesley's account laid the foundation for the Methodist emphasis on holiness and entire sanctification. It influenced not only Methodism but also the broader Holiness movement and even Pentecostal traditions. The idea that Christians can experience a transformative encounter with God that leads to a holy life continues to inspire worship, preaching, and theological reflection.

Debates and Misunderstandings around Christian Perfection

Given the complexity of the topic, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" has generated significant discussion and sometimes controversy.

Common Misinterpretations

Some critics argue that Wesley's teaching promotes spiritual pride or unrealistic expectations. However, Wesley himself warned against boasting and emphasized humility as an essential fruit of perfection. He clarified that Christian perfection is about the heart's intention, not flawless performance.

Others mistakenly believe that perfection means sinless perfection in every action, but Wesley rejected this notion. Instead, he taught that the believer can still make mistakes or err unknowingly but will not willfully sin.

The Balance between Grace and Effort

Wesley's theology is often misunderstood as either too works-based or too grace-oriented. In truth, he maintained a delicate balance: salvation and sanctification are entirely the work of God's grace, but believers are called to actively pursue holiness through disciplined spiritual practices.

This synergy between divine grace and human responsibility is a hallmark of Wesleyan theology and central to understanding the plain account of Christian perfection.

Exploring the Spiritual Benefits of Christian Perfection

Beyond doctrinal definitions, John Wesley's account highlights the profound spiritual benefits that come with pursuing Christian perfection.

Deepened Relationship with God

Entire sanctification fosters an intimate communion with God, marked by peace, joy, and confidence in His love. It removes the barriers of guilt and fear that often hinder believers from experiencing God's fullness.

Empowerment for Service and Witness

Wesley believed that a perfected heart naturally leads to effective Christian service. The believer becomes a channel of God's love, inspiring others and advancing the gospel through both word and deed.

Freedom from the Power of Sin

One of the most encouraging promises in Wesley's teaching is that Christian perfection breaks the power of sin's dominion in the believer's life. While temptation may remain, the desire to sin and the power to act on it are overcome by love and grace.

John Wesley's "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" invites believers into a transformative journey toward holiness that is both hopeful and attainable. It challenges us to rethink perfection not as an impossible ideal but as a God-given reality rooted in love and grace. For anyone seeking a deeper, more authentic Christian life, revisiting Wesley's plain account offers timeless wisdom and encouragement.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of John Wesley's 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection'?

The main theme of John Wesley's 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' is the doctrine of Christian perfection, which emphasizes the possibility of attaining a state of perfect love and holiness in this life through the grace of God.

When was 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' written by John Wesley?

John Wesley first wrote 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' in 1766 as a response to misunderstandings about the doctrine of Christian perfection.

Why did John Wesley write 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection'?

Wesley wrote the book to clarify misconceptions and defend the Methodist teaching on Christian perfection, explaining that it is a real and attainable experience of entire sanctification by God's grace.

How does John Wesley define Christian perfection in 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection'?

Wesley defines Christian perfection as a heart habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor, enabling a believer to live free from voluntary sin and fully devoted to God.

Is 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' still

influential in modern Methodism?

Yes, Wesley's work remains influential within the Methodist tradition and other holiness movements, shaping their understanding of sanctification and spiritual growth.

What scriptural basis does John Wesley use to support Christian perfection in the book?

Wesley references various scriptures such as Matthew 5:48, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, and 1 John 4:18 to support the biblical foundation for Christian perfection and entire sanctification.

How does 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection' address misconceptions about holiness?

The book addresses misconceptions by explaining that Christian perfection does not mean absolute sinlessness or flawlessness but a heart purified by love, free from willful sin and motivated by grace.

Additional Resources

****John Wesley: A Plain Account of Christian Perfection****

john wesley a plain account of christian perfection stands as a seminal work in the history of Christian theology, particularly within the Methodist tradition. Penned by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, this treatise seeks to clarify and expound upon the concept of Christian perfection—a doctrine that has often been misunderstood or misrepresented. Wesley's plain and accessible prose aims to demystify the spiritual goal of holiness and sanctification, making it comprehensible not only to clergy and theologians but also to laypeople seeking deeper spiritual growth. This article undertakes a comprehensive and analytical review of Wesley's influential text, exploring its theological underpinnings, historical context, and enduring relevance.

An Historical Context of Wesley's Treatise

The 18th century was a period marked by religious fervor and revivalism in England and the American colonies. John Wesley emerged as a central figure within this landscape, spearheading the Methodist movement and emphasizing personal piety and social holiness. "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," first published in 1766, was written during a time when Wesley sought to address widespread confusion about the nature and attainability of holiness in the Christian life.

Wesley's insistence on the possibility of perfect love—defined as a heart filled with the love of God and neighbor, free from voluntary sin—challenged prevailing notions that sanctification was either instantaneous or unattainable in this life. His work was a response to critics who accused Methodists of claiming sinless perfection prematurely or of

promoting an unrealistic spiritual ideal.

Theological Foundations of Christian Perfection

At its core, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" articulates Wesley's doctrine of sanctification as a process culminating in perfect love. Unlike the Catholic concept of the Immaculate Conception or Eastern Orthodox hesychasm, Wesley framed Christian perfection not as flawlessness or absolute sinlessness but as a heart fully oriented toward God, empowered by divine grace to resist willful sin.

Defining Christian Perfection

Wesley describes Christian perfection as "perfect love," which involves:

- The complete cleansing of the heart from original sin and actual sin.
- A life motivated by pure love for God and one's neighbor.
- The absence of voluntary transgressions, though not necessarily the absence of human infirmities or mistakes.

This definition diverges from the idea that perfection implies absolute flawlessness. Instead, Wesley acknowledges human imperfection while emphasizing the transformative power of sanctification.

Process and Attainability

Wesley contends that Christian perfection is both a gift of grace and a practical goal attainable in this life. He argues against fatalism or complacency, encouraging believers to actively pursue holiness through:

1. Faith and repentance.
2. Regular participation in the means of grace, such as prayer, scripture reading, and communion.
3. Continuous self-examination and seeking the Holy Spirit's empowerment.

His balanced approach rejects both legalism and antinomianism, presenting Christian perfection as a dynamic and ongoing spiritual journey.

Comparative Analysis: Wesley's Account and Other Christian Traditions

When juxtaposed with other theological traditions, Wesley's "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" occupies a unique niche. For example, the Catholic Church emphasizes sanctification through the sacraments and the cooperation of human will with grace, often reserving the term "perfection" for the beatific vision after death. Eastern Orthodoxy highlights theosis, a process of becoming godlike, yet acknowledges the mystery of ultimate union with God.

In contrast, Wesley's Protestant framework democratizes holiness, making it accessible and expected for all believers within their earthly lives. This emphasis on perfect love as the hallmark of Christian maturity reflects Wesley's pastoral concern and pragmatic spirituality.

Strengths and Limitations

Among the strengths of Wesley's work is its clarity and pastoral sensitivity. By using straightforward language and relatable examples, Wesley dismantled theological barriers that had alienated ordinary Christians. His emphasis on love as the essence of perfection resonates with biblical ethics and practical faith.

However, critics have pointed out potential ambiguities, particularly regarding the tension between the idea of perfection and human fallibility. Some argue that Wesley's optimistic theology may inadvertently pressure believers toward spiritual legalism or unrealistic expectations. Additionally, the subjective nature of discerning "perfect love" poses challenges for definitive measurement or assurance.

Impact and Legacy in Contemporary Christian Thought

The influence of "John Wesley's A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" extends beyond Methodist circles, informing broader evangelical and holiness movements. Its insistence on sanctification as a present and attainable reality continues to inspire spiritual disciplines and revivalist zeal.

Methodism and Modern Holiness Movements

Within Methodism, Wesley's treatise remains a doctrinal cornerstone, shaping preaching, teaching, and discipleship. Holiness denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene and the Salvation Army trace their theological heritage to Wesley's emphasis on entire sanctification.

Moreover, contemporary Christian authors and pastors often revisit Wesley's ideas to

address modern spiritual struggles, including moral failure, spiritual dryness, and ethical ambiguity.

Challenges in Application Today

Applying Wesley’s vision of Christian perfection in a pluralistic and secular society presents challenges. The cultural shift toward relativism and individualism can undermine the communal and disciplined aspects of holiness Wesley advocated. Additionally, the psychological complexity of modern believers may require nuanced pastoral approaches beyond Wesley’s original framework.

Nonetheless, the enduring call to love God and neighbor remains timeless, and Wesley’s "plain account" provides a foundational blueprint for those seeking to integrate faith and practice.

Key Features of Wesley’s Treatise

To distill the essence of "john wesley a plain account of christian perfection," several key features stand out:

- **Accessibility:** Written in plain English, the text avoids dense theological jargon.
- **Practicality:** Offers actionable guidance on spiritual growth.
- **Scriptural Basis:** Rooted deeply in biblical texts and exegesis.
- **Emphasis on Love:** Positions perfect love as the defining mark of Christian maturity.
- **Balance:** Avoids extremes of legalism and antinomianism.

These features contribute to the work’s continued relevance and pedagogical value.

Pros and Cons Summary

Pros	Cons
Clear articulation of sanctification	Potential for misunderstanding perfection as sinlessness
Encourages active spiritual pursuit	Pressure on believers to attain high spiritual standards
Strong biblical grounding	Subjectivity in evaluating spiritual perfection

The nuanced strengths and limitations reflect the complexity of the topic and Wesley's pastoral intentions.

As the modern Christian landscape continues to evolve, revisiting foundational texts like John Wesley's "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" offers valuable insights into the pursuit of holiness. Its balanced theological perspective, practical approach, and heartfelt call to love remain a beacon for believers navigating the challenges of sanctification in an imperfect world.

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to support certain views - such as those involving the love of oneself, others and the Lord - and in keeping with his style intersperses his own poetry with the explanations. A distinguished author, preacher and cleric in 18th century England, John Wesley created a deep and abiding body of work which remains emblematic of Christian thought of his era. He is most remembered today for his role in founding Methodism, and his scholarship which continues to hold an influential place in theological study.

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