

Are Christians Ever Really Perfect?

I was privileged this week to speak at [Old Bethel United Methodist Church](#) in Indianapolis as part of their Legacy series, which is taking a look at some of the foundational beliefs and practices of the Methodist movement. Specifically, I was asked to speak on one of John Wesley's distinctive theological emphases. So, of course, I chose his most controversial: the Doctrine of Christian Perfection.

I chose this topic, because it has been so often misunderstood and yet was of such critical importance to the spread of early Methodism. At the end of the day, we are left to decide whether or not Wesley's doctrine was clear and is it true? For that matter, we must decide what Wesley was really trying to say in the first place.

Just this week I read a quote from a scholarly work on Wesley, which says he never claimed a "sinless perfection". It is true that he never claimed this for himself, but he did claim it as an expectation (and a sometimes reality) for everyday Christians. I've read the material and it is unmistakable.

Now, a whole lot of extra stuff goes into this claim, especially how Wesley defined sin as *a willful transgression of a known law of God*, and also what it means to say one is "sinless" (Wesley specifically meant that a person no longer intentionally commits sin; this does not mean they do not commit unintended sins).

We also should consider the method of Wesley's writing on the

subject, when tended towards the defense of this concept of holiness as an expectation for God's children. So, sometimes his words carry more force and persuasive intent than they might in another context. It can make him sound quite dogmatic and as though the issue is a simple true/false dichotomy. Because of this, many people have found his claims hard to swallow.

And yet these claims are formed in the context of a deep reading of scripture. We would do well not to dismiss them without careful thought and much prayer.

At the end of the day, what I believe Wesley was trying to say is that God is ever calling us forward in faith to embrace a different way of being. We are to evaluate our thoughts, our desires, and our actions in the light of God's holiness, and to seek the Holy Spirit's power in altering our own sub-standard realities, until we become like Jesus.

So, are Christians ever really perfect? From a performance standpoint, I think the evidence clearly points to an answer of "no". But this really isn't Wesley's main point. Because holiness (or sanctification) is never about performance; it is about the heart.

And for Wesley, as with the Biblical authors, God – and God alone, in cooperation with our faith – is able to take a stony human heart and produce from it a heart that is made of flesh and capable of loving God and other people as God loves.

And God loves perfectly!

When Christians submit themselves fully to God, through faith

in Jesus, and allow the Spirit to work in and through them, holding nothing back out of selfish desire, then something incredible can and does happen. They don't suddenly become perfect in their performance, but they do become perfected in love.

And this is what Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection is all about.

If you would like to learn more about this, you can now view my entire lecture (just 26 minutes) below, or [online here](#).