

Abstract

‘THE PECULIAR DOCTRINE COMMITTED TO OUR TRUST’: IDEAL AND IDENTITY IN THE FIRST WESLEYAN HOLINESS REVIVAL, 1758-1763

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Spiritual and religious identity—on personal, corporate and denominational levels—ultimately exists in the truth of the God that is believed to be revealed and worthy of praise. Almost, if not, equally determinative are the ideals that are esteemed and pursued by persons, communities, traditions and faiths, respectively. For early Methodism, the source of all spiritual life and worship was the Triune God of historic Christian confession; the ideal that shaped its identity was nothing less than the possibility of Christian perfection. According to its leader John Wesley, the knowing and sharing of this biblical dictum and promise was the Methodist ‘testimony’ and reason for its providential existence. Speaking to the interrelatedness of Methodist ideal and identity, Wesley distinguished ‘perfection’ as ‘the peculiar doctrine committed to our trust’.

Over the past decade or so, some within the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition have declared, for a number of reasons—not least of which because of some of the peculiarities of Wesley’s interpretation (yes! this thesis will play on Wesley’s use of the word ‘peculiar’)—that the holiness movement and doctrine associated with his name is now dying if not already dead. Others, with intentions to revive his doctrine from the potential death-blows of (post-)modern critique and apathy, have reinterpreted Wesley’s thoughts into versions of his concept that no longer fully retain its original and radical semblance. With no intention in this study to affirm its demise or attempt to revive it for today, this thesis comprehensively locates and presents Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection in his particular context—in fact, a very particular context—the few years in early Methodism when the shape and preaching of this doctrine inspired the results he had long dreamed of, always desired, but never saw again on such a widespread level. What did Wesley actually teach about Christian perfection and how did Methodist people actually respond when early Methodist preaching of this doctrine, according to Wesley, was most effective?

This thesis has aimed to accomplish two objectives. First, it analyzes the shape of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection as it developed throughout his lifetime through a detailed and recurrent chronological review of his key holiness sermons, treatises, correspondence and the Methodist Conference minutes. In so doing it offers a new framework/timeline for charting this development, which, in particular, highlights the theological-practical importance of Wesley’s late 1750s revision of perfection’s amissibility (capability of being lost) alongside his increased emphasis on instantaneousness and his historic introduction of ‘second blessing’ terminology. Second, it retells the history and drama, critically evaluates the soteriological themes and holiness spirituality, and demonstrates the defining significance for Methodist identity (personal, corporate and eventually ecclesial) of the one season in early Methodism when the shape of Wesley’s doctrine first fully matured (in substance and structure) and his preaching proved most popular in early Methodism—a period herein titled the first Wesleyan holiness revival, 1758-1763.

This season has been mostly remembered in scholarly treatment for the perfectionist controversies it included. Indeed, the revival ended in scandal, the foreseeable relapsing of most of its claimants of

Christian perfection and, to Wesley's often expressed frustration and discontent, the doctrine's subsequent unpopularity in early British Methodism. But these 'living witnesses' whom Wesley repeatedly described in event-centred terms as 'exceedingly clear in their experience' were the first of many tens, if not hundreds, of thousands in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition who have at some point personally testified to a distinct, entirely sanctifying moment in their lives. The revivalist roots of this tradition are particularly traceable to the vivacious Wesleyan Methodism of this 1760s juncture. Though, more often than not, this season's significance has been overlooked, downplayed or undermined, if not framed in a mostly negative light. In this thesis, however, it is argued as definitive for both early Methodist ideal and identity in that it first defined and exhibited the ideal of Christian perfection dynamically and, in turn, experimentally while concurrently being the empowering context for some of Methodism's most momentous steps in determining and securing what would eventually become its dissenting and denominational status. This was hardly coincidental, as many early Methodists and its opponents amongst the established Church of England realized. Holiness revivalism in the Wesleyan tradition, as a religious experiment in its own right, has been unable to escape its 250+ year long history of splintering denominationalism and associations with sectarianism.

As the theological and practical distinctions between John Wesley, early Methodism and the nineteenth-century American Holiness Movement (and the present holiness groups which emerged out of it) continue to be superficially exaggerated, this thesis uses the wealth of primary source materials available in Wesley's wide-ranging theological and pastoral corpus as well as those held at the Methodist Archives and Research Centre at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester-Special Collections to argue and demonstrate that early Methodism was—far above any of its paradoxical institutional or ecclesiological concerns—the original evangelical British Holiness Movement of the eighteenth century and that the still elusive but increasingly tamed and respectable John Wesley is best and most accurately represented as the father of evangelical holiness revivalism in the modern age ... radicalism, peculiarities and all.