

## **Christian Perfection and Christian Mysticism: A Way to Resurrection?**

**Daniel Castelo, PhD**  
**Professor of Dogmatic and Constructive Theology**  
**Seattle Pacific University and Seminary**  
**Seattle, Washington (USA)**  
**[casted1@spu.edu](mailto:casted1@spu.edu)**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the Wesleyan understanding of holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection, particularly as it is understood, perpetuated, and often assessed as “dead” among those stemming from the progeny of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness Movement. The argument presented is that the changes that have transpired in this movement are not necessarily ones resulting from lacking fidelity as generations pass as they are symptoms and consequences of an unworkable paradigm, one that seeks to reify certain approaches and narrations of Christian experience that simply cannot be widely applied. The recommendation made is that the Wesleyan paradigm surrounding sanctification must be reoriented along mystical lines for its long-term vitality and appeal.

Some time ago, Kenneth Collins offered his assessment as to why the Holiness Movement is “dead.”<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Collins was joining a number of contemporary assessors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century movement who have lamented similar things. The Holiness Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century spawned a number of denominations, educational institutions, and so on; therefore, the movement is not gone or inconsequential. Collins recognizes the point. Collins also admits that movements have life cycles, and this reality would be no different for the Holiness Movement. Things necessarily change, and Collins knows this. These admissions notwithstanding, one senses some grief and pain in his reflections. The language of “death” certainly heightens the tension.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, “Why the Holiness Movement is Dead,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 54.2 (1999): 27-35.

Is Collins being hyperbolic? I would say not entirely. Given my experience of the Holiness Movement over the years, I do sense shifts and changes, some of a significant degree.<sup>2</sup> If Collins is right in some sense, what was lost within the movement? In citing a work by Keith Drury,<sup>3</sup> Collins affirms that vitality and evangelistic power were lost. Further losses were the profession, testimony, and confidence of perfect love or Christian perfection. Soteriologically, Collins believes there has been a shift from an optimism of grace to a pessimism of human nature so that it is difficult to affirm the Wesleyan understanding of being free from the power and dominion of sin.<sup>4</sup> Collins furthermore wishes to distinguish between Christian maturity and what is at stake in the profession of entire sanctification (which he suggests would be open even to children)<sup>5</sup> to highlight the lost recognition of the active power of God to transform. In addressing the modernizing processes that contributed to this situation, Collins refers to the loss

---

<sup>2</sup> I will offer just one case from personal experience. A colleague of mine who was hired at Seattle Pacific University, my home institution (which is related to the Free Methodist Church, a major denomination stemming from the Holiness Movement) was asked during his job interview in the late 1980s if he understood and had the experience of a “second work of grace.” This language, much less the expectation of its corresponding experience, is rarely mentioned today, not only at Seattle Pacific but also throughout the Free Methodist conference in which the school locates itself.

<sup>3</sup> The original work is Keith Drury, “The Holiness Movement is Dead,” *Holiness Digest* 8.1 (1994): 13-15.

<sup>4</sup> Collins, “Why the Holiness Movement is Dead,” p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> This is quite an unusual claim, given that for many years Wesley believed that entire sanctification was experienced by people (presumably adults) shortly before their deaths. In support of the point, Collins mentions that “Wesley attested to the entire sanctification of both a four-year-old girl as well as a twelve-year-old-girl” (Collins, “Why the Holiness Movement is Dead,” p. 29) and cites two passages from Wesley in support of the point. The first passage stems from Wesley’s Journal entry of Sunday, 16 September 1744 and runs as follows, “I buried, near the same place, one who had soon finished her course, going to God in the full assurance of faith when she was little more than four years old. In her last sickness . . . she spent all the intervals of her convulsions in speaking of, or to, God” (*Bicentennial Works of John Wesley*, vol. 20, eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater [Nashville: Abingdon, 1991], p. 39). In my reading of this entry, the point is not clear (unless we take “full assurance of faith” as synonymous with “entire sanctification,” which is possible and yet a distinct hermeneutical move). The other example is more telling and direct. This one is a letter written on 12 October 1764 to a “Mrs. A. F.” and it is largely didactic in that Wesley uses the example of a twelve year old to show that “the quantity of time is nothing to [God]” (“Letter CCCXXIX” in *Works of John Wesley*, Jackson Edition, vol. 12 [Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1979], pp. 333-334 [333]). He states, “I have seldom known so devoted a soul as S\_\_\_\_H\_\_\_\_, at Macclesfield, who was sanctified nine days after she was convinced of sin. She was then twelve years old, and I believe was never afterwards heard to speak an improper word, or known to do an improper thing. Her look struck an awe into all that saw her. She is now in Abraham’s bosom” (*ibid.*).

of a “depth dimension of the Christian faith, that faith in Jesus Christ radically transforms within such that the dispositions of the heart become remarkably and decisively holy and new.”<sup>6</sup>

In the midst of these analyses and laments, Collins does not explore the possibility that these losses may have been a kind of correction or maybe even a necessary development given the original formulations or constructs. In other words, in reading Collins’s article, one senses a kind of “fall from grace” regarding the movement, an idealized depiction of past forms and an adulterated or compromised state of present forms. Although I am sympathetic with Collins’s overall depiction, and I tend to agree with the general thrust of his analyses, I find this potential idealization of the past and the setting up of a compromised present to be problematic in principle. One could make an argument that some changes and losses were the result of compromise; but one could also make the argument that some changes and losses may have been the result of necessary correctives to particular and limited theological and conceptual constructs.

I wish to pursue the latter track with the aim of suggesting two things. First, the claim and conviction of the Wesleyan Holiness Movement in the power of God to transform creation here and now in the form of a definite “second work of grace” is limited in part by a revivalist construct that is often left to stand rather than problematized when people recall the past of the movement. Without critique and alteration, this construct was bound to be affected as times, sensibilities, and plausibility structures changed. Second, the theme itself can be potentially vivified today by a model reflecting patterns of thought and speech stemming from traditions of Christian mysticism. Rarely does Christian mysticism come to the fore in these discussions among Methodist circles,<sup>7</sup> yet one could say that the theme of perfection relies on this tradition

---

<sup>6</sup> Collins, “Why the Holiness Movement is Dead,” pp. 32-33.

<sup>7</sup> There are some exceptions to this, including Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1989) and Elaine A. Heath, *Naked Faith: The Mystical Theology of Phoebe Palmer* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009).

more than many others. In due course, I hope to render an account in which certain losses will be depicted as inevitable but also one in which certain gains may come to the fore as well. The point to maintain is that belief in the power of God to transform is a nonnegotiable; it is a feature of the Wesleyan-Methodist witness as this movement has historically and theologically interpreted and extended itself. This belief, then, is the core. What is being explored in this paper is how to secure this belief theologically, epistemically, and so conceptually. Given the fluctuation of contexts, thought-patterns, worldviews, and so on across time and space, I am of the opinion that one can secure this main point in different ways. And given this plethora of possibilities over time, some alternatives may prove more helpful, compelling, and meaningful than others. For this reason, it could be the case that death may be a necessary feature of thought-forms and paradigms, but this need not be a full-stop but rather on the way to a kind of resurrection. Christians, after all, are people of the resurrection. And if so, then Christian doctrines, experiences, and themes can find new life amid declarations of death.

### **I. The Limits of a Past Paradigm**

In a telling line, Collins makes the following remark as he expounds on how entire sanctification is now doubted among the heirs of the Holiness Movement: “The repetition of the altar call, then, a liturgical form employed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an invitation to Christian perfection, soon became an annoyance, the reopening of a wound, a painful reminder that the favor of God so graciously received by the elders of another generation had apparently not been received by the next.”<sup>8</sup> The first part of the quote is telling in that it directly connects the “invitation to Christian perfection” with the “repetition of the altar call.” The second part of the quote points to the views of the heirs of the movement, and these Collins does not adequately

---

<sup>8</sup> Collins, “Why the Holiness Movement is Dead,” p. 29.

explore. In particular, the language of “wound” and “painful reminder” suggests that happenings are lurking in the background. These two parts of the quote will be explored as a way of showing the limits of a past paradigm for securing and understanding the transformative power of God in people’s lives.

It is true that various expressions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness Movement were explicitly attempting to claim the Wesleyan heritage of holiness. Many felt that something had been lost with the transplantation and embourgeoisement of the Methodist movement in the USA and that in turn it had to be retrieved. Being a “John Wesley Methodist” (to use one phrase from the time) was both a call and a badge of honor, a marker of differentiating those who had stayed “true” to the tradition from those who had not.

Of course, the challenge in claiming the tradition of holiness, sanctification, and Christian perfection in the Wesleyan movement is that the original vision by Wesley himself is notoriously difficult to pin down, not simply for those who would succeed Wesley in time but even among his contemporaries. This was admittedly due to Wesley vacillating in his lifetime on various points, largely due to the evolution of his thought. His sources included devotional literature he read early in his adulthood, Peter Böhler and the Moravians, and various examples of extremes (including quietism and antinomianism) *and* ideals he came across in his ministry over time. According to John L. Peters, there was some vacillation on the part of Wesley up to the Yorkshire revival of 1759-1763, which provided for Wesley an experiential surge of evidence for a doctrinal orientation, one that had entire sanctification as “an instantaneous act of the Holy Spirit receivable *now and by faith*.” Peters further notes, “He had been moving toward it since 1738, but almost twenty years elapsed before he gave it unreserved emphasis.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> John L. Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1985), p. 31.

In terms of a gestalt or synthetic approach, Wesley's views on Christian perfection can be said to form both a simple and an intricate and complex vision. In simple terms, Wesley firmly believes in a kind of purity of intention so that the great love commandments of loving God with everything we are and our neighbors as ourselves is possible to obey in this life because of God's grace-filled, enabling capacity.<sup>10</sup> In William Abraham's typically incisive prose, one can say in a more detailed fashion that Wesley's approach to the topic is "an exercise in ascetic theology, a vision of realized eschatology, and a psychology of spiritual development."<sup>11</sup> The first point relates to this life being one that needs attending to in the form of an *askesis*, one that bypasses simplistic "works-righteousness" concerns and highlights self-discipline and victory over evil in a way consistent with "the faith of the church in the first millennium"<sup>12</sup>; the second point highlights an "already" dynamic that is nevertheless best understood in terms of the *eschaton*; and the third point suggests that a different kind of modality is needed in relation to the Christian life, what Abraham calls a "radical spiritual reorientation beyond conversion"<sup>13</sup> that hints at a fuller presentation of what *metanoi* can mean and look like.

That Wesley's thought evolved is not an issue per se, for this is to be expected of any person. The larger point worth pressing is that the evolution of Wesley's views was held together within the larger context of the practice of Christian ministry more so than the academic activity of systematizing or conceptualizing. And so, the "base materials" for Wesley's thought included

---

<sup>10</sup> This point resonates well with the summary definition on offer toward the end of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*: "In one view, it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all, our soul, body, and substance, to God. In another view, it is all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a renewal of the heart in the whole image of God, the full likeness of Him that created it. In yet another, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves" (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* [Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1966], p. 117).

<sup>11</sup> William J. Abraham, "Christian Perfection," in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 587-601 (587).

<sup>12</sup> Abraham, "Christian Perfection," pp. 597-598.

<sup>13</sup> Abraham, "Christian Perfection," p. 588.

a number of figures and movements he engaged textually (especially those within his Anglo-Catholic heritage<sup>14</sup>) but also figures and movements he engaged personally. These personal encounters were just as significant as his textual engagements for his theological imaginary. They represented “living arguments” to the possibilities available in light of God’s transforming grace. Therefore, the interaction between these people’s professions of faith—their testimonies—and Wesley’s assessment of them created a nexus of theologically relevant resources that impacted his views in a deep and yet difficult to track way.

Part of the difficulty here is that whereas students of Wesley can look at the sources in the Anglo-Catholic tradition he read and analyze his thoughts on them, the personal engagements Wesley had elude us. These are mediated to us via Wesley’s own accounts, and so when he says that a child or someone else had an experience of sanctification, we simply have his words, his thought-processes, and his way of making sense of things. And these happenings are taking place within a revival setting in which people are using this language and making it do work to help them understand what is happening and what to expect for their own lives.

When the language of holiness, sanctification, and Christian perfection is transplanted to the USA, the revivalist dimensions take on new features native to their new context. When calls were made to be “John Wesley Methodists,” then, one of the ways, perhaps the principal way, to heed such a call was through an American revivalist paradigm. What I mean by an “American revivalist paradigm” has at least the following points: 1) short-term, open-air meetings, usually led by itinerant preachers; 2) a kind of voluntarism that assumed that people’s agency and decision-making was crucial; 3) an air of expectancy surrounding the possibilities that could take place in such meetings, including the possibility of transformative and instantaneous change; 4) a

---

<sup>14</sup> For a helpful summary of Wesley’s readings along these lines, see D. Marselle Moore, “Development in Wesley’s Thought on Sanctification and Perfection,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20.2 (Fall 1985): 29-53.

general acceptance that these happenings could include various kinds of phenomena, including crying, screaming, shaking, and the like; 5) a sense that the location for these kinds of happenings would be the altar, which people would come to in response to a general call; and 6) a working assumption that people could claim and identify distinct spiritual experiences at these times with a fairly staunch sense of certainty. This paradigm can be generalized to a number of movements within the USA, including the First Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, the Pentecostal Movement, and hosts of camp meetings and similar kinds of gatherings.

Therefore, when the language of holiness, sanctification, and Christian perfection came to be utilized on the American scene, it was impacted, infused, and altered by this revivalist paradigm. The person repeatedly lifted up as an example of this tendency is Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874), who is well-known for her “shorter way” to holiness and her “altar theology.” One of Palmer’s chief biographers, Charles Edward White, believes that Palmer modified the Wesleyan message of sanctification in several distinct ways that highlighted the American values of immediacy, accessibility, and biblicism.<sup>15</sup> The general consensus of White and others is that there is a relatively clear accentuation on the part of Palmer upon the immediacy side of a dialectic of process and instantaneity in Wesley’s own vision. But in his particular analysis, White takes an additional, bold step; he believes that Palmer simply is a logical consequence of the Wesleyan vision: “Not only was [Palmer] applying ‘all that was America in the nineteenth century’ [referencing the work of Melvin Dieter] to Wesley, but she was also carrying Wesleyan doctrines to their natural conclusion; she was working out their inner logic.”<sup>16</sup> What is this inner logic? White continues: “If it is true that all Christians will eventually be sanctified, and if it is true that it is better to be sanctified than merely justified, and if it is true that God can sanctify

---

<sup>15</sup> Charles Edwards White, *The Beauty of Holiness* (reprinted; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), pp. 125-144 (for a summary, see pp. 125-126).

<sup>16</sup> White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, pp. 134-135.

the believer now just as easily as a thousand years from now, and if it is true that God gives sanctification in response to the believer's faith, then every Christian should be sanctified now.”<sup>17</sup>

This remark points to at least two things. First, it suggests that Wesley and Palmer may have more in common than some observers have granted. Wesley was not so much the “ideal” and Palmer not so much the “corrupter.” Major features of Palmer’s paradigm are traceable to Wesley’s legacy, and both worked within broadly revivalist settings. A second point is even more incisive. White suggests that Palmer’s accentuation upon immediacy is the logical consequence of Wesley’s vision (however dialectically framed it can be reconstructed), thereby suggesting in part that the original framework is problematic or limited in some sense.

Let’s repeat one of the quotes from Collins’s article noted above: “The repetition of the altar call, then, a liturgical form employed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an invitation to Christian perfection, soon became an annoyance, the reopening of a wound, a painful reminder that the favor of God so graciously received by the elders of another generation had apparently not been received by the next.”<sup>18</sup> Why would the heirs of the Holiness Movement find the altar call invitation to Christian perfection to be an “annoyance,” “the reopening of a wound,” and “a painful reminder”? Collins seems to think that at work here is the failure of a younger generation to enjoy “the favor of God so graciously received by the elders of another generation.” In other words, implied here is that the younger generation’s experience of God is somehow less favorable than the older generation’s, and so the repetition of the altar call to Christian perfection occasions these negative feelings.

---

<sup>17</sup> White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> Collins, “Why the Holiness Movement is Dead,” p. 29.

My sense is somewhat different. I tend to believe that the connection between the altar call and Christian perfection at work in the revivalist setting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness Movement was bound to be undone over time because of the limitations inherent in the original Wesleyan framework. That people cannot claim the same experience in the same way over time is not necessarily the result of people experiencing less favor from God; it could be the case that what is happening is the declining appeal of a certain account of religious experience. To say that Christian perfection is available as a result of a response to an altar call may not convince as much as before. Why? One answer could be because as the paradigm unfolded across the decades and instantiated by a bevy of people, it became less and less compelling. The annoyance, wounds, and pain alluded to by Collins are not necessarily self-inflicted by a lacking spirituality; they could very well be the consequences of a failing paradigm over time. Often, the cause of the failure is attributed to legalism, but I would suggest a conceptual unworkability as an additional culprit.

What are the sources of this unworkability? One can trace them back to Wesley himself and to subsequent figures like Palmer. Abraham mentions some possibilities. One would be that, “Wesley never really integrated his bedrock commitment to perception of the divine in religious experience with his vision of special revelation in Scripture.”<sup>19</sup> Not only in Wesley but in Palmer as well there is a sense that these two authorities are somehow not reconciled so that Scripture can be appealed to in almost absolutist ways all the while adjustments are made here and there for the sake of accounting for features of various revivals. Abraham continues, “Moreover, the privileging of the epistemology of theology over theology proper meant that the tradition could never take Wesley’s own material claims on the heart of the faith as primary.”<sup>20</sup> There is a

---

<sup>19</sup> Abraham, “Christian Perfection,” p. 593.

<sup>20</sup> Abraham, “Christian Perfection,” p. 593.

considerable amount of unpacking that can be made of this claim. At the heart of it, Wesley operates out of a particular epistemology that makes his theological claims surrounding holiness, sanctification, and Christian perfection sink or swim. One sees this in the evolution of his views: He changes course from time to time simply because he cannot fathom something contrary to a person he has met or a testimony he has heard. That he can assume for himself the capacity to detect holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection in others typically goes unquestioned. When most people read these accounts of Wesley or his associates, the assumption runs that either the testimonies by those who have these experiences and/or Wesley's evaluations of their testimonies are normative. If in Wesley's judgment a person appears sanctified (as in the case of the twelve year old girl mentioned above), then typically people grant the point: she must have been sanctified.

But that robust sense of experiential identification (that one can detect that one has experienced a “second work of grace”) was bound to fail over time. Notice that the work of God to transform is not what is being challenged here. What is being pressed is the long-term viability of the thought-world that allows for people to make these kinds of identifications with certainty. This possibility is indicative of an epistemic situation that was bound to change over time. What is fascinating, of course, is that the intellectual and cultural resources of any particular situation directly and indirectly relate to the work of God in that context. Not that the cultural situation somehow determines what God can or cannot do (much like one can say that it is not the individual who determines what God can or cannot do in a person's life), and yet, there are confluences and synergies here of significant consequence.

The way forward, I will argue, is not a retrieval of a past epistemic paradigm. In other words, the way to revive the language and reality of holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian

perfection is not necessarily to return to the camp meeting model and all its corresponding dynamics, including its epistemic ones. In many ways, the model worked for a time in the north-transatlantic context, and perhaps it continues to be of importance in other places throughout the globe. But the limits of the model, as exposed by the assessments that the “Holiness Movement is dead,” invites a rethinking of ways to sustain the point that divinely enacted transformation and change can happen in this life. And for this, I suggest that rethinking holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection along mystical terms is an important option.

## II. Moving Forward

The role of mysticism within Methodism is an interesting one, as people periodically note. In Wesley’s case, he early on admitted he was intrigued by some mystical writers, but at one point he concluded that the mystical view of these writers “was nothing like that religion which Christ and his apostles lived and taught.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Wesley included in *The Christian Library* at least eight mystical tracts, most of which were by authors stemming from the Catholic (or the so-called “Counter”) Reformation.<sup>22</sup> This legacy, then, is mixed. Certainly, Wesley did not care for forms of mysticism that were overly emphatic of human striving and individualistic, nor did he care for forms that appeared to be “inventive, irrational, and unscriptural.”<sup>23</sup> And yet these concerns notwithstanding, the mystical strands of Christianity proved to be both formative and appealing to Wesley’s understanding of the Christian life.

One could also make the case for a mystical understanding of Phoebe Palmer, as Elaine Heath has done in her groundbreaking work, *Naked Faith: The Mystical Theology of Phoebe*

---

<sup>21</sup> Journal Entry of Tuesday, 24 January 1738 as found in Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Tuttle, *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition*, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Tuttle, *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition*, p. 130.

*Palmer*. Heath's contention is that Palmer is best understood as a modern mystic, and the failure to appreciate her as such has led to reductive and simplistic readings that make Palmer's theology sound mechanical and formulaic. As Heath notes, "It would seem the difficulty with Palmer's sanctification theology is that it has suffered what [David] Tracy calls the 'imposition of otherness' by interpreters who failed to truly listen to Palmer's orientation as a mystic. . . . The real problem with Palmer has been one of hermeneutics: failing to 'read the mysticism' in her theology, thereby failing to interpret her meaning adequately."<sup>24</sup>

I am in agreement with Heath in terms of how she perceives the way people have interpreted Palmer, but I would like to press her analyses a bit further, relying on her appeal to the notion of "reification" as she picks it up in dependence upon Al Truesdale.<sup>25</sup> Part of the challenge Heath sees in the transition from Wesley to Palmer is that Wesley's vision of sanctification as a second work of grace was assumed to be normative and so reified by Palmer and others of his theological progeny. When Palmer did not have a similar experience to this framing (especially as related to the sense of "assurance" and the "witness of the Spirit"), it created a sense of loss and frustration (similar, perhaps to the heirs of the Holiness Movement whom Collins mentions?). Nevertheless, Palmer had a "deliverance from the reification of Wesley's experience of sanctification"<sup>26</sup> through her own mystical experience, the famous "day of days," and yet, it can be argued, that Palmer's own experience has been reified in a certain sense as promoters of the Holiness Movement went on to remove "the mystical foundation of Palmer's theology"<sup>27</sup> and rely on a form that was congenial to an American revivalist paradigm.

---

<sup>24</sup> Heath, *Naked Faith*, p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> "Reification of the Experience of Entire Sanctification in the American Holiness Movement," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30 (1996): 95-119.

<sup>26</sup> Heath, *Naked Faith*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> Heath, *Naked Faith*, p. 31.

One could blame any number of figures as to how and why these happenings took place. Heath seems to place the burden on those who have received and interpreted Palmer, and by implication those who receive and interpret Wesley. Truesdale's notion of reification here is important, however, to broaden the scope of issues involved. Truesdale draws on the work of Alfred North Whitehead to suggest that reification (particularly the fallacy of reification or the fallacy of misplaced concreteness) tends to treat an abstraction as a substantive. In particular, Truesdale believes that the Holiness Movement "fostered a reification of experience, rather than an existential fidelity to it."<sup>28</sup> And so, Wesley's abstraction was seen as a normative substantive by the Holiness Movement, and the Holiness Movement in turn generated an abstraction of its own that was perpetuated as a normative substantive by its progeny. But part of the difficulty in all of this is that Wesley and Palmer didn't do themselves or their progeny any favors in this regard, for each of them perpetuated the fallacy of reification as they went on to promote, teach, and preach their understandings of sanctification. Put another way, there is a wild disconnect between the rich, varied, and multilayered spiritual narratives of Wesley and Palmer and their formally articulated views on holiness, sanctification, and Christian perfection. There is a strong break between the "stuff of embodiment" and the "stuff of concepts" that makes "existential fidelity" (to use Truesdale's phrase) a challenge if not impossibility for their followers to embody and follow (depending, of course, on their own varying particularities). To take the particular case of Palmer: Heath's analyses are in many ways very compelling to get a sense of the fullness of Palmer's testimony, but Palmer never came close to understanding this fullness in such a way that it affected her conceptualizing, that is, her work of abstracting or theorizing the Christian life. I agree with Heath that Palmer was a mystic; I am not clear that Palmer understood

---

<sup>28</sup> Truesdale, "Reification of the Experience of Entire Sanctification," p. 96.

herself as such, nor do I sense that her formal work was pursued or reflects an explicit mystical sensibility. The same could generally be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of Wesley.

Perhaps this is the challenge of a mystical sensibility being encased in a Protestant form. The Wesleyan language of “entire,” the expectation of experiential possibilities occurring “here and now,” the notion of a “work of grace” even—all these sound exceedingly Protestant. Wesley, after all, was *conceptually* affected by the Moravians, despite his reservations at the personal level at different stages of his life. For her part, Palmer was an American evangelical revivalist, a category which beckons its own species of Protestant flair. Nevertheless, these Protestant encasements, and their accompanying conceptual baggage, work against and are at odds with perpetuating the “existential fidelity” at the heart of any vision of the Christian life that is to be firewalled from the fallacy of reification. What is needed is a reorientation to the mystical dimensions of the Wesleyan *via salutis*.

The kind of mysticism I have in mind<sup>29</sup> is not so much individualistic, privatized, and internal, nor is it about an ineffable, fleeting, esoteric experience of the numinous. Certainly, Christian mysticism gravitated to these forms over time, but in early Christianity up to the medieval period, mysticism could be understood in sacramental and communal terms; it could look to the great doctrines of the faith (the Trinity, the Incarnation, and so on) as holy mysteries, ones that are not simply proclaimed and elaborated but reverenced and practiced in worship, contemplation, and witness; it could even look to biblical interpretation not so much in terms of gathering the “facts of revelation” into some coherent whole but as an exercise in *lectio divina* in which God’s Spirit illumined the inspired scriptures for the sake of “enscripturating” the gospel into the hearts and lives of the faithful. This kind of mysticism is what Wesleyan accounts of

---

<sup>29</sup> My understanding of mysticism in the following points is deeply shaped by the work of Mark McIntosh; see in particular his *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection are typically missing, especially as they attempt to pass from one cultural-intellectual setting to another.

What would this classical form of mysticism provide the Wesleyan understanding of holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection? First, it would stress the connection between doctrine and practice. It would allow for the repeated discussions of how Wesley was not a “systematic theologian” to be put to rest because it would recognize that the assumed ideal (the “systematician”) is not the ideal practitioner of theology, particularly since the discipline in question (“theology”) is not so much an academic exercise in objective analysis but a form of contemplation in which knowledge and love are two sides of the same coin.

Second, this classical form of mysticism would suggest that it is *precisely through* the means of grace and not simply through the revivalist, camp-meeting setting that powerful, life-changing, transformative encounters with the living God can take place. Through the exercise of the means of grace, any number of heretical challenges can be resisted given that the means of grace are rhythms of activity that happen routinely in community over time rather than individualistic, fleeting moments.

Third, classical Christian mysticism can contribute to the Wesleyan understandings of holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection by highlighting the central role of human desire, especially as it is shaped and honed over time. Lurking behind Wesley’s claims of eradicating not only the guilt but the power of sin is the necessary process of human desire being transformed into holy love. And so the language of affections, holy tempers, and the like must be actively included in any discussion of entire sanctification and Christian perfection—which it sometimes is, but it is certainly complicated via the revivalist paradigm, which highlights instantaneity not only in terms of experience but also transformation as well. A reckoning with

human desire allows for both the instantaneous and progressive features of Wesley's vision to come through.

Fourth, classical Christian mysticism can aid Wesleyan understandings of holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection resist what is ultimately the most tempting and disastrous feature of this vision, namely its achievability, actualization, and fulfillment in this life, as if entire sanctification or Christian perfection "happens," "is identifiable," and so is "documentable" and "relatable." In their stress of real change by an active and holy God, expressions of Wesleyanism turn to a kind of anthropological immediacy that traffics in theological clothing. Let me explain. I am not convinced that what Wesley and his followers are after is best served by their claims of a "second blessing" or a "second work of grace." What I believe they are after is a kind of holiness of intention and motivation that is the result of a changed life subjected to the transformative power of the Holy Trinity. Such is not a status but a way of being in the world. This is not an achievement but a condition of grace. Therefore, the conceptual gesture of registering this way of being in the world or condition of grace in terms of a "blessing" or "work" is necessarily reductive. Can change happen at the altar? Absolutely. But the kind of change Wesley and his followers are after is not exclusively served in terms of a mode of instantaneity. The instantaneous has a place, but at stake here are human lives who subsist over time. I believe many heirs of the Holiness Movement are keen on this point, even if they do not articulate it as such—the point being that real change happens in a variety of ways, and a variety of ways must be involved for real change to take place. Again, this is not to question God's power or ability; it is simply a recognition that the medium in question, the theater of God's operations in this case—human lives—have their respective properties, and God is not necessarily in the business of violating those properties since God created them as such in

the first place. Therefore, if normative patterns for Christian experience are promoted, a risk will always present itself that such normativity is reductive in terms of how God works. For all that Wesley says to problematize the time-constitutive features of human development so that the “quantity of time is nothing to God,” a corollary to such thinking could be “conceptual frameworks of the Christian life are nothing to God” as long as the existential fidelity is preserved in terms of living and growing in the great love commandments.

All of this talk of God leads me to my fifth and final point at which classical Christian mysticism can contribute to Wesleyan understandings of holiness, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection. Given the capitulation to the temptation mentioned in the fourth point, heirs of the Wesleyan Holiness Movement have had to wrestle with similar issues that their Pentecostal progeny have had, namely a preoccupation with “the gift” rather than the “gift-Giver.” Ultimately, what drives the Wesleyan sensibility of real change being possible in this life is the confession and embrace of an active and powerful God. Classical Christian mysticism can make Wesleyan doctrine surrounding holiness and the Christian life more theo-logical, that is more attuned to the presence and activity of the Holy Trinity. This means that expectation sets, plausibility structures, linguistic registers are themselves “laid at the altar” for potential crucifixion and reconfiguration. The great apophatic traditions within Christianity are not aimed at silence *per se*, but a kind of silence *en via*, on the way to a certain Someone. Revivalist settings are prone to emphasize experiences possibly even more so than God’s very self. But the source of the change that makes a difference, the kind that these Wesleyans and Methodists are after in their understandings of holiness, sanctification, and perfection, is the God of their worship and confession. And this point cannot be lost in the midst of these discussions, or else the patient truly is dead, and there is nothing more to hope for.