

Entire Sanctification In Our Modern Time

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Introduction

This paper is a starting point, not a conclusion of research. The only conclusion it contains is a description of where I am in my spiritual journey, relating to my church ministry and theological studies. I am a second generation Nazarene; my parents started the pioneering work of the Church of the Nazarene in the Netherlands when I was five years old. The driving and shaping force of the ministry of both of my parents was a purifying and renewing 'cross-experience' which they had prior to their acquaintance with the Church of the Nazarene. This experience, which they learned to define as entire sanctification, was their hermeneutic for ministry.¹ This atmosphere at home and in the church has had a lasting influence on my life. At the age of twelve I experienced entire sanctification as much as a boy of that age can understand and experience it.

As a theology student at the university I had intended to study Wesley and entire sanctification. But, because of the attraction of Erasmus, I became a student of the Reformation and never made it into the 18th century. In this period Wesley as a theologian was not appealing to me, nor the literature I read on Wesley and entire sanctification.

As a pastor in Rotterdam, I found myself more involved with laying a solid foundation of grace in the lives of the people, than with challenging them to go on unto perfection. The times I did preach holiness or explain it in membership classes I was strengthened in my impression that the traditional way of presenting entire sanctification was not relevant to the modern congregation. In my preaching I always tried to search for different terminology and a non-traditional approach. In these years of

¹ In *Gedreven door de Geest*, a booklet published in 1993 by the Dutch district of the Church of the Nazarene, my father, Cor Holleman, says of his early ministry years: "I recognised some patterns in the Bible: everything leads to Calvary, and in the life of all followers of Jesus there is a moment of entire surrender, a moment of dying, in order to arise in a new phase of life. For me this was like a template which I imposed on Scripture, and which gave me a new understanding. During several years, reading the Bible with this understanding was the source for my preaching. Then, I was someone with just one message in a variety of ways" (40,41).

pastoring, many questions arose within me. Wesley and the literature I read on entire sanctification were not appealing because they didn't really help me in my search.

I look upon my current assignment at European Nazarene Bible College as an opportunity to think through the questions I had as a pastor, and to develop relevant answers that will strengthen the proclamation of holiness to the modern generation of Christians in our churches. The first result I can report is that I have rediscovered Wesley as an important theological guide, and that I enjoy studying his writings. The second result is this paper, which is actually more a starting point for further research.

Purpose of this paper

I will begin this paper with a historical survey of Wesley's development in his thinking on entire sanctification. This will show the important role experience played for Wesley in defining entire sanctification. The second part is more methodological and focuses on the use of our current experience in defining entire sanctification. I will conclude with some tentative thoughts on how we could describe entire sanctification for a new and modern generation of believers, based on what I have said in the paper.

Wesley's development in his thinking on entire sanctification

In dealing with Wesley's teaching on entire sanctification Randy Maddox provides a chronological perspective, emphasising both continuity and fluctuation in Wesley's thinking.² He distinguishes three phases: Wesley's first phase is characterised by varying emphases on holiness, and by an ambiguity between affirming and denying the possibility of perfection. For the early Wesley sanctification is the way to justification, described as assurance.

² R. Maddox, *Responsible Grace, John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, Abingdon Press, 1994) 180-187. In my presentation of the development of Wesley's thinking on Christian perfection, I follow Maddox. I also wish to acknowledge the great help of his extensive references in the footnotes.

His heart warming experience at Aldersgate, and other related events of 1738, lead him into the second phase in which he distinguishes between justification and sanctification, based on experience. In his preface to the 1740 collection of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, Wesley says: "... We do not know a single instance, in any place, of a person's receiving, in one and the same moment, remission of sins, the abiding witness of the Spirit, and a new, a clean heart".³ In describing the leading up to, and the experience of, entire sanctification, Wesley uses experiential language.⁴ Although Wesley defends the possibility of attaining Christian perfection during this period of his life, he is quite reluctant to accept claims of attainment.⁵

From 1757 onwards, Maddox noticed in Wesley's thinking "a subtle – but significant – shift of emphasis", introducing the third phase. Now Wesley is much more affirmative in his claim that believers can experience the second blessing, and he encourages his people to expect this to happen in their lifetime.

Wesley's pastoral concern

I would like to take a closer look at Wesley's shift in about 1760, from the second to the third and final phase in his development. It is my impression that Wesley made these changes as a pastor who is concerned about the spiritual condition of the flock. What concerned Wesley in the

³ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* § 9, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd edition, Editor Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; Reprinted, Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1986) 14:326. Cited hereafter as *Works* (Jackson).

⁴ *Ibid.* § 10, 11. "Indeed, how God *may* work, we cannot tell; but the general manner wherein he *does* work is this:..." and then follows a general account of how Christians experience going from justification to entire sanctification.

⁵ In the *Minutes of the First Annual Conference of 1744*, in *John Wesley*, Editor Albert Outler. A Library of Protestant Thought Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 141, hereafter cited as *John Wesley*, Wesley asks: "Q 9. Can we know one who is thus saved? What is a reasonable proof? A. We cannot, without the miraculous discernment of spirits, be infallibly certain of those who are thus saved. (...) Q. 10 How should we treat those who think they have attained? A. Exhort them to forget the things that are behind, to watch and pray always that God may search the ground of their hearts".

See also: Letter to Thomas Olivers (24 March 1757), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, Editor John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1909-16) 3:212, hereafter cited as *Letters* (Telford); and *Journal* (2 December 1744), *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Editor in Chief Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff.) 20:44, cited hereafter as *Works*.

early years of his ministry was that people might claim perfection, and not meet the criteria he used to describe it. In his *Journal*, on 2 December 1744, he asks himself the question why he does not rejoice and praise God about someone who testifies to entire sanctification. His answer is: “Perhaps because I have an exceeding complex idea of sanctification, or a sanctified man. And so for fear he should not have attained all I include in that idea, I cannot rejoice in what he has attained”.⁶ Another fear was the possibility of backsliding. In a letter to Thomas Olivers, Wesley writes: “We should neither be forward nor backward in believing those who think they have attained the second blessing... Barely to feel no sin, or to feel constant peace, joy and love, will not prove the point. We have known some who remained in that state for several years, and yet have afterwards lost almost all they had received”.⁷

It seems that around 1760 such concerns are replaced by another, far greater concern, causing a transition in his thinking. As an introduction to an abstract from the Journal of Elisabeth Harper, published in 1772 he writes: “To set the doctrine of Christian Perfection too high is the ready way to drive it out of the world.”⁸ As a reasonable suggestion for this change Maddox says: “It would appear that Wesley became convinced around 1760 that he had been operating for the past several years with some assumptions about Christian Perfection that were too exacting, and that these were hindering his people from experiencing the blessing which he believed Scripture promised them.”⁹ In his *Minutes of Several Conversations*, published later in his life, Wesley says: “If there be such a blessed change before death, should we not encourage all believers to expect it? and the rather, because constant experience shows, the more earnestly they expect this, the more swiftly and steadily does the gradual work of God go on in their soul... Whereas, just the contrary effects are observed whenever this expectation ceases. They are ‘saved by hope’, by this hope of a total change, with a gradually increasing salvation. *Destroy this hope, and that salvation stands still, or, rather, decreases daily.* Therefore whoever would advance the gradual change in believers should strongly insist on the instantaneous”.¹⁰

⁶ *Journal* (2 December 1744); *Works* 20:44.

⁷ Letter to Thomas Olivers (24 March 1757), *Letters* (Telford) 3:212.

⁸ *Works* (Jackson) 14:261.

⁹ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 183.

¹⁰ *Minutes of Several Conversations* Q 56, *Works* (Jackson), 8:329, italics mine.

As a first conclusion, we can say that Wesley's pastoral concern was to encourage his people in their spiritual journey, so that they fully appropriate God's gift in their lives. Or to put it in others words, Wesley wanted his people to witness God's victorious power over sin in their lives. In his ministry Wesley became convinced that proclaiming entire sanctification as an instantaneous moment is the best means to lead his people to this end of full appropriation of the salvation offered by God. His real concern was not entire sanctification, but what we now call the spirituality of his people, the practice of the presence of God in their lives.¹¹

Wesley's theological modification

Proclaiming entire sanctification requires a specific theology. The shift in Wesley's ministry from proclaiming Christian perfection to proclaiming entire sanctification as an instantaneous moment involved more than just an increased optimism about the possibility of attaining Christian perfection. Connected with this mental change is a slight theological transition. Maddox calls attention to two theological modifications, that accompanied his more optimistic view concerning the experience of full salvation.¹²

First, Wesley reversed his previous claim that one entirely sanctified could not fall again into sin. In *Farther thoughts on Christian Perfection*, published in 1763, he asks:

Can they fall from it [perfection]? 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.

¹¹ I am using the words I found in two publications that have helped in describing Wesley's focus in contemporary words. These are Franz Hildebrandt, *Christianity according to the Wesleys, The Harris Franklin Rall Lectures, 1954 delivered at Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Illinois* (London: Epworth Press, 1956; Reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 31; and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility, A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 100.

¹² Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 183-185.

There is no such height or strength of holiness as it is impossible to fall from... Can those who fall from this state recover it? 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.¹³

Second, Wesley qualifies the type of sin from which Christian perfection brings deliverance. In *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, published in 1760 he is distinguishing between sin “properly so called” and “improperly so called”.¹⁴ Wesley describes the first as a “voluntary transgression of a known law”, and the second as an “involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown”. He is using this distinction in answering the question of whether there is a perfection in this life which excludes all sin. His answer is: “I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions, which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality... Such transgressions you may call sins if you please. I do not for the reason above mentioned”.¹⁵

These theological modifications allowed Wesley to bring Christian perfection more within the reach of believers. The first removed a lot of pressure off those who testified to entire sanctification, and off persons like Wesley who acknowledged their accounts. It helped to focus the attention on the present spiritual situation of the believers, and not on the future, asking the question if those persons will not sin any more. Entire sanctification was for Wesley no longer a lasting state a believer reaches, but a description of the current faith. Answering an objection that in the entirely sanctified believers, sin is not destroyed but only suspended till the moment they sin again, Wesley answers: “Call it which you please. They are all love *to-day*; and they take no thought for *the morrow*” (italics mine).¹⁶ The second modification helped Wesley to lower the standards of Christian perfection, but to avoid perfectionism.¹⁷ The

¹³ *Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection* Q. 30, 31, as quoted in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Works* (Jackson) 11:426.

¹⁴ In *John Wesley, Q. 5*, p. 287. The following quotes are taken from this passage also.

¹⁵ For the history of this distinction between sin as a voluntary and involuntary transgression see A. Outler’s introduction to Sermons 13 and 14 in *Works* 1:315.

¹⁶ *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* §26, *Works* (Jackson) 11:443.

¹⁷ Sermon 76, “On Perfection” II,9,16, *Works* 3:79,83. Wesley concludes §16, talking to his imaginary opponent: “For your idea [of perfection] includes abundantly too much - even freedom from those infirmities which are not separable from a spirit that is

driving force behind these theological re-definitions was his pastoral concern.

Substance and Structure

In trying to understand Wesley's development of his thoughts on entire sanctification, and transferring his message to our time, I have found the distinction between "substance" and "structure" or "circumstance" to be very helpful. It was Wesley himself who made this distinction. In his *Minutes of Several Conversations*, printed for the first time in 1789, Wesley says that the *substance* is settled, meaning that "all ... agree to ... salvation from all sin, by the love of God and man filling our heart... and that it may be attained before we die". And he continues: "But, as to the *circumstance* (italics mine), is the change gradual or instantaneous?"¹⁸ To my knowledge it was both Rob Staples and Mildred Bangs Wynkoop who reintroduced this distinction into Wesleyan theology in 1972.¹⁹

By "substance" is meant the content of sanctification, its biblical description. The "structure" refers to how Christians can reach this goal in their lives. The substance describes God's gift of Christian perfection to the Christian, while the structure describes the human appropriation of this Gift, which is called entire sanctification.²⁰

Most of the theological tensions among the Methodists dealt with the structure of sanctification, more specifically with this question: is entire sanctification an instantaneous moment or a gradual process? In the

connected with flesh and blood. But if you keep to the account that is given above, and allow for the weakness of human understanding, you may see at this day undeniable instances of genuine, scriptural holiness".

¹⁸ *Works* (Jackson) 8:328-9.

¹⁹ Rob L. Staples, "Sanctification and Selfhood: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Wesleyan Message" in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 7 (Spring 1972) 3-16, uses the distinction substance and structure. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love, The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1972) in chapter 15 and 16 is following Wesley's terminology and uses the words substance and circumstance. I will use the words structure instead of circumstance.

²⁰ See Staples, "Sanctification and Selfhood", 4; Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, 303. If we accept the working definitions Paul Bassett provides of Christian perfection and entire sanctification in *Exploring Christian Holiness* Vol. 2 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1985) 19,20, we can *almost* say that the substance is being described by the doctrine of Christian perfection, and the structure by Entire Sanctification.

discussions the Methodists had among themselves it becomes clear that while Wesley described the substance of entire sanctification in Biblical terms, the foundation for describing its structure is the collective experience of the community of believers. In his sermon “On Patience” he says that the Scriptures are silent upon the issue of instantaneousness or gradual growth. “Every man therefore may abound in his own sense, provided he will allow the same liberty to his neighbour”.²¹ He then continues in the next paragraph by referring to his experience and sharing the examples of persons who gave witness of their entire sanctification, and whom he had interviewed, and whose conduct he and others had observed. He concludes the paragraph as follows: “But as I have not found, in so long a space of time, a single person speaking thus [about gradual sanctification only]; as all who believe they are sanctified, declare with one voice, that the change was wrought in a moment, I cannot but believe that sanctification is commonly, if not always, an *instantaneous* work”.²²

Wesley even says that “if I were convinced that none in England had attained what has been so clearly and strongly preached by such a number of preachers, in so many places, and for so long a time, I should be clearly convinced that we had all mistaken the meaning of those scriptures; and therefore, for the time to come, I too must teach that ‘sin will remain till death’”.²³

²¹ Sermon 83, “On Patience” §11, *Works* 3:177.

²² *Ibid.*, §12, *Works* 3:177,178. Till the end of his life he was still very convinced of the instantaneousness of entire sanctification. He wrote to Sarah Rutter on 5 December 1789: “...But full deliverance from sin, I believe, is always instantaneous – at least, I never yet knew an exception”, *Letters* (Telford) 8:190.

²³ *Thoughts upon Christian Perfection* Q. 38, *John Wesley*, 297. Such an argument from experience is also used by many believers who reject entire sanctification. They are not impressed by the witness of those who claim to be entirely sanctified. Following Wesley’s argumentation, we have nothing to convince them, except for “lowering” the standard by using a twofold definition of sin, and showing them that what they call sin, we call mistakes. But such an argumentation is even less convincing. The other option is by blurring the distinction between substance and structure, see Staples comment on this in “Sanctification and Selfhood”, p. 13.

In his discussions with his Methodist opponents, Wesley even admits that the term *entire* sanctification is not fully biblical, and that the main focus of the New Testament is justification and not sanctification.²⁴

Staples says that according to Wesley the scriptural support for the structure of entire sanctification was that sin remains in the believers after the new birth, and that an entire sanctification is possible in this present life.²⁵ But we can also consider these claims as talking about the substance of entire sanctification.

Our conclusion is that for defining the *how* of entire sanctification, Wesley is mainly dependent on experience. With his evidence from experience (in our time we would probably use the word psychology) Wesley is reflecting the British empiricism of the 18th century. We know that he was in much agreement with the Lockean epistemology,²⁶ but from the criticism of David Hume on Locke we also know that evidence from experience says only something about what has happened in the past.²⁷ It does not give any logical evidence that what has happened so far, will continue to happen in the future.

This brings me to my major concern, that has led me to presenting this paper. If we agree with Wesley's use of experience in describing entire sanctification, which is part of his quadrilateral method, and, if we agree that the modern generation of believers is experiencing life and religion different than the people in the time of Wesley, does then Wesley's experiential methodology imply that we will have to redefine his formulations of entire sanctification for our people? I have formulated my driving concern as a question. Before I can change it into a statement, we need to take a look at our current experience in relation to entire sanctification.

Sanctification and our modern experience

²⁴ Report on the Fourth Conference in 1747 in *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* §17, *Works* (Jackson) 11:388.

²⁵ R. Staples, "Sanctification and Selfhood", 7,8.

²⁶ See on Wesley's empiricist epistemology Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 27,28.

²⁷ David Hume (1711-1776) was a contemporary of Wesley, but Wesley probably never read his writings. His *Dialogues on Natural Religion* can also be read as a criticism on Wesley's use of experience.

I want to put my thoughts on this issue into two theses. My first thesis is that our experience of the world, and the way we experience our faith is totally different from Wesley's time. Wesley lived in an age of rationalistic optimism, our worldview is more pessimistic. He lived during the sunrise of the modern period, we live in the sunset of this period, which several call the post-modern time. Wesley's use of religious experience is uncritical; the psychology of the subconsciousness was not yet explored. We have learned to be much more critical about our own experience. We face a secularised society and a secularised mind-set of the people, while Wesley operated in a still religious society. We live in a time, dominated by existentialist philosophy, and by an emphasis on emotion over reason. In most churches we sing more choruses than (Wesley) hymns. I think that in the past twenty years we have moved farther away from the spirituality of the early Methodists than in the preceding 200 years.

My second thesis is that the way the believers in our time experience entire sanctification is different from the early Methodists.²⁸ Believers who testify of their entire sanctification, many times do not use the traditional terminology; they define it using their own terms. This conclusion is mainly based on my experience as a modern believer, and a pastor in the Church of the Nazarene in the Netherlands. To support this statement, I want to make five general observations.

- (1) In our time we emphasise gradual sanctification at the expense of instantaneous sanctification, only we call it spiritual formation. This emphasis does not exclude instantaneous moments or crises, but these are overshadowed by a stress on gradual growth. Today, retreats in silent places like monasteries are more attractive, and probably more effective than holiness campaigns.
- (2) Entire sanctification has become less public and more private, and has become more integrated with someone's personal development and less with the holiness sermons. People still experience entire sanctification, not at an altar as a result of a sermon, but at home, or with a spiritual friend. People experience entire sanctification when the right moment has come in their development, and it seems that

²⁸ This is also true when we compare our time with the 19th century American holiness movement. It could be true that in my general observations I am more comparing our situation with the tradition that emerged from the 19th century holiness movement, than with the early Methodist movement. This needs further research.

this right moment cannot be summoned by our preaching. Successful evangelistic and holiness campaigns with altar calls to which many people respond are becoming rare. There is a much more individualistic approach, in evangelism it is called friendship evangelism;²⁹ each one win one. And when people do come forward, it is often not directly related to the specific call of the pastor. I have learned as a pastor to first ask the people why they have come forward, and not to assume that it is a direct response to the call. It seems that pastors have less “guiding control” over the movement of the Spirit in the lives of the people. And when they try to regulate the moving of the Spirit, it is called manipulation.

- (3) We are very reluctant in using Wesley’s terminology of sin properly so called to talk about perfection as “love excluding sin”. It is no longer felt appropriate to claim being free from sin, because we know of holiness pastors who had to leave the ministry because sin entered their lives, and of sanctified believers who have left the church altogether. Also psychology has made us aware of hidden emotions and thoughts, and has taught us to be very cautious when we make statements like “I surrender all”.
- (4) There is among modern believers a greater need for the message of grace than to hear the challenge to go on to perfection. In our competitive and demanding society, where people are continually challenged to perform at a high level, believers search for an oasis, a moment to recuperate, just being in the presence of the Lord, without any demands, or calls to respond. Other believers lack a solid foundation of grace and forgiveness, and are involved in a similar struggle to Wesley before Aldersgate. Many of those who receive counselling are still busy appropriating God’s healing grace. As a pastor I became convinced that when a solid foundation of grace and forgiveness is absent in the lives of the believers, we cannot yet urge them to go to perfection, because then sanctification will become a human effort to prove oneself holy to God, to the fellow believers, and to oneself. It is also my impression that most of the traditional

²⁹ One of my Dutch students, Ronald Knetsch brought to my attention that Rev. Ed Meenderink of the Vlaardingen Church of the Nazarene wrote in his report to the district assembly of 1998 that his congregation is growing through *relation and process evangelism* (relatie- en procesevangelisatie).

advocates of entire sanctification were – or can I still use the present tense are? – strong personalities by nature.

- (5) We are less optimistic about the full victory over sin in the lives of the believers. The current trend in psychology is a focus on determinism. We are much more determined by our genes, our parents, childhood experiences, environment than we used to think. We find out that many things in us don't change, they might be absent for a while, but many times they return. For some people intensive counselling sessions are more effective than praying at an altar. For others anti-depression medicine brings more relief than an experience of entire sanctification. Fortunately we all know people who are examples of God's life changing power, but we also carry with us a growing accumulation of disappointments, which temper our optimism of grace.

Entire Sanctification for a new generation

I think that after what has been said, we can change the question in which my main concern was formulated, into a statement. This is the central thesis of my paper: *Following the Wesleyan quadrilateral, and taking the modern experience of believers seriously we have to re-define our description of entire sanctification.*

How should such a re-definition look? In concluding this paper, I want to share some tentative thoughts, along which we could develop a re-definition.

- (1) We should describe Christian perfection in terms of love, using biblical and dynamic language and terminology that is appealing to the modern mind. This should describe the goal Christians will strive for during their journey here on earth, not a state of glorification after death. Our language is of utmost importance, not just for its literal meaning, but more its connotated meaning that is communicated through the words and sermon illustrations. "The essence of language is permission."³⁰ Our description of Christian perfection should be inviting and should give us permission to believe in the transforming power of God in our lives. One of the

³⁰ Ernst Fuchs in an article "Das hermeneutische Problem", Quoted in H. Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology, A Report of a Personal Journey* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 175.

advice Wesley gives is very appropriate: “We must speak very tenderly on this head [entire sanctification], for it is far better to lead men than to drive. Study to recommend it rather as amiable and desirable than as necessary.”³¹

- (2) In our description of how God sanctifies his people, we should refrain from rationalistic explanations which make sanctification a system and an *ordo salutis* that can be fully described, promoted and defended. Instead, we should emphasise more the amazing mysterious way God deals with his people. God is much greater and exceeds the *ordo salutis* we ascribe to him. In one of his letters Wesley writes: “The dealings of God with man are infinitely varied, and cannot be confined to any general rule; both in justification and sanctification he often acts in a manner we cannot account for.”³²
- (3) We should talk about justification and sanctification as the two interrelated aspects of the Christian life. Although there is some sequence – justification is the foundation of the Christian life, and of sanctification – this should not be developed into a linear theory. Instead, in describing the Christian life, I would offer the model of an upward moving helix (spiral) with two focal points; justification and sanctification. Both aspects keep coming back as we face new situations in life, and as we come to a fuller understanding of ourselves.
- (4) Entire Sanctification should be described as a breakthrough moment in our process of sanctification. It was actually Wesley who inspired me to look at it in this way. In *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* he says, talking about Christian perfection: “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*”.³³ Entire Sanctification means enabling further growth, not decreasing the necessity of it. The image I have is that of narrowings in a stream, where the water accumulates. Entire sanctification describes the moment in our life when the streams of living water break through, and can flow more abundantly than ever before. Such breakthroughs are crucial moments or crises in our lives in which we struggle with God and ourselves, but in which, enabled by God’s

³¹ Letter to Thomas Olivers (24 March 1757), *Letters* (Telford) 3:213.

³² Letter to Miss March (31 May 1771), *Letters* (Telford) 5:255.

³³ *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* §26,8, *Works* (Jackson), 11:442.

power we come to a point of surrender, resulting in a renewal. Such crises and breakthroughs are not restricted to one moment.

- (5) We should not “lower” entire sanctification by using a twofold definition of sin, because it has caused more confusion than real help. This doesn’t mean that we should not give priority to the intentionality of sin, and to love as the opposite of sin. But we should be silent about sinless perfection, or any similar term. All we should proclaim is that God saves us from sin, that sin doesn’t have to reign in our life, that in Christ we can be victors over the powers of death and sin in our life. The question if all sin can be removed from our life is a theoretical question. Addressing this question will distract us from the real issue: will we be receptive to God’s sanctifying power in our life, so that we can grow in grace, leave sin behind and reflect the love for God, our neighbours, and God’s creation, as can be seen in Jesus Christ. I find this concern reflected in Wesley’s answer to the question if Christian perfection is sinless. He says: “It is not worthwhile to contend for a term. It is ‘salvation from sin’”³⁴ He doesn’t say salvation from all sin, but salvation from sin. We don’t need to know more.

Conclusion

In the historical survey of Wesley’s thinking on entire sanctification, I said that Wesley’s ultimate pastoral concern was to lead his people into experiencing God’s victorious power over sin in their lives. This should also be our main concern as modern Wesleyans. Where we differ from Wesley is on the way we lead people unto this perfection. But even in this, following the Wesleyan quadrilateral we remain true Wesleyans.

I would like to end with the sentence I started with. This paper is a starting point, not a conclusion of research. In writing this paper, reflecting on my experiences, and sharing my thoughts with colleagues, students and my wife, I became aware of the fact that the pastoral concern dealt with in this paper is the heart of the call God placed on my life. This was my driving force as a pastor, and is still my motivation and guide in teaching and research. I want to give myself to this aim of proclaiming Christian perfection to a modern generation of believers. To put it in a personal way, I want the church to be able to effectively communicate the

³⁴ *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* §26,6, Works (Jackson), 11:442.

liberating message of full salvation to my children, when they grow up and mature in the 21st century.