

Reclaiming Christian Perfection  
in United Methodism

# Earnestly Striving

Joanne Carlson Brown

We read the Bible through spectacles blurred by tradition...  
God be praised, we are out of the controversial belt. We have left behind  
the highways where theologians marched and countermarched.  
We study the book now, not for clubs with which to beat each other's theological brains,  
but for food to make us strong to fight the common enemy.<sup>1</sup>

*Jennie Fowler Willing*

Jennie Fowler Willing, a 19th century Methodist holiness reformer, wrote that before 1906 and we could do well to take note of her position. Wesley claimed to be a man of one book. As we search for commonality in creeds born of an ecumenical spirit, we tend to downplay our uniqueness. Methodists have often disparaged their theological foundations, speaking of Methodism as formed by folk theologians and folk religion. But Methodism does have a strong theological contribution to make, one which, as 19th century religious reformers knew, can give us a strong basis for bringing the Kingdom of God in, here, now. The Wesleyan concept of Christian Perfection has been lost of late in mainline Methodism. Many contemporary United Methodists look puzzled or embarrassed when they hear the term and feel uncomfortable when told it is a major component of their theological tradition. Ordinands snicker nervously when giving their

affirmative answer to Wesley's historic questions about perfection: "Do you believe you can attain perfection in love in this life?"—and before you've even had a chance to catch your breath—"are you earnestly striving for it?"

Methodists have seen this concept challenged as not really Protestant, as impossible, and as a sword that divides rather than a "tie that binds." It is time that we, as United Methodists, embrace wholeheartedly this concept that formed the foundation of Wesley's theology. This doctrine was at the heart of Methodism when it was most effective in the world. If you have not read John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in a while, I suggest you take it out and read it again and share it with your congregation. In this little book, Wesley early on spells out what he understands Christian Perfection to be and how we as Methodists are to live into this life-sustaining doctrine.

For Wesley, sanctification or perfec-

tion is a direct result of our justification. Justification is what God has done for us and sanctification is what God does in us. As we study scripture and pray and experience the radical love of God in our lives, we can see and understand what God's will is for our lives and the world. Grace abounding enables us to have our wills become so one with God's will that we can do and be what God wants us to do and be without even having to think about it. Faith and holy living—you cannot separate the two. This doctrine fell out of favor with 19th century establishment Methodism. But even if it slipped out of official usage, it was alive and well not just in the holiness offshoots but also in its very midst. The men and, especially, the women who worked in the religious reform movements did so out of their sanctification. **I do not see mainline Methodism accommodating to modernity so much as capitulating to the pessimistic, supposedly realistic view of human nature. In order for**

**Methodism to be revitalized we will have to resist worshipping at the altar of the idol of human helplessness.** It is a much easier approach to say I can't help what I do, I am not responsible, I'm only human. Yes, we are human, but for Wesley that meant created and restored in God's image. We need to hold before us the texts which inspired the people of God before us to strive to be what God wanted them to be. We need to have the ears to hear the words of Deuteronomy 30:11,14 (RSV): "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. . . But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it;" and the words of Matthew 5:48 (RSV): "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

We need to reclaim Christian perfection for United Methodism. It is not just a holiness concept. No less a "radical" than Bishop Francis J McConnell in his book, *The Essentials of Methodism*, exhorts people toward entire sanctification.

"Still with all the defects of the doc-

trine we must insist that it is essential to Methodism to keep alive the ideal at which it aims; that is, the bringing of all parts of the life under subjection to the law of the Kingdom. In the emphasis upon the doctrine not enough stress has been laid upon the will to act up to the full light, as the light is revealed. A good working definition of entire sanctification is that of an old saint, that entire sanctification consists in a purpose to sanctify everything one can get one's hands on. It will not do to allow this ideal to drop from Methodist thinking. Whether progress in individual life comes through sharply marked crises, or whether it is a gradual unfolding which cannot mark times and places, the truth is that the essential duty or progress must always be kept before the mind of the Christian. As well teach that the mere fact of enlistment in an army makes a man in a full sense a soldier, as to teach that mere enlistment in a church makes a man a full citizen of the Kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

We cannot allow this ideal to drop from Methodism. We can never see our

selves so sophisticated and so jaded that this concept has no meaning for us. American Methodism has proclaimed grace and freedom for over 200 years. A recommitment to the ideal of Christian Perfection will allow us to work to make them a reality in this world. □

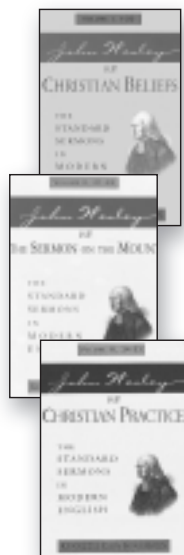
1 Jennie Fowler Willing, *God's Great Women*, Louisville, Kentucky: Pentecostal Publishing Co, N.D. (pre 1906), p. 41.

2 Francis J. McConnell, *The Essentials of Methodism*, Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, 1916, p. 22.



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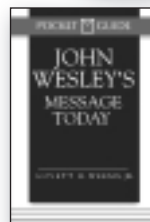
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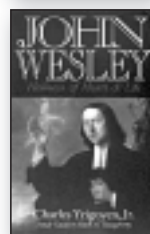
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