

# **AN ARMINIAN-WESLEYAN UNDERSTANDING OF HOLINESS IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**

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Many books have been written about the concept of holiness in the thought of John Wesley, and on this occasion we can only summarize briefly some of the main themes in his doctrines and the practice of the life of holiness that are part of our heritage as the Church of the Nazarene in Latin America.

We call ourselves a church in the Wesleyan-Arminian holiness tradition, and we owe much to James Arminius and to John Wesley, each of whom in his time called attention to a Biblical truth that seemed to have been neglected by the church. However, we must recognize that our heritage in the Church of the Nazarene as a product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness Movement received influences from various currents that produced modifications to the thought and practice of Wesley. And throughout a century of development as a denomination we have seen changes of emphasis and strategies, while we have tried to stay centered in our 'distinctive doctrine' of entire sanctification.

In the past two or three decades in our church and in other sister denominations there has been renewed interest in the thought and practice of Wesley, to help us define our reason for existence as a denomination, and to give us direction for the future. On one occasion Dr. Phineas Bresee declared that the mission of the Church of the Nazarene was to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land. If this continues to be our mission as a denomination, we must understand the doctrine of holiness and live the life of holiness. In the Wesleyan tradition we have abundant resources to help us. The purpose of this paper is to focus our attention on the contributions of James Arminius and John Wesley to our heritage as a holiness church.

As we consider the contribution of James Arminius we must remember that his writings focus on the controversy with the Calvinist Reformed Church about the interpretation of the sovereignty of God and the meaning of predestination. We find the position of Arminius in the Five Propositions of the Censurants presented by his followers to the Synod of Dort:

1. Conditional Election—Instead of choosing arbitrarily those who would be saved and those who would be condemned, God permits man to participate in his own election. The condition of election is faith: the positive response to God's offer of grace.
2. Universal Atonement—Christ died for all, not only for the elect.
3. Natural Incapacity—Sin has affected the human being to such a degree that apart from divine grace, man is incapable to do good.
4. Prevenient Grace—Grace operates in favor of each person, even before he or she becomes aware of the need. Each human being can resist or reject this grace.

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5. Conditional Perseverance—God provides sufficient grace to overcome any temptation, but by resistance or negligence, man can lose the benefit of grace and perish eternally (Wynkoop, *Theological Bases of Arminius and Wesley*, 61).

Even though Arminius's concepts of perfection and sanctification do not coincide exactly with those of John Wesley, the theological bases which he provides are fundamental for the development that Wesley gives to these doctrines. Arminius presents a God who loves all human beings and freely offers His saving grace, without which no one can be saved. At the same time, God's grace gives to each one the capacity to respond positively or negatively, accepting or rejecting the offered grace.

John Wesley, building on the foundation that Arminius left, stresses the responsibility of the human being to accept and act in response to the grace of God.\* For Wesley, sanctification is considered within the broader theme of salvation. His *ordo salutis* places justification before sanctification, since justification is a relative change (that is, a change in relationship) and sanctification is a real change. Justification is performed by God in an instant, when the sinner, in response to divine grace, confesses his sin, repents, and by faith receives salvation, with its concomitants of adoption, regeneration and justification. The interpreters of Wesley have used the phrase *initial sanctification* to refer to this experience, which is the beginning of the person's sanctification.

In his summary of "Christian perfection," Wesley responds to many of the same questions that we still face.

1. There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.
2. It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to 'go on to perfection' (Heb. 6:1)
3. It is not so late as death; for St. Paul speaks of living men who were perfect. (Phil. 3:15).
4. It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not the man, nor to angels, but to God alone.
5. It does not make a man infallible: None is infallible, while he remains in the body.
6. Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is 'salvation from sin'.
7. It is 'perfect love'. (1 John 4:18). This is the essence of it; its properties, or inseparable fruits, are, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks. (1 Thess. 5:16, etc.).
8. It is improvable. 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.
9. It is amissible, capable of being lost; of which we have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this, till five or six years ago.
10. It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.

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\* This discussion of Wesley's theology is based largely on *An Introduction to Wesleyan Theology*, by William M. Greathouse and H. Ray Dunning (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1989).

11. But is it in itself instantaneous or not? In examining this, let us go on step by step.

An instantaneous change has been wrought in some believers: None can deny this.

Since that change, they enjoy perfect love; they feel this, and this alone; they ‘rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks’....

‘But in some this change was not instantaneous.’ They did not perceive the instant when it was wrought. It is often difficult to perceive the instant when a man dies; yet there is an instant in which life ceases. And if ever sin ceases, there must be a last moment of its existence, and a first moment of our deliverance from it (“A Plain Account of Christian Perfection”, *Works* XI:442-43).

Wesley emphasizes the person’s need to make use of the means of grace, actively receiving the grace that God offers in every moment. He defines the *means of grace* as “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” (*Works* I:319). The means of grace include the classical spiritual disciplines such as worship, intake of the Word and prayer, as well as the sacraments and “Christian converse”. They are practiced not by obligation nor only to obey an ordinance of God, but with full awareness that by means of these actions we are opening ourselves to receive the grace that God offers at this moment.

Wesley’s “radical optimism” believes firmly that God is able and wants to transform the heart and life of the believer who fully commits to Him. The only barrier to the power of God to restore the human being to the image and likeness of Christ is the person’s own resistance. God’s grace offers all the opportunities and means, and all we have to do is reach out to receive this grace. Having received grace, in intimate relationship and continual obedience to Him, the life of the person will be transformed.

This is not an individualistic religious experience, but a life in community. Wesley’s radical optimism teaches that while God is working in my life, He gives me the privilege to be an instrument in His hands to help others in their walk with the Lord. Mutual spiritual support is essential in Wesley’s thought, and the Classes and other groups established in early Methodism were applications of the concept in which the structure itself of the movement facilitated the practice of accountability.

This optimism is applied also to all of creation, which for Wesley is included in the divine plan for restoration. God works through the persons who are committed to Him, to transform the world. There is ample evidence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Methodists of how God used them to effect changes in their society, each one doing what was within his or her grasp to improve the conditions of others and in this way demonstrate to those around them the love that God had poured out in their hearts. In Wesley this social aspect of the Gospel is a natural consequence of the internal transformation of the sanctified person.