

# A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

Hello Sojourners!

Our sermon this past week from Pastor Andy focused on Wesley's Aldersgate experience, when he received assurance of his salvation from the Holy Spirit. Andy told of his own faith journey as *moments of heightened awareness*, and said that perhaps the Aldersgate event for Wesley was one of those. While that may be true, the Bible seems to describe an encounter with Christ as a paradigm shift in our experience of the Almighty; things have changed, and there is a new beginning, a *new birth* if you will. Wesley's own description of the experience mentions His conviction "that (Christ) had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." This is what we call *justification*, receiving the gift from God of His saving grace for our sins, not relying on our own *goodness*. It is a defining moment in our faith walk – but is not the end of our experience of salvation. It is the beginning of a journey toward sanctification, or "going on to perfection" as Wesley would say. Maxie Dunnam has written an article describing the experience, and I have excerpted the following from it.

One more thing: when you receive and read this article, please respond by return email that you have done so - as many of you have been doing - for attendance purposes. Feel free to comment.

Thanks!

Bill

## Saved to the Uttermost

By Maxie Dunnam

To be a Christian is to change. It is to become new. It is not simply a matter of choosing a new lifestyle, although that will change. It has to do with being a new person. A new person does not emerge fully formed. Conversion – passing from death to life – may be a miracle of a moment, but the making of a saint is a process of a lifetime. The process of saint-making is to work out in fact what is already true in principle. In position, in our relationship to God in Jesus Christ, we are new persons. Now our condition, the actual life we live, must be brought into harmony with our new position.

Paul contended that we are to become new creatures in Christ Jesus. In fact, that's the way he defined a Christian: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Nothing less is the aim of the Christian life: to be new creatures in Christ Jesus.

In our preaching and teaching, we too often put most of our emphasis on our coming into the Christian life; in confessing, repenting, and trusting Christ as Savior, and receiving his forgiveness. The theological or biblical term for God's work in this dynamic is justification. When we think and talk about salvation, this is often where we center.

This is limited thinking. John Wesley, who with his brother, Charles, was one of the founders of the Methodist movement, used the term salvation in a broader and deeper way, referring to the entire saving activity of God in human lives. "By salvation I mean, not barely ... deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its ... original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth."

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul calls us to "grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). It is a call to full salvation: maturity in Christ, spiritual adulthood, perfection in love.

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In the Wesleyan tradition, we acknowledge this and talk about going on to salvation. Beginning with justification, full salvation includes sanctification, which is the theological word for God's cleansing and purifying work within us. In his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation," Wesley used the term "full salvation," saying, "It is thus that we wait for entire sanctification; for a full salvation from all our sins – from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief; or, as the Apostle expresses it, 'go unto perfection.' "

The climactic work of full salvation is glorification, the answer to Jesus's prayer for his followers: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24). . . .

Most people in the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition of the Christian faith know at least the broad outline of the life of our founder, John Wesley. In 1725, having been nurtured by his mother, Susanna, and his father, Samuel, a priest in the Church of England, John, while a student at Oxford University, had a conversion to the ideal of holy living. There are few examples in history of a more disciplined religious person: he rose at 4 a.m., read the New Testament in Greek for an hour, and then prayed for an hour with his brother Charles and others who had joined him in what was derisively called the Holy Club. He spent time visiting prisons and gave to the poor all of his money except that which was absolutely necessary for his own living. He was almost neurotically preoccupied with the right use of his time.

He was a man desperately seeking salvation and assurance of his salvation. He was tirelessly bent upon achieving that and drove himself as a merciless taskmaster in all the religious disciplines and services that could be imagined. He even went to the American colonies as a missionary to the Indians, but failed in that, and returned home from Georgia, downcast in mind, despondent in spirit, pierced to his heart with the futility of all his efforts and the emptiness of his soul.

It was in that despondent mood that he went to a prayer meeting on **Aldersgate** Street, London, on May 24, 1738. A layperson read Martin Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans and Wesley described later what happened in his own life: "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

This was the watershed experience that gave Wesley assurance of his salvation. The transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer was the chief theme of John Wesley's life and work, and a distinctive contribution the Methodists make to the rest of the church. The British Methodist William B. Fitzgerald summarized Wesley's theology of salvation with this fourfold dictum: All people need to be saved from sin, all people may be saved from sin, all people may know they are saved from sin, and all people may be saved to the uttermost.

This **Aldersgate** experience transformed Wesley from a slave to a son. He knew that, in his words, "Christ had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

In his introductory comment to Wesley's sermon "Christian Perfection," Albert Outler wrote, "If, for Wesley, salvation was the total restoration of the deformed image of God in us, and if its fullness was the recovery of our negative power not to sin and our positive power to love God supremely, this denotes that furthest reach of grace and its triumphs in this life that Wesley chose to call 'Christian Perfection.' "

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Christian perfection is another term for sanctification. "Just as justification and regeneration are thresholds for the Christian life in earnest ('what God does for us'), so also sanctification is 'what God does in us,'" said Wesley, "to mature and fulfill the human potential according to his primal design."

Wesley particularly emphasized this idea that "all can be saved to the uttermost"; he called it "going on to perfection," drawing on Hebrews 6:1. By this he didn't mean a sinless kind of moral perfection, nor a perfection in knowledge, but a perfection in love. The single identifying mark of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives is love. Do we love God and do we love one another? That's the test of our sanctification.

Wesley was always deeply disturbed when he saw Christians who were more like the Pharisees, people who trusted in their own righteousness, and consequently, showed little evidence of the growing presence of God's love in their lives. He spoke of this often. . . .

The work of the Holy Spirit is transformative. We can better understand the full impact of that transformation by reflecting on the distinction between God's action for the sinner – pardon and justification – and God's action in the pardoned sinner's heart – restoration of the broken image of God and of the human power to avoid and resist intentional sin. Again, Albert Outler expresses it clearly: "We have no part in our justification before God, save the passive act of accepting and trusting the merits of Christ. But we have a crucial part to play in the further business of 'growing up into Christ, into the stature of the perfect man.' "

In the dynamic process of sanctification, "Christian perfection," we work out in fact what is already true in principle. In justification, our **position** in relation to God is that we are new persons; now, in sanctification, our **condition**, the actual life we live, is brought into harmony with our position.

*Source:* Maxie Dunnam is the Director of Christ Church Global at Christ United Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. He is the former president of Asbury Theological Seminary and world editor of *The Upper Room*. This excerpt is adapted from *The Wesleyan Journey: A Workbook on Salvation* (Abingdon Press).