THE PILGRIMAGE OF PERFECTION IN LOVE

Devotional Address

by Gerald O. McCulloh

You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. Matthew 5:48 (also I John 4:7-21; Philip 3:12-14).

Introduction

Let us direct our thoughts for these moments of devotion to the subject, "The Pilgrimage of Perfection in Love".

We as Methodists are recipients and stewards in a particular way of the incessant, indeed infinite, call to Christian perfection. John Wesley wrote of this emphasis upon the call to purity of heart and perfection in love as "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up."

In the examination of ministerial candidates for conference membership and ordination in the United Methodist Church the question is asked as it has been from the Methodist beginnings:

Are you going on to perfection?

Do you expect to be made perfect in this life?

Are you earnestly striving after it?

Every Methodist pastor in the American circle has been asked and answered this question, with individual interpretation to be sure in connection with his or her ordination.

There is currently a new sense of the centrality of this doctrine in our understanding of the gospel. In a group of thirty seminary students in a course in Methodist Doctrine about a third of them chose as a subject for a term paper study project some statement of the doctrine of Christian Perfection, Holiness, or Sanctification.
The emphasis on holiness, sanctification, and perfection in love is clearly traceable from the account of the rise of Methodism in 1729 when Wesley says two young men were sent forth by God to raise a holy people. More than sixty years later (1790), he wrote that for the sake of propagating this doctrine chiefly God had raised up the Methodist people.

But it should not be regarded as an idiosyncrasy or private possession of Methodism. The life of pure and perfect love is a calling of every child of God into the fulfillment of love for which he or she was created.

There is a broad expectation in ecumenical circles that the Methodist contribution to the emerging great world Christian community will be in the realm of emphasis upon the call to perfect love.

Wesley, throughout his life and ministry, continually stressed this Christian Perfection as the calling of every child of God. Wesley's understanding of Christian Perfection saw it as an insatiable vocation to seek after perfect love to God and fellowmen. It was for him no absolute perfection which was an achieved state of deliverance from finite weakness, illness, lack of knowledge, or "a thousand infirmities incident to flesh and blood." It is a completeness of love to God and fellowmen as the total commitment by the Christian to the new life with God into which he has been reborn.

Eric Baker, in his book on The Faith of a Methodist, gives a highly effective restatement of the centrality of this doctrine to Methodist faith. He notes, in regard to its continuing demands, the following:

Perfection...consists not in conformity to some absolute rule, but in the completeness of the response made at that moment to the love of God at whatever stage we may have arrived in our pilgrimage. (p. 42)

Perfection in love is not angelism, self-sufficiency or self-adulation. It is not conformity to an absolute rule. It is not achieved or accumulated bit
by bit, obedient act by obedient act, in the manner of
a ladder of merit. Nor is it a mystical transport of
detachment into some splendid vision of or union with
the divine being.

The Christian perfection to which we are called
is the perfect love of God extended to us and expected
of us in the total response of discipleship. Our
walking in the way of life and love is a movement on-
ward into greater fullness from wherever we are, it is
an experience of growth in grace; it is our pilgrimage
of perfection.

Perfection in love is growth in grace, the way,
the truth, the life; it is in very fact a pilgrimage
of perfection in love.

Perfection in love responds in love to God, ex-
tends in love in the community of fellow Christians,
and issues in loving, sacrificial service unto every
man and women, every child of God.

What does this Perfection of Love require?

The Source of Knowledge and Revelation Is the Scriptures

Perfection in love requires return to the source
of our knowledge of God and his revelation in the
Scriptures.

As we seek to hear and know the Living Word through
Bible study, we are moving forward, not backward, in
keeping with our heritage. John Wesley called himself
a man of one book. His true source was the scriptures.

The holiness which he enjoined was scriptural
holiness. When he was faced with the criticism that
his view of perfection was not biblical, his response
was twofold: if it were not scriptural he wanted no
part of it, but he went on to demonstrate by textual
references that his call to perfect love was inherent
in the message of both Old and New Testaments. Par-
ticularly he cited Jesus' call to be perfect, reflected
in our text, Matthew 5:48. The Ephesian admonition to
be imitators of God to press on "until we all attain
to the perfect man, to the measure of the stature of
the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13; 5:11). The Pauline determination to be "straining forward to what lies ahead, the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phillippians 3:12-14) and the Johanine epistle with its assent that "God is love; he abides in us as, we, abiding in love, abide in him. In this is his love perfected in us."

Perfection in love is a part of the living word, the gospel, which we find attested and manifested in the Scriptures. Let us take guidance from the scriptures as we make the pure, holy, and perfect love of God our ground and our guide.

The Perfect Love of God in the Church

Our Pilgrimage of Perfection in Love leads us into a new appreciation for the tradition, the history of our place in the Church as the Living Body of Christ in the world.

The earlier writers to whom John Wesley traced his understanding of the living word of Perfect Love were Clement of Alexandria, Plotinus, Augustine, Macarius, Tauler, Fenelon, Pascal, as well as á Kempis, William Law and Jeremy Taylor. Sharing in the history of the church gives opportunity to participate in the experiences of worship in community as well as reading the wisdom of the fathers.

It is interesting that as long as it was possible for the Methodists to avail themselves of the liturgy and sacraments in the historic church there was no serious move on the part of the Methodists to a separate ecclesiastical institution. It was only when the availability of the sacramental offices was cut off by circumstance that Wesley began to make extraordinary provision through ordination for the preachers in America. Later, of course, similar steps were taken in ordinations for Scotland, Ireland and last of all England.

I have recently shared in a review of the historic creeds as symbolic declarations and affirmations of faith. A student group and I were reminded that the creed in which nearly two millenia of Christians have
affirmed their faith emerged from the simple confession of belief in the baptismal formula. The early Christian convert said "I believe in Jesus Christ Son of God Savior" as he went to the water to receive the sacrament of cleansing and new birth in baptism.

The perfect love of God somehow comes to vivid and soul searching experience in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Here, the love is manifest in the sacrifice of the Son, who bore the cross and endured the shame to bring the saving love of God in power into time and history.

"The Incarnate God has died for me."

The Sacraments are the visible signs of the inward and spiritual grace whereby the saving love of God is at work as a power for perfection in us. By this God's act we are cleansed, we are new born, we are made whole.

The Commission to Pure and Holy Love in the World

Perfection in love requires extension of the apostolic mission in the world. The world is the creation of God and the object of his redeeming love. "God so loved the world that he gave, not to condemn, but that the world might be saved." Sanctification is no excuse for dwelling in some self-protective sanctuary. The world is all about us with its cruelty and violence, selfish and sensate, driven by fear and divided by hate. This is the world for which Christ died.

We do not stay securely in the household. God's Perfect Love is love to God and fellowman, to the outsider, the enemy, the last, the one hundredth sheep.

"There is no holiness but social holiness," Wesley said.

Perfect love exists not in beatific vision but in right relationships and the saving of the world:

Wesley wrote:

The drunkard commenced to be sober and temperate; the whoremongers abstained from adultery and fornication; the unjust from oppression and wrong. He that had been
accustomed to curse and swear...swore no more. The sluggard began to work with his hands, that he might eat his own bread. The miser learned to deal his bread to the hungry, and to cover the naked with a garment...They...left off doing evil and learned to do well. (Baker, The Faith of a Methodist, p. 32.)

The Wesleyan Revival was credited with enabling England to avoid the bloody excesses of the French Revolution, not because the evangelists stayed in sanctuary or turned their heads away, but because at the pit head with the miners, on the carttail at a hanging, in the Horsefair in Bristol they moved among the people with the word of sanctifying love.

Conclusion

What are the real alternatives which society confronts today. There are at least four:

2. A police state with its loss of freedom. Order is purchased at the price of liberty.
3. Anarchy and vigilanteism with every man strong enough to protect his own interests. Let the most resourceful in self-preservation survive.
4. The transforming and reconciling power of pure and holy love.

The law of life is not violence, selfishness, survival by slaughter, but Love:

Love: Creating
Love: Redeeming
Love: Purifying and Perfecting

This is salvation for man and the world.

Salvation for all mankind is the goal and the fulfillment of the pilgrimage of perfection in love.

Prayer: Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy holy spirit that we may perfectly love Thee, and magnify thy holy name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.