

Praise for *Perfect Love*

What an incredible blessing and gift to the body of Christ! A roadmap to finding your way to, or back to, that spiritual experience that will change your life—being and living the sanctified life! Kevin Watson skillfully writes and warmly invites the entire Wesley Family, with all its differences, uniqueness, and similarities, to experience or re-experience the one thing that binds us together as a spiritual community and spiritual descendants of John Wesley, the experience of sanctification.

—**Bishop John Mark Richardson Sr.**

California New Journey Jurisdiction, Church of God in Christ

Phrases like *entire sanctification, full salvation, holiness, and second blessing of holiness* reminds me of a personal call to which I respond in the affirmative. I applaud a clear call to awaken ourselves to the blessing and gift of entire sanctification and I celebrate not simply a link to a tradition of teaching but a real experience that does translate into hope and healing . . . from the uttermost to the uttermost.

—**General Brian Peddle**

The Salvation Army International, London, England, UK

Some years ago, I heard Kevin say that if we Methodists do not take the doctrine of entire sanctification seriously, we are guilty of taking up needless space in the body of Christ. This is our unique contribution to the world and perhaps now is exactly the time to champion this doctrine. The world has never been more in need of an outpouring of holy love. And how could perfect love not be the logical goal toward which all Christ-followers are headed? There is nothing in Scripture about arriving short of that goal.

—**Rev. Carolyn Moore**, DMin, Founding Pastor

Mosiac United Methodist Church, Evans, Georgia

In *Perfect Love*, Kevin Watson reclaims the centrality of this doctrine, which will deliver us simultaneously from mainline malaise as well as from generic evangelicalism, and restore this vital witness of the gospel. The genius of Watson's work is that he moves us from understanding sanctification as merely a "crisis event" to the deeper role Christian community plays in a process, including accountability bands and a necessary heightened view of our sinfulness. This book powerfully reminds us how far we have drifted from the apostolic Christianity of our origins, what Wesley called "scriptural Christianity." I believe that the message of this book needs to be heard in fresh ways across the church and I applaud Watson for yet another landmark book in rebuilding our movement.

—**Timothy C. Tennent**, PhD, President,

Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky

Perfect Love is a clarion call back to a core teaching of the Methodist movement. I moved through its pages with joy and wonder. The author reintroduces the doctrine of sanctification with brilliant clarity and great practical insight. Written to be used by anyone seeking to grow their faith in love, *Perfect Love* should become a foundational document for seminarians and Sunday school classes. This book will play a key part in the emergence of a new day for the Methodist movement alongside a rediscovery of class and band meetings.

—**Bishop Mike Lowry**, Resident Bishop of the Central Texas Conference
Fort Worth Episcopal Area of the United Methodist Church

As Kevin Watson writes in *Perfect Love*, we hope with a “holy desperation” for the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Along with a clear description of John Wesley’s understanding of holiness and practical advice on how to receive entire sanctification. Watson’s book on recovering the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification is exactly what is needed for the church at this very moment.

—**Douglas M. Strong**, PhD, Dean of the School of Theology
Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington

Kevin Watson’s profound, practical, and passionate appeal to reclaim the formative elements of John Wesley’s movement is powerfully informative and inspiring. As a part of the global Methodist family, I found myself convicted, challenged, and ultimately convinced of the importance of this call to return to our mission to “spread scriptural holiness.” May we expect, and, yes, experience, perfect love.

—**Bishop W. Darin Moore**, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church,
Mid-Atlantic District and Immediate Past Chair of the National Council of
Churches, USA, Largo, Maryland

Watson’s book is a timely gift for the church universal. He reintroduces the “grand depositum” of early Methodism—the audacious and optimistic teaching that Christian faith is more than forgiveness of past sins and pardon. Here we are taken back to the rich doctrine of full salvation; that is, empowerment for holy living and freedom from the clutches of sin in the here and now. This is, indeed, the reason God raised up a people called Methodist. John Wesley himself would be well-pleased with Watson’s book, which sounds much like Father John himself, who consistently calls us to go higher into God’s love.

—**Bill T. Arnold**, PhD, Professor of Old Testament Interpretation
Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky

With passion, clarity, and focus Kevin Watson yearns for the broad Methodist movement to experience, preach, and claim an infusion of perfect love—holiness. Watson’s scholarly grounding and pastoral focus remind me of salvationist Samuel L. Brengle. I will be recommending *Perfect Love* for the rest of my life.

—**Captain Dr. Andy Miller III**, Area Commander and Pastor
The Salvation Army, Tampa, Florida

We commend Kevin Watson's latest book, *Perfect Love*, to anyone who is a serious follower of Jesus Christ and especially to those of us who are heirs of the holiness movement. But be warned, this is not a book for the faint of heart! It is hard for us to imagine anyone reading Watson's unvarnished unpacking of Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification and its vital role in fueling our movement without a profound awareness of how far we have drifted from the moorings of this key distinctive of Methodism. We are reminded of Wesley's prediction that if future Methodists were ever to stray from the doctrine, spirit, and disciplines of the pursuit of holiness, we would become a dead sect. May the Lord of the church use this book to revive us again!

—Bishops **Linda Adams**, **Keith Cowart**, and **Matt Whitehead**
Free Methodist Church USA

Some of us have had to answer these questions: Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this lifetime? More of us have prayed multiple times to the God from whom no secrets are hidden that his Holy Spirit would "cleanse the thoughts of our hearts so that we might perfectly love." All of us ought to read Kevin Watson's fine, accessible treatment on what it means to answer these questions, offer this prayer, and attend to the historical core of Wesleyanism.

—**Lester Ruth**, PhD, Research Professor of Christian Worship
Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

As I read *Perfect Love* my heart leapt within me. My imagination cannot grasp the enormous outpouring God would do in this generation and those to come if we recover entire sanctification. May it be so Lord!

—**Dr. JoAnne Lyon**, General Superintendent Emerita
The Wesleyan Church, Fishers, Indiana

This book lit a fire in me that I hope never goes out. Kevin Watson reminded me of the unique nature of the Methodist movement and why it captivated my heart so many years ago. The book will change the way I preach and teach. It gives me hope for the future! If you are pastor, this will be the most important book you will read this year.

—Rev. Jacob Armstrong, Founding Pastor
Providence Church, Mt. Juliet, Tennessee

Here is a book that could redirect and change Methodism. Methodists should not be satisfied with lukewarm Christianity. Kevin Watson urges that we recommit to our historic message of entire sanctification; live our General Rules and transform the world.

—**Riley Case**, Associate Director of the Confessing Movement, Kokomo, Indiana

This is a fine book. In many ways it fills a need for a contemporary statement of Wesley's theme in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. In winsome, and yet direction language, Watson makes the case the Christian life is not about

going to heaven, but experiencing the love of God in all its fullness. This is a book for every Methodist.

—**John N. Oswalt**, PhD, Visiting Distinguished Professor of Old Testament
Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky

Perfect Love is a book that has been needed for a long time. What John Wesley gave the original Methodists in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* Kevin has refreshed for our generation and future generations.

—**Maxie D. Dunnam**, Executive Director, Christ Church Global
Christ United Methodist Church, Memphis, Tennessee

As a people called Methodist, it appears segments of our movement are waking up from decades-long theological amnesia. Our understanding of grace, and the way it was embedded in the preaching and practices of the early days of our movement, have often been adulterated or lost in recent memory. That is why I thank God for scholars like Dr. Kevin Watson. Writing in clear language and a winsome spirit, he invites us to rediscover, preach, and put perfect love (sanctifying grace) into practice. This book will help the reader to understand the reality of the truth of this doctrine, and inspire them to pursue it for themselves and others.

—**Rev. Jeffrey E. Greenway**, DMin, Senior Pastor,
Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church, Reynoldsburg, Ohio

Kevin Watson's *Perfect Love* portrays the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification for what it is—the promise that we can be changed. Rather than a set of rules or a restrictive leash, Watson describes the concept of Christian perfection as God's gracious invitation to a future that is hopeful, transformative, and the deepest desire of every believer's heart.

—**Rob Renfro**, President, Good News, The Woodlands, Texas

From the first word to the last, the Holy Spirit was stirring my soul to desire more of God's sanctifying work in our lives and through the people called Methodist. The words leapt off the page as I said out loud many times "Yes! Yes!" Dr. Watson captures the pathway to a vibrant and vital future Wesleyan Methodist movement that desires nothing but humble holiness and changed lives. I'm convinced this book—and more importantly the move of the Holy Spirit for which it yearns—can and will empower a new generation of Methodists that are wholly sanctified to God's glory!

—**Rev. Steven Taylor**, Lead Pastor
Panama United Methodist Church, Panama, New York

Kevin Watson has already established himself as a leading Methodist scholar of his generation. Here he reminds us that all his labors, scholarly or otherwise, are for the church. *Perfect Love* expands Watson's seminal work on the

class and band meetings by orienting Methodism's peculiar practices to their goal: the radical indwelling of divine love in the heart of the faithful. With historical and theological sensitivity, Watson makes a compelling case for a doctrinally vivified Methodism, and invites us to embark on it here and now.

—**Justus H. Hunter**, PhD, Assistant Professor of Church History
United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio

There is more to the Christian life than so many of us have experienced or ever expected, as Kevin Watson shows us here. This resource provides a clear and compelling call for the spiritual heirs of John Wesley to remember who we are—and whose we are—and to share the message of God's perfect love with the world. Come, Holy Spirit!

—**Ken Loyer**, PhD, Senior Pastor, Spry Church, York, Pennsylvania

Perfect Love hits the sanctification bull's-eye! Kevin Watson does a dynamic job of dissecting the misunderstood and under-appreciated secret to a life filled with the power and love of the Holy Spirit. He takes us into doctrine and discipline to understand entire sanctification, and then calls us to preach it and experience it as John Wesley expected early Methodists to do. This is the DNA strand that Methodism needs to recover!

—**Rev. Tim Johnson**, Senior Pastor
Pfrimmer's Chapel United Methodist Church, Corydon, Indiana

Dr. Kevin Watson's *Perfect Love* gives an excellent contemporary practical overview of entire sanctification, the grand depositum, a core doctrine of the Wesleyan/Methodist stream. At this critical time in the United Methodist Church in particular, the various future parts of the church need to consider carefully how this core doctrine will be fleshed out in their new families.

—**Rev. Frank Billman**, DMin, Mentor for the Doctor of Ministry
in Supernatural Ministry, United Theological Seminary, Dayton Ohio

Kevin Watson believes and knows that God can bring change in the inner heart and outward actions of a person. In a warm, personal, and conversational manner, Dr. Watson examines and explains John Wesley's call to entire sanctification and encourages readers to discover the blessed life that God has in store for them. It is well worth the journey to read and to listen to this book.

—**Rev. Martin Nicholas**, Senior Pastor
Sugar Land United Methodist Church, Sugar Land, Texas

In *Perfect Love*, Kevin Watson offers an even plainer account of Christian perfection. Reengaging the doctrine of entire sanctification under the power of the Spirit will be key for the new Methodism.

—**Rev. Bob Kaylor**, DMin, Lead Pastor
Tri-Lakes United Methodist Church, Monument, Colorado

It is not too controversial of a claim to say that John Wesley was difficult to understand on the question of entire sanctification or Christian perfection. And yet, the doctrine is central to Methodist identity. This combination of both ambiguity and centrality has left Wesley's progeny with a choice: either ignore the doctrine or seek vigilantly to invigorate it time and time again. Watson's latest book does the latter, and we should be grateful for it. The people called Methodist must live into the fullness of their theological heritage in order that their identity mean something that can last. *Perfect Love* is a wonderful aide in this regard. I hope it will be a book that is widely read by serious and earnest members of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition.

—**Daniel Castelo**, PhD, Professor of Theology and Methodist Studies
Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

In *Perfect Love*, Kevin Watson calls the larger Wesleyan family to imagine the impact of a renewal of the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification. He reminds us of the promise of the full gospel, namely deliverance from sin and transformation of the affections. I join with the author in praying for a revival of holy love, and the flourishing of pure religion.

—**Cheryl Bridges Johns**, PhD, Robert E. Fisher Professor of
Spiritual Renewal and Christian Formation
Pentecostal Theological Seminary, Cleveland, Tennessee

This timely book is a gift to the entire Methodist family of our blessed heritage of biblical truth. It inspires believers to rediscover the what, why, and how for transformation in the image of God by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. Kevin Watson, scripturally and historically, communicates the core belief of the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification. This book should be on the shelf of every Wesleyan leader and every Bible study/small group leader.

—**Dr. Nina Gunter**, General Superintendent Emerita, Church of the Nazarene

Here is an excellent recovery of the vital doctrine in Wesleyanism. Kevin Watson has done us a great service in this important book. Scripture, history, doctrine, and the work of the sanctifying Holy Spirit as the way to renewal for all of us in the Methodist family. Read this book! It will enrich how you think and pray and minister as we move ahead in the spirit of John Wesley.

—**Steven Hoskins**, PhD., Professor of Christian History,
Trevecca Nazarene University, Nashville, Tennessee

Entire sanctification is not only a hidden jewel of Wesleyanism, but also a cornerstone of our organization as Methodists and a key to our abandoned passion. Dr. Watson presents a cogent introduction to the Wesleyan concept of Christian perfection with contemporary interpretation and original sources. Those across the Methodist family desiring to reclaim our heritage in the pursuit of holiness will find *Perfect Love* a useful resource and discussion guide.

—**Bishop Jeffrey N. Leath**, 128th Bishop,
The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), Nashville, Tennessee

During the twentieth century there was a renaissance in Wesleyan studies. While the new attention to John Wesley's career, writings, and thought was salutary for Methodists and also Christians in other communions, in the end a recovery of Wesley's thought matters little if there is no appropriation of the Wesleyan way of salvation and of Christian living. The main value of Kevin Watson's *Perfect Love* is not that he articulates so well the meaning of Wesley's teaching about entire sanctification, but that he inspires us and shows us how to appropriate this teaching for ourselves and for the church today. Methodism began and grew with a distinctive message about becoming holy by God's grace through faith, and it is this message that is necessary for Methodists and all Christians today as the church lives in the era following Christendom when it must be equipped for its witness by serious teaching of the apostolic and universal faith and by the kind spiritual well-being described in *Perfect Love*.

—**Timothy W. Whitaker**, Bishop, retired,
Southeastern Jurisdiction, The United Methodist Church

In *Perfect Love*, Watson ably argues that Methodism's identity crisis is rooted in our neglect of teaching and preaching entire sanctification. He combines his own small-group experience with John Wesley's teaching to suggest that the future vitality of Methodism depends on recovering this most distinctive doctrine. His argument is persuasive and important for all Christians today.

—**Bishop Scott Jones**, Resident Bishop of the Texas Conference
Houston Episcopal Area, The United Methodist Church

For twenty-five years I have regularly encountered the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, both in my own life and in the lives of others. Through the worldwide Methodist family and its commitment to a Wesleyan understanding of sanctification, people from Nigeria to New Zealand and from Cuba to Congo, have experienced deep and abiding Holy Spirit-inspired change in their lives. I am deeply grateful to Kevin Watson for providing a clear and hopeful vision of the fullness of salvation, and pray that the North American part of our global family would be emboldened by his words to reclaim the power of the Holy Spirit DNA that lies at the heart of our movement.

—**Kimberly D. Reisman**, Executive Director,
World Methodist Evangelism, West Lafayette, Indiana

Perfect Love urges the people known as Methodists to reclaim the power of their faith—entire sanctification or holiness. He grounds his premise in Scripture and uses the words of John Wesley to remind us of the divine calling God has placed on us to model Christian perfection. The gift of this book is that Watson ends with a strong note of hopefulness that we will return to this faith quest and provides some very simple ways for individuals and groups to begin the journey.

—**Bishop Teresa Jefferson-Snorton**, Presiding Bishop, Fifth Episcopal District
and Ecumenical Officer, The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME),
Birmingham, Alabama

PERFECT LOVE

Recovering Entire Sanctification—
The Lost Power of
the Methodist Movement

KEVIN M. WATSON



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Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version, Cambridge, 1796.

Printed in the United States of America

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-62824-808-1

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-62824-809-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-62824-810-4

uPDF ISBN: 978-1-62824-811-1

DVD ISBN: 978-1-62824-485-4

Library of Congress Control Number:

Cover illustration by

Cover design by

Page design by

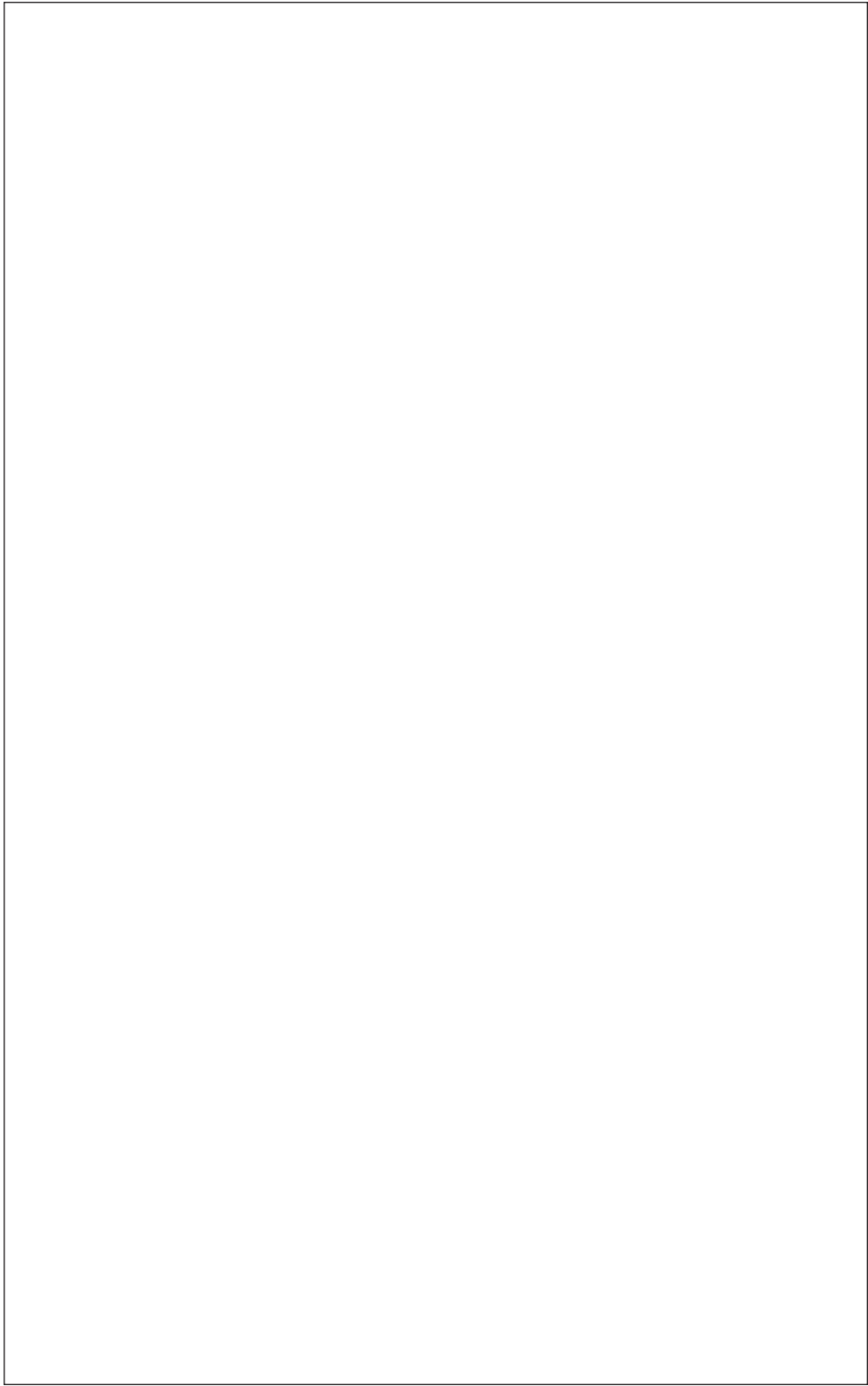


SEEDBED PUBLISHING

Franklin, Tennessee

seedbed.com

To Lesly Broadbent, Matthew Johnson, Matt Judkins,
and Andrew Thompson



SIX MONTHS BEFORE HIS DEATH, JOHN WESLEY WROTE A LETTER to an influential Methodist preacher concerning the supreme importance of the doctrine of entire sanctification on the power of the Methodist movement:

I am glad brother D— has more light with regard to full sanctification. This doctrine is 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.

—John Wesley

Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 15, 1790¹

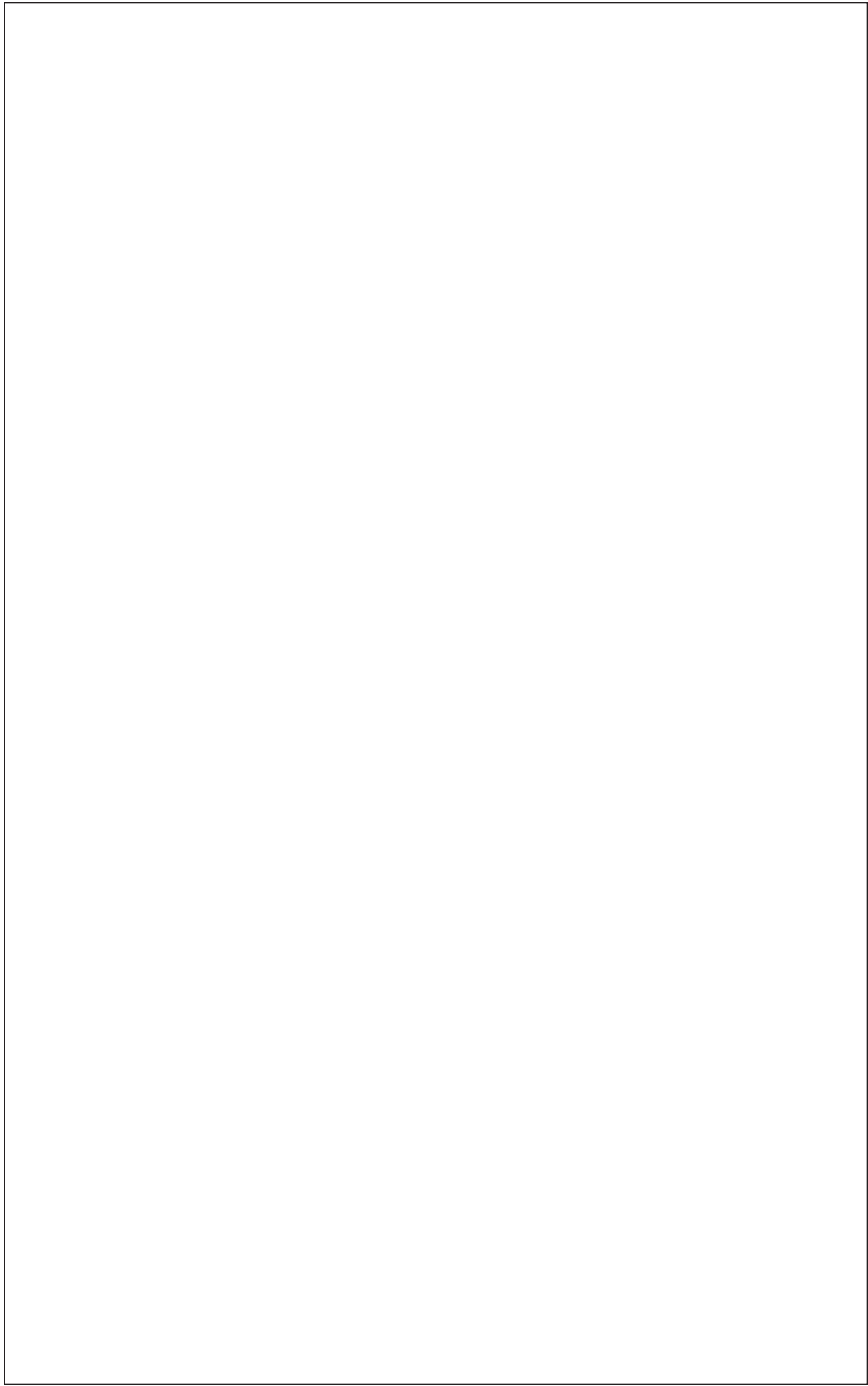


THE FOLLOWING EXTRACT WAS FOUND IN HANDWRITTEN MANUSCRIPT notes by Oswald Chambers for a book titled *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*. Chambers died without the book being published. Oswald Chambers, the author of numerous books, is best known for his classic devotional *My Utmost for His Highest*.

There was one doctrine of John Wesley's—the doctrine of perfect sanctification—which ought to have led to a great and original ethical development; but the doctrine has not grown; it seems to remain just where John Wesley left it. There has been want of the genius or courage to attempt the solution of the immense practical questions which the doctrine suggests. The questions have not been raised—much less solved. To have raised them effectively, indeed, would have been to originate an ethical revolution which would have had a far deeper effect on the thought and life—first of England, and then of the rest of Christendom—than was produced by the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

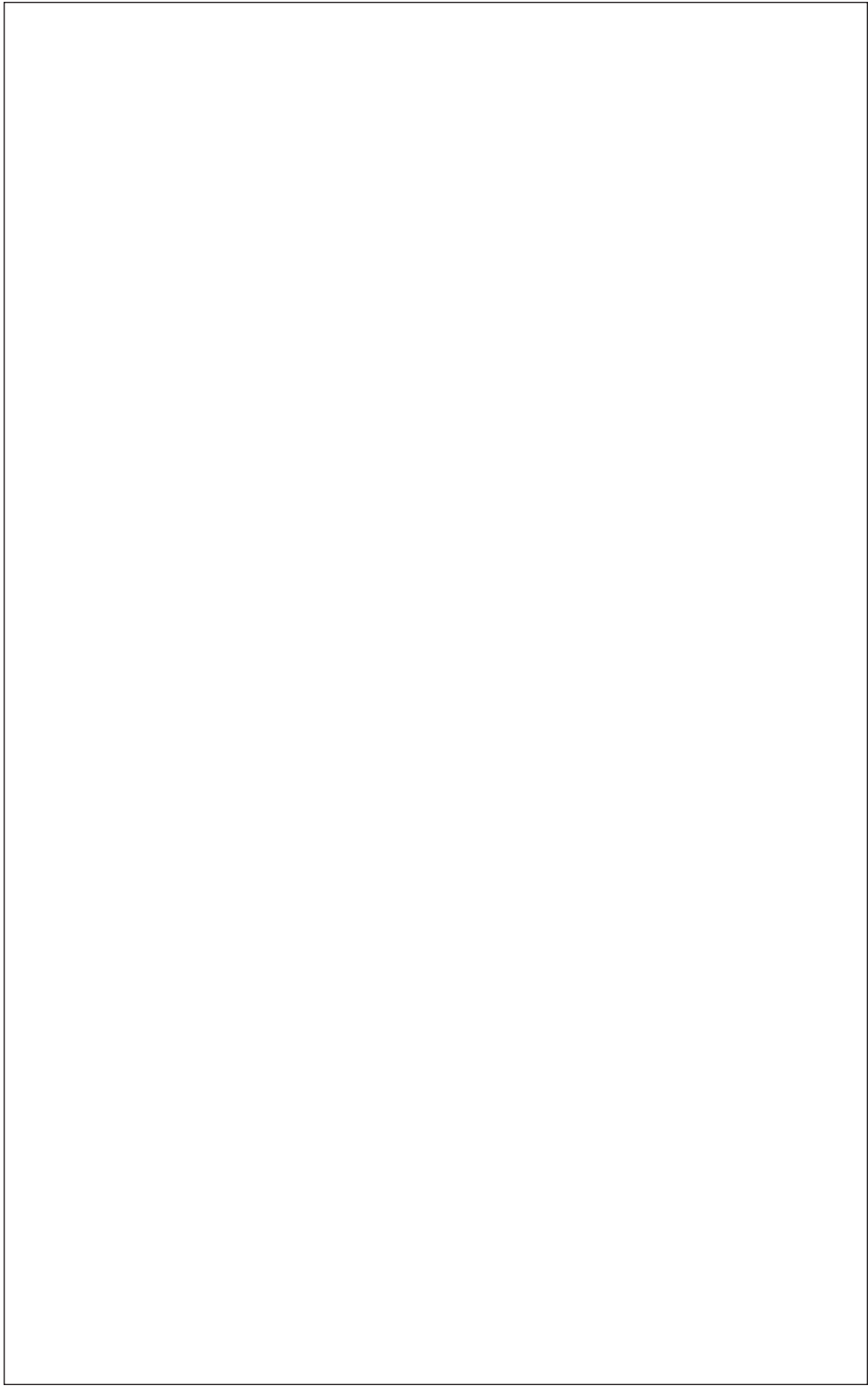
—R. W. Dale

The Evangelical Revival²



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Foreword

The phrase “entire sanctification” was very common in my upbringing. Throughout my childhood growing up in an American Holiness–influenced denomination, sanctification was part of regular preaching. It generally meant “two trips to the altar”—one to get saved and one to get sanctified.

Shortly after I graduated from college and married my husband, Wayne, we set out to lead our first church. We both felt a strong calling and were eager to reach people for Jesus. We worked hard. I taught school to assist in the income, but my heart was in growing the church. It was not long before reality set in. I was no longer the preacher’s kid; I was the preacher.

I had a constant gnawing in my spirit that there had to be something more. Even though it was difficult to explain, I finally decided that the best way to get rid of this inner pain was to persuade Wayne to leave the ministry. Over dinner one night I said how wonderful it would be to have the capacity to give away a lot of money and help many people. Then I suggested that his leaving the ministry and selling insurance might be a good way to do this. I was not prepared for the immediate response. Looking

me straight in the eyes he slowly articulated, “Jo Anne, I don’t know what you are going to do, but God has called me to preach and that is what I have to do.” End of conversation.

My restless spirit did not end. One day returning from school and washing my hands, I heard God say, “Jo Anne, you need to get your spiritual life in order.”

I responded audibly, “I can’t right now. I have to get this Christmas program ready at church. Maybe in February I can think about it.” I really did not think this was anything spiritual. After all, I knew everything there was to know about all this stuff.

Many Sundays I would wake up ill. I strongly disliked attending church and more and more disliked the people. A rather difficult place to be when one is a pastor! It didn’t occur to me to connect the dots of a spiritual need because I had always followed all the rules. Yes, I knew about John Wesley’s heart-warming experience. I had heard it preached many times. But that did not apply to me in the way I had arranged my spirituality.

One morning I woke up quite ill and it was not Sunday. Wayne scooped me up and took me to the emergency room. They put me in the ICU and said I would need immediate surgery on my stomach. Wayne had been wanting me to read Catherine Marshall’s book *Beyond Ourselves*, but I resisted. In my mind I thought, *What can she teach me? She is Presbyterian and I know everything there is to know.* But somehow in my desperation that day I asked him to bring me the book. My arrogance still in charge, I wanted to look at the chapters first to see if it was even worthwhile. My eyes fell on the chapter, “Ego Slaying” and as I read, God began to speak to my heart. I began to confess my sins of pride, arrogance, self-promotion, greed, selfishness,

self-sufficiency, and on and on. In fact, it felt to me as if God put a big screen in front of me and wrote them down. I was broken. I became so hungry for God that all I wanted was Him. I had never been this hungry for God. I had no label from my limited theology and didn't care.

Miraculously, I did not need surgery and after a few days was sent home. The hunger and openness to God continued though. I started reading Scripture. Not to check it off my discipline list, but to know God. I began to read the Holiness classics. Frankly, I did not expect anything; I just simply knew I was hungry and seeking God and He would receive me.

A month later I was leading the Wednesday night prayer meeting. In all honesty I did not like attending these meetings. They were frustrating to me. Everyone gave the same testimony and in addition I did not like the people. We began singing the old hymn "Satisfied" by Clara Teare Williams. Suddenly it was as if wave after wave of the Spirit of God came over me. I wept and began confessing to the people how I had not liked them and had not liked to come to church. I could not believe the words tumbling out of my mouth. The people were stunned. They had never had a pastor talk like this! But the greater thing is that God gave me love for the people that night that I could have never conjured up myself. I began to tell them how much I loved them. I saw them in a totally different light. His love filled that little church that night and continued over the years in more ways than I have space to write.

That night in that little church in Springfield, Missouri, in January of 1965 was the beginning of my journey of the sanctified life. A new lens in seeing others and the world through the eyes of Jesus that continues to this day.

As I read *Perfect Love* my heart leapt within me. My imagination cannot grasp the enormous outpouring God would do in this generation and those to come if we recover entire sanctification. May it be so Lord!

Jo Anne Lyon,
General Superintendent Emerita
The Wesleyan Church

Acknowledgments

This book is my attempt to bring ideas that are not my own back to the forefront of the broad Methodist family. I am indebted to all who have gone before me and have preached, taught, and written about Methodism's "grand depositum," or great gift, of entire sanctification. I am genuinely grateful to be, in some small way, a steward of Methodism's theological heritage. It is beautiful and worth giving our best thought and attention.

The idea for this book came from a conversation with Andy Miller at Seedbed. Since my first book with Seedbed, it has been a blessing to be able to call Andy a friend and partner in ministry. Andy not only planted the seed for the need for a book like this, he also put far more time and energy than usual into reading multiple drafts and providing helpful comments about the structure of the book and often more detailed editorial comments. He has also been exceptionally patient with me throughout this process. Thank you, Andy, for your friendship and support of this project. Thanks are also due to the team at Seedbed for their hard work and determination to "sow for a great awakening." May it be so!

I want to publicly thank the key mentors who first taught me about entire sanctification, which is not intended to suggest that they will necessarily agree with everything that follows. Doug Strong was the first seminary professor who taught this doctrine in a way that grabbed my attention from that day to the present. Scott Kisker was the other key professor of mine when I was in seminary who strengthened and confirmed my understanding of Methodist doctrine. I also want to thank William J. Abraham for ways that he challenged and sharpened my understanding of entire sanctification. Daniel Castelo was a crucial conversation partner when we were colleagues together at Seattle Pacific University. Thank you, Doug, Scott, Billy, and Daniel.

A number of people have read parts or the entirety of this manuscript or have been important conversation partners along the way. I am especially thankful to Justus Hunter, Stephen Rankin, and Ken Loyer for the time and energy they have given to discussing all things Methodist.

As always, I could not do any of this without the love, support, and care of my family. Thank you, in particular, is due to my wife, Melissa, and to my kids, Bethany, James, and Eden. Though you all know better than anyone how much room I still have to grow, it is my prayer that these words come alive in each of our lives.

Finally, I want to thank the men in my current band meeting: Lesly Broadbent, Matthew Johnson, Matt Judkins, and Andrew Thompson. You all have been a tangible and invaluable source of support and encouragement over the past several years. You have encouraged me to earnestly strive after entire sanctification. God has heard and often answered your prayers on my behalf. I give thanks to God for bringing us together. Words fail me when I try to express how much you all mean to me. This book is dedicated to you four with love and gratitude.

Prologue

I remember the first time I heard someone give a detailed explanation of Methodism’s “grand depositum,” the doctrine of entire sanctification. I was a seminary student preparing to become a pastor. And after Dr. Doug Strong’s lecture was finished, I knew I now had the vocabulary to give voice to things I knew I believed but couldn’t express.

The Methodist theological tradition gave me the framework I needed to express the hope, optimism, and possibility for deep transformation in Christ that I read about in Scripture.

This book is about a core belief that John Wesley was convinced was the reason the Holy Spirit breathed life in the people called Methodists. We were created to bring this belief to the church and plant it as deeply as we could in the souls of as many people’s lives as possible.

This belief is radical because it professes that radical change *in this life* is possible *by the grace of God*.

Ever since that class more than a decade and a half ago, I have been hoping and praying to see a revival of entire sanctification in the church. I want people to hear about this teaching. I want it to be taught across the church. But more than that, I

want to see a revival of the experience of freedom from the power of sin in the lives of Christ-followers that comes by the amazing grace of God.

I want to see a generation of Christians experience all that God has for them.

In the pages that come, I am going to do everything I can to convince you that there is more to the Christian life than you may have experienced or even expected.

I want to give you fair warning that there will be times I say things that may sound crazy or unbelievable to you. When this happens, I am doing the best that I can to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture and the Wesleyan theological heritage. I hope you will explore both for yourself and hold me accountable to them.

I am passionate about this book because I believe the Christian faith is much more than forgiveness of sins and pardon—though it is certainly that. And I do not by any means intend to suggest that justification is trivial.

I believe those who are in Christ are offered full salvation—a salvation that addresses past sin and offers freedom from the power of sin in the present.

And this is really Methodism's big idea: salvation brings not only forgiveness and pardon but also empowerment and freedom to live a faithful and holy life *entirely* and *right now*. This is our grand depositum—the treasure that God has entrusted to the particular people called Methodists.

I have wanted to write a book like this for a long time. I don't think I've ever been more excited to write something. I have also struggled with this book more than any other because this book

gets at my deep hope and passion for Methodism's theological heritage. Entire sanctification is the beautiful treasure that God has entrusted to us.

I have done the very best I could to do justice to our grand depositum. But as I've written I've been deeply aware of my own shortcomings as a pastor, teacher, and author.

Because this book is about the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification, I also need to be upfront with you that I am writing about a doctrine I believe in but have not yet experienced. Writing this book has increased my awareness of my desperate need for God and my hunger for God to do in me what I cannot do in myself.

I hope and pray it does the same for you. May God graciously give us faith and expectation to be filled to overflowing with love for God and other people. I'd like to end with a powerful quote in which John Wesley expresses emphatically the unparalleled significance of love in Methodist theology:

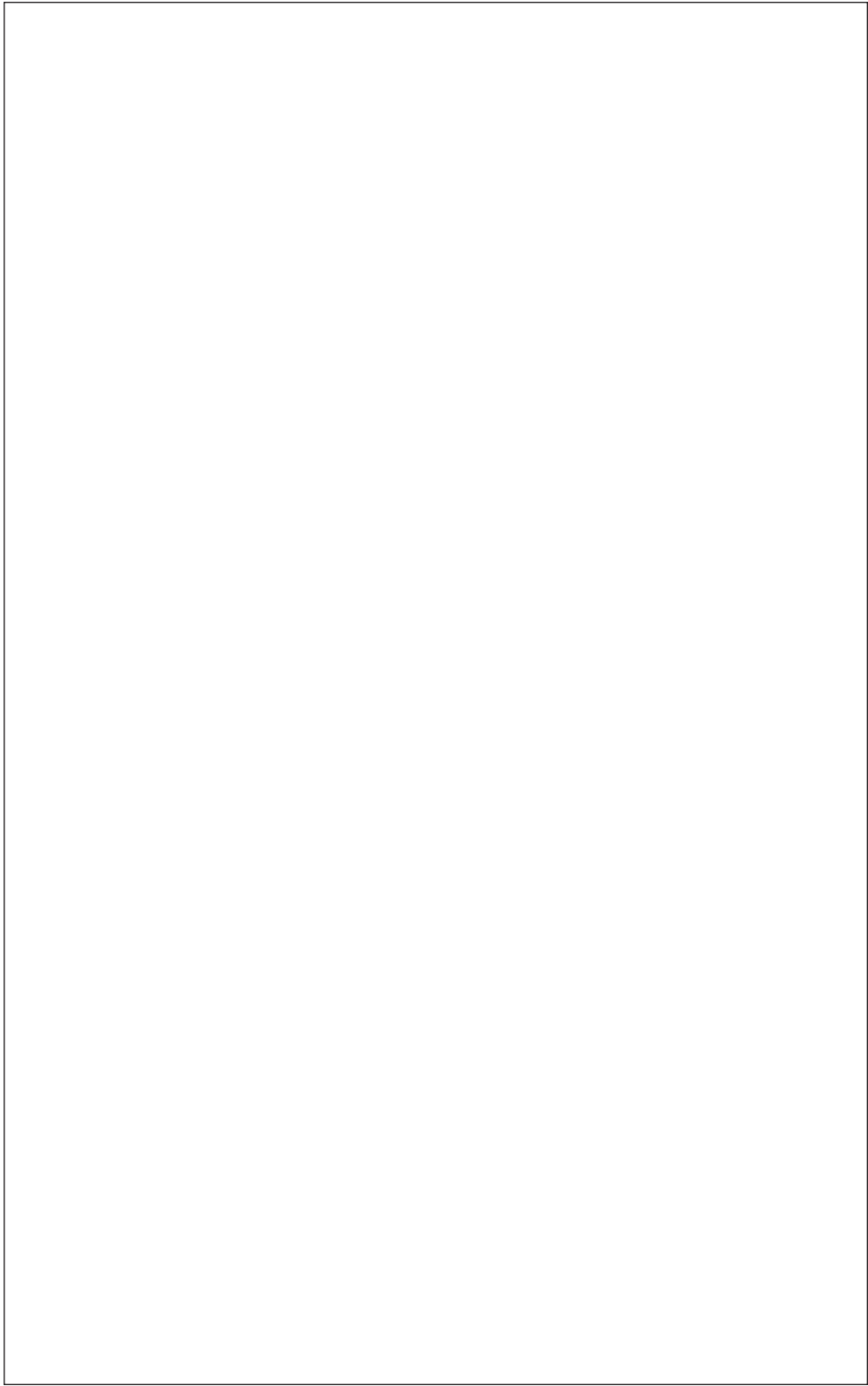
[One cause of] a thousand mistakes is [this:] . . . not considering deeply enough that love is the highest gift of God; humble, gentle, patient love; that all visions, revelations, [or] manifestations whatever, are little things compared to love; and that all [other] gifts . . . are either the same with or infinitely inferior to it.

[Y]ou should be thoroughly [aware] of this—the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion; there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way. And when you are

asking others, “Have you received this or that blessing?” if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them [on] a false scent. Settle it then in your heart, that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing more but more of that love described in the thirteenth [chapter] of [First] Corinthians. You can go no higher than this, till you are carried into Abraham’s bosom.

—John Wesley
from “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection”¹

**PERFECT
LOVE**



1

A Crisis of Identity—We Have Forgotten Who We Are

Methodism is in the midst of an identity crisis. We have forgotten who we are. We have abandoned our theological heritage. In the pages that follow, I will make a simple argument: above all else, God raised up the people called Methodists to preach, teach, and experience one core doctrine. This doctrine is Methodism's reason for existence. If we get this right, everything else will fall into place. If we get it wrong, we will miss the unique calling and purpose that God has for us.

Less than six months before he died, John Wesley wrote a letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury that referred to this core doctrine 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.”¹

That sounds important! But the previous quotation also contains a handful of words that we do not use much today. Let's start with "grand depositum." Wesley meant that God had deposited or entrusted Methodism with something of great worth and importance. Propagating means to spread or pass on to others. So, Wesley was saying that God had entrusted Methodism with something specific of great worth and importance. And God raised up Methodism in order to spread what God has entrusted to us to as many other people as possible.

Wesley identified the key thing that God gave to Methodists as a specific doctrine or teaching. So, what is this doctrine? Entire sanctification or Christian perfection is the grand depositum that God has given to us. This book is an attempt to bring entire sanctification back to the forefront of Methodism.

Entire sanctification is the doctrine that defines Methodism's audacious optimism that the grace of God saves us entirely, to the uttermost.

I hope to convince you that this grand depositum is *still* the reason God raised up Methodists. Methodism exists in order to preach, teach, and proclaim the bold optimism that the grace of God is able to bring full salvation to everyone. Methodism separated from this core teaching has no future. If Methodism focuses once again on this grand depositum, it will find new life and fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in its midst.

We have the opportunity to recover this powerful truth and again present it to a world desperate for hope and healing. How exciting!

Before we go any farther, let me say a word about what I mean by "Methodist" or "Methodism" in this book. This book is for everyone who at some point traces their spiritual lineage back to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. It is probably

most obvious that this includes denominations that have the word *Methodist* in their names, such as the United Methodist Church² or the African Methodist Episcopal Church. I also have members of the Holiness Movement in mind, like the Wesleyan Church, the Free Methodist Church, Church of God (Anderson), Church of the Nazarene, and the Salvation Army. But this is still not the full extent of the Methodist family. I am also thinking of members of the global Pentecostal movement whose understanding of a second work of grace and baptism of the Holy Spirit can be traced back to John Wesley and the doctrine of entire sanctification. When Pentecostalism is taken into consideration, we are talking about well more than a billion (yes, billion with a “b”) Christians today who can trace their heritage back to Wesley and early Methodism.

Methodism’s significance within the body of Christ is often underestimated or overlooked. But we are a powerful movement of the Holy Spirit that has brought not only forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ, but also freedom from the power of sin and an outpouring of holy love in countless lives over the past three centuries. Methodism has been the most Spirit-filled in our history when people have leaned into our grand depositum and wrestled with God to help people receive the blessing of entire sanctification. When Methodists have lowered their expectations of what God can do in this life, spiritual and numeric decline have followed.

God did not raise us up to lower expectation for what is possible through the work of Jesus Christ. We have been brought to life to tell the world that “it is God’s will that you should be sanctified” (1 Thess. 4:3a). And God is able to do what he wants to do in us!

Why Are We Here?

These are trying times for Wesley's spiritual heirs. All who trace their spiritual lineage back to John Wesley are facing sustained challenges in a variety of ways. Despite these real and serious challenges, I feel excitement and a growing sense of anticipation. I have an expectation in my spirit that the living God is going to do an (old) new thing.

Unsettled and even chaotic times can provide an opportunity for reevaluation. They can bring clarity. Difficult seasons can bring renewed focus on the reason a group exists. This is a great time to seek clarity about a basic question: Why are we here?

I am convinced that there is one main reason we exist: to preach, teach, and help people receive the gift of entire sanctification. This is the reason God first breathed life into Methodism. And this is the reason I have hope God will breathe life into our churches once again.

Return³

Like many of you, I've been praying. I've been asking God to break through. I've been wrestling with what faithfulness looks like in this time and in this place. And I've been hearing the word *return*. The first time I heard that word, my mind was going in so many different directions I wasn't sure what it meant. But as I've kept hearing *return*, the mist and confusion have been clearing away and one particular Scripture passage has stood out:

Thus says the LORD:
Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,

where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.

But they said, “We will not walk in it.” (Jer. 6:16 NRSV)

It is time for the people called Methodists and all of John Wesley’s spiritual heirs to return to the ancient path that Wesley referred to as the “grand depositum” of “the people called Methodists.” Lest we respond like those who heard Jeremiah: “But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’”

The grand depositum of Methodism was the doctrine of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection. The mission of Methodism in Britain and in the United States was initially to “spread scriptural holiness.” Holiness, or sanctification, was the core focus and purpose of the people called Methodists. Wesley understood holiness to be an ongoing process of becoming more and more like Jesus, loving God and neighbor to the exclusion of sin. Entire sanctification (which will also be referred to as Christian perfection or full salvation here) was the goal of ongoing growth in holiness. So, what exactly is entire sanctification? In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley gave a succinct definition:

(1) That Christian perfection is that love of God and our neighbor, which implies deliverance from all sin. (2) That this is received merely by faith. (3) That it is given instantaneously, in one moment. (4) That we are to expect it, not at death, but every moment; that now is the accepted time, now is the day of this salvation.⁴

The goal for Wesley and his followers was to actually live the kind of life that Scripture tells us is possible by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. This determination was expressed most boldly

in the doctrine of entire sanctification. This teaching was the grand depositum that God gave to Wesley and those who went before us.

It is time to return, to recommit to steward what has been entrusted to those who follow in the footsteps of Wesley and the first Methodists.

The Stakes Are High

I am convinced that any form of Methodism that is not clearly connected to the doctrine of entire sanctification has no future. Any new movements or expressions of Methodism must place our grand depositum at the center of our faith and practice. I am equally convinced that if we as a people recommit ourselves to this grand depositum, God will breathe new life into our movement out of love for a desperate and hurting world.

Here is what I see as being at stake for us today: We live in a world where many are desperate for hope and healing. Many have a quiet desperation that comes from the numbness and pseudo connections that have developed from spending too much time connected to our screens and far too little time connecting in person in life-giving relationships. Many are desperate because they know that their lives are going in directions that are not going to end well, but they are not able to stop. Many are depressed, discouraged, and simply without hope. The list could go on.

In this reality, our calling is to preach the full gospel. We have the good news of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus not only brings forgiveness and pardon; the gospel brings hope and healing. Through faith in the amazing grace of God, we can be

forgiven and reconciled to God. This is, indeed, good news. But there is more! God doesn't want to just forgive us, he also wants to offer us power and freedom over the ways of sin and death. We need not limp through this life, defeated, merely surviving. No! "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37 NRSV)!

We can be saved to the uttermost!

Jesus Is Able

There should not be a church in any of our communities that has a more audacious and bold optimism of what God's grace can do in the lives of every single person than churches that trace their roots back to John Wesley. Entire sanctification is not an abstract idea or merely a theory.

Not at all!

Entire sanctification is the fruit that comes from knowing a person—Jesus, our risen Lord. Jesus saves. Jesus rescues. Jesus heals. He has done these things before and he will do them again!

There is still Living Water here.

As we unplug the well of entire sanctification and invite people to drink deeply from it, we will see fruit. We will see lives undone by the love of God that has been poured out over the world in Jesus Christ. We will see lives mended and made whole. We can unplug this well now and offer the Water that is already in it today to the people in our communities.

For those confused by my connection of Methodism to Pentecostalism, it may be helpful to realize that John Fletcher (1729–1785) was a key spokesperson for John Wesley during Wesley's lifetime. (Fletcher actually died before Wesley, though

he was younger than him.) When Fletcher wrote about the possibilities of entire sanctification or Christian perfection, he often referred to it as baptism in the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost). This language echoed through the generations until the second blessing of entire sanctification was picked up in the beginnings of Pentecostalism and found new life and new development.

Once Pentecostalism became a major movement, baptism in the Holy Spirit quickly became associated, if not synonymous, with the Pentecostal emphasis on speaking in tongues. One way this is seen in Methodist history was when the Church of the Nazarene changed the first part of their original name, Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene, once it became clear that “Pentecostal” was firmly connected to glossolalia in most people’s minds. Nazarenes did not embrace the Pentecostal emphasis on speaking in tongues as a sign of a second blessing of being filled with the Spirit. Despite this different emphasis, the two traditions nevertheless have the same theological roots.

One of the foremost historians of the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition, Vinson Synan, has argued that, “Pentecostalism was basically a modified ‘second blessing’ Methodist spirituality that was pioneered by John Wesley and passed down to his followers in the holiness movement, out of which came the modern Pentecostal movement.”⁵

Before those of us who are not connected to Pentecostal churches are too quick to reject Pentecostalism as a part of our extended family, we would do well to remember that ecstatic experiences were common in early Methodism. Methodists would often experience things that looked nearly identical to what would today be described as falling out or being slain in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit often showed up in surprising and

unpredictable ways when Methodists gathered for worship! We will see multiple examples of this in the following pages.

One of the best-known examples occurred less than a year after John Wesley's famous experience that happened on May 24, 1738, at Aldersgate Street.

Wesley and a variety of key leaders (including George Whitefield and Charles Wesley) in the beginning of the Methodist revival in England were meeting together at the Fetter Lane Society for a love feast on New Year's Eve. A love feast was a time of sharing a light meal and testifying to how they had seen God at work in their lives. There were about sixty people who had gathered together to pray and testify to the goodness of God. And then the Holy Spirit came upon them in a powerful and unexpected way. Here is John Wesley's account of what happened:

About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, inso-much that many cried out for exceeding joy, and *many fell to the ground*. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his majesty, we broke out with one voice, "We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord."⁶

This account sounds like what Pentecostals and charismatics would describe as "falling out" under the power of the Holy Spirit.

And many Wesleyans and Methodists who are desperate for God to do a new work in their lives are encountering God in powerful, supernatural, and life-changing ways today. I have seen this myself at Seedbed's New Room Conference, which started meeting annually in September 2014. God has been present in powerful and life-changing ways at New Room, with powerful

manifestations of the Holy Spirit. A host of testimonies have come out of New Room of people who have experienced inner healing, physical healing, and freedom from addiction, as well as people being filled with the Holy Spirit. It has been a place of renewal, restoration, and healing.⁷

It is not surprising that this conference started with a core commitment to lift up the full gospel.

The yearly Aldersgate Conference is another place where people hungry for more of God are being filled with God's presence. It was at an Aldersgate Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that a close friend of mine went to the event, by his own account, a bit of a skeptic. But the Lord met him there and delivered him from a long-term addiction to chewing tobacco. As of this writing, he has not used tobacco in well over a year.⁸

It is always risky to mention specific examples like these in a book like this. They tend to become dated quickly and then date the book itself. I share these here, despite that risk, to illustrate that people are hungry for encounters with the living God today, just as they were in eighteenth-century Methodism. And though these may soon be outdated, new expressions will doubtless arise to replace them.

A Road Map for the Rest of This Book

Okay, I hope I have your attention! My goal is straightforward: I want to convince you to boldly press into our grand depositum.

The central importance of Christian perfection in the history of Methodism is not just a theoretical idea, it is a doctrine that many Methodists experienced and testified to with joy and exultation.

The rest of this book is divided into two main parts. The first part gives you a sense of the central place of the doctrine of entire sanctification for John Wesley and the first Methodists. You will encounter several testimonies of Christians who experienced full salvation. These demonstrate that this was a living word for those who have gone before us. I hope they will also awaken a desire in you to press in with God in prayer to seek all that God has for you. The decline of entire sanctification in Methodist theology and experience will also be briefly discussed in order to help us understand where we are.

The second part is intended to deepen our understanding of what exactly it is that we are after. What is and is not meant by entire sanctification? And how can we receive this precious gift today?

If you are satisfied with your life and content with where you are, then this book may not be for you. But if you have a sense that God has more for you, then *this book is for you*. If you know that part of your life is not the way that God intends for it to be and if you are hungry and thirsty for more of God, *this book is for you*. If you are desperate and ready to experience, as my friend J. D. Walt often says, the rest of the gospel—then *this book is most definitely for you*.

Now is always the time to boldly pursue all that God has for us. Methodists have left our theological heritage in a musty basement or in a forgotten chest in the attic for far too long. It is time to retrieve and receive the grand depositum that God has so graciously given to us.

As I've written these pages, I've worried that I may seem negative or pessimistic about the future. Please know that I have

written this book with a deep hope and optimism for what is possible by the grace of God.

I am a Methodist because I believe, by the grace of God and the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we can experience complete freedom from sin and death now. I am a Methodist because I believe we have been entrusted with the most audacious, bold, and positive vision for the possibilities of transformation that are available on this side of Easter.

I am a Methodist because I do not believe that the Christian life must be one of futility or frustration, where one does the best one can but is not able to completely give one's life in obedience to Christ. By faith in Jesus, all who are created in the image of God can experience not only the joy of having our sin canceled, but the deeper joy of experiencing God break the power of canceled sin, as Charles Wesley so eloquently put it.

Teaching and preaching the possibility of being made perfect in love for God and neighbor, and seeking to actually become entirely sanctified are the reasons Methodism was raised up.

May we remember who we are and why the Holy Spirit brought us to life!

Come, Holy Spirit, breathe life into your people once more.

Small Group Discussion Guide

My hope is that this book will serve not only as an individual resource for greater understanding of the doctrine of entire sanctification and its central role in Methodist theology, but that it will also be used in small groups to study Methodism's grand depositum. More important, I hope people will come together to support, encourage, and pray for one another, pressing into the heart of God for complete salvation.

In hopes of facilitating group discussion, a guide is included at the end of each chapter. There will be a handful of discussion questions to help kickstart your conversation and to further explore the concepts in the book.

Throughout the history of Methodism, many denominations have asked a series of questions of those who are pursuing ordained ministry. Three of the first four questions relate specifically to the doctrine of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection. They are:

Are you going on to perfection?

Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?

Are you earnestly striving after perfection in love?⁹

Since this book is intended to not merely be about an idea, but to encourage the pursuit of entire sanctification, the final question each week focuses on your own pursuit of entire sanctification. This guide, then, will give each group member a chance to weigh in on the extent to which they have been earnestly striving after perfection in love.

The point of this last question is not to try to outdo one another. It is to provide a place to tell the truth in hopes of

lovingly encouraging each other to take the next step in pursuing all that God has for us. I know in my own life there have been times when my honest answer to that question would have been: “No, I have not been earnestly striving after perfection in love.” If that is where you are, it is good to be honest. Progress starts with an honest and realistic assessment of where you are before you can move forward. The goal of this question is mutual support and encouragement to see God break through and to receive the gift of full salvation.

Open with a Prayer

Introductions (15 minutes)

During this time, group members should introduce themselves to each other, as necessary. Begin by sharing what made each person interested in reading this book.

Questions for Discussion (30 minutes)

1. What have your expectations been for your life as a follower of Jesus Christ? How did this chapter impact those expectations?
2. Do you find that the particular part of the broad Methodist tradition that you are in is experiencing a crisis of identity? If not, how would you describe that identity? If so, what are the key convictions that are needed in order for your community to rediscover its identity in Christ?
3. What was most challenging to you about this chapter? Were you more energized or eager to learn and experience more in this chapter?

**Are you earnestly striving after perfection in love?
(10 minutes)**

Each group member should be given an opportunity to answer this question each week. For the first few weeks, it might be helpful to frame the question in this way: On a scale of 1–10, how earnest have you been in striving after perfection in love?

Close with a Prayer