



# DISCOVERY

edited by  
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## Christian Perfection in The Evangelical Disciplines

by Kenneth E. Rowe

From the very first edition of the Discipline of the Evangelical Association published in Reading, Pennsylvania in 1809 the Evangelicals included, in addition to the German translation of the Methodist Articles of Religion of 1784, a lengthy statement on Christian Perfection.<sup>1</sup> This statement, with slight alterations, was continued in each successive edition of the Discipline of the Church. Upon union with the United Brethren in 1946 the statement on Christian Perfection was included along with the Articles of Faith in the Discipline of the Evangelical United Brethren Church from 1947 through 1959 until the adoption of the new Confession of Faith in 1962.

It is often assumed that the Evangelical Discipline was simply a German translation of that of the Methodists. In collating the Evangelical perfection statement with the early Methodist one it is obvious the Evangelicals did not simply translate the paragraph "Of Perfection" printed in the 1808 or 1804 Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. A considerably expanded statement was adopted and printed by the Evangelicals. What is its origin?

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<sup>1</sup>*Glaubenslehre und Allgemeine Regeln Christlicher Kirchenzucht und Ordnung der Sogenannten Albrechts-Leute . . .* von George Miller., Reading, Pa.: Johann Ritter, 1809. "Von der christlichen Vollkommenheit", Part 6, pp. 37-42.

George Miller, who was charged with drafting a book of discipline for the newly organized Evangelical Association, used an unofficial (semi-official?) German translation of the 1804 M. E. discipline called for by Bishop Asbury and the Philadelphia Annual Conference to spur their own missionary work among the Pennsylvania "Dutch".<sup>2</sup> The translation was prepared by Dr. Ignatius Romer, a Swiss-born, Roman-Catholic trained physician recently turned Methodist from Middletown, Pennsylvania, under the close supervision of Henry Boehm, Asbury's trusted adviser on German work.<sup>3</sup> Although the translation was completed in 1807, it was not published until 1808 in Lancaster under the title: *Lehre und Zuchtordnung der Bischöflich-Methodistischen Kirche*. Here we find the same lengthy statement "Von der Christlichen Volkommenheit" which appears in the 1809 *Glaubenslehre* of the Evangelical Association.<sup>4</sup> Thus, rather than adopting or supplementing the Methodist statement on perfection, the Evangelicals took over the statement from the Romer-Boehm translation.

But where did Romer and Boehm get the first eleven paragraphs on perfection? The latter part of the statement (paragraphs 14-16 in text below) is clearly a German translation of the section on perfection in John Wesley's "Large Minutes" of 1768 which Methodists traditionally

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<sup>2</sup>Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences*. New York: Carlton & Porter, 1865, pp. 173-179. See also Francis Asbury, *Journal and Letters*, edited by Elmer T. Clark, Nashville: Abingdon, 1958, Vol. II, p. 645.

<sup>3</sup>Reuben Yeakel in his *History of The Evangelical Association* (Cleveland: Thomas & Mattill, 1894) vol. I, p. 101 suggests "Dr. Ignatius Roemer". I am following Boehm's spelling of the last name. The *National Union Catalog*, under "Ignaz. Romer" lists an extensive commentary on the book of Revelation which was published by the same printer in Lancaster the next year, 1809. Raymond Albright, in his standard *History of The Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Evangelical Press, 1956, c1942) notes only in a footnote Miller's dependence on a "German edition of the Methodist *Discipline* printed in Lancaster, Pa. in 1808", p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>*Lehre und Zuchtordnung der Bischöflich-Methodistischen Kirche, Aus Dem Englischen Ubersetzt*, Lancaster, Pa.: Henrich und Benjamin Grimler, 1808, pp. 65-70. Copyright dated January 12, 1808. A careful collation of the Romer-Boehm text of 1808 and the Miller text of 1809 suggests that Miller copied almost word for word from Romer-Boehm. Only occasional differences in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, mood, prefix or word order can be found.

printed in their disciplines up to that time.<sup>5</sup> I have been unable to trace, however, the precise origins of the first eleven paragraphs of the Romer-Boehm text. Surely they are in the Wesleyan spirit but are they Wesley? Hezekiah Bowman, an Evangelical pastor writing in 1882, confidently suggests that the first "few" paragraphs were "afterwards supplied from Mr. Wesley's writings."<sup>6</sup> He was trying to make the point that the Evangelicals were more Wesleyan than the Methodists on the matter. Bishop Asbury would have been too busy. Besides, he had his chance at improving or improvising Wesley on perfection in the annotated edition of the Discipline he and Coke published in 1798. When it came to the section on perfection, they simply refer the reader to "Mr. Wesley's excellent treatise on that subject."<sup>7</sup> Henry Boehm says in his autobiography that he "aided" Dr. Romer in the translation and proofread the entire manuscript in addition to hiring the printer and footing the bill but takes no credit for the extra paragraphs on perfection.<sup>8</sup> That leaves Romer. In his nine-page preface Romer assures his German readers that the work before them is "eine getreue Übersetzung der Methodistischen Kirchengenossenschaft, wie solche 1804" and does not mention

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<sup>5</sup>*Minutes of The Methodist Conferences From The First Held In London By The Late John Wesley A.M. In The Year 1744.* London: John Mason, 1862, Vol. I, p. 81; Frank Baker, "Doctrines in the Discipline", *Duke Divinity School Review*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Winter 1966), p. 39-55

<sup>6</sup>Hezekiah J. Bowman, *Voices On Holiness From The Evangelical Association.* Cleveland, Ohio: Publishing House of the Evangelical Association, 1882, p. 17. Ralph K. Schwab, in his 1922 University of Chicago doctoral study, *The History of the Doctrine of Christian Perfection in the Evangelical Association* notes Miller's dependence on Boehm's translation, does not mention Romer nor does he speculate on the origin of the first eleven paragraphs (Menasha, Wis.: Collegiate Press, 1922, p. 18). Two recent interpreters do not deal with the matter of the origin of the Evangelical statement on perfection: J. Wesley Corbin, "Christian Perfection and the Evangelical Association through 1875", *Methodist History*, vol. 7, no. 2 (January 1969) pp. 28-44, and William H. Naumann, *Theology and German-American Evangelicalism: The Role of Theology in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association.*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1966.

<sup>7</sup>*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America With Explanatory Notes by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury.* Philadelphia, Pa.: Printed by Henry Tuckniss for John Dickins, 1798, p. 185.

<sup>8</sup>Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences*, pp. 174-175.

any "additions."<sup>9</sup> The mystery remains.

By whose authority were the eleven paragraphs "added" to the German translation of the 1804 English text? The title page suggests an Asbury-Philadelphia Conference imprimatur.<sup>10</sup> There is no evidence that the 1808 or 1812 General Conference of the M. E. Church ever made the Romer-Boehm text official. Official German translations of the M. E. Disciplines began in 1841 but that was after the doctrinal essays had been jettisoned from the Discipline; so no statement on perfection appeared.

A full text of "Concerning the Doctrine of Christian Perfection" as adopted by the Evangelical Association in 1809 follows. The text is from the first English translation (from the German edition of 1831) published in 1832.

Paragraph numbers have been added.

### THE DOCTRINE AND DISCIPLINE OF THE EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION

New-Berlin, Pa.: George Miller, 1832. pp. 69-76  
First English edition from the 1831 German edition

#### SECTION VI.

*Concerning the Doctrine of Christian Perfection.*

How we may attain to true holiness of heart even in this life.

[1] The Lord Jesus expressly saith, Matt. v, 48. *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.* And the Apostle expressly exhorts, 1 Thess. v, 16. 17. 18. *Rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing; in every thing give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

[2] He that would fully comply with these exhortations at all times, must have a whole and perfect resignation to the will of God; consequently all self-will and selfishness must be perfectly subdued: he must bear up with every thing that may befall him, as from the hand of the Lord; or he cannot meet every adversity with acquiescence and resignation, much less with gratitude; he must thus stand upon his guard, firm and immoveable, that he may, at any moment, parry and

<sup>9</sup>*Lehre und Zuchtordnung*, p. 11. Although the introduction is unsigned, Boehm in his autobiography credits Romer with having prepared it: Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences*, p. 178.

<sup>10</sup>"Auf Anrathen des Ehrw. Bischofs Asbury und der Philadelphischen Conferenz, unter der Anweisung von Henrich Böhm, zum Druck befördert."

gain the victory over any temptation that may present itself, without yielding more or less, either voluntarily or negligently, as it does sometimes happen with weak Christians. If his rest, or peace and joy in God, be no more interrupted by none of the like vicissitudes, or occurrences, he must be well founded in God; and of a truth he must love God with all his heart, with all his mind and with all his strength: sin, so to speak, has lost all its power against such an one, being so surrounded by the love of God, as with a wall of fire. The flesh, the world and Satan are under his feet, and he rules over his enemies; yet with watching, and not slumbering.

[3] This is the state which this Evangelical Association [A] understands by *Christian Perfection*.

[4] That such a state is attainable even in this life, is very evident, because Christ and his Apostles exhort thereto: yea, from this we learn that it is every Christian's bounden duty to strive thereafter, for Christ and his Apostles exhort all thereto without exception or distinction. And how could he be a Christian, who would not desire to submit wholly unto God, and to love him in truth, with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his strength?

[5] By experience we have been fully persuaded, that such a state is attainable, and is attained by many, who happily persevered therein for many years, even to the end of their days. Many others had attained it, and for want of watchfulness, have lost it again. This we have learned by sad experience. Experience has also taught, that this blessed state, after it had been lost through negligence, may again be attained by the grace of God; and that a person may finally, though having been as a reed shaken by the wind, become a firm and immoveable pillar in the Temple of God.

[6] With many others this work has never come to that perfect clearness; a great degree of grace has indeed been discovered, yet, collateral infirmities were at the same time discernible, which could not be properly distinguished by those who look upon externals only, whether these were only involuntary natural infirmities, or slighter voluntary deviations and overcomings of sin.

[7] Experience has moreover taught that ordinarily, this state of Christian perfection is attained gradually, by an upright course of life in following the Lamb; however, under this graduation, this work is perfected in the soul, sooner or later, by a sudden and powerful influence of grace and outpouring of the divine Spirit. Those who have actually experienced this, describe this effusion of the divine life as being similar to the grace of justification, yet far exceeding the same. This grace is thus called *sanctification*.

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[A] "die methodistische Kirche" in Romer-Boehm.

[8] This santification is the basis of Christian perfection. By which God writes his law of love with quickening power in the heart, according to his precious and faithful promise.

[9] Notwithstanding this, because all created beings will ever be finite and circumscribed, and according to the nature thereof, is at all times and for ever less than God himself: thus will also the most perfect man or angel for ever be inferior to God, though he become a partaker of the Divine seed through justification, and through sanctification is much more assimilated to the divine Being; therefore, he can, after having attained to this degree of sanctification, grow and increase more and more in grace, and proceed from one degree of glory to another.

[10] And should even this progression be brought to a state of cessation with some, it is not to be inferred from hence, that an eternal and everlasting increase should therefore be impossible with others. Nevertheless, the happiest spirit will still be far inferior to God himself.

[11] Secondly, what is further to be considered here, is this, that sanctifying grace does therefore not take away the natural infirmities of man; yea, it does not even cover them, yea but, on the other hand, it sometimes manifests and exposes them the more. Such are, a weakly and morbid body, weakly understanding, weakness of memory, of judgment and of the mind. Therefore such an individual may be easily imposed upon by false appearances, and through a misdirected judgment, to think more esteemingly or derogatively of a person than he really deserves — indistinctness, yea, confusion in expression — give unfit advice; and through all kinds of such weaknesses, which God never beholds or imputes as willful sins, may render himself exceptionable and ridiculous before a wise world. Therefore, such an one should never refuse to receive instruction and good counsel of others, who do not possess the same degree of grace with him, in as much as he sees that God deigns to instruct him in this way.

[12] Thus much was deemed necessary to be added here to prevent a misunderstanding of the matter, and to enable the reader to see this doctrine in a clear light, and to form just conceptions thereof.

[13] Whereupon this Evangelical Association [B] further declares:

[14] Let us seriously and explicitly admonish all believers, to strive ardently for Christian perfection. In order that we may teach one thing on this point, let us decide once for all, whether we shall continue, or give up this doctrine. We are all unanimous to defend and maintain it: understanding by it now, as at all times before, nothing less than a total emancipation from every sin, in the proper sense of the word, by means of the love of God being shed abroad in our heart, influencing and actuating the same.

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[B] *Ibid.*

[15] Some indeed say: "This cannot be attained, till we have passed through purgatory." Others say: "No, this is accomplished at the moment when body and soul are separated." But others say: "We can attain this before we die; one minute afterward is too late." We are unanimous that we may be redeemed from *every* sin long before we die — that is, of all evil affections and desires. Thus the main point remains settled.

[16] Touching the circumstances of the matter, the further inquiry is: Is this happy change gradually wrought, or instantaneously? Both take place, one as well as the other. Shall we insist upon one as well as the other, in our preaching? We must certainly insist upon a gradual change, and this zealously and continually. And have we not equally good reasons to insist upon an instantaneous change, wrought by the effusion of grace in an instant? May we expect such a blessed change, shall we not earnestly exhort all believers to seek it? And the more so, because, the more earnestly this instantaneous work of grace is sought, the more it is longed after, the quicker and the more steadfast will the gradual work of grace in the soul progress. The more they are concerned about such a change, the more punctual will they be in observing the divine ordinances: whereas on the other hand, the contrary is to be observed with all those, who are not expecting those things. They are blessed in hope, and become so through this hope and expectation of a total change, by gradually growing in grace. Where this hope falls away, the work of grace is retarded, if it does not apparently decrease. Therefore, whoever is concerned to promote the gradual growth in grace, should encourage believers in the hope of such an immediate influence of grace.