The Problem of “Perfection”

All candidates for ordination in The United Methodist Church, whether as deacons or as elders, are asked these questions (among others) by their bishop:

1. Have you faith in Christ?
2. Are you going on to perfection?
3. Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?
4. Are you earnestly striving after perfection in love?¹

The ordination candidates are of course expected to answer “Yes” to all four of these questions (usually coupled with a mental if not verbal qualification, such as “by God’s grace” or “with God’s help”)—but what do they really mean when they do give the expected affirmative answer? We have a problem in The United Methodist Church, and perhaps in other parts of the Wesleyan/Methodist family. We’ve largely lost touch with the meaning of John Wesley’s teaching about Christian perfection.²

There is a widespread consensus in modern culture that rejects the very idea of the “perfection” of any individual person as prima facie evidence of psychotic delusion. We have learned from modern psychology just how very far from “perfect” all human beings are. Any claim of human “perfection” is usually met with great suspicion and cynical dismissal. We have also learned just how imperfect all our human social, political, and economic systems and institutions are—including our churches. Dishon-

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¹ The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012); deacons, ¶330, p. 250; elders, ¶336, p. 262.

² An earlier version of this article was published as “‘The Words Get in the Way’; Rethinking John Wesley’s Idea of Christian Perfection,” in Revista Caminhando [the scholarly journal of the Faculty of Theology of the Methodist University of São Paulo, Brazil] 18.2 (2013): 97–114.
esty, corruption, and lack of integrity seem almost universal in both public and private life. Consequently the notion of “perfection” of any sort, whether of individuals or of institutions, is a very “hard sell” today.

This general cultural suspicion of “perfection” is exacerbated among Methodist people by the unfortunate consequences of the Holiness movement of the nineteenth century. First in America, and then in England and elsewhere, the Holiness movement gave rise to what mainstream Methodists regarded as serious distortions of John Wesley’s teachings about Christian perfection. As Kenneth J. Collins has noted, Wesley himself disliked and preferred not to use the term “sinless perfection.” However that idea, understood simplistically as the power not to commit sinful acts, took root in some parts of the Holiness movement. The result was the eventual reduction of Christian perfection to a kind of legalistic and behavioristic moralism. This gave rise to popular notions that a “perfect” Christian was one who refrained from certain actions that were considered to be sinful. Lists of such actions varied but often included (for example) drinking, smoking, cursing, gambling, and having sex outside of marriage. The message was clear: “Good (= holy) people don’t . . .”—and vice versa.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a number of Holiness groups had split off from the major American Methodist denominations, and mainstream Methodists were becoming alienated by the “increasingly sectarian and schismatic extremism characteristic of much of the Holiness movement.” As a result, they tended to abandon the doctrine of Christian perfection altogether because of what they perceived as “overemphasis and misinterpretation of entire sanctification and a flouting of

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ecclesiastical authority” by Holiness movement proponents. The consequence has been, as Albert Outler once put it, that

the keystone in the arch of Wesley’s own theological “system” came to be a pebble in the shoes of standard-brand Methodists . . . leaving them “alienated even by the bare terms—“holiness,” “Christian perfection,” “sanctification”—not to speak of an aversion toward persons who actually profess such spiritual attainments.

Scott J. Jones provides a very similar assessment, and William J. Abraham expresses an even more pessimistic view: “John Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection is at best a dead letter and at worst a political delusion among contemporary Methodists.” Randy Maddox has perceptively identified a key factor in this history:

In significant part because of losing touch with Wesley’s mature moral psychology, his North American descendants found it increasingly hard to make sense of his affirmation of the possibility of Christian perfection. Many sought to distance themselves from his perceived unrealistic claim about the goal of sanctification. In the process his emphasis on the centrality of spiritual transformation to salvation was muted. Add to this the impact of popular expositions of genetic determinism, psychological determinism, and the like, and it is little wonder that Wesley’s current descendants are as likely as anyone else to doubt that we can expect much transformation in our character.

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To further complicate the picture, calling someone a “perfectionist” or saying that someone exhibits “perfectionism” is not always considered a compliment in areas of life other than science and sports and music. Being a “perfectionist” can have some positive dimensions, as psychologist Adrian Furnham recently noted:

Perfectionists value and foster excellence and strive to meet important goals. In certain areas, like sports and science, perfectionism is not just tolerated but encouraged. To some, perfectionism is about high standards, persistence, and conscientiousness. Perfectionists are organized. They have self-imposed high standards, and in the role of parent, teacher, or mentor, they tend to impose those standards on others. Combined with ability and stability, perfectionists can, should, and do, reach their ultimate level of performance.10

However, as Furnham continued, there is a dark side:

Perfectionism is seen as a cause and correlate of serious psychopathology. At worst, perfectionists believe they should be perfect—no hesitations, deviations, or inconsistencies. They are super-sensitive to imperfection, failing, and weakness. They believe their acceptance and lovability is a function of never making mistakes. And they don’t know the meaning of “good enough.” For them, it's always all or nothing... They are driven by a fear of failure; a fear of making mistakes; and a fear of disapproval... Psychologists see perfectionism almost always as a handicap. They see perfectionists as vulnerable to distress, often haunted by a chronic sense of failure; indecisiveness and its close companion procrastination; and shame.11

Perfectionism is recognized by the American Psychological Association as a component of Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), which is defined as follows:

A personality disorder in DSM-5 characterized by a pervasive pattern of preoccupation with orderliness, perfectionism, and control, at the cost of flexibility, openness, and efficiency, beginning by early adulthood and indicated by such signs and symptoms as excessive preoccupation with details, rules, and

11 Ibid.
order; perfectionism that interferes with task completion; excessive devotion to work at the expense of leisure; excessive conscientiousness and scrupulousness; tendency to hoard worthless objects; reluctance to delegate tasks to others; thrifty or stingy attitude towards money; rigidity and stubbornness.\textsuperscript{12}

Psychologists disagree about whether or not perfectionism should be divided into categories of “adaptive” and “maladaptive” (or “nonadaptive”), but perfectionism is generally regarded as “a vulnerability factor for unipolar depression, anorexia and suicide” and the weight of current opinion in the world of psychology seems clearly to be that “no form of perfectionism is completely problem free.”\textsuperscript{13}

In the realm of philosophy, as H. P. Owen has written, the concept of perfection has two closely allied and often overlapping meanings:

First, it means “completeness,” “wholeness,” or “integrity”: \( X \) is perfect when he (or it) is free from all deficiencies. Second, it means the achievement of an end or a goal. This meaning emerges most clearly from the connection between the Greek words \textit{teleios} (“perfect”) and \textit{telos} (“end” or “goal”). An entity is perfect when it has achieved its goal by actualizing its potentialities and realizing its specific form. Bringing these two meanings together, one would say that a thing is complete or entire when it has fulfilled its nature and thereby reached its “end.”\textsuperscript{14}

Samuel Blackburn continues this line of discussion, commenting on the “powerful but difficult tradition” in philosophy (and theology) that “associates reality, perfection, absence of change or eternity, and self-sufficiency”:

\textsuperscript{12} Andrew M. Colman, ed., \textit{A Dictionary of Psychology}, fourth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). \textit{DSM-5} is the \textit{Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders}, fifth edition; this is the most recent (2013) update to the American Psychiatric Association’s standard classification and diagnostic tool.


A perfect being would be that which is most real; there is a departure from perfection if anything that could be real is not. Hence a perfect being has no potential that is unrealized, and undergoes no change. Evil is downgraded to mere defect, or absence or lack of something positive: criminality is the failure of some genuine potentiality to be actual, and all such actualization is good.\(^\text{15}\)

The result of all this taken together is that many (most?) of John Wesley’s spiritual descendants, at least in North America and perhaps elsewhere, have largely abandoned the language of “perfection,” even when (or perhaps especially when) it is modified by the adjective “Christian.”\(^\text{16}\) The question is whether or not it may be possible to reclaim the Wesleyan theme of “holiness of heart and life” for our lives and our churches today by rethinking and reframing Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection. I believe that it is important to try to do this, and want to suggest here some ways in which we might begin.

**Christian Perfection in Wesley’s Writings**

The single most consistent theme in John Wesley’s thought over the entire span of his life and ministry was “holiness of heart and life” (or more simply, “holy living”) and its cognate goal, Christian perfection. His interest in the theme of “holiness of heart and life” is evident from what Albert Outler has characterized as his “first conversion” in 1725, “a conversion to the ideal of holy living.”\(^\text{17}\) That interest continued through every phase of his life, until his death in 1791. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766) is Wesley’s most important single work on the


\(^{16}\) It is interesting to note that the recent (2006) Holiness Manifesto, which grew out of a three-year consultation among representatives from a consortium of self-identified Holiness denominations sharing a Wesleyan theological heritage as an effort to provide “a compelling articulation of the message of holiness” for the church today, makes no use of the terms “perfect” or “perfection”; see the text on the webpage of the Wesleyan Holiness Consortium: [http://www.holinessandunity.org](http://www.holinessandunity.org) (accessed 1 June 2015).

\(^{17}\) Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, 120.
topic.\textsuperscript{18} It was published to try to demonstrate the consistency of his teaching across the years. However, one can see over time evidence of a subtle but significant shift in Wesley’s thinking about the nature of Christian perfection. Through the 1730s and 1740s Wesley used mostly what can be characterized as a negative language in talking about perfection, describing it primarily as freedom from, or the absence of, a host of bad things: freedom from sin; freedom from fear; freedom from doubt; freedom from guilt; freedom from sorrow; and so on. Beginning in the 1750s and 1760s, the negative language largely (though not entirely) disappeared and Wesley characteristically began to use a more positive language, describing Christian perfection as the presence of love filling the heart and governing all one’s words and actions.\textsuperscript{19} This more positive language about Christian perfection as the presence of love filling the heart is dominant in his later writings. Both the negative language and the positive language occasionally occur together, as in the following example from one of his very latest sermons, “On the Discoveries of Faith” (1788):

But what is the ‘perfection’ here spoken of [in Heb. 6:1]? It is not only a deliverance from doubts and fears, but from sin, from all inward as well as outward sin; from evil desires and evil tempers, as well as from evil words and works. Yea, and it is not only a negative blessing, a deliverance from all evil dispositions implied in that expression, ‘I will circumcise thy heart’ [Deut. 10:16; 30:6], but a positive one, likewise, even the planting all good dispositions in their place, clearly implied in that other expression, ‘To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul’ [Deut. 13:3, etc.].\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{A Plain Account of Christian Perfection} was the product of a period of significant controversy within Methodism about the nature of Chris-


\textsuperscript{19} David B. McEwan captures this dynamic nicely in \textit{Wesley as a Pastoral Theologian: Theological Methodology in John Wesley’s Doctrine of Christian Perfection} (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), when he says that after the 1760s Wesley “keeps the emphasis in Christian perfection on love and the positive desire for its fullness, rather than the more negative focus on sin and the desire to be cleansed” (p. 158).

tian perfection. Around 1760, John Wesley became convinced that he had been articulating such a high standard for Christian perfection that people were being hindered from experiencing its freedom. He began encouraging people to seek (through God’s grace) the immediate experience of Christian perfection while emphasizing the limits of the deliverance from sin that comes with such perfection. Two leaders of the London society, Thomas Maxfield and George Bell, took this to an extreme:

Maxfield and Bell proclaimed a perfection that was instantaneously attained by the simple affirmation “I believe,” forfeiting any role for responsible growth prior to this event. And they portrayed this perfection as “angelic” or absolute, such that there was no need for growth after the event, or for the continuing atoning work of Christ.

They also claimed gifts of prophecy and healing, and Bell attempted to cure blind people and raise the dead. John Wesley was slow to act, but finally repudiated both Maxfield and Bell when Bell predicted the end of the world on 28 February 1763. In reaction to these developments, Charles Wesley became progressively more critical of John’s heightened emphasis on the possibility of present attainment and moved toward a more exacting expectation of Christian perfection, which he came to believe could be attained only at or very near to death. The “perfectionist controversy” lies behind the publication of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, which incorporated in edited form several previously published documents.

In his *Thoughts on Christian Perfection* (1760), using the question-and-answer format typical of the Minutes of Conference, Wesley sought to respond to the growing confusion that was beginning to result from the ways in which some of the Methodist preachers and people were talk-

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22 Maddox, “Be Ye Perfect?” 34.
ing about Christian perfection, and in particular to address questions about whether “perfect” Christians were freed from all human infirmities (which Wesley denied) and whether only fully sanctified Christians could be assured of final salvation (which Wesley also denied).23 Two years later, Wesley found it necessary to publish Cautions and Directions Given to the Greatest Professors in the Methodist Societies (1762).24 This tract was then incorporated in expanded form into a larger work, Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection (1764).25

In 1764, prompted by the persistent misinterpretations of his teachings by extremists such as Bell and Maxfield and the subsequent tensions with his brother Charles, John Wesley undertook “a review of the whole subject” of Christian perfection, and “wrote down the sum of what I had observed in the following short propositions:"

(1) There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.

(2) It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to “go on unto perfection” [Heb. 6:1].

(3) It is not so late as death; for St. Paul speaks of living men that were “perfect” [Phil. 3:15].

(4) It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone.

(5) It does not make a man infallible—none is infallible, while he remains in the body.

(6) Is it sinless? It is not worthwhile to contend for a term. It is salvation from sin.

(7) It is perfect love [1 John 4:18]. This is the essence of it; its properties, or inseparable fruits, are “rejoicing evermore,” “praying without ceasing,” and “in everything giving thanks” [1 Thess. 5:16-18].

(8) It is improvable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.

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23 Wesley, Thoughts on Christian Perfection (1760), Treatises II, 57-82, with introductory comments, 54-56; see note about incorporation into the Plain Account in Treatises II, 167.

24 Wesley, Cautions and Directions Given to the Greatest Professors in the Methodist Societies (1762), Treatises II, 83-91, with introductory comments, 81-82.

25 Wesley, Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection (1764), Treatises II, 95-131, with introductory comments 92-94; see note about incorporation into the Plain Account in Treatises II, 218.
(9) It is *amissible*, capable of being lost; of which we have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this, till five or six years ago.

(10) It is constantly both preceded and followed by a *gradual* work.²⁶

One can see John Wesley struggling here to articulate his views clearly. What kind of “perfection” is this, if it is something that can grow or increase? something that can be lost or destroyed? something that happens “in a moment” but is both preceded and followed by a gradual work? something that is not absolute? something that does not produce infallibility or sinlessness? This seems to be a very *imperfect* sort of “perfection.” The paradox is that “perfection” as Wesley understood it could co-exist with “imperfections” or infirmities of various kinds, since its essence is an unbroken relationship of love of God and neighbor.²⁷

All of these shorter works were incorporated in whole or in abridged form, in the *Plain Account* when it appeared in 1766. Another short piece that also eventually found its way into later editions of the *Plain Account* is worth special attention here, because it provides evidence of important elements of emerging nuance in Wesley’s conception of Christian perfection subsequent to the first publication of the *Plain Account*.

In 1767 John Wesley wrote a letter to his brother Charles outlining three main points relating to Christian perfection, seeking to “come to a good understanding” with Charles about them:

Some thoughts occurred to my mind this morning which I believe it may be useful to set down: the rather because it may be a means of our understanding each other clearly; that we may agree as far as we can, and then let all the world know it.

I was thinking on Christian perfection, with regard to the thing, the manner, and the time.

(1) By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man ruling all the tempers, words, and actions, the whole heart by the whole life.

I do not include an impossibility of falling from it, either in part or in whole. Therefore I retract several expressions in our Hymns which partly express, partly imply, such an impossibility.

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²⁶ This text, apparently never published separately, was incorporated into the *Plain Account*; see Treatises II, 187. The text goes on to consider at some length an eleventh proposition about whether or not Christian perfection is “instantaneous”; that section of the text is omitted here, but the issue is taken up below.

And I do not contend for the term sinless, though I do not object against it. Do we agree or differ here? If we differ, wherein?

(2) As to the manner. I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by faith, by a simple act of faith, consequently in an instant. But I believe in a gradual work both preceding and following that instant. Do we agree or differ here?

(3) As to the time. I believe this instant generally is the instant of death, the moment before the soul leaves the body. But I believe it may be ten, twenty, or forty years before. Do we agree or differ here?

I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within five years or five months after it. I know no conclusive argument to the contrary. Do you? If it must be many years after justification, I would be glad to know how many. Pretium quotus arroget annus? And how many days or months or even years can you allow to be between perfection and death? How far from justification must it be? And how near to death?

If it be possible, let you and I come to a good understanding, both for our own sakes and for the sake of the people.²⁸

The evidence of this letter shows John Wesley as being relatively clear in 1767 about what he understood the nature of Christian perfection to be: “the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man ruling all the tempers, words, and actions, the whole heart by the whole life.” He was also relatively clear about the manner of perfection: like justification and regeneration, entire sanctification or Christian perfection comes to one sola fide, by faith alone, consequently in an instant—but (paradoxically?) with a “gradual work” both preceding and following that instant. But he does here express some uncertainty about the timing of perfection. How many years must pass between justification and perfection? Since Chris-

Christian perfection comes through faith, it could come at any moment in a person’s life, and Wesley wants to encourage people to be constantly seeking, hoping, longing, and praying for that moment to come. But generally, he says here, most people don’t actually experience this until the moment just before death occurs—seeming to echo the position of his brother Charles on this issue.  

There is no surviving evidence that Charles Wesley ever replied to John’s letter. In fact, the brothers never did come to a complete agreement about these issues. In February 1767 John wrote to Charles about their differing views on sanctification and perfection:

The voice of one who truly love God surely is—“’Tis worse than death my God to love / And not my God alone.” Such a one is certainly “as much athirst for sanctification as he once was for justification.” You remember this used to be one of your constant questions. It is not now. Therefore you are altered in your sentiments. And unless we come to an explanation, we shall inevitably contradict each other. But this ought not to be in any wise, if it can possibly be avoided.

Then June 1768 John again wrote to Charles about perfection:

I think it is high time that you and I at least should come to a point. Shall we go on in asserting perfection against all the world? Or shall we quietly let it drop? We really must do one or the other; and, I apprehend, the sooner the better. What shall we jointly and explicitly maintain (and recommend to all our preachers) concerning the nature, the time (now or by-and-by), and the manner of it (instantaneous or not)? I am weary of intestine war, of preachers quoting one of us against the other. At length let us fix something for good and all; either the same as formerly or different from it.

Finally in March 1772 John wrote once again to Charles about the matter:

I find almost all our preachers in every circuit have done with Christian perfection. They say they believe it; but they never

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29 For somewhat different but I believe compatible discussions of Wesley’s changing views, see D. Marselle Moore, “Development in Wesley’s Thought on Sanctification and Perfection,” Wesleyan Theological Journal 20/2 (1988): 29-53; McEwan,138-41; and Maddox, Responsible Grace, 176-90.

30 Letter from John Wesley to Charles Wesley, 12 February 1767, Letters, 5:40-41.

31 Letter from John Wesley to Charles Wesley, 14 June 1768, Letters, 5:93.
preach it, or not once a quarter. What is to be done? Shall we let it drop, or make a point of it?\textsuperscript{32}

I have found no evidence of any reply from Charles Wesley to brother John’s letters.\textsuperscript{33} John Wesley was not willing to “let it drop” and continued to advocate the possibility of Christian perfection, but one lasting result of the controversy was his more careful distinction after the 1760s between “outward sin” and “inward sin” and his greater emphasis on the point that “sin may remain but does not reign” in believers.\textsuperscript{34} A second result was greater emphasis on the themes of “having the mind that was in Christ” and “walking as Christ walked” as being the essence of Christian perfection, as in this letter from 1769 to an (unknown) “Irish Lady”:

By Christian Perfection I mean (1) loving God with all our heart. Do you object to this? I mean (2) an heart and life all devoted to God. Do you desire less? I mean (3) regaining the whole image of God. What objection to this? I mean (4) having all the mind that was in Christ. Is this going too far? I mean (5) walking uniformly as Christ walked. And this surely no Christian will object to. If any one means anything more or anything else by perfection, I have no concern with it.\textsuperscript{35}

And a third result of the “perfectionist controversy” was the virtual disappearance after about 1770 of the language of “sinless perfection” and its replacement by the language of love filling the soul and “expelling” sin.\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{34} In this regard see in particular his important sermons “On Sin in Believers” (1763), \textit{Sermons}, 1:314-34, “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765), \textit{Sermons}, 2:153-69, and “The Repentance of Believers” (1767), \textit{Sermons}, 1:335-52.

\textsuperscript{35} Letter from John Wesley to “an Irish Lady,” 27 June 1769, \textit{Letters}, 5:141.

\textsuperscript{36} See, for example, the letter from John Wesley to Walter Churchey, 21 February 1771, \textit{Letters}, 5:223: “Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is neither more nor less than pure love—love expelling sin and governing both the heart and the life of a child of God. The Refiner’s fire purges out all that is contrary to love. . . ."
Translating “Perfection”

John Wesley once famously characterized the doctrine of Christian perfection as “the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists.”

He first expressed the idea of Christian perfection through his preaching in the sermon “The Circumcision of the Heart,” which was originally written in 1733 though not published until 1748. In 1741 he published his sermon entitled “Christian Perfection.” In 1785 he published “On Perfection,” his last sermon focused on the doctrine. The idea appears in numerous other sermons across more than 50 years. Across these five decades, two scriptural texts are dominant in Wesley’s preaching on this theme: Matthew 5:48 (eighteen times between 1740 and 1785) and Hebrews 6:1 (fifty times between 1739 and 1785). Some consideration of the translation traditions of these two texts in several languages will help to demonstrate the difficulties caused for the Methodists of Wesley’s day, and also for modern Christians, by the use of the words “perfect” and “perfection” in Wesley’s preaching. The following chart shows the English translation of these key verses in the King James Version of the Bible (1611) compared to the Latin of the Vulgate and the Greek Textus Receptus.

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38 Sermon 17 “The Circumcision of the Heart” (1733/1748), Sermons, 1:398-414.
41 These statistics come from Albert C. Outler’s introductory comments to Sermon 76, “On Perfection” Sermons, 3:70. See also “Register of John Wesley’s Preaching Texts,” compiled and annotated by Wanda Willard Smith, online at the Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, https://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/research-resources/register (accessed 1 June 2015). The records in this register indicate the importance of Heb. 6:1 to the elderly Wesley: in the last three years of his life, he preached on this text a total of thirty-three times—eleven times in 1788, ten times in 1789, and twelve times in 1790. In all, the sermon register records 100 sermons on Heb. 6:1. In addition, he preached on Matt. 5:48 five times in 1788, and once in 1789. Curiously, while he had published his sermon “Christian Perfection” in 1741 on Phil. 3:12 (see Sermons, 2:97–124), the sermon register contains no record of Wesley ever preaching on Phil. 3:12 and only one record of his use of Phil. 3:15; see the note on p. 265 (1744) and the entry on p. 298 (1783).
Matthew 5:48
(KJV) Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.42
(Latin) estote ergo vos perfecti sicut et Pater vester caelestis perfectus est.
(Greek) esesthe oun humeis teleioi, hōsper ho patēr humōn ho en tois ouranois teleios estin.

Hebrews 6:1
(KJV) Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection.
(Latin) quapropter intermittentes inchoationis Christi sermonem ad perfectionem feramur.
(Greek) Dio, aphentes ton tēs archēs tou Christou logon, epi tēn teleiotēta pherōmetha.

In the Greek of the New Testament, the words translated into Latin as perfectus (and related forms) and into English as perfect and perfection are forms of teleios and teleiōsis. Both come from the Greek root telos, which has the basic meaning of end, goal, objective, destination, or purpose. Depending on the particular context of their use, both terms can also carry the sense of completion, fulfillment, consummation, accomplishment, wholeness, or maturity. Jeffrey S. Lamp provides this helpful analysis in his article on “Perfection” in The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible:

In the NT, teleiotēs and its cognates convey several senses. Matthew 5:48 uniquely in the NT refers to God as perfect—and, then, identifies God’s perfection as the standard for Jesus’ followers. This exhortation is not to some abstraction of perfection, but is rather tied concretely to the exercise of love (Matt 5:43-47). Similarly, Col 3:14 identifies love as the bond of perfection, and 1 John collocates love and perfection in contexts of obedience (2:5), love between believers (4:12), eschatological

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42 It is interesting to note that John Wesley’s own translation of Matt. 5:48 is “Therefore ye shall be perfect; as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.” This converts the imperative command of the KVJ (“be ye therefore perfect”) into a “covered promise” (“ye shall be perfect”). See his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, 3rd corrected edition (Bristol: Graham and Pine, 1760–62; reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981). Hereafter NT Notes. Cf. Sermon 25, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, 5” (1748), §II.3, Sermons, 1:554-55: “every command in Holy Writ is only a covered promise.”
confident (4:17), and vanquished fear (4:18). Related to this is the statement in Jas 3:2-12 that perfection is evidenced in those whose speech is without bitterness. Some theological traditions have summarized the biblical doctrine of perfection in the commands of Jesus to love God and neighbor completely (Mark 12:30-31).

Occasionally in the NT perfection language is used in a positional sense, indicating that believers, by virtue of their status as those redeemed by Christ, have reached a telic apex in human existence (1 Cor 2:6; Phil 3:15; Heb 5:14). In other texts, maturity is identified as the goal toward which believers are to strive (e.g., Eph 4:13; Col 1:28; 4:12; Heb 6:1; Jas 1:4).  

The Latin perfectus comes from the verb facere = “to make” or “to do” plus the prefix per = “completely” or “thoroughly.” In the root sense, then, something is “perfect” when it is “thoroughly done” or “completely made”—when it is finished. From this root meaning we get the English words factory (= a place where things are made) and manufacture (= the process of making something, literally by hand—manus + facere). From the same root meaning we also get the English theological terms justification (= being made or declared righteous) and sanctification (= being made holy). The Latin perfectio is defined as “the highest or most complete condition of a thing or attribute” which “indicates both a transcendence of mutation and a fulfillment of all potential or potency (potentia).”

The Greek teleiosis was translated into the Latin of the Vulgate as perfectus, and from there came into English as perfection. That is not a mistake: perfectus (Latin) or perfection (English) is an entirely good and appropriate translation of the Greek term teleiosis, at least in certain contexts. However, in other contexts, the Greek terms teleios / teleiosis can equally well be translated into English as whole / wholeness, complete / completion, or mature / maturity. Several recent versions of the Bible have

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44 Richard A. Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms, Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 221.
chosen to use some of these terms rather than *perfect* / *perfection* in translating Matt. 5:48 and/or Heb. 6:1. At the risk of creating an artificially sharp dichotomy between them, the differences of meaning and implication of the Latin *perfectus* and the Greek *teleiōsis* can be summarized as follows.

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<th><em>perfectus</em></th>
<th><em>teleiōsis</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>static state</td>
<td>dynamic process</td>
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<tr>
<td>finished action</td>
<td>ongoing development</td>
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<tr>
<td>passive/receptive</td>
<td>active/operative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past/present</td>
<td>present/future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flawless, unchangeable</td>
<td>improvable, amissible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fixed, unmovable</td>
<td>can change, increase or decrease</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It seems clear that Wesley himself understood “perfection” in the sense of the Greek *teleiōsis*—as “perfecting perfection,” as an ongoing process of growth and development in grace. Albert Outler called attention to this point as early as 1964, pointing to the lasting influence on Wesley, dating from his Oxford days, of writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Macarius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ephraem Syrus:

What fascinated him in these men was their description of “perfection” (*teleiōsis*) as the goal (*skopos*) of the Christian in this life. Their conception of perfection as a process rather than a state gave Wesley a spiritual vision quite different from the static perfectionism envisaged in Roman spiritual theology of the period and the equally status quietism of those Protestants and Catholics whom he deplored as “the mystic writers.”

Outler subsequently stressed the point, contrasting the implications of the key Latin and Greek terms:

The crucial term for Wesley was not *perfectus* but *teleiōsis*—a dynamic understanding of “perfecting” that had come to him from early and Eastern spirituality, such as Clement, Gregory of Nyssa, Macarius, Ephraem Syrus, et al. In this view, “perfection”

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45 See the Appendix (below) for comparative translations of Matt. 5:48 and Heb. 6:1.
may be “realized” in a given moment (always as a gift from God, received by trusting faith), yet never as a finished state.47

Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric, in his valuable study of Wesley, *Aquinas and Christian Perfection*, questions “the categorical validity of opposing an Eastern *teleiōsis* to a Western *perfectus*” that he sees going on in Outler’s argument.48 But as Outler elsewhere noted, Wesley himself somehow never quite managed to grasp the point that most people in his time, influenced as they were by the traditions of Latin Christianity, naturally understood the English term “perfection” in the sense of the Latin *perfectus*—as “perfected perfection,” as a final, finished, static, unchanging condition of completed growth:

Protestants, convinced of the *simul justus et peccator*—and used to translating *perfectio* as some sort of perfected perfection—were bound to see in the Wesleyan doctrine, despite all its formal disclaimers, a bald advertisement of spiritual pride and, implicitly, works-righteousness. Even the Methodists, working from their own unexamined Latin traditions of forensic righteousness, tended to interpret “perfection” in terms of a spiritual elitism—and so misunderstood Wesley and the early Eastern traditions of *teleiotēs* as a never ending aspiration for all of love’s fullness (perfecting perfection). Thus, “Christian Perfection” came to be the most distinctive and also the most widely misunderstood of all Wesley’s doctrines.49

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“Perfection” Reconsidered

These reflections and observations prompt an important question: Do we face a situation today in which, to quote the 1980s hit song of Gloria Estefan, “the words get in the way”? Has the term “perfection,” even when qualified by the adjective “Christian,” become such a “turn off” that it has become essentially dysfunctional in the life of the church today? We have evidence that John Wesley himself recognized that the word presented difficulties even in his own time, but that he resisted “laying aside” the expression. His sermon “Christian Perfection” (1740) is based on Phil 3:12, which he translates with the KJV as “Not as though I had already attained; either were already perfect \( \text{teteleiōmai} \).” In the introduction, Wesley says this:

There is scarce any expression in Holy Writ which has given more offence than this. The word ‘perfect’ is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them. And whosoever ‘preaches perfection’ (as the phrase is), i.e. asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man or a publican.

And hence some have advised, wholly to lay aside the use of those expressions, ‘because they have given so great offence’. But are they not found in the oracles of God? If so, by what authority can any messenger of God lay them aside, even though all men should be offended? We have not so learned Christ; neither may we thus give place to the devil. Whatsoever God hath spoken, that will we speak, whether men will hear or whether they will forbear: knowing that then alone can any minister of Christ be ‘pure from the blood of all men’, when he hath ‘not shunned to declare unto them all the counsel of God’.

We may not therefore lay these expressions aside, seeing they are the words of God, and not of man. But we may and ought to explain the meaning of them, that those who are sincere of heart may not err to the right hand or to the left from the mark of the prize of their high calling. And this is the more needful to be done because in the verse already repeated the Apostle speaks of himself as not perfect: ‘Not’, saith he, ‘as though I were already perfect.’ And yet immediately after, in the fifteenth verse, he speaks of himself, yea and many others, as perfect. ‘Let us’, saith he, ‘as many as be perfect, be thus minded.’\(^50\)

The problem is that the Greek words underlying the English “perfect” in both Phil. 3:12 [teteleiōmai] and Phil. 3:15 [teleioi], are forms of teleios. In his own Notes Upon the New Testament Wesley tries to deal with the problem posed by these Greek terms by commenting on Phil. 3:12 that “There is a difference between one that is perfect, and one that is perfected. The one is fitted for the race, ver. 15; the other, ready to receive the prize.” Phil. 3:15 in the KJV reads: “Let us therefore, as many as be perfect [teleioi], be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.” Wesley’s not entirely helpful notes on Phil. 3:15 characterize those who are “perfect” as being “strong in faith” while those who are “not perfect” are “weak in faith”:

Let us, as many as are perfect—Fit for the race, strong in faith; so it means here. Be thus minded—Apply wholly to this one thing. And if in anything ye—Who are not perfect, who are weak in faith. Be otherwise minded—Pursuing other things. God, if ye desire it, shall reveal even this unto you—Will convince you of it.

As is the case with Heb. 6:1, modern translations of these verses have largely moved away from rendering the Greek with versions of “perfect,” preferring instead to use the language of “completion” or “wholeness” or “maturity.” Consider the Common English Bible’s rendering of the whole passage Phil. 3:12-16, which is couched in developmental language about reaching a goal:

It’s not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don’t think I’ve reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus. So all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her. Only let’s live in a way that is consistent with whatever level we have reached.

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51 NT Notes, Phil. 3:12.
52 NT Notes, Phil. 3:15.
53 See the Appendix (below) for evidence of this movement in the translation of both Matt 5:48 and Heb. 6:1, especially the latter.
In his valuable study of *Wholeness in Christ: Toward a Biblical Theology of Holiness*, which thoroughly surveys the biblical basis of the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification, William M. Greathouse comments that “the most difficult term with which we must deal is the Greek term *teleios*, ‘perfect’:

In the broadest sense, *teleios* denotes something that has arrived at its *telos*, which has actualized its raison d’être. Biologically, *teleios* may thus be rendered “full-grown,” “mature,” or “adult.” Employing this metaphor, Paul admonished the Corinthians who were making a toy of glossolalia: “Do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults [*teleioi*]” (I Cor. 14:20).

Could we today not better express what John Wesley really meant by speaking about “Christian perfection” if we speak instead about “Christian wholeness” or “Christian maturity” or “Christian adulthood”? Randy Maddox has suggested something like this move in his discussion of Christian perfection in Wesley’s thought: “One of Wesley’s most characteristic descriptions of those who have attained Christian perfection was that they are now adult—or *mature*—Christians.” Scott Jones agrees that the best way to interpret Wesley’s thinking about Christian perfection is “to use the image of maturity.” And Stephen Rankin explores this trajectory in his recent book *Aiming at Maturity: The Goal of the Christian Life*, in which he provides what I find to be a profoundly sensible and pastoral reinterpretation of Wesley’s vision of Christian perfection without dwelling on the term:

. . . grown-up Christians keep growing. Spiritual maturity is never a static state. It is always a *maturing maturity*. We have the blessed privilege of going from strength to strength as long as we live. As long as we live we can eagerly look forward to new levels of growth.

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54 William M. Greathouse, *Wholeness in Christ: Toward a Biblical Theology of Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1998), 206. Greathouse has a note at the end of this paragraph saying that “John Wesley understood the ‘perfect’ to be the ‘adult’ children of God (Heb. 5:11-6:1) or ‘fathers’ in the faith (I John 2:12-14).”


Wesley himself regularly employs the analogy of physical birth with spiritual re-birth or “new birth” (regeneration). Just as the birth of a child is the beginning of natural life, just so the “new birth” of a Christian is the beginning of spiritual life. What follows in either case is a process of growth and development that moves toward maturity:

As in the natural birth a man is born at once, and then grows larger and stronger by degrees, so in the spiritual birth a man is born at once, then gradually increases in spiritual stature and strength. The new birth, therefore, is the first point of sanctification, which may increase more and more unto the perfect day.58

Wesley makes frequent use throughout his life of the language of 1 Cor. 3 and 1 John 2 about “babes in Christ” or “little children,” “young men,” and “fathers.”59 In his sermon “Christian Perfection” (1740) Wesley says that “there are several stages in Christian life as well as in natural: some of the children of God being but new-born babes, others having attained to more maturity,” then observes that “accordingly St. John, in his first Epistle, applies himself severally to those he terms little children, those he styles young men, and those whom he entitles fathers.”60 In his sermon “The Wilderness State” (1760) Wesley admonishes his preachers: “Convince them [the Methodist people] that the whole work of sanctification is not (as they imagined) wrought at once; that when they first believe they are but as new-born babes, who are gradually to grow up, and may expect many storms before they come to the full stature of Christ.”61 In his sermon “On Patience” (1783), he comments that “there is as great a difference in the spiritual as in the natural sense between fathers, young men, and babes.”62

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59 A particularly important example is found in the journal entry for 6 June 1738: see John Wesley, Journal and Diaries, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Vols. 18–24 in The Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988–2006), 1:254. Hereafter Journal and Diaries. The incident recounted here marks the beginning point of Wesley’s development of the notion of “degrees of faith” and thus “degrees of salvation.”

60 Sermon 40, “Christian Perfection” (1740), §II.1 Sermons, 2:105.


“What is Man?” (1788), he speaks of the spiritual riches of the Psalms, which have “richly supplied the wants, not only of ‘babes in Christ’ — of those who were just setting out in the ways of God — but of those also who had made good progress therein, yea, of such as were swiftly advancing toward ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’.”

Wesley also refers frequently to the distinction between milk as (spiritual) “baby food” and meat as food for fully grown adults that is found in (e.g.) 1 Cor. 3, Heb. 5, and 1 Pet. 2. In commenting on Heb. 5:12-14, Wesley distinguishes the “babes in Christ,” those “who desire and can digest nothing but the doctrine of justification and imputed righteousness,” from those of “full age,” who embrace the “sublimer truths relating to ‘perfection’” and who exhibit “spiritual understanding, arising from maturity of spiritual age.”

He characterizes the “milk of the word” in 1 Peter 2:2 as “that word of God which nourishes the soul as milk does the body” and which enables one to grow “unto the full stature of Christ.” In the sermon “Salvation by Faith” (1738) he combines the two sets of images involving the growth and development of Christians:

He who is thus justified or saved by faith is indeed ‘born again’. He is ‘born again of the Spirit’ unto a new ‘life which is hid with Christ in God’. And as a ‘newborn babe he gladly receives the adolon, the sincere milk of the word, and grows thereby’ [1 Pet. 2:2]; ‘going on in the might of the Lord his God’, ‘from faith to faith’, ‘from grace to grace’, ‘until at length he comes unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ [Eph. 4:13].

The process of a Christian’s growth and development in grace, or spiritual maturation, is what Wesley calls sanctification. The goal toward

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64 NT Notes, Heb. 5:12-14.

65 NT Notes, 1 Peter 2:1-2.

which that process moves he calls *entire* sanctification, which is a synonym for Christian perfection. He put it this way in a letter to Joseph Benson:

> A babe in Christ (of whom I know thousands) has the witness sometimes. A young man (in St. John’s sense) has it continually. I believe one that is perfected in love, or filled with the Holy Ghost, may be properly termed a father. This we must press both babes and young men to aspire after—yea, to expect. And why not now? I wish you would give another reading to the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.\(^{67}\)

He said much the same thing in a letter to John Fletcher:

> It is certain every babe in Christ has received the Holy Ghost, and the Spirit witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God. But he has not obtained Christian perfection. Perhaps you have not considered St. John’s threefold distinction of Christian believers: little children, young men, and fathers. All of these had received the Holy Ghost; but only the fathers were perfected in love.\(^{68}\)

When Wesley speaks about Christian perfection, then, he is really painting a picture of what he thinks a fully grown-up, adult, mature Christian would look like. As Randy Maddox has succinctly put it, “For Wesley, then, Christian perfection was that dynamic level of maturity within the process of sanctification characteristic of ‘adult’ Christian life.”\(^{69}\) In his sermon “On Patience” Wesley is quite clear about the developmental nature of the process of sanctification:

> Love is the sum of sanctification; it is the one *kind* of holiness which is found, only in various *degrees*, in the believers who are distinguished by St. John into ‘little children, young men, and fathers’. The difference between one and the other properly lies in the degree of love. . . . The faith of a babe in Christ is weak, generally mingled with doubts or fears. . . . In the same proportion as he grows in faith, he grows in holiness: he increases in love, lowliness, meekness, in every part of the image of God; till it pleases God, after he is thoroughly convinced of inbred sin, of the total corruption of his nature, to take it all away, to purify his heart and cleanse him from all unrighteousness. . . .\(^{70}\)

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\(^{68}\) Letter to John Fletcher (Mar. 22, 1775), *Letters*, 6:146.

\(^{69}\) Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 187.

\(^{70}\) Sermon 83, On Patience” (1783), *Sermons*, 3:175.
Christian perfection for Wesley thus involves what might be considered to be a kind of developing sainthood. The point is helpfully articulated in Gordon T. Smith’s valuable volume, *Called to be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*:

The animating and empowering call to transformation in Christ is a call to mature in faith, hope and love—to be “perfect” in Christ. And yet many recoil from such talk largely because they have seen the downside of perfectionism. The fear of perfectionism has even led some New Testament translators to avoid the use of the word *perfect* to translate *telos* (see, for example, the New International Version and New Revised Standard Version translations of Colossians 1:28).

This avoidance is perhaps an overreaction, but we still need to be clear about what we do and do not mean by use of the word *perfect*. Perfectionism is deadly, whereas the call to full maturity in Christ is animating (that it, it enlivens us).  

Recent scholarship has suggested similarities between Wesley’s notion of Christian perfection and the concept of *theosis* of the Eastern Orthodox Church, with its implications of a constantly on-going process. Understood literally, *theosis* means divinization, deification, or making divine. It is the process through which a believer puts into practice the spiritual teachings of Jesus Christ and His gospel and is gradually transformed thereby, as the believer comes to participate more and more fully in the life of God. In particular, *theosis* refers to the attainment of

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71 Gordon T. Smith, *Called to be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014). While Smith is not a Wesleyan—he is an ordained ministry with the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and currently serves as President and Professor of Systematic and Spiritual Theology at Ambrose University in Calgary, Alberta—there seem to me to be important points of contact between his thought and the Wesleyan theological tradition. See the appendix (below) for examples of the translation of key NT texts that use various forms of *telos* with terms other than *perfect*.

72 Let me be clear that am not here making an argument for the “genetic dependence” of Wesley’s notion of Christian perfection upon the Orthodox concept of *theosis*, but only noting certain similarities between them. The “genetic dependence” argument, which is often attributed to Albert Outler, has aptly been challenged in the work of (among others) Ken Collins and Edgardo Colón-Emeric.

73 It is worth recalling the importance to Wesley in his Oxford days of the classic little devotional book by the Scottish divine Henry Scougal titled *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, which expresses the essence of this image in a powerful and persuasive way.
likeness to God, or union with God, that is the final stage of this process of transformation and is as such the goal of the spiritual life. However, the “union” with God envisioned by theosis is never human participation in the divine substance, in the very being of God—that would be apotheosis, or actually becoming God, and such a claim would certainly be heretical! Instead, theosis involves participation in the divine energies of God, which are present to the believer in and through the Church and its sacraments and mysteries. The process is necessarily incomplete in this earthly life; it can only be fully consummated through the resurrection of the believer, when the power of sin and death, having been fully overcome by the atonement of Jesus, will lose hold over the believer forever.74

Wesley’s position is similar: the Christian in this earthly life really never is perfected, but is always being perfected. D. Stephen Long succinctly expresses the point: “Our sins are the lack of what God possesses in full. . . . our perfection does not depend on us securing our own perfection by our own resources, but on our participating in God’s perfections.”75 In Wesley’s view, the “perfect” Christian never completely attains the fully restored image of God while living in this human life; such a perfected perfection is an eschatological reality that Wesley reserves for heaven, after the advent of the “new creation.”

Matthew Schlimm points out that in Wesley’s view even those who have obtained Christian perfection continue to grow in grace because “perfection is a dynamic state that builds upon past progress and results in becoming increasingly like God.”76 Ken Collins agrees, writing that

Wesley rejected the idea of a static perfection that would not admit of a continual increase and advance as one improves the rich grace of God. Thus, there is no place in Wesley’s theology for the notion that “one has arrived,” spiritually speaking. . . . Christian perfection, so understood, is not static but dynamic, and it bespeaks the richest measures of holy love.\(^{77}\)

In this life, in this world, Wesley’s “perfect” Christians in fact become increasingly aware of their physical, moral, psychological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual weaknesses and imperfections, and thus increasingly conscious of their total dependence upon God’s grace and mercy. As T. A. Noble has helpfully put it,

Wesley constantly struggles, particularly in his later years, to clarify what he meant by this “imperfect perfection” and explains it in terms of two linked areas of imperfection. First there is our physical constitution as fallen creatures, and second there is our consequent liability to involuntary or unintentional transgressions and to faults of character so long as we live in the body. The consequence of this continuing fallen condition and continuing involuntary transgressions is that we are always dependent on forgiveness through the atonement of Christ.\(^{78}\)

It is important to note that for all the stress placed upon it in his preaching and writings, John Wesley himself never claimed to have personally experienced what he described as Christian perfection, habitually using Phil. 3:12 as a kind of disclaimer: “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect [KJV].”\(^{79}\) Of more modern translations, the NABRE seems to best capture the sense of Wesley’s characteristic use of this passage: “It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity [teteleiōmai], but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus].”

For Wesley, in the end, Christian perfection (or real Christian maturity) “is nothing higher and nothing lower than this: the pure love of God and man—the loving God with all our heart and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. It is love governing the heart and life, running through all our

\(^{77}\) Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 300.

\(^{78}\) Noble, Holy Trinity: Holy People, 91.

tempers, words, and actions." In Wesley’s view, “Pure love reigning alone in the heart and life … is the whole of scriptural perfection.” As John Tyson has said,

John Wesley persistently defined Christian perfection in terms of loving God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength, and loving one’s neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:37-39). This purity of intention is a consistent Christian maturity (“perfection,” or “wholeness”), which fulfills God’s law through love and does not willfully violate a known law of God. Intentional sin ceases to dominate and determine our lives as we are being filled and transformed by God’s love.

Ted Runyon beautifully captures the point of this powerful Wesleyan language:

The best starting point for reinterpreting and reappropriating Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection . . . is the perfection of God’s love as we receive it from Christ through the Holy Spirit. But in rethinking this doctrine it is important to focus first of all not on our own perfection but on the perfection of that which we receive. God’s love is perfect … We receive and participate in perfect love.

Although his reading of Wesley’s soteriology differs in some important respects from that of Runyon, Ken Collins agrees that in the final analysis “Christian perfection . . . is another term for holy love.” Edgardo Cólon-Emeric puts it this way:

To be perfect here below [i.e., in this life] is to be made perfect in love. The identification of Christian perfection with perfect love is a persistent and consistent theme in Wesley’s theology. Perfection in love is a fitting end [i.e., telos, goal] for humans in the condition of grace, for such perfection entails participation in the very nature of the God who is love.

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80 A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, in Works (Jackson) 11:397.
81 A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, in Works (Jackson) 11:401.
82 Tyson, The Way of the Wesleys, 103.
84 Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 302.
85 Colón-Emeric, Wesley, Aquinas and Christian Perfection, 30.
Perhaps if Christians focus less on their own efforts to become “perfect” and seek to open themselves more fully to being filled by God’s presence and grace, with God’s perfect (whole, complete) love, they can grow toward greater maturity as Christians. Steve Manskar ably summarizes this conviction: “Christian perfection is the work of divine grace that, through faith in Jesus Christ, restores the human soul, damaged by sin, to wholeness and helps babes in Christ grow up to maturity in faith and love.”

Perhaps if we reframe John Wesley’s teaching about Christian perfection in terms of growth in grace toward real Christian “adulthood,” or maturity, we can reclaim his notion of “holiness of heart and life” in a way that is more useful for our people and our churches and our world today. As Runyon put it,

We are called not just to receive but to reflect this perfect love into the world, to share it with our fellow creatures—and to share it perfectly, that is, to share it in such a way that it can be received and appropriate by others as a love whose source is God. . . .

Our sanctifying is linked to and directed toward the sanctifying of the world, and as such is an ever-beckoning, never-finished project, even though the love we redirect is complete as it comes from the divine source.

In commenting on the questions noted at the beginning of this article, the questions that are put to all ordination candidates in The United Methodist Church, Scott Jones (now himself one of the bishops who asks those questions) comments that the last question could be phrased in contemporary language as “Are you earnestly trying to grow up?” and observes that in the Wesleyan understanding, “the goal of human life is to allow God’s grace to shape us into the kind of mature human beings God intended us to be.” Steve Manskar agrees: “Christian perfection is nothing more, or less, than growing up in love and becoming a whole, complete human being made in the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.”

**Teaching and Translation**

Relatively few people in the second decade of the twenty-first century, even if they are well-educated native English speakers, can easily

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read and understand these opening lines of the original text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a late 14th-century Middle English chivalric romance:

*SIPEN þe sege and þe assayt watz sesed at Troye,
þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondeȝ and askez,
þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt
Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe:
Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde,
Pat siȝen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicome
Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles.*

The English language has changed through time, and the original Middle English text now obviously needs to be translated for the modern reader:

*After the siege and the assault of Troy,
when that burg was destroyed and burnt to ashes,
and the traitor tried for his treason,
the noble Æneas and his kin
sailed forth to become princes and patrons
of well-nigh all the Western Isles.*

Even more obvious is the need of translation for the modern reader of texts from the past not originally written in English—such as the Bible. The scholarly literature concerning Bible translations and translation theory is enormous and can here only be acknowledged in passing. But as my friend and colleague Steven J. Kraftchick has observed:

*Translation is always interpretation, and so is preaching. In their sermons, preachers “translate” biblical texts for contemporary congregations, but they (or their sources) have already

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translated the sermon text from a biblical language into a contemporary idiom. Each of these steps is inevitably fraught with ambiguity—of which the good preacher must always be aware.  

The familiar Italian aphorism “Traduttore, traditore,” usually translated into English as “Translator, traitor,” or alternatively as “to translate is to betray,” makes the point that all translation involves distortion—or “betrayal”—of the original. (The phrase also provides a good example of exactly what it describes: even though the meaning comes through in English, the pun based on the close similarity between the Italian words is lost.) Translations from a source language may reveal meaning to a reader of the target language, but at the same time will also inevitably conceal meaning. But translations of the Middle English texts like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—or of the Bible—are necessary if modern readers are to understand anything of their meaning.

Do the writings of John Wesley also need translation for modern readers? Has the language of Wesley’s eighteenth-century English receded far enough from twenty-first century readers to render his meaning unclear or indistinct? Some would answer these questions affirmatively. In 2002–2003, Abingdon Press published a three-volume set of John Wesley’s “Standard Sermons in Modern English” by Kenneth C. Kinghorn, who at the time was Professor of Church History and Historical Theology and Vice President-at-Large at Asbury Theological Seminary.  

This is the publisher’s description of the project in first volume:

How many times have you heard people say “everyone should read Wesley” or maybe you’ve thought about reading the Standard Sermons but couldn’t get past the original language? This volume contains the first twenty sermons, in which Wesley deals with theology, in modern English, making this volume appropriate for individual and small group study.

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A review of the first volume of this series posted on the publisher’s website praises Kinghorn’s efforts in these terms:

The sermons . . . are faithful to the originals while avoiding the awkwardness of Wesley’s 18th century English. Where Wesley used the King James version of the Bible most quotations from Scripture are now taken from the NRSV. Hebrew, Greek and Latin quotations are translated into modern English. Words that have fallen out of use over the past 250 years or whose meanings have changed with time are updated. Kinghorn also corrects much of Wesley’s sometimes awkward sentence structure thus making for a very readable transcription of the Standard Sermons. This volume goes a long way toward making Wesley’s sermons accessible to modern readers.96

More recently a British scholar, James Hargreaves, has undertaken a similar project: Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons In Today's English. Based on the conviction that “the English language has changed and evolved to the point that his [Wesley’s] works can no longer be as easily read and understood in their original dialect,” translation into contemporary English is necessary “to preserve Wesley’s message, and to make it come to life for a new generation.” This includes the use of gender-inclusive language to escape Wesley’s “archaic” use of the word “he” to indicate “everyone.” The word “humanity” is preferred over “mankind,” as the latter “now carries with it gender implications which were not present in Wesley’s time.”97

These publishing projects indicate the clear perception by the authors and publishers involved of a need for “updating” and “modernizing” the original language of Wesley’s sermons. Whatever one may think of such translation projects—and as a historical theologian, I must confess my serious reservations about them—they betray a concern by those involved about communicating the essential theological content of Wesley’s message to modern readers. I share that concern, and every time I teach a class on Wesleyan theology, I am also engaged in the activity of translation. Teachers are translators, unavoidably so, every bit as much as preachers.

Sometimes the translation activity involved in my teaching is relatively simple and uncomplicated. An example would be pointing out to my students that when they see the word “want” in John Wesley’s writings, or Charles Wesley’s hymns, they should generally read that word as meaning “lack” or “need” rather than “desire.” When Wesley instructed his preachers to “go always, not only to those that want you, but to those that want you most,” he was not telling them to go to those who liked them most and who most desired their presence, but to those who most needed their ministry and their message.98

Sometimes the translation activity involved in my teaching is more subtle and complicated. This article is an example. When I try to help students to understand the meaning of Wesley’s language about Christian perfection, I am inevitably engaged in a sort of translation project. And if it is true that “Traduttore, traditore,” then it is my responsibility as a teacher to be as conscious and perceptive as possible about the consequences and implications of my translation activity.

Retranslating “Christian Perfection”

I am suggesting here that we today might better express what John Wesley really meant by speaking about “Christian perfection” if we reinterpret—or retranslate—the concept, by speaking instead about “Christian maturity” or “Christian adulthood.”99 The latter expressions certainly seem to resonate with my students far more naturally and easily than does Wesley’s original language about “Christian perfection,” however qualified or glossed. But if such a conceptual retranslation inevitably both reveals meaning and conceals meaning, what dimensions of Wesley’s concept of “Christian perfection” are concealed or obscured by its translation as “Christian maturity”? The image of “Christian maturity” is inevitably tied to the paradigm of human growth and development, from infancy to childhood to adolescence to full adulthood. But that paradigm has several problems when transposed into a theological key. One problem is that human growth and


99 Let me be clear that I am not proposing alteration of the text of Wesley’s writings along the lines of the projects by Kinghorn and Hargreaves mentioned above. My suggestion involves conceptual retranslation, not textual revision.
development is something that happens naturally, indeed inevitably, unless the process is interrupted by malnutrition or disease or premature death. The spiritual maturation of any individual, at least in Wesleyan thought, requires active and conscious and intentional human response to and cooperation with divine grace, and is not something that just “happens naturally.”

A second problem is that the paradigm of human growth and development does not stop with full adulthood; it continues in an arc from full adulthood through stages of decline during old age to the inevitable point of death. The parallel between natural, physical life and spiritual life again breaks down when pressed to its limits in this way; Wesley, at least, is convinced that spiritual life does not enter a downward spiral from the point of “Christian maturity” but instead proceeds “from glory to glory.” Recall Wesley’s words from his “Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection”: “I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by faith, by a simple act of faith; consequently in an instant. But I believe in a gradual work, both preceding and following that instant.”

That quotation also indicates a third problem with retranslating Wesley’s conception of “Christian perfection” as “Christian maturity”—namely, obscuring the relationship in his thought between the gradual process of sanctification (which for him entailed growth and development in grace) and the transforming moment of entire sanctification (which for him was a precise synonym for Christian perfection). Ken Collins has been particularly eloquent about the importance of maintaining both the distinction and the relationship between the process and the moment—between the progressive development and the instantaneous transformation—which he quite correctly maintains is an important conjunction in Wesley’s own thought:

. . . if perfection itself is subsumed under a progressive paradigm, if it is ever a flying goal, as Outler put it, always moving, then it is never actualized or realized in the warp and woof of life. . . . those who emphasize the processive nature of the order of salvation to the virtual exclusion of the instantaneous aspect will fail to see that entire sanctification is a whole work, an entire work, as the name suggests, a whole-ness and entirety that can only be lost in a nearly exclusive emphasis on process and Christian nurture along the way. The genius of Wesley as a practical theologian, then, is that he held both these elements

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100 Wesley, “Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection,” *Treatises II*, 199.
together, process and realization, a gradual element and an instantaneous one, in a subtle and well-crafted tension. Yes, there will be continual growth in grace, even after the grace of Christian perfection has been realized. But it will be a pure heart that continues to grow in the favor of God. The completeness of this work, therefore, need not be denied in the name of nurture.\textsuperscript{101}

Giving full credit to the force and the importance of the argument that Collins states here, it leaves us with the difficulty of understanding how Christian perfection (or entire sanctification) can be instantiated in a moment, how it can be realized at a certain point in time, and yet remain so “imperfect” as to both allow and require, in Wesley’s words, “a gradual work both preceding and following that instant.” Here we again see the problem of how Wesley’s vision of a perfecting perfection (based on the Greek teleiōsis) collides with the notion of a perfected perfection (based on the Latin perfectus).

In Wesley’s view, as Collins is I think saying, the moment (or event) of Christian perfection (or entire sanctification) punctuates but does not terminate the process of growth in grace and development in love of God and neighbor that both leads up to that moment and flows from it. In a similar way, one could speak of the way in which the moment (or event) of full maturity or adulthood punctuates but does not terminate the process of human growth and development within which it occurs. But this way of thinking has problems, as Jason Vickers has noted:

. . . as to the logic-chopping insistence that there must nevertheless be a moment at which a person is entirely sanctified, we might note that this is like saying that there is some moment at which a person ceases to be an adolescent and becomes a grown man or woman. There are rites of passage and other indicators, to be sure, but where is the line exactly that marks off adolescence from adulthood? Better yet, it is like saying that there is some moment at which two persons love one another maximally. To the degree that sanctification has to do with love, logic breaks down entirely the moment we notice that love is not the sort of thing that has a ceiling or some other limit. It is not like, say, a sauce pan that can hold so much and no more. Thus people often say that they know the moment at which they fell in love. Yet, when probed, they will sometimes say that there were subsequent moments at which

\textsuperscript{101} Collins, \textit{The Theology of John Wesley}, 295; cf. 279-312. See also Collins, \textit{The Scripture Way of Salvation}, 177-80.
they fell in love with one another in ways they did not previously know existed.
Suffice it so say that, if there are often unsounded depths in the love that exists
between individuals, then surely this is infinitely multiplied when we are dealing with
the love that exists between human individuals and God.102

As Vickers suggests here, it is difficult if not impossible to identify with clarity and
precision the exact moment comes in which any person comes to full maturity as a human
being. We know that no two human beings mature in exactly the same way, or on the same
schedule, or to the same degree; that girls usually come to maturity at an earlier age than
boys; and that the physical, intellectual, emotional, and sexual maturity of any individual
typically do not occur simultaneously or coincide with that of other individuals. Part of what
this demonstrates is the fact that the analogy between the physical process of human growth
and development leading to the telos of full human maturity, and the spiritual process of
sanctification leading to the telos of Christian perfection (or entire sanctification), breaks
down at a certain point. So will any other analogy or metaphor if pressed far enough or hard
enough. Still, with its limits, this particular analogy is useful in facilitating an understanding
of Wesley’s struggle to express the fundamental point of the New Testament emphasis on
teleiōsis within the limitations and implications of the English language about “perfection”
deriving from the Latin perfectus.

Affirmation of the possibility of a moment of entire sanctification (or instantaneous
Christian perfection) may have been the most distinctive element of Wesley’s theology, but
the conception of sanctification (taken as a whole) as “a progressive journey in responsive
cooperation with God’s empowering grace” was the most characteristic dimension of
Wesley’s theology.103 It is just for that reason that my students seem to find it helpful to
retranslate Wesley’s language about Christian perfection into the language of “Christian
maturity” or “Christian wholeness.”

The language of “perfection” has, in most modern ears, an overtone of finality, a
suggestion of flawlessness, and an implication of being finished and done and through, that is
not present in the same way in the language of “maturity” or “adulthood.” The Oxford
English Dictionary

International, 2009), 103.
103 Maddox, Responsible Grace, 190.
The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) indicates that the “usual sense” of the word “perfection” is “the condition, state, or quality of being free from defect; flawlessness, faultlessness; purity; also in weakened sense: supreme or comparative excellence.”¹⁰⁴ Webster’s New World College Dictionary defines “perfection” as “the quality or state of being perfect or complete, so that nothing requisite is wanting; entire development; consummate culture, skill, or moral excellence; the highest attainable state or degree of excellence; maturity; as, perfection in an art, in a science, or in a system; perfection in form or degree; fruits in perfection.”¹⁰⁵ The American Heritage Dictionary gives the following among its definitions of “perfect” and “perfection”:¹⁰⁶

**Perfect** (adj.) (1) Lacking nothing essential to the whole; complete of its nature or kind. (2) Being without defect or blemish: a perfect specimen. (3) Thoroughly skilled or talented in a certain field or area; proficient. (4) Completely suited for a particular purpose or situation.

**Perfection** (n.) (1) The quality or condition of being perfect. (2) The act or process of perfecting: Perfection of the invention took years. (3) A person or thing considered to be perfect. (4) An instance of excellence.

The sense of “perfect” or “perfection” as having anything to do with spirituality or the religious life, though it continues to be present in the dictionaries, has largely disappeared from ordinary, everyday English usage. When “perfection” is used with reference to religious life, the implication is all too often negative, as in this recent Internet “blog” post on “The Perils of Worshiping a Perfectionist God”:

As a child, I felt guilt constantly. I felt constantly bombarded with my failures and shortcomings, despite the fact that I acted like the new intellectual savior. I was and always have been a perfectionist. With each flaw and error in my life and choices, I saw these as direct representations of my immortal soul, and I

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thought that I as a person was inherently flawed and would do nothing but fail.

Unfortunately, the Bible backed me up.

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” as Jesus said in Matthew 5:48. The Sermon on the Mount felt like basic tenets, but right there he demanded perfection. I wanted to make Jesus happy, so my standard for “good enough” became “Godly perfection.” Once I read those words, my guilt spiraled out of control. I felt guilt for things I had done, but also things I hadn’t done. I just wanted to make Jesus proud and I was making myself miserable.

Of course, the Bible has messages about inherent self-worth, but those aren’t the messages that I heard. Those weren’t the messages that rang in my ears when I couldn’t sleep. I’d lie awake thinking, “Why would God waste his time on me? I’m completely evil and everything I do inadvertently dishonors him.”

Such an understanding of “perfection,” with its implications, is altogether too prevalent in today’s world, and has nothing to do with what John Wesley meant when he spoke of “Christian perfection.” For this reason, it seems worthwhile to attempt retranslation of the Wesleyan concept into the language of adulthood, or wholeness, or completion, or perhaps best, maturity. Christians may be regarded as mature by the degree to which they exhibit what Wesley described as “the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man ruling all the tempers, words, and actions, the whole heart by the whole life.”

By that measure, even fully mature Christians, those who could be described as “saints,” aren’t really “perfect” in the ordinary sense of the term, but continue to grow in grace as they are more completely filled with and transformed by the energy of divine love. Wesley himself put it this way in one of the most beautifully and powerfully poetic images in all of his writings: “What is the most perfect creature in heaven or earth in thy presence but a void, capable of being filled with thee and by thee?”

109 A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, in Works (Jackson) 11:440.
Appendix: Comparative Translations of Matthew 5:48 and Hebrews 6:1

The comparative translations provided here show the decisions made by various translators as to how best to render the Greek terms teleioi / teleios of Matthew 5:48 and teleiotēta of Hebrews 6:1 into the Latin of the Vulgate and into five modern languages: English, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. English is technically classified as a Germanic language, but the influence of Latin on English is so pervasive, particularly in the technical vocabulary of philosophy and theology, that it bears strong kinship with the major modern Romance languages that developed directly from Latin. The weight of opinion in the five modern languages represented here has been to use a form of “perfect” in the various languages in translating Matthew 5:48, but since about 1970 to use a form of “wholeness,” “completion,” or “maturity” in translating Hebrews 6:1. The first English version to prefer “maturity” in Hebrews 6:1 appears to have been the Revised Standard Version (1952), followed by the New American Standard Version (1963). All of the more contemporary English translations surveyed use “maturity” or “completion” in translating Hebrews 6:1. Both the Bible in Basic English (2011) and the Common English Bible (2011) also use “complete” in translating Matthew 5:48.

Matthew 5:48

Greek, Textus Receptus: esesthe oun humeis teleioi, hōsper ho patēr humōn ho en tois ouranois teleios estin.

Latin, Vulgate: estote ergo vos perfecti sicut et Pater vester caelestis perfectus est.

“Classic” English Translations:

King James Version (1611): Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. The Revised Standard Version (1952) is very similar: You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. The New Revised Standard Version (1989) continues the tradition: Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

American Standard Version (1901): Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. The New American Standard Version (1963) is similar: Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
“Classic” Romance Language Translations:

French, Ostervald (1744): Soyez donc parfaits, comme votre Père qui est dans les cieux est parfait. Louis Segond (1927) and La Nouvelle Edition de Genève 1979) are very similar, also using parfaits and parfait.

Italian, Giovanni Diodati Bible (1649): Voi adunque siate perfetti, come è perfetto il Padre vostro, che è ne’ cieli. Nuova Riveduta Bible (1927) is very similar, also using perfetti and perfetto.


Portuguese, João Ferreira de Almeida Atualizada (1681): Sede vós, pois, perfeitos, como é perfeito o vosso Pai celestial. Almeida Revista e Atualizada (1959) is very similar, also using perfeitos / perfeito.

Contemporary English Translations:


New International Version (1973): Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

New Jerusalem Bible (1985): You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Contemporary English Version (1995): But you must always act like your Father in heaven. [The actual terms disappear here, but the meaning is the much the same as if “perfect” were used.]

New English Translation (2005): So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Bible in Basic English (2011): Be then complete in righteousness, even as your Father in heaven is complete.

Common English Bible (2011): Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

Contemporary Romance Language Translations:

Hebrews 6:1

Greek, Textus Receptus: 

Dio, aphentes ton tēs archēs tou Christou logon, epi tēn teleiōtēta pherōmetha.

Latin, Vulgate: 

quapropter intermittentes inchoationis Christi sermonem ad perfectionem feramur.

“Classic” English Translations:

King James Version (1611): Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection. The Revised Standard Version (1952) seems to have been the first English translation to use “maturity” rather than “perfection” in this verse: Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity. The New Revised Standard Version (1989) reverts to a translation very similar to that of the KJV: Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ.


“Classic” Romance Language Translations:

French, Ostervald (1744): C’est pourquoi, laissant les premiers principes de la doctrine de Christ, tendons à la perfection. Louis Segond (1927) is very similar, also using perfection. La Nouvelle Edition de Genève (1979) uses a different construction: C’est pourquoi, laissant les éléments de la parole de Christ, tendons à ce qui est parfait.

Italian, Giovanni Diodati Bible (1649): Perciò, lasciata la parola del principio di Cristo, tendiamo alla perfezione. Nuova Riveduta Bible (1927)
uses a different construction: Perciò, lasciando l’insegnamento elementare intorno a Cristo, tendiamo a quello perfetto.

**Spanish**, Reina-Valera Antigua (1602): Por tanto, dejando la palabra del comienzo en la doctrina de Cristo, vamos adelante á la perfección. Reina-Valera Revisado (1960) is identical.

**Portuguese**, João Ferreira de Almeida Atualizada (1681): Pelo que deixando os rudimentos da doutrina de Cristo, prossigamos até a perfeição. Almeida Revista e Atualizada (1959) is very similar, also using perfeição.

**Contemporary English Translations:**

New American Bible (1970): Therefore, let us leave behind the basic teaching about Christ and advance to maturity. The New American Bible, Revised Edition (NT 1986) is almost identical, also using maturity.

New International Version (1973): Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.

New Jerusalem Bible (1985): Let us leave behind us then all the elementary teaching about Christ and go on to its completion.

Contemporary English Version (1995): We must try to become mature and start thinking about more than just the basic things we were taught about Christ.

New English Translation (2005): Therefore we must progress beyond the elementary instructions about Christ and move on to maturity.

Bible in Basic English (2011): For this reason let us go on from the first things about Christ to full growth.

Common English Bible (2011): So let’s press on to maturity, by moving on from the basics about Christ’s word.

**Contemporary Romance Language Translations:**


**Spanish,** La Biblia de las Américas (1997): Por tanto, dejando las enseñanzas elementales acerca de Cristo, avancemos hacia la madurez.

**Portuguese,** Nova Versão Internacional (1999): Portanto, deixemos os ensinos elementares a respeito de Cristo e avancemos para a maturidade.