

A Vision of Holiness for God's People

FMCiC Minister's Conference Fall 2013

[slides available at: http://prezi.com/_ihfmss2sbca/holiness/]

I am feeling very privileged to be here sharing with you tonight. Thank you Bishop Keith for the invitation.

I grew up in the Free Methodist Church in Saskatchewan, first in Kindersley and then in Saskatoon. I remember asking my parents when I was young why we attended the church that we did, I was about 4 years old and I think we were on our way to church. My mom said it's the church that my dad and his parents attended. It didn't really make sense to me as a 4 year old, but I have a better appreciation for that heritage now. Both my grandfathers pastored FM churches and my parents met at the youth weekend May Rally at the Alex campground in Alberta. I am a third generation Free Methodist (more if you count the heritage in the Holiness movement church on my dad's side of the family), but I am also Free Methodist by conviction. In Bible College at Rocky Mountain College (here) in Calgary I took time to examine Wesleyan doctrine and I was encouraged to discover that I agree with what I found.

When I moved to Vancouver to attend Regent College for my masters degree, I was unable to continue attending an FM church since there was not one close by, but I found a new way to engage with my heritage through the research for my thesis. I took my interest in issues of maturity in the Christian life and applied it historically to Methodist spirituality. In the background of my initial question was why the rich spiritual heritage of Methodism was not a significant part of the vision for Christian maturity that I received as a young Christian in Free Methodist churches. The project that emerged was an examination of the spirituality of the early Methodist people in England; in particular relation to the way in which telling their spiritual narrative of Christian Perfection transmitted the doctrine throughout the Methodist communities and spurred others on to seek holiness. In other words, I made a lot of friends 200+ years my senior, who told me their stories and I want to share some with you. I had hoped to do the hard work of connecting history to our current situation today, but that ended up being outside the scope of my thesis. So, I am glad to have a chance to do some of that translation work tonight as I highlight a few things that I hope will be helpful to bridge the gap between the stories of the early Methodists and the stories of all of us in this room.

To give you a taste of the inspiring stories that I encountered, let me read a bit from a letter written by Sarah Crosby to John Wesley, outlining her search for holiness and experiences of intimacy with Christ in prayer. To begin, she writes of her first encounter with John Wesley, (this is from a letter to Wesley, himself, mind you):

I said [to myself], I will go to the foundry first, for I wanted to see Mr. W[esley]. He preached, but, as I thought, with no power. I remember nothing he said, but this, – “If it be possible for God to give us a little love, is it not possible for him to fill us with love?” This I have reason to remember; for I answered in my heart, “yes it is possible, but he will not do it.” Mr. W. was just then going to Ireland, and I heard him no more for eight months.

... [later she writes]

At length one day, while I was sitting at work, the Lord Jesus appeared to the eye of my mind surrounded with glory, while his love overwhelmed me; ... My soul seemed all love, and I desired nothing so much, as to lay down my life for others, that they might feel the same.¹

... [later she tells of another encounter with God]

Once, when I was kneeling down to pray, it was suggested to my soul with much power, “ask what thou wilt, and I will do it for thee.” My soul was amazed, and replied, “Lord, I ask nothing in earth, or heaven, but perfect holiness;” and this I was assured I would receive. My heart seemed now to be dissolved in love; the presence of God surrounded me, and I have slept as in the arms of his love.²

Would you pray with me as we begin our look at Holiness and Christian Perfection....

[slide] In this next hour we will be looking at the doctrine of Christian Perfection, through the lens of history and the lives of the early Methodist people. I want to start you thinking about how this connects to your ministry, to your churches and the people you know, as well as in your own experience of God. So, we will start with a framework to hang some ideas on, then talk about our assumptions about Perfection. Then I will share some more stories to set alongside what you already heard from Sarah Crosby. To

¹ Crosby to Wesley, in *Holy Women*, 2:28,33. The quoted hymn is the final two lines from Charles Wesley’s *Redemption Hymns*, hymn #42. Charles Wesley, *Hymns for Those that Seek and Those that have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ* (London: Strahan, 1747). Text available at http://www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/texts/cw_published_verse.html (accessed April 20, 2010).

² *Ibid.*, 2:36.

finish up we will take some time to think through connecting the early Methodist experiences to our own contexts.

Wesleyan Spiritual Lifespan

This week we are focused on Wesleyan theology, and last night John walked us through a number of aspects of Wesley's teaching that are central to the Wesleyan tradition. To lay the foundation for what I am going to talk about, I just want to do a quick refresher on (or introduction to) what I call the Wesleyan spiritual lifespan. [slide]

The spiritual life can be understood using the metaphor of the lifespan. The triptych of birth, life and death is used by historian David Hempton to describe Methodist spirituality.³ These aspects on the screen are not the only words that John Wesley used to describe the spiritual life, but it gives us a structure to work with.

Prevenient grace begins the story of the spiritual lifespan. [slide] Prevenient grace is the grace that comes before, while we were yet sinners. It is the grace that God extends to humankind that lifts us from our natural state (which is turned in on ourselves) and enables us to look beyond ourselves to other people. But more importantly, prevenient grace enables us to recognize God in our life and respond to Him. If you would like to explore Wesley's teaching on prevenient grace, there is a great book coming out from Chris Payk that exhaustively examines Wesley's teaching. *Grace First: Christian Mission and Prevenient Grace in John Wesley*, is available as the third volume in the Tyndale Seminary series in Wesley Studies.

Next in the lifespan we have regeneration. [slide] Regeneration is a biological word that uses the metaphor of life to unpack the idea that at the beginning of the Christian life God makes all things new. Regeneration marks that point when we go from dark to light, from death to life, from life in the flesh to life in the spirit. The parallel metaphor in forensic (or legal) terms is "justification." The language of justification evokes the idea that at the beginning of the Christian life God declares that we are restored to right relationship with Him.

Alongside regeneration is assurance of salvation. [slide] This aspect of the Christian life marks the time when we first receive the assurance that God loves us, not just loves humanity in general, but loves *us* in particular. This is the moment famously described by John Wesley as when he felt his *heart strangely warmed*. When he felt

³ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, 60-68.

something outside himself, a stranger to himself, enter into his emotional experience and it warmed him with the power of love. Therefore, conversion (both regeneration and assurance of salvation) offer freedom from sin by God's love through an encounter with God and the objective declaration of righteousness.

Because the spiritual life is more than just a moment, there is more to spirituality than conversion. Sanctification, or Christian Perfection, is how John Wesley described both the ongoing process and a particular moment in the life of the Christian. [slide] This is the *life* portion of Hempton's birth-life-death imagery. I will continue to unpack both the process and event elements of sanctification throughout our time here tonight.

Finally, the entrance into Glory. [slide] Glory is when we finally enter into God's presence through the promise of eternal life, when we shall see Christ face to face. John Wesley (pushing back on a Roman Catholic understanding of the spiritual lifespan that included purgatory) writes about the vision that believers who die in faith will be cleansed from sin by God's power and will stand in God's presence in Glory, fully whole and restored (with no need for purgatory). Glory as the end-goal fits well with the therapeutic metaphor of salvation which articulates the goal of the Christian life as the movement toward wholeness and healing, rather than stopping at a forensic declaration of righteousness.

[slide] Now these elements of the spiritual lifespan are not likely to occur evenly spaced throughout the earthly life of an individual, the dots may move on the timeline to look more like this [slide]. The first testimonies of Christian Perfection were recorded by John and Charles Wesley as they attended at the deathbed of faithful Christians. In those testimonies, Perfection slides later in life, much closer to glory.⁴ Or the spacing of the spiritual live events could have some other timing entirely. What I find helpful about having an idea of the Wesleyan spiritual lifespan is the sense of both an ongoing process *and* that there are particular moments in our spiritual life that are important to mark as landmarks.

⁴ Charles reports the faithful death of sister Hooper on May 6, 1741 and from her expression of devotion to Christ he interprets, "this is that holiness, or absolution, or Christian Perfection!" Charles Wesley, *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. ST Kimbrough, Jr. and Kenneth G. C. Newport (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2008) 1:304. John Wesley visited a very ill friend, Nancy Morris, and her testimony on May 15, 1741 of being cleansed prompted Wesley to discuss the possibility of being cleansed from all sin with Moravian, Peter Böhler the next day. John Wesley, May 15, 1741, *Journal and Diaries II: 1738-1743*, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater, vol. 19 of *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 194-195.

Assumptions

Okay, now that we have this frame to hang some ideas on, let's dive deeper into sanctification and Christian Perfection. Before I unpack some of the things I have learned from the eighteenth century Methodists, let's take some time to face some of the assumptions that we hold today about Christian Perfection. [slide] Turn to someone beside you, in groups of 2 or 3, let's talk for a few minutes about the assumptions we currently have. Have you heard about Christian Perfection before? How would you define it? If you haven't heard about it, what would you assume it means?[slide]

[Discussion 5-10 min]

[transition back to the big group] I discovered as I was writing my thesis the depth to which the doctrine of Christian Perfection was misunderstood. I was warned that while you are writing your thesis you will get asked over and over again what you are writing about, and it is actually helpful to try to put your huge project into small-talk sized explanations. So, as I was commuting home on the bus I ran into a Regent professor and we got chatting about my thesis work. He asked what my topic was and I said it was "the doctrine of Christian Perfection." And he launched into how important it was to argue against Christian perfection because he knew someone who had been so abused by her church by the demands of being perfect that she had struggled and walked away from faith. I didn't really know where to go from there - do I explain that I am not writing about perfectionism, or do I explain that I am arguing *for* the doctrine? I think I just agreed that the doctrine is very misunderstood, and internally I was glad that my bus stop was coming up soon.

[Calling out ideas from their discussions for the whole group - 2-5 min]

[slide] The first assumption that I want to face is that Christian Perfection is about moralism. [slide] The term *Perfection* in English carries with it a connotation of elitism, of moral superiority, of a "holier than thou" attitude. None of these things is what Wesley meant when he used the term. *Perfecting Love* might be closer to the idea, where the love of God evokes transformation, as we heard in Sarah Crosby's account. But, as terminology *perfecting love* becomes awkward and imprecise. (Trust me, I tried to use it in the first draft of my thesis, it didn't work.)

Christian Perfection is not about moralism, it is about encountering the living God. Moralism sets up rules and boundaries for the sake of identifying who is in, and who is out. Moralism can create a hierarchy of sin where only a few public sins get all

the condemnation. Moralism can lead to pointing out the speck in our neighbour's eye while ignoring the plank in our own. Instead, Christian Perfection is about encountering the living God who is full of grace for our failures. Holiness calls us to more than moralism, to a life that is wider than being on the right side of hot button issues. To choices that are complex as we ask God to show us the particular good of our life that involves saying no to many things that are not in themselves sinful, but would be unhelpful for us to indulge in. Perfection goes so far beyond the narrow vision of moralism.

So if Perfection is not about moralism, we have also heard that Perfection is a claim to sinlessness. I think this is one of the most problematic misunderstandings. John Wesley did not teach that Christian Perfection means sinlessness. [slide] Christian Perfection, as Wesley described, is being freed from what he called the "inbred sin" that plagues our lives, but the potential to sin (in new ways or the same ways) in the future is still very much possible after an experience of Perfecting love.

Let me put it another way. The spiritual lifespan of a believer reveals that there is growth in maturity, particularly in relation to sin. There is sin before conversion that is set aside by the power of God's love and the choice to repent and live a new life. And yet, sin after conversion shows itself, too. We do fail in the effort to always do the right thing, and that is not contrary to what it means to be a Christian. Sin after conversion is actually part of the Christian life, and is to be expected, for that there is repentance. But even more challenging in the continued struggle with sin, is that there are sins that are not so obvious as outward behaviour. After outward obedience to God's law begins to take shape in our lives, a new layer of our brokenness tends to emerge. We struggle with selfishness, with pride and other inward attitudes that pull us away from God, despite our best efforts to the contrary. [pause] It is as if conversion is the moving out broken furniture in a dark room and once it is clear, we see the dirt and graffiti that was underneath all the furniture. It was there the whole time, but we couldn't do anything about it until we face the brokenness. And the good news is that as God shines light into the dark room of our heart revealing the dirt and graffiti, the light of His love begins to clean away the things it reveals. Christian Perfection is not about sinlessness, but about dealing with the complexity of sin.

So if these new levels of maturity and freedom from sin are possible through an experience of Perfecting love, then should we be *requiring* that those who lead attain

this level of spiritual maturity? With the risk of undermining the relevance of my talk tonight, I want to make it clear, that in no way are spiritual leaders *required* to experience Christian Perfection as a sign of fitness for leadership. To encounter God in a Perfecting love experience is a *gift* and should never be used as a power move or to exert authority over others. Christian Perfection is not about elitism [slide]

One way the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century was revolutionary was because it mixed the social classes together in the Methodist societies. The aristocracy would worship alongside the workers in the factories. And John Wesley asserted that each could learn from the other in fellowship in the Methodist class and band meetings. In many ways Wesley fought against elitism (although he also had his blind spots) and one way he fought against elitism was during the Perfectionist controversy of the 1760s.

By then the Methodist revival had been going on for several decades and there was a significant increase in the claims to the charismatic experience of Perfecting love. In worship services and small groups people had encountered God in ways that they described as releasing them from sin. It is clear from the letters and diaries that not all of these expressions of Perfection could be backed up with the evidence of transformed lives, but not all were false either. There were excesses around two Methodist preachers, Maxfield and Bell. Under their leadership a group withdrew from the London Methodist societies insisting that those who had an experience of Perfecting love could only be taught by those who shared the experience. Wesley bluntly rejected this teaching and insisted that Christian Perfection was not a requirement for teaching others and not required for salvation. Wesley corrects and says *no, salvation and Perfection are a gift from God!* This Perfection is not a requirement that we must fulfill, but a gift and grace from God that *He* offers us. Turn around the teaching from burden to gift. The vision of holiness that Wesley encouraged among the early Methodist people is the description from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks. There is no place for elitism in this vision.

Excesses and distortions can be seen in history in connection to the doctrine of Christian Perfection. And I've heard anecdotally about the excesses in the Free Methodist movement in previous generations around claims to sinlessness, as well. But excesses should not be our reasoning for disregarding *every* vision of holiness and Christian maturity. Rather, we need to name those excesses as wrong expressions of

holiness that undermine more than the doctrine of Perfection. For example, prideful claims to sinlessness undermines the ability to call pride itself sin. Undervaluing Christian maturity leads to congregations of immature Christians who get stuck and are unable to live into the freedom that Christ offers. Although it gets messy and it is the hard part of doing ministry with real people, history shows that we need to be discerning when people boastfully claim their own maturity, and we *can* test those claims with love and grace.

Christian Perfection in Wesley's time

So, if those are some of the things that Perfection is not, then what is it? [slide] My research focused on the idea of Christian Perfection during Wesley's lifetime, that's the time period I am talking about. There were shifts in theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; in North America in contrast to Britain, and those are future research projects that I still need to tackle. So, forgive me if this is not the doctrine of Perfection that you have heard taught in other contexts.

During Wesley's lifetime Perfection was controversial and still being shaped. [slide] I want to begin with the caveat that we need to hold the idea loosely for a number of reasons. Because it was controversial when Wesley talked about it, because not all Methodists held the same ideas about Christian Perfection (even John and Charles had disagreements about the details), and because the particulars of the doctrine of Perfection are not held in common by all traditions across Christian history. This is not a doctrine to create division over. Yet, I do think that it offers a helpful way to understand the Christian life. On the other hand, *holiness* in general *is* a doctrine held in common by all Christians and found in early writings and it is central to spiritual writing from the desert Fathers to the medieval monastics through to Protestant traditions like the Quakers, German Pietists and our own Wesleyan Holiness tradition.

The doctrine of Christian Perfection in the context of Wesley is an exciting research topic for me as a historian because it was a doctrine that was still being shaped and defined by Wesley and the Methodist people. Experiences and testimony shaped the language used to describe holiness. The encounters with God that people were sharing with Wesley were shaping how he proclaimed the gospel.

So with those caveats in mind, Christian Perfection is how John Wesley described the *goal* of the Christian life. [slide] In simplest form defined as loving God with all

your heart, and loving your neighbour as yourself.⁵ In more complex language Perfection is freedom from inward or inbred sin. Inward sin being the struggles that are related to the motivations and underlying impulses (which can be manifest in outward behaviour), rather than merely the obvious actions that transgress God's law. To be free of these inward distortions of motivation is the longing we heard in Sarah Crosby's letter.

Christian Perfection is a goal to move toward through a process of sanctification, but it is also more than the process. Perfection also refers to an actual *experience* of a particular encounter with God, similar to the experience of assurance of salvation at conversion. It is an event, even though the process to get to the experience can be quite lengthy. Seeking Perfection offers the hope of transformation and provokes movement in the right direction.

The process part of the experience of Perfecting love can take place over years, or decades. Listen to a bit of the journal of George Clark, a lay leader in the London Methodist society. [slide] John Wesley published his account to encourage the Methodist people:

[slide] June 28, [1761]: My soul morns after God. I have indeed a sense of his favour and presence; but the old man is not dead: my will is not subdued: unbelief often revives: these I want to have entirely destroyed. But some of my friends tell me, "It cannot be: that there is no instantaneous work after Justification: but only a gradual decay of sin." When I give way to this, I suffer much loss: I lose all my hunger and thirst after righteousness. And I see those who are of this opinion gain no ground, but are just what they were twenty years ago. . . .

[slide] March 28[, 1762]. The Lord still continues the work of his grace, and comforts me by a sense of his mercies. He give me likewise freedom in prayer, and the witness of his Spirit, that Christ is mine and I am his. But all this suffices not, since I am still unholy: it only whets my desire, to give my whole soul to this gracious God, who deigns to accept such a polluted heart.⁶

There was progress going on in Mr. Clark's life, he was seeing the grace of God in his life, he was practicing the means of grace, but something was driving him forward to seek even more freedom. He was seeking after the release of peace that accompanied an

⁵ For example see Letter from John Wesley to Lawrence Coughlan, August 27, 1768. *Letters*, 5:101-103.

⁶ George Clark, "An Extract from the Journal of Mr. G— C—," in *Arminian Magazine*, 6 (1783)186-187.

encounter with God. Listen to the journal entry for [slide] Pentecost Sunday, May 30, 1762:

Blessed be the Lord, that he hath brought into my soul the liberty I so long [have] been seeking for. This morning I thought much of the descent of the Holy Ghost on the Apostles, and prayed that He might rest upon me. But I found little answer till the singing of the first hymn, when his Spirit made me deeply sensible of his presence. I then pleaded with him, and that with many tears, to make me a partaker of his sanctifying love, by removing forever the bitter root of pride, self-will and unbelief. All this time my heart was broken before the Lord, and my face covered with tears: and I found nothing left but a fear lest the Spirit should depart, before he had purified me from inbred sin. While I was thus agonizing with God in prayer, the power of the Lord came upon me, so that my whole body trembled under it. But I kept my spirit still, and continually cried, “My heart, Lord! work within! work within!” In that instant I felt the Spirit of God enter into my heart with mighty power, and as it were literally accomplish that promise, *I will take away the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh*: the old heart seeming to be taken away, and God himself taking possession of my soul in the fulness of love: and all the time of the service, I enjoyed such a heaven of love as I never before experienced. All the day I watched every motion of my heart, to see if the evils I before felt were there or not: but I found none: I could find nothing there, but solid joy and heart-felt peace.⁷

George Clark sought after the goal of holiness. He heard about it from others, he saw it in the life of people he respected. But, even more remarkable than the years of seeking Perfection is the transformational impact of the encounter with God that he had on that Sunday in 1762.

Clark’s testimony you just heard shows how Perfection is an experience that brings profound release. [slide x2] One thing I had not expected to find in the stories of the early Methodists was such an honest wrestling with sin. They were concerned about the anger, pride and selfishness that seemed to overpower them. The release that was experienced in Perfecting love is profound in the journal of George Clark. He sought holiness and on that Pentecost Sunday he encountered God during the worship service and walked away with “solid joy and heart-felt peace.” What I was most surprised about is that this peace and joy continued to express itself in his journal after this experience.

⁷ George Clark, “An Extract from the Journal of Mr. G— C—,” in *Arminian Magazine*, 6 (1783)244-245.

Where angst and struggle marked his entries before this experience, peace prevailed afterward. He no longer condemn himself for struggles, but released them to the Lord.

Clark celebrated lasting peace after his experience of Christian Perfection. Thirteen months after his Perfecting love experience, Clark reflects on the lasting effects, he writes,

[slide x2] July 3 [1763]. By the mercy of God, the peace and love I have enjoyed for many months does not diminish, but rather increase; though I have never had the rapturous Joy, which many have. If I had, I had probably been carried away with the same Enthusiasm. But this day my soul had a lively sense of its union with Jesus in holy love.⁸

The continued thankfulness for peace and freedom is evidence of the transformation. Yet, the experience continued to deepen: [slide] December 11, 1763 found Clark feeling “a purer love, and in a greater degree,” and [slide] January 1, 1764 found Clark “preserved in perfect peace.”⁹ Clearly, Clark’s sanctification was not a static event, it continued to grow.

[slide] I long to have this type of encounter with God. I may not have such a dramatic release as the narratives I’ve studied, and I don’t claim a perfecting love experience of my own, but I can point to some experiences of God in my life that provided a release of burdens and I moved forward into life lighter. I long for this to always be what marks my spiritual life.

For example, the last eight years of my life have been a season focused on study and preparation for whatever ministry that God calls me into. I have enjoyed the luxury of this season of study and I have been affirmed that study and teaching is part of how God has wired me. But I have also struggled with intense doubt rooted in the fact that I have not had many opportunities to minister in the area that I feel specifically called into: teaching. I have ministered in other ways that I am gifted in, behind a sound board, administratively, I have been blessed to minister by serving communion and looking people in the eye and declaring that the body and blood of Christ is given for them. These have all been part of finding my place in the body of Christ. But, when it comes to

⁸ Ibid., 6:301. Clark’s comment about enthusiasm is best understood when set in the historical context of the Perfectionist controversy where ecstatic encounters with God were increasing and the settled peace Clark claims was not always evident.

⁹ Ibid., 6:352, 353.

teaching, which seems to be so close to my heart, the opportunities have been slow in coming.

In the year after I graduated from Regent I was wrestling with this intense doubt that I would ever have opportunity to teach. I was taking time to get physically and emotionally healthy again after the years of study, and I was holding down the fort as my husband got through his own thesis. When I was starting to feel better again and Tim was nearing graduation I knew it was the time to start job hunting. But, I just couldn't face the inevitable rejection that job hunting involves. I was anticipating that the rejection would reinforce the feelings of doubt. I knew this was a block that was rooted deep within, and I found release in an unexpected place: the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with perfume. Listen to the story from John 12:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

I was at a day long prayer retreat, and the reflection on Mary at the last session of the day was on the reckless abandon that she displayed out of love for Christ in this passage. I had been naming the fear I was feeling while journaling earlier in the day of prayer. I wrote, "No matter how clear it is to me that Tim & I together have discerned that this is where God wants us right now, I still fear that my calling to teach will never be allowed to be the guiding principle of our [future] discernment. I wonder how much that fear has kept me from seeing God at work. A fear like that colours things. I want to be able to see God at work, and join Him in that work." After hearing about Mary's reckless abandon I pondered the possibility that my reckless abandon would be to release the idea of teaching as necessary to my happiness, but as I sorta tried that idea on for size a whole new idea came to mind. It was so unlike the fear that marked my thinking for years, that I can only attribute it to God. It occurred to me that I could take risks to teach *as* the reckless acts that parallel Mary and her perfume. That I could send out resumes, market myself, put in the hard work to make myself available, not as selfish boastful acts, but similar to the self-lessness of Mary, when she lost all thought of herself and anointed Jesus' feet out of love. When my eyes turned to Jesus and what I can offer to him as a priceless gift, then the fear of rejection fell away.

Now, my doubt and fear have surfaced many times since that prayer retreat a year and half ago, but that encounter with God and the truth that he whispered to me that day opened up a part of my heart and released a part of my hurt and fear. I can recall that feeling of encountering God and it realigns my life again, putting my eyes back on Christ and off myself. Releasing me from the sinful barriers of fear.

This story is just one example of my experience that God is active today bringing release when we encounter Him in such a personal way. The early Methodists told their narratives vividly of transformational release from the sin that entangled them. And in seeking after this freedom, holiness and Christian Perfection offered the goal to which they sought after.

Why focus on Holiness?

With all the missteps and misunderstandings that we have already discussed, it is fair to ask the question, what good is a focus on holiness? Or to put it another way, what is missing when holiness is rarely discussed in our churches?

I have offered you some ideas that I have about holiness. Turn to someone — the same person you already talked to, or someone new and share one take away point that you have from what we have been talking about. One thing that will impact how you do ministry or one thing for your personal spiritual journey. [slide] If you need to stretch your legs, feel free to walk across the room and find someone new — or just stand up and stretch while you chat.

[6 min or so]

[slide] Call out some things that impacted you [5 min]

Here are some of my ideas. The focus on holiness is important because it is inherently aspirational. [slide] There is always more holiness, more wholeness, more healing that can take place. There have been many metaphors that express the reality that there is always more and more to discover about the goodness of God and the richness of our life in Christ. Think of the metaphor of athletic training in Philippians 3: “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Another metaphor is found in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses* where the infinity of God is explored in the mysterious cloud that Moses enters at the top of the mountain.

The aspiration toward holiness is a significant topic in Wesleyan *hymns* as the singing congregation seeks the restoration and wholeness. Charles Wesley's hymns offer a tangible outlet for the doctrine of Christian Perfection in ministry. Singing about the aspiration of holiness allows the singer to enter into the journey from conversion, through sanctification with the hope of glorification as the goal. While Charles and John differed on the particulars of the doctrine, I would argue that their differences were ones of emphasis rather than of content. Charles' emphasis was on the gradual sanctification (leaning on images like healing and restoration of the image of God) which is completed only in faithful death and glorification. While John's emphasis was on the hope of significant release in this life. Either way, the emphasis on sanctification as the outworking of justification is clear in both the Wesley brothers.

Listen to this verse of a hymn by Charles [slide]:

Shall we mistake the morning-ray
Of grace for the full blaze of day?
Or humbly walk in Jesus' sight,
Glad to receive the gradual light
More of His grace and more to know,
In faith and in experience grow,
Till all the life of Christ we prove,
And lose ourselves in perfect love!¹⁰

The aspirational notes in this hymn are evocative and poetic. Morning rays of light are transformational compared to the darkness of night, and yet to mistake the brightness of dawn for the full blaze of day is to miss out. That the journey of the Christian life holds the potential of both the transformation of night to dawn, and then to the full blaze of the noon-day sun is a rich image of hope. The language of growth and losing ourselves in perfect love offer further layers in Charles' poetry. This hymn is found in a manuscript that Charles put together and there is a copy where John added notation to "correct" Charles' theology. John adds his note at the end of line four. [slide] To the gradual growth in holiness, John adds his hope that God can also impart the grace of holiness suddenly. [pause] May we all aspire to holiness in whatever way that God wants to bring it to our life.

¹⁰ CW, Short Hymns - manuscript notated by John. See Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim*, 248; and Tyson, *Charles Wesley and Sanctification*, 249.

Further to the aspirational value of the doctrine of Christian Perfection, the importance of talking about holiness in our churches is that holiness is a picture of Christian Maturity. [slide x2] The discussion of holiness is often limited to discussing it as an attribute of God; part of the otherness of God is that He is holy, while humanity is not holy in comparison. This is true, but it is also only part of the story. An increasing Christian maturity involves increasing holiness. There is real progress that can be made, by the grace of God, and we are called to seek after this maturity in Christ.

Think about those people who you know that are mature Christians. The elderly gentleman or lady in your congregation who is an example of what you want to be when you are in that stage of life. What are they marked by? Peace? Grace? Wisdom? Why do you trust their council? Why do you receive their rebuke? Is it because they never do anything wrong (that they appear to be perfect), or is it because they have encountered God throughout their life, and have been transformed to be more like Christ? Holiness as a mark of Christian maturity is the lined face of a wise Christian who has seen trouble and pain, but has turned to God in the midst of struggle. Encounters with God evoke holiness. And casting a vision of the growth in grace and holiness is an important part of the ministry of the church.

I am a bit biased, because it's my research area, but I think that it would be a good thing to talk about holiness more in our churches. There will be people will be quietly getting holier whether we talk about holiness or not, because that is the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, but telling the story of seeking holiness does have an impact on the spiritual life of our communities of faith. The stories of Perfection in the eighteenth century spread the doctrine of Perfection, and stories have the power to spread holiness today. [slide] Indeed, my main argument in my thesis (and forthcoming book) is that the stories of Christian Perfection actually transmitted the doctrine through the early Methodist connexion. I hadn't set out to write about narratives, I hadn't set out to read the stories of the unknown early Methodist people, but as I did my research I discovered that that is where the juicy story is, it's with the people. It's in the process of living life. It's in the transmission of faith from one person to another. So, you can read more about my argument for the evidence that narrative transmission took place in the eighteenth century when you buy my forthcoming book in the Tyndale Seminary series. But let me share a bit of what was going on then, to give you some ideas of how holiness can spread now.

John Wesley was the big name speaker in the Methodist connexion, he traveled to all the communities, but rather than only speaking about his own life and teaching the abstract doctrine, he knew the power of story. He carried with him letters of spiritual experience that he would pull out in the context of a worship service instead of preaching a sermon. These letters were at first inspirational letters from other communities, such as German Moravians sharing about their missions work around the world. But, as the spiritual testimony of the Methodist revival grew those were the stories that he took to various communities. John Wesley built the pattern for telling stories right into the structures of the Methodist communities, with events such as the Love Feast, which was a gathering for sharing testimony about what God had done in the lives of the people. And the Methodist people followed this example and shared their stories with each other. Many of the narratives that I discovered of people telling their account of Perfecting love also held an earlier account of hearing the story of someone who had the experience. Someone that this person knew and respected for their spiritual maturity, and the testimony caused them to see that holiness was attainable.

We have already heard how Sarah Crosby heard about holiness in John Wesley's sermon on holiness carving the phrase deep in her mind: "If it be possible for God to give us a little love, is it not possible for him to fill us with love?" And this sparked a longing for holiness that lasted her whole life.

Another example of narrative transmission of Christian Perfection was told in the *Arminian Magazine*. This letter tells the story of an unnamed man who sought out a friend who had reportedly received a clean heart, or Perfection. He was skeptical but curious about the claim. He writes, "A little while after, I spoke to her: but it was as if the Lord had put a bridle in my jaws. I could not contradict. I could only say at last, 'If you have this blessing, pray that I may have it also.'" Although doubtful when approaching his friend, he went away seeking freedom from sin more intensely. His letter continues and bears witness to his own experience of Christian Perfection while he was praying with friends.

How could this transmission work itself out today? It is not hard to make the case today for the power of story, we tell stories all the time, but do we tell our spiritual narratives? What about using blogs to tell part of our spiritual journey. What about creating discussion groups that share personal spiritual narratives. Public testimony is a powerful medium for sharing spiritual truth. What about a testimony night at your church, or including testimonies during your Sunday service. And, of course, the most

powerful witness is to hear the story of holiness one-on-one through spiritual friendships and mentoring. One of the most startling accounts I discovered in my research was from one of these opportunities for one-on-one mentoring. Bathsheba Hall, a young lay leader in Bristol shared her Perfection narrative with a friend, and not only did it inspire her friend it actually provoked an encounter with God. Listen to what Hall wrote in her journal:

Wednesday [September] 18 [1771]. I asked *M. Stokes* to come home with me, and I would read her my Experience. While I was reading, I felt the mighty power of God descend upon me, and my soul overflowed with gratitude to him, who reigned in me without a rival. We then went to prayer, and strong faith was given me, to wrestle for my friend. She cried out in great agony of soul. I prayed on, till she fainted away. When she recovered, she said, “The Lord has done something for me, but I know not what.” I said, Wait, and he will answer for himself.¹¹

Bathsheba Hall took seriously the power of her narrative of encountering God, and through her willingness to share she impacted the life of her friend. And, her journal tells of other times when she similarly shared her story in one-on-one settings, and impacted other women.

What does Christian Perfection mean for your own spiritual journey?

Have you got a few gems collected in your pocket for what holiness could mean in your ministry? What about in your personal spiritual life? [slide] One thing that I have been convicted of many times during my studies at Regent has been to be careful when I start collecting ideas that I want to pass along to others, without really stopping and letting them sink deep into my heart.

Bernard of Clairvaux used the imagery of the canal and the reservoir. A canal is a useful structure that uses water to transport ships, but after the water and ship passes through the canal is left empty. The other possibility is a reservoir that is filled with water and then overflows to benefit the area around it. I want to be a reservoir when it comes to speaking about holiness. So, don't forget about your own spiritual journey as you teach and preach about holiness. [slide] As you cast a vision of spiritual maturity for your community, don't forget to pay attention to your own spirit.

¹¹ Bathsheba Hall, “An Extract from the Diary of Mrs. Bathsheba Hall,” in *Arminian Magazine*, 4 (1781) 197.

While I was looking for more spiritual narratives for my research I started to look particularly for a balance of male and female narratives, and I had a hard time finding the male stories. I had the opportunity to talk to Methodist theologian Randy Maddox about my project and I asked if he knew about any narratives that I might find helpful, men's stories in particular. He suggested a few places to look and then asked if I had any theories on why I was having so much trouble finding perfection narratives from men. So I shared with him my gut reaction, which hasn't changed. From reading the spiritual accounts of a number of early Methodist preachers, I think that some of the men in the early Methodist movement were rushed into ministry — itinerant preaching to be specific — much too soon after their experience of assurance of salvation. Then in the busyness of travel and preaching they didn't have the opportunity to fully engage for themselves in the class or band meetings designed to spur people on to holiness. While women more often were doing ministry in their local contexts and could develop spiritual friendships and pay attention to their own spiritual needs. Men missed out on the opportunities to seek holiness that they were themselves preaching about.

I would hate to see that pattern working itself out again in our movement. I would hate to see men and women pastors get so caught up in the pressure to be the program director for the community that they don't take the time to seek out solitude. I would hate for pastors to be so caught up caring for others that they don't have a trusted group of friends that ask about the joys and sorrows of their own soul. I would hate to see pastors get worn down by the burden of their struggles and failures and forget that God offers the power to be more whole and offers freedom from sin.

What I would love to see is pastors who are humble and honest about their struggles and seeking after more freedom and holiness. What I would love to see is pastors who can proclaim the power of God to release us from sin, because they have encountered God and been freed themselves. What I long to see is pastors who are so healthy in their own spirits that they can't help but draw people closer to God.

This week is part of caring for the spirit of the Free Methodist pastors in Eastern/Western Canada. There will be time after this talk to dwell here a while and seek after more of the wholeness and peace. To ask God boldly to pour out more of his Spirit, to encounter us and set us free from the inbred sin that distracts and entangles us.

Would you pray with me...