

SANCTIFYING GRACE

Howard Mellor

CONSIDER 
REFLECT 
THINK 

This is the third and final interactive Bible study about Grace. One of the gifts of the Wesleyan heritage to wider Christian thought is an understanding about the way grace works in the life of the Christian believer. That can be summed up in this way: Grace is God influencing, wooing (prevenient grace); God rescuing, redeeming (saving grace); God shaping, empowering (sanctifying grace) - so that we may be mature Christian people fitted for service.

Throughout his life Wesley spoke of sanctifying grace. His reading of scripture led him to believe that the person who finds faith in Christ is filled with the love of Christ. This divine love, he argued, would bring them maturity, to be 'perfect'. He urged people to long for, to pray for, the love of Christ to fill their lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine was discussed at the first Methodist Conference in 1744 where the question (set by Wesley) was raised, 'What is implied in being a perfect Christian?' The answer given (by Wesley) was, 'loving the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our mind, and soul, and strength' (Deuteronomy, 6:5; 30:6; Ezekiel 36: 25-9). In a letter to Hannah Ball, the pioneer of Methodist Sunday Schools, Wesley wrote, 'All that is necessarily implied therein (i.e. in Christian perfection), is humble, gentle, patient love, love regulating all the tempers and governing all the words and actions' ('Letters,' Vol 6, 65).

Wesley commented on the use of the word 'perfect' in the letter to the Hebrews (e.g. Hebrews 10:14; 11:40; 12:23): 'But what is perfection? The word has various senses: here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the same' ('The Scripture Way of Salvation,' 1765, 'Sermons,' Vol.2, 448).

Wesley makes the same emphasis in a letter to Walter Churchey in 1771: 'Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is neither more nor less than pure love - love expelling sin and governing both the heart and life of a child of God' ('Letters,' Vol.5, 223).

So, for Wesley, sanctifying grace, or Christian perfection, is the operation of God's love in the life of the Christian in such a way that the love of God is fully alive in us. 'Love' - 'pure love' - 'love expelling sin' - 'perfect love': these were the descriptions, which Wesley employed to express the heart of what he meant.

LOOKING AT SCRIPTURE

There are two groups of words in the New Testament translated as 'perfect': *teleios* and *katartizō*.

Teleios (Ephesians 4:13) - referring to the goal of Christian discipleship - maturity in Christ. It refers to: being complete, mature; to make perfect by reaching an intended goal; a full complement of sailors on a ship, to bring to a full end.

(See also: John 17:23 - Jesus' prayer that we would be 'completely' one; Matthew 5:48 - being mature and complete as is 'your heavenly Father'; Colossians 4:12 - behaving in a mature way, 'toward outsiders'.)

Katartizō (Matthew 4:21) - referring to the mending of nets and is often used in practical ways such as repair, fit, frame, mend, restore, complete.

(See also: 1 Corinthians 1:10 - restored believers who are of the same mind and judgement; Galatians 6:1 - call to restore other Christians, 'in a spirit

of gentleness;' Colossians 3:14 - made to be in harmony with God and each other; 1 Thessalonians 3:10 - to supply or complete what is lacking.)



Look at these texts and consider what they say to you. What other Bible themes or verses would you add?

SANCTIFYING GRACE SHAPES OUR LIVES

Holiness or sanctification is NOT for personal consumption and personal delight. God fills us with his love so that we may express outwardly the life of Christ in our lives. Sanctifying grace by the power of the Holy Spirit is very positive - it introduces a radical difference to us - a life that has quality.

The letter to the Ephesians exhorts Christians to express the life of Christ:

- 'be imitators of God' - being a mirror image of Christ. This is why the fruit of the Spirit are so important, because they are the expression of the life of God brought to our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:1).
- putting off and putting on - the language of baptism, putting off the old life and taking hold of a new way of living (Ephesians 4:2).
- it is a deliberate act of will, an attitude of the mind which affects behaviour, values, relationships (Ephesians 4:23).
- it affects our relationships with others, and highlights the close relationships, the way we treat others, and love others as Christ would do (Ephesians 5:3).

- behaviour and purpose - we are created for 'good works' (Ephesians 2:10).



If you were to describe a person who 'expressed Christ' in their lives, what would you expect to see? What sort of evidence would you find in their lives?

HOW DOES THIS WORK?

This experience is, according to Wesley, both gradual and instantaneous. The Aldersgate experience on the 24 May 1738, we sometimes call a 'conversion', but so much led to it and followed from it. Moments of sudden disclosure are normally preceded and followed by the work of God's Holy Spirit in our lives.

Wesley considered the question of whether sanctification or holiness occurs suddenly in a crisis experience, or as a maturing process. To one of his preachers, George Gibbon, he wrote, 'It is our duty strongly and explicitly to exhort the believers to go on to perfection, and encourage them to expect perfect love by simple faith, and consequently to expect it now' ('Letters,' Vol.7, 267). But to his brother Charles on another occasion, he wrote, 'Go on, in your way, what God has peculiarly called you to...Press the instantaneous blessing: then I shall have more time for my peculiar calling, enforcing the gradual work' ('Letters,' Vol.5, 16).

The work of sanctifying grace is a dynamic relationship with God in which there are moments of disclosure, realisation and other times of development and growth. Ephesians has the same notion about a dynamic life of the Spirit: That we should 'be, being filled' (a continuous flow is assumed in this text) with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).



What about your spiritual journey? Have there been moments when you knew God particularly close, transforming your life - times of slow and steady development and growth?

THE RESOURCES OF SANCTIFYING GRACE

There are two factors which empower our Christian lives and they are intertwined. First our relationship with God, and second our openness to the empowering, equipping and enabling of the Holy Spirit.

Sanctifying grace:

- assumes that we are in a right relationship with God, that we are 'grafted' into Christ, the vine (John 15:1-17).
- assumes that we know, as Wesley knew, that we are pardoned and have peace with God (Romans 5:1-11).

- 'perfects' - makes us fit for purpose in life.
- gives us power for witness (1 Corinthians 10:13; Acts 1:8).
- is a dynamic process - we need to keep on being filled with God's love, with the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

However, Christian perfection is not:

- absolute (God's perfection is unequalled).
- sinless (only Jesus is without sin).
- infallible (not free from ignorance or mistakes to which no blame is attached).
- free from temptation (even Jesus was tempted).
- free from infirmities (such as dullness of thought or slowness of speed).
- final (there is always room for growth).
- inviolable (it can be lost).

HOW CAN WE SPEAK OF PERFECTION?

There is another element found in Wesley's doctrine, which needs to be understood. Henry Rack highlights the paradox of Wesley's doctrine of a 'perfection which was not perfect' ('Reasonable Enthusiast,' Epworth, 1992, 399). Rack indicates that Wesley's doctrine is only understandable and plausible because he operated with two definitions of perfection which



in turn related to his doctrine of sin. Christian perfection was attainable in this life as long as the believer had not committed a known transgression. Wesley had defined sin as a 'voluntary transgression of a known law.' He considered that 'involuntary transgressions' did not undermine the relationship of a 'person filled with the love of God' and he did not identify this as sin. 'Therefore, sinless perfection is a phrase I never use' ('Wesley, Entire Sanctification,' Kelly, 1898, 53).

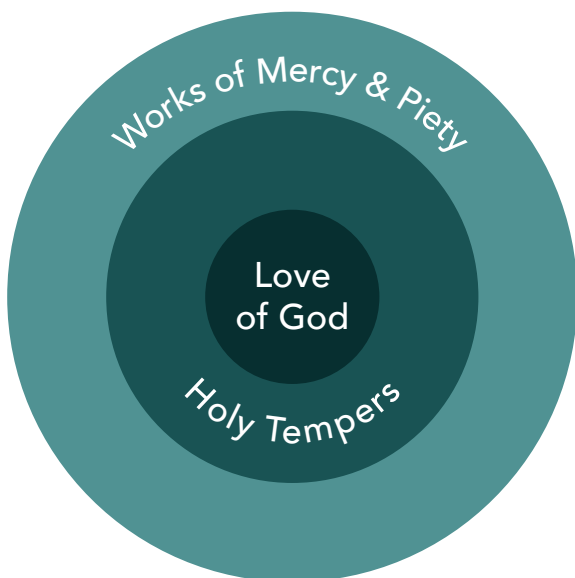
SANCTIFYING GRACE AT WORK IN US!

Wesley, when writing about the effect of salvation in the inner character of the believer, used the term 'Holy Tempers' to describe the innermost response to the love of God. Wesley was convinced it was the love of God which brings about sanctification. The love of God, alive in the believer flows to every part of our lives transforming values, attitudes, behaviour and relationships.

Therefore, he focusses on the inner person (Holy Tempers) before highlighting the outward effect in terms of Acts of Piety and Mercy. He sets this out clearly in his sermon 'On Zeal'.

In a Christian believer love sits upon the throne which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers; - longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, temperance; and if any other were comprised in 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus.' In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers - by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed works of piety - reading and hearing the word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord's supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one body, the church, dispersed all over the earth - a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation.

'On Zeal,' Sermon 92, 'Works 7', 60



I have set out Wesley's description in the form of a diagram to clarify visually the illustration he gives.



Draw your own diagram of the circles of your spirituality:

- Where do you place the love of God?
- What are in the circles around it?
- Are they describing 'being' - or 'doing'?
- Does anything need to change?

Discipleship, Wesley knew, was a dynamic process and not just an instantaneous experience which remained constant. Christian faith was a relationship with God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and like any other relationship it needed to be nurtured and developed to be fresh and alive. So, he spoke of the 'means of grace' as the way to keep our discipleship alive and a proper expression of God's love in our lives. He wrote and preached about 'works of mercy' and 'works of piety'. By piety he meant being in worship, receiving Holy Communion regularly, personal and corporate prayer, reading the scriptures and being in fellowship sharing about faith and life.

With this he urged Methodists to live out the love of God by acts of kindness to others in what he called 'works of mercy'. Throughout his life he gave generously to help those in need and started schools, orphanages, established groups to serve the poor and visit those in prison. The early Methodists were noted for their commitment to Bible study and fellowship and at the same time to activism in community issues.

These Means of Grace are also vital for a deepening spirituality. It will be readily assumed that the works of piety are those which bring spiritual depth and growth. But Wesley also thought of the practical works of mercy as also achieving this. When Christians practise the works of mercy in love, their love increases, their holy tempers (patience, gentleness, etc.) are exercised and improved and they grow in grace.

I pray that in sharing in these three Bible studies on grace, you too have grown in grace. God bless you,

Howard Mellor is a Methodist Minister who has recently returned from Hong Kong, where he and his wife Rosie have served the Methodist International Church for five years. Howard was formerly Principal of Cliff College and is now working out what 'retirement' means! He still drives a 2CV - slowly!



Note from the editor:

Many thanks again to Ruth Field for supplying more 'Images of Grace' - photos © Ruth Field - from her photos featured on Paul Field's 'Piano Blog': paulfield.com. For more information and to see more of Ruth's work, please visit: ruthfield.com