The people imagine many harmful ideas from these false commendations of the monastic life. They hear celibacy praised with great exaggeration; therefore, they live as married people with a guilty conscience. They hear that mendicants [monks who beg] are the only ones who are perfect; therefore, they who have possessions buy and sell with a guilty conscience. …Others think that all political and civil positions are illegitimate jobs for Christians to hold (Augsburg Confession 2.6).

Coming out of the medieval period, many Europeans were confused about what it meant to lead a holy life. In addition to being wrong about the nature of justification, the Roman Catholic Church was also largely wrong about what it meant to live in a way that was pleasing to God. The Protestant Reformers focused a great deal of attention on explaining what it meant to be right with God or justified. But these same Reformers also addressed the question of how one should live and how one might grow in godliness. The topic of sanctification featured prominently in their confessions of faith, and the churches that developed out of the Reformation largely agreed on the nature of sanctification.

I. A Consensus on Sanctification

A. Sanctification in the Lutheran Tradition

1. Martin Luther’s Understanding of Sanctification

Throughout his career as a Reformer, Luther consistently tied sanctification to the work of the Holy Spirit. In 1529, Luther published two catechisms of differing lengths. In his discussion of the Apostles’ Creed in the Large Catechism, Luther wrote,

The Holy Spirit will remain with the holy community or Christian people until the Last Day. Through it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Word. By it he creates and increases holiness, causing it
daily to grow and become strong in the faith and in its fruits, which the Spirit produces. ...Forgiveness is constantly needed, for although God’s grace has been acquired by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God’s Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet we are never without sin because we carry our flesh around our neck (Large Catechism, The Apostles’ Creed, para. 53–54).

In a series of sermons on the catechisms, Luther was even more explicit about the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification:

The third article [of the Apostles’ Creed] is about the Holy Spirit, who is one God with the Father and the Son. His office is to make holy or to vivify. ...Here he is called the “Holy Spirit.” Why is he so called? Because he sanctifies. And therefore I believe in the Holy Spirit, because he has sanctified me and still sanctifies me. ...What does this article mean? Answer: I believe that the Holy Spirit sanctifies me. So, as the Father is my creator and Christ is my Lord, so the Holy Spirit is my sanctifier (Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings, ed. Dillenberger, pp. 211–12).

Luther’s post-Reformation theology was not always completely consistent. However, he did consistently teach that sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit and that sanctification is both a past work and one that continues throughout the believer’s lifetime.

2. Philip Melanchthon’s Understanding of Sanctification

Like Luther, Melanchthon also tied sanctification to the work of the Holy Spirit. In his Loci Communes, Melanchthon wrote, “that very Spirit of Christ which we have received, puts to death the remnants of sin in our flesh. ...the Spirit is such by nature that it cannot but mortify the flesh. ...I have said that our freedom is not yet complete because our sanctification is not yet perfected. For our sanctification begins as an act of the Spirit of God, and we are in the process of being sanctified until the flesh is utterly killed off” (Melanchthon, Loci Communes in Melanchthon and Bucer, ed. Pauck, p. 130).

3. The Formula of Concord (1576)

“This same gift [the Holy Spirit] daily cleanses and expels the sins that remain and works to make people truly pure and holy. ...the Holy Spirit, which cleanses human beings and daily makes them more upright and holier” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration 2.35).

“Thereafter, once people are justified, the Holy Spirit also renews and sanctifies them. From this renewal and sanctification the fruits of good works follow” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration 3.41).
B. Sanctification in the Reformed Tradition

1. Martin Bucer’s Understanding of Sanctification

Bucer identified the twofold purpose of election as being the sanctification of the believer and the glory of God. Like Luther, Bucer saw sanctification as primarily a work of the Holy Spirit whereby he changes believers and gradually conforms them to the image of Christ. For example, he wrote,

when the Spirit of Christ has been given to the elect, just as he enables them to consecrate themselves to Christ, and through him to call on God as Father, so also he at once represses in them sinful desires and daily transforms them to the image of Christ. Their redemption from sins will be complete in the future, when, with all sin purged away, they fully express his image (cited in Stephens, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer*, p. 72).

2. John Calvin’s Understanding of Sanctification

Like Bucer, Calvin also saw sanctification as involving a daily fight against sin. In his *Institutes*, Calvin wrote,

We are purged by his sanctification in such a way that we are besieged by many vices and much weakness so long as we are encumbered with our body. Thus it comes about that, far removed from perfection, we must move steadily forward, and though entangled in vices, daily fight against them (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.3.14).

C. Sanctification in the English Churches


They who are effectually called and regenerated having a new heart and a new spirit created in them are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.

In which war, although the remaining corruption, for a time, may much prevail; yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome; and so, the saints grow in
grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (Westminster Confession of Faith 13.1–3).

2. Congregationalists: The Savoy Declaration (1658)

They that are united to Christ, effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are also further sanctified really and personally through the same virtue, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened, and mortified, and they more and more quickened, and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of all true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

This sanctification is throughout in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.

In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail, yet through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome, and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (Savoy Declaration 13.1–3).

3. Baptists: The London Baptist Confessions (1644 & 1677/89) and The Orthodox Creed (1678)

The London Baptist Confession (1644)

That the same power that converts to faith in Christ, the same power carries on the soul still through all duties, temptations, conflicts, sufferings, and continually whatever a Christian is, he is by grace, and by a constant renewed operation from God, without which he cannot perform any duty to God, or undergo any temptations from Satan, the world, or men.

That all believers are a holy and sanctified people, and that sanctification is a spiritual grace of the new covenant, and an effect of the love of God, manifested to the soul, whereby the believer is in truth and reality separated, both in soul and body, from all sin and dead works, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, whereby he also presseth after a heavenly and evangelical perfection, in obedience to all the commands, which Christ as head and King in this new covenant has prescribed to him.

That all believers in the time of this life, are in a continual warfare, combat, and opposition against sin, self, the world, and the devil, and liable to all manner of afflictions, tribulations, and persecutions, and so shall continue until Christ comes in his Kingdom, being predestinated and appointed thereunto; and whatsoever the Saints, any of them do possess or enjoy of God in this life, is only by faith (London Baptist Confession, chaps. 26, 29, 31).
**The Second London Baptist Confession (1677/89)**

They who are united to Christ, effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, are also further sanctified really and personally through the same virtue, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened, and mortified, and they more and more quickened, and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of all true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

This sanctification is throughout in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.

In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail, yet through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome, and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God, pressing after a heavenly life, in evangelical obedience to all the commands which Christ as Head and King, in his Word hath prescribed to them (*Second London Baptist Confession* 13.1–3).

**The Orthodox Creed (1678)**

Those that are united unto Christ by effectual faith, are regenerated, and have a new heart and spirit created in them, through the virtue of Christ his death, resurrection, and intercession, and by the efficacy of the Holy Spirit, received by faith, and are sanctified by the word and Spirit of truth, dwelling in them, by destroying and pulling down the strongholds, or dominion of sin and lust, and more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, in the practice of holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. And this sanctification is throughout the whole man, though imperfect in this life, there abiding still in the best saints, some remnants of corruption, which occasions a continual war in the soul (*The Orthodox Creed* 26).

D. Prior to Wesley there was a broad confessional agreement on the nature of sanctification.

1. Confessional Protestants agreed that sanctification was a work of the Holy Spirit.

2. Confessional Protestants agreed that at the beginning of salvation, the believer is sanctified—set apart as holy to God.

3. Confessional Protestants agreed that sanctification also entails a progressive element.

4. Confessional Protestants agreed that such progressive sanctification is never complete in this life.
II. The Rise of John Wesley and His Influence

John Wesley (1703–1791) was an Anglican clergyman who was profoundly influenced by the Moravians. Wesley’s conversion in 1738 marks a theological turning point in church history. In his journals, Wesley described his “Aldersgate experience” as follows:

In the evening [of May 24, 1738], I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for 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 (cited in John Wesley, ed. Outler, p. 66).

In addition to having his heart “strangely warmed,” this experience caused Wesley to begin emphasizing the work of the Holy Spirit in a new and more profound way. As one author correctly noted, “From that point on, the Holy Spirit has a central role in Wesley’s definition of the ‘true Christian,’ his understanding of how one becomes a Christian and his explanation of how one knows he or she is a Christian” (Heitzenrater, “Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity,” in Aldersgate Reconsidered, ed. Maddox, p. 90).

Shortly hereafter, Wesley’s influence on English Protestantism exploded. Cairns has rightly noted that Wesley dominated the 1700s as far as religion was concerned. He put it this way:

Methodism ranks with the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution as one of the great historical phenomena of the century, and some subscribe to the idea that Wesley’s preaching saved England from a revolution similar to that of France. Methodism was to Anglicanism what Pietism was to Lutheranism (Cairns, Christianity through the Centuries, p. 384).

Wesley’s theological influence has stretched far beyond eighteenth-century England. Today, the United Methodist Church is the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States and one of the largest denominations in the world.

III. Wesley’s Model of Sanctification

Although Wesley was apparently converted in connection with the reading of Luther’s commentary on Romans, he would later express disagreement with his spiritual forebear on the issue of sanctification. In a sermon on Isaiah 5:4, Wesley asked, “Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conceptions of it?” Wesley then continued, “In order to be thoroughly convinced of this, of his total ignorance with regard to sanctification, [one] needs no more than to read over, without prejudice, his celebrated comment[ary] on the Epistle to the Galatians” (Wesley, Works, 7:204).
Wesley realized that he was breaking from Luther and other Reformers on the issue of sanctification, but he believed that God had raised the Methodists so they might declare a more accurate understanding of sanctification to the world.

On September 15, 1790, less than six months before he died, Wesley wrote, “…with regard to full sanctification. This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appears to have raised us up” (letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, 15 Sept 1790, http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1790b/).

A. Wesley saw three stages or kinds of sanctification.

1. Like the Reformers, Wesley believed that there was a sense in which the believer is sanctified at the point of conversion.

In a sermon titled, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” Wesley explained the relationship between justification and sanctification this way. He said that salvation consists of two general parts, justification and sanctification. Justification is another word for pardon. It is the forgiveness of all our sins and (what is necessarily implied therein) our acceptance with God. …And at the same time that we are justified, yea, in that very moment, sanctification begins. In that instant we are “born again,” “born from above,” “born of the Spirit.” There is a real as well as a relative change. We are inwardly renewed by the power of God (Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” in John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology, ed. Outler and Heitzenrater, p. 373).

In another sermon, Wesley further explained the relationship between justification and sanctification:

We experience the proper Christian salvation, consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God (Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology, ed. Outler and Heitzenrater, p. 488).

2. Like the Reformers, Wesley also spoke about sanctification as a process that takes place over time by the power of the Holy Spirit as the believer is gradually conformed to the image of Christ.

In a sermon on “Grieving the Holy Spirit,” Wesley declared, “The title ‘holy,’ applied to the Spirit of God, does not only denote that he is holy in his own nature; but that he makes us so; that he is the great fountain of holiness to his Church” (Wesley, “Grieving the Holy Spirit,” in Works, 7:486).

In a letter to Sarah Rutter dated December 5, 1789, Wesley wrote, “Gradual
sanctification may increase from the time you w[ere] justified…” (http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1789b/).

When questioned about sanctification, at times, Wesley would explain it as a gradual process: “From the moment we are justified, there may be a gradual sanctification, a growing in grace, a daily advance in the knowledge and love of God” (“Large Minutes,” in Works, 8:329).

3. Where Wesley differed from the Reformers and the standard confessions of faith was in positing what he called “Christian perfection,” “entire sanctification,” or a “second blessing” which was available to believers in this life.

On a number of occasions, Wesley wrote to individuals assuring them that complete deliverance from sin could be experienced in this life. To a Methodist minister who had corresponded with Wesley about his continuing struggles with sin, Wesley wrote,

“But is there no help? Is there no deliverance, no salvation from this inbred enemy?” Surely there is; else many great and precious promises must fall to the ground. “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you.” “I will circumcise thy heart” (from all sin), “to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul.” This I term sanctification (which is both an instantaneous and a gradual work), or perfection, the being perfected in love, filled with love, which still admits of a thousand degrees. But I have no time to throw away in contending for words, especially where the thing is allowed. And you allow the whole thing which I contend for—an entire deliverance from sin, a recovery of the whole image of God, the loving God with all our heart, soul, and strength. And you believe God is able to give you this—y — yea, to give it you in an instant. You trust He will. O hold fast this also—this blessed hope, which He has wrought in your heart! And with all zeal and diligence confirm the brethren, (1) in holding fast that whereto they have attained—namely, the remission of all their sins by faith in a bleeding Lord; (2) in expecting a second change, whereby they shall be saved from all sin and perfected in love (letter to Joseph Benson, 28 Dec 1770, http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1770/).

In that previously quoted letter to Sarah Rutter, Wesley wrote, “Gradual sanctification may increase from the time you was [sic] justified; but full deliverance from sin, I believe, is always instantaneous—at least, I never yet knew an exception” (http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1789b/).

Although Wesley’s views on entire sanctification appear to have developed somewhat over the course of his lifetime the basic substance of his views did not change. In his book, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection (pub. 1777), Wesley traced what he had taught about Christian perfection over the course of five decades (1725–1777).
Describing the first Methodist Conference (1744), Wesley wrote,

The next morning we seriously considered the doctrine of sanctification, or perfection. The questions asked concerning it, and the substance of the answers given, were as follows:—

Q. What is it to be sanctified?
A. To be renewed in the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.

Q. What is implied in being a perfect Christian?
A. The loving God with all our heart, and mind, and soul (Deut 6:5).

Q. Does this imply that all inward sin is taken away?
A. Undoubtedly: or how can we be said to be saved from all uncleanness? (Ezek 36:29)

(Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, p. 33 [hereafter, Plain Account]).

At the second Methodist Conference (1745), Methodists once again took up the topic of sanctification. Wesley recounted the following discussion:

The next morning we spoke of sanctification as follows:—

Q. When does inward sanctification begin?
A. In the moment a man is justified. (Yet sin remains in him, yea, the seed of all sin, till he is sanctified throughout.) From that time a believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace.

Q. Is this ordinarily given till a little before death?
A. It is not, to those who expect it no sooner.

Q. But may we expect it sooner?
A. Why not? For, although we grant (1) That the generality of believers, whom we have hitherto known, were not so sanctified till near death; (2) That few of those to whom St. Paul wrote his Epistles were so at that time; nor (3) He himself at the time of writing his former Epistles; yet all this does not prove, that we may not be so today (Wesley, Plain Account, pp. 33–34).

On January 27, 1767, Wesley decided to summarize his thoughts on Christian perfection in a single page which has come to be known as his Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection. In this summary, Wesley wrote,

By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions. I do not include an impossibility of falling from it, either in part or in whole. …And I do not contend for the term sinless, though I do not object against it.

As to the manner. I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by a simple act of faith; consequently in an instant. But I believe in a gradual work both preceding and following that instant.

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. I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within five years or five months after it (Wesley, Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection, an appendix at the end of Plain Account).

In response to criticisms of his views, Wesley laid out several ideas which both he
and his brother (Charles) had taught:

(1) That Christian perfection is that love of God and our neighbor which implies deliverance from all sin; (2) that this is received merely by faith; (3) that it is given instantaneously, in one moment; (4) that we are to expect it, not at death, but every moment; that now is the accepted time, now is the day of this salvation (Wesley, Plain Account, p. 41).

Wesley’s admission that Christian perfection implies deliverance from all sin forced him to redefine sin somewhat. In view of his doctrine of Christian perfection, Wesley defined sin as “a voluntary transgression of a known law” (Wesley, Plain Account, p. 45). He believed that Christian perfection meant freedom from committing such intentional sins. Wesley recognized that even Christians who have achieved Christian perfection are necessarily still marked by human frailty. As such Christian perfection does not enable one to completely avoid all errors that are due to ignorance or mistakes that are simply part of human infirmity, even if such errors or mistakes involve transgressing the law of God. But Wesley denied that such involuntary transgressions could properly be called “sins” (Wesley, Plain Account, p. 45).

B. Wesley’s teaching on Christian perfection continues to impact contemporary Christianity.

To this day, the Confession of Faith of the United Methodist Church includes this statement on entire sanctification:

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God (Confession of Faith, art. 11, http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/confession-of-faith).

More significantly, Wesley’s concept of Christian perfection has been adapted and embraced by many Christians outside of Methodist circles. Through the preaching and writings of individuals like Charles Finney (1792–1875) and Asa Mahan (1799–1889)—men who were even less careful than Wesley in talking about Christian perfection—the idea that a Christian may reach a higher plane of experience has been sown in large swaths of the evangelical landscape. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Higher Life or Keswick movement taught the need for some kind of crisis or second work of God by which one might instantaneously be lifted to a new level of Christian experience—the higher Christian life.
Selected Bibliography

Allison, Gregg R. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine.*


