

Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley's  
Theological Dialogue on Christian Perfection

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Of

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## Abstract

### Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley's Theological Dialogue on Christian Perfection

Yong Hwa Lee  
Concordia University 2004

The advent of the third millennium calls for a renewed spirituality. New channels for dialogue in all fields have been opened, especially in theology and religion. This phenomenon generates an intellectual quest to discover the relevance of classical spirituality in the postmodern era. Separated by fourteen centuries, we find that Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century father, and John Wesley, an eighteen century revivalist, share a certain interest in Christian perfection. They teach us that believers seek to participate in the knowledge, grace, love, and goodness of God in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:12-15). The purpose of this thesis is to explore the notion of Christian perfection and an effect of Christology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley as a central theme of Christian faith. In discovering essential elements of similarity and difference this thesis will propose "an unity in diversity" in theological dialogue between Gregory and Wesley meaningful for our present ecumenical era, and thus find a real place of Wesley in Christian tradition: He synthesizes a dynamic relationship between the eastern and the western theologies, and creates an ecumenical theology in relation to Christian perfection in the Christian tradition.

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To Kyung Hi Lim, my beloved wife, who has patiently and selflessly supported me by "faith working through love" from the beginning of our marriage in 1985, and to our two beautiful daughters, Grace and Angela, and our gentle son, Livingstone, who

have created joy and smile and provided sweetness in our home, I gratefully dedicate this thesis.

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# Introduction

## 1. The Purpose and the Problem

The purpose of this thesis is to present the interpretation of Philippians 3: 12-15, which Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley considered as a central text for the theme of Christian faith in their historical life setting, and to find the real place of Wesley in regard to the theological and biblical foundations of Christian perfection.

Until today, the revival of Reformation studies led some scholars to trace Wesley's lineage back to the continental Reformers: Calvin, Luther, Pietism, Anglican and Puritanism.<sup>1</sup> These arguments gave Wesley different places in the Christian tradition, but actually the experts are of one voice in saying that Wesley is firmly rooted in the Western Christendom tradition.

However, by the middle of the twentieth century, an increasing awareness developed for a global appreciation of the eastern and western portions of the ancient Church in a dimension of ecumenical theology. More specifically research has suggested a structural affinity between the theological positions of these two theologians, Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley. Jaeger's study<sup>2</sup> as a historico-literary criticism throws a new light upon those wedded to Wesley's thought and theology. In fact, Jaeger's particular

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, George Cell traced Wesley's lineage back to 'Calvin'; Franz Hildebrandt to 'Luther'; Martin Schmidt and Clifford Towlson to 'Continental Pietism and Moravianism'; Jean Ocibal to 'the Western mystical tradition'; Maximin Pierette and John Todd to 'Roman Catholicism'; Leo Cox, Claude Thompson, George Turner, and Mildred Wynkoop to 'the Holiness Tradition'; Gordon Rupp, Paul Sanders and Albert Outler to 'Anglican in Earnest'. See "The Search for the Historical Wesley", by Kenneth Rowe *The Place of Wesley in the Christian Tradition* (ed.) Kenneth Rowe (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1965. He was the great Harvard Hellenist scholar; Maloney, George A. S.J. *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter* Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992, p. 11.

study suggests a new direction by calling for a theological dialogue between Gregory and Wesley. As a result, one may note several forms of research concerning eastern fathers<sup>3</sup> like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Chrysostom, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. Arthur M. Allchin asserts Wesley's theological affirmation as close to eastern orthodoxy in terms of his appeal to spiritual experience and his search for perfection, which correspond to emphases of the characteristic fathers of the Eastern Church.<sup>4</sup> Howard Snyder insists on Wesley's similarity to Macarius the Egyptian by arguing that they both stress the potential of human personality for growth and positive change in Christian perfection, and the capacity of Christians to cooperate with God in the ongoing work of salvation.<sup>5</sup> Albert Outler insists that all of Wesley's heroes from the age of Christian antiquity are "Eastern", and this helps to explain the emphases in his soteriology and spirituality which rarely were as prominent in Latin Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Greathouse presents Christian perfection in a historical perspective in order to show how Christian perfection is essentially driven from the Scripture to Wesley: jointed with Paul, Peter, and John of the New Testament, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo.<sup>7</sup> In fact, with respect to the theology of Gregory of Nyssa and Wesley, Brightman attempts well to present the theological dialogue on the Christian life in his dissertation treating theoretical and doctrinal perspectives.<sup>8</sup> In his last chapter, he attempts to perform an

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<sup>3</sup> "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel", BE, vol. 3, §II, 3, p. 586; WJW, vol. 7, §II, 3, 424.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur M. Allchin, "Our Life in Christ: In John Wesley and the Eastern Fathers", *We Belong to One Another* (ed.) A. M. Allchin (London: Epworth Press, 1965), p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Snyder, "John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian", *The Asbury Theological Journal* vol. 45, no. 2 (1990), p. 259.

<sup>6</sup> Albert C. Outler, "John Wesley's Interests in the Early Fathers of the Church", *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage* (eds.) Thomas Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), pp. 107-108.

<sup>7</sup> William M. Greathouse, *From the Apostle to Wesley* (Kansas: Beacon Hill Press, 1979)

<sup>8</sup> Robert Sheffield Brightman, "Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley in Theological Dialogue on the Christian life," (Unpublished, Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1969)

imaginary dialogue as it might take place between Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley. Through this imaginary dialogue he reemphasizes what he has presented throughout in his thesis. His imaginary dialogue is a very interesting one, Brightman does not integrate Christian perfection with Christology, but he separates each subject. Hence he may have missed an important aspect of Christology in connection with Christian perfection understood as a gradual process in ascetic theology, since the ascetic writings of Gregory and Wesley present Christian perfection through Christological and soteriological perspectives. Hence reviewing the study of scholars about Wesley's notion of Christian perfection suggests a basic problem. That is why I shall discuss here the theological dialogue on Christian perfection between the two theologians, Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley.

## 2. Methodology and Scope of Research

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the notion of Christian perfection and the Christology of Wesley as well as of Gregory will be examined and then compared, by specially focusing on the *De Vita Moysis* and *De Perfectione* of Gregory, and on *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* of Wesley and on some of his sermons and treatises.

In fact, patristic theology has played a great role in the formation of medieval and reformation theology, including in the Anglican tradition to which Wesley belonged. Wesley himself regards "the first four centuries"<sup>9</sup> as being formative for Christian theology and life. It is true that Wesley affirms the Bible as the primary source for authentic Christian theology. However, when Christians face problematic passages in the

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<sup>9</sup> "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel", BE, vol. 3, §II, 3, p. 586; WJW, vol. 7, §II, 3, 424.

Scriptures, those passages should first be examined in the light of the interpretation and theology of the Early Church Fathers. Hence Wesley emphasizes equally the importance of the knowledge of the early church fathers in his treatise, "Address to the Clergy", as follows:

Can any who spend several years in those seats of learning, be excused, if they do not add to that of the languages and sciences, the knowledge of the Fathers? the most authentic commentators on Scripture, as being both nearest the fountain, and eminently endued[sic] with that Spirit by whom all Scripture was given. It will be easily perceived, I speak chiefly of those who wrote before the Council of Nicea. But who would not likewise desire to have some acquaintance with those that followed them? With St. Chrysostom, Basil, Jerome, Augustine; and, above all, the man of a broken heart, Ephraim Syrus?<sup>10</sup>

In particular, Gregory of Nyssa is one of these "authentic commentators" of the Greek Eastern Fathers in the study of Christian theology, especially his ideas about perfection and freedom.<sup>11</sup>

The first step in the argument will be to describe the main ideas of Gregory and of Wesley about Christian perfection and Christology, based on their primary materials. In the last chapter, Wesley will be compared with Gregory in the light of the particular identification of each one.

### 3. A Brief Presentation of Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley: Theological and Historical Formation

Recently, I came into contact with the books, *De Vita Moysis* and *De perfectione*, written by Gregory of Nyssa as "a speculative and ascetic theologian,"<sup>12</sup> as "the most

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jackson, (ed.), *The Work of John Wesley* vol. 10, §I, 2, p. 484.

<sup>11</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), p. 208.

gifted of the three Cappadocians,"<sup>13</sup> and as "a brilliant and original thinker,"<sup>14</sup> and *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* and some sermons written by John Wesley as "the most influential man in modern history,"<sup>15</sup> as "an extraordinary leader of men and a constructive religious genius,"<sup>16</sup> and as a main root of "modern holiness movements."<sup>17</sup>

### A. Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa was the youngest among the three Cappadocian fathers: Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa. As a rhetorician in his early life Gregory of Nyssa did not have great commitment to the Church even if he grew up in a strong Christian family. However, in the year 372 he reluctantly accepted an appointment as Bishop of Nyssa from Basil, metropolitan Bishop of Caesarea. After Basil's death, Gregory became one of the foremost champions of the orthodox faith against Arianism. Yet Gregory of Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa studied together the works of Origen and published a selection of extracts from his Commentaries which they called "Philocalia."<sup>18</sup> Gregory's thought was greatly influenced by Church fathers like Clement and Origen. Hence his theological and philosophical ideas coincided with theirs. His "philosophy was identical with theology,"<sup>19</sup> so that he treats each single philosophical

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis [The Life of Moses]* Translation, Introduction and Notes by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York · Ramsey · Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978), p. xvi.

<sup>13</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. III (Utrecht-Antwerp: Spectrum Publishers, 1960), p. 254.

<sup>14</sup> Charles McGrath, "Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Knowledge of God" (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Fordham University, 1964), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> John Wilkins Sigsworth, *World-Changers: Karl Marx and John Wesley* (Belleville, Ont.: Easingwold publications, 1982), p. i.

<sup>16</sup> J. Ernest Rattenbury, *Wesley's Legacy to the World* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1929), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> William E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection: An Examination and Restatement of John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (London: the Epworth Press, 1984), p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, (Eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers - Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.* vol. 5, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson publishers, Inc., 1995), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, op., cit. p. 8.

view only as “a help to grasp the formula of faith.”<sup>20</sup> In that respect rational considerations are not necessarily drawn from the philosophy of that time because Gregory of Nyssa relied on established Christian doctrine. Considered in that light, Gregory of Nyssa has performed the most significant service of any of the authors of the Church in the fourth century.<sup>21</sup> During the years following the Council of Constantinople he was acknowledged as “a master of Christian doctrine”<sup>22</sup> by council and emperor in the middle of his life. But in his later age he paid attention to the spiritual experience under the influence of his sister Macrina who was “the master of the family.”<sup>23</sup> For the last several years Gregory of Nyssa devoted himself to the study of the Scripture and the works of “his master Origen.”<sup>24</sup> In consequence, Gregory was recognized as “a master of the spiritual life”<sup>25</sup> by the ascetics of Asia Minor. He concentrated on contemplation as a philosophical ascetic theology. *De Vita Moysis* could have been written by him in his latest age in the early 390s.

## B. John Wesley

John Wesley’s prominence is solid and secure: the founder of Methodist, evangelist, reformer, practical genius theologian, and prolific author and publisher. However, some people called him “a herald of the Romantic revival” or “a Holy Lover.” Such a conception of Wesley may be very misleading unless seen in connection with “central revelations of his personality.” Rather he possessed an “overwhelming passion

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis* op., cit, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, op., cit. p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis* op., cit, p. 3.

for God and a sense of his own vocation as a brand plucked from the burning for a specific, divine purpose.”<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, through his scrutiny and understanding of his spiritual life and evangelical mission, Rattenbury describes him as “a man sent from God”<sup>27</sup> in the eighteenth-century England. But in his early life, his life and evangelical theology were unfocused. In June 1740 Wesley wrote, “After we had wandered for many years in the new path of salvation by faith and works, about two years ago it pleased God to show us the old way of salvation by faith only.”<sup>28</sup> His conversion on May 24 1738 was Wesley’s own instantaneous experience of the pardoning grace of God. Through his own conversion he discovered both outward and inward holiness because religion is of heart, not merely of the hands. His experience of conversion became the driving force of a great revival movement in the Methodism. Hence his conversion was regarded as “the real birthday of Methodism” in English history.<sup>29</sup> To spread Christian perfection is his vocation with a revival movement.

“A Library of Protestant Thought”<sup>30</sup> is designed “to exhibit Wesley as theologian by providing a representative collection of his writings, together with what are intended as useful introductions and notes for a general reader’s guidance.”<sup>31</sup> Particularly, what is presented in a Library of Protestant Thought serves “as a valid sampling of Wesley’s main ideas in their scope and depth.”<sup>32</sup> However, for Wesley Anglican theology and theological literature established the rational basis in which he steeped himself at Oxford

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<sup>26</sup> J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys: A Critical Study* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> It is a collection of writings intended to illumine and interpret the history of the Christian faith in its Protestant expression. It includes not only its literary forms and theological positions, but also tracts, letters, sermons, monographs, and other types of literature comprising the heritage of Protestant thought.

<sup>31</sup> Outler, Albert C. (Ed.), *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. ix.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

and in Georgia.<sup>33</sup> For Wesley the deepest wellspring is the Bible and its interpretation by the ancient fathers of the Church. His great mentors in spiritual life were Jeremy Taylor, Thomas a Kempis and William Law.<sup>34</sup> Specially, the seventeenth century England was the age of revival of patristic studies.<sup>35</sup> Wesley learned the intimate correlation of Christian doctrine and Christian spirituality and then immersed himself in the piety and spirituality of the early Christian fathers like the eastern fathers.

These two theologians are eminent on Christian perfection in their setting in life as a faith-culture. They will be great mentors for the next generation to come in the light of Christian perfection and spirituality.

#### 4. A Sketch on Christian Perfection

What is the authentic Christian life for the present time? Can it be said that the chief end of human being as the ultimate goal of life is to grow and participate into the knowledge and grace of God in Jesus Christ continuously? Is it the will of God that by His grace we should attain to it? Here we can turn to Christian theology which has long reflected on these questions in Christian history. The idea of perfection has taken various forms through the ages. There are three kinds of ideas of perfection: some thing beyond attainment or a state which will be attained as soon as the soul and the body are apart or a state that can be attained before people die: a moment after is too late!

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<sup>33</sup> V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley: A Study of John Wesley and Oxford* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1961), p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), pp. 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), Translated into Korean by Kim Jin Hong and Cho Ho yeon (Seoul: Korea Inter Varsity press, 1997), p. 162.



As an ideal perfection, that “sinless” perfection<sup>36</sup> can be attained in this life, needs not to be regarded here. For the term perfection is precisely incorrect when we applied to any attainment itself in this life. It is not the ultimate goal of Christians. As a criticism it is truly irrelevant. However, Gregory understands perfection basically in terms of virtue.<sup>37</sup> The nature of virtue is essentially related to the nature of God.<sup>38</sup> Further no virtue has a limit in its nature. In this light Gregory affirmed that the course of perfection, consequently, has no end in this life: it is “impossible for those who pursue the life of virtue to attain perfection.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the word perfect or perfection as applied to a certain degree of attainment in this life is enshrined in the Sermon on the Mount, in the Epistles of Paul, and in the Epistle to the Hebrews and thus has a long and honorable history in Christian tradition.

In this respect, we could recognize that the concept of ‘freedom from sin’ and of ‘knowing God’ in Christ as the Prophet are elements in Christian perfection. Such ideas of Christian perfection are “likeness” toward God in Jesus. “Likeness” is to become holy and righteous in Jesus Christ as the King, and is to have the true relationship with God, who is “the fullness of Christ.” In short, “knowing God” and being “free from sin” are to recover the image of God in human beings through Jesus Christ as the Priest. Consequently, being like Jesus in this life is the ultimate goal of Christian life. In the New Testament Paul says in the third chapter of the letter to the Philippians [ΦΙΛΙΠΠΗΣΙΟΥΣ]:

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<sup>36</sup> Augustine seems to admit the possibility of attaining to a sinless state in this world only through a miraculous exertion of the power of God. See *De spiritu et littera*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, I. 5, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 48, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 6, p. 31.

8 ἀλλὰ μενουγγε και ἡγουμαι πάντα ζημίαν εἶναι διὰ το υπερέχον της γνώσεως Χριστου Ἰησου του κυρίου μου, δι' ὃν τα πάντα ἐζημιώθην, και ηγουμαι σκύβαλα, ἵνα Χριστον κερδήσω 9 και ευρεθω ἐν αὐτῷ,...12 Οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον ἢ ἤδη τετελείωμαι, διώκω ωὐ εἰ και καταλάβω ἐφ' ὃ και κατελήμφθην ὑπο Χριστου [Ἰησου]. 13...εν δέ, τα μεν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος τοις δε ἐμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος, 14 κατα σκοπον διώκω εἰς το βραβειοντης της ἀνω κλήσεως του θεου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησου. 15 ‘Ὅσοι ουν τέλειοι, τουτο φρονωμεν.<sup>40</sup>

[8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him,...12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 ...But one thing I do:...and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.]<sup>41</sup>

In fact, those who are justified should pursue Christian perfection because inward Christian perfection commences in the moment of justification. Here justification is also part of gradual Christian perfection as growing and participating into the grace and the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. However, one has the seed of sin still in him/her. Sin remains in one until one is sanctified throughout. From the moment of justification, a believer gradually comes to know and participate into the knowledge of God in Jesus and grows in grace and dies to sin. The Christian perfection which we say here denotes mature Christians, adult Christians in Christ, not babes in the Gospel.

Christian perfection focuses essentially on the work and person of Jesus Christ. Without Jesus Christ we cannot know the knowledge of God because God is fully and totally revealed in Jesus. Coming to know the knowledge of God is coming to know the

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<sup>40</sup> *The Greek New Testament* Former Editions edited by Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, Fourth Revised Edition edited by Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martin, and Bruce M. Merzger in cooperation with the Institute for New Testament Textual Research, Münster/Westphalia Deutsche Biblegesellschaft United Bible Societies (Nördlingen, Germany: Germany Drukerei C. H. Beck), 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Phil. 3:8,9a, 12, 13b, 14, and 15a (NIV).

knowledge of Jesus. It is not difficult to find that Christian perfection is thoroughly based on Christology in Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley's writings. Rather, we can see this everywhere in the treaties which they wrote even if they would not have written a systematic Christology in their time.

## Chapter 1

### Gregory of Nyssa: The Way of Christian Perfection: Endless Ascent

The Divine One is himself the Good whose very nature is goodness...  
Certainly whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God,  
because he is himself absolute virtue...since this good has no limit,  
the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place  
but stretches out with the limitless.<sup>1</sup>

In the introductory section, we dealt with the historical theological formation of the two theologians. The theology of Christian perfection is of a very great significance for both theologians in bringing them into dialogue. Gregory of Nyssa was not only recognized by the ascetics of Asia Minor as “a master of spiritual life,”<sup>2</sup> but also he was declared “a master of Christian doctrine”<sup>3</sup> by council and emperor. Gregory of ‘the fourth century’<sup>4</sup> has been regarded as “the greatest of all the Eastern teachers of the quest for perfection,”<sup>5</sup> by a Wesleyan eminent scholar about half a century ago. It is certain that in *De Vita Moysis*<sup>6</sup> Gregory intends to present Christian perfection in context of a virtuous

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis [The Life of Moses]* (translation, introduction and notes by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, New York, Ramsey and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978), I, 7, p. 31. Hereafter it will refer to as LOM.

<sup>2</sup> LOM, p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> LOM, p. xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Harnack calls the fourth century “the greatest organized quest for perfection in history.” Quoted by George Allen Turner, *Christian Holiness* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 1977), p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Albert C. Outler, (ed.) *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 9. See footnote #26.

<sup>6</sup> In scholarly tradition, Philo's and Gregory's treatises bear the same Latin title *De Vita Moysis*. For the figure of Moses occupied a prominent place in the thinking of Jews and Christians. Philo already wrote *Life of Moses*, which was divided into two parts: to present the historical order of Moses' life and to give a topical treatment of the character of Moses. According to Abraham J. Malherbe “Gregory similarly outlines the life and then takes Moses as a model of the spiritual life” (p.6). Seeing such a situation, Gregory's work may not be his own eminent idea to explain the Christian perfection in virtue but borrow its format and idea from Philo's *life of Moses*. But the main difference between them is that Philo's work was “topical”; Gregory's was more “theoria.”

life. In this chapter we will attempt to show the nature of Christian perfection as representing the very distinctive core and essence of Gregory's ascetic theology in his experience of 'faith-culture'<sup>7</sup> as a spiritual pilgrim. Firstly, we wish to demonstrate how Gregory understands and interprets the passage, Philippians 3:13, from which originates the dynamic dimension of his notion of Christian perfection; secondly, we show how he deals with the nature and attainment of Christian perfection in determining what function Christology has in his doctrine of perfection.

### 1. Philippians 3:13-14 – The Biblical Foundation of “Perfection” in Gregory of Nyssa

The most significant work of a theologian is to lay down a foundation as the cornerstone of the planned building, as a key for the great purpose to go onto the goal, and as a presupposition for a theoretic construct. According to the foundation which one has laid for one's theory, principles will stand firm or fall.

In that respect, we will see where Gregory laid an essential foundation of thought when he attempted to explore the subject of Christian perfection for teaching and advising young monks and next generations.

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To decide for a precise dating of the *life of Moses* written by Gregory of Nyssa is impossible because Gregory himself tells us having carried the work from youth into his “old age” (LOM, I. 2, p. 29). Accordingly this work of Gregory would seem to belong to his late age at about the early 390s. This book consists of two parts as two books: the first book was called *historia* as a historical sketch of Moses' life; the second book was called as *theoria* to show, by means of allegorical exegesis, how the life of Moses can be an example for a virtuous life (II. 319-321; cf. I. 15). There is a close parallel between the two parts. But Heine insists an earlier date as the middle of 380s because of arguing that the treatise belongs to the Eunomian controversy. See *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relationship between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1975).

<sup>7</sup> It does not mean faith and culture as two realms, but rather the culture of faith as a different form of culture.

## A. Gregory's Authentic Source

Gregory lays the significance of a theoretical foundation on the Bible as “the divine word”<sup>8</sup> and “divine oracles.”<sup>9</sup> For him the Bible is the most important foundation in his treatises and in his life.<sup>10</sup> He is thoroughly dependent on “the testimony of Holy Scripture.”<sup>11</sup> Gregory himself was deeply acquainted with the Bible. Through reading his writings we can recognize that he was an eminent biblical scholar and at the same time a philosophical theologian too, as we have seen already.<sup>12</sup> His quotations of the Bible demonstrate how much the Bible was his particular and authentic source, and how he had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures in relation to the themes which he was treating. It indeed is not difficult to see that, for instance in, *De Perfectione (On Perfection)*,<sup>13</sup> he cites scripture about 131 times; and *De Vita Moysis*, he quotes as many as 201 biblical verses apart from Exodus and Numbers.<sup>14</sup> Moreover such quotations are not mere grafting without comprehension and interpretation of quotations, but they are well delivered keeping the original meaning of the cited verses in the context intended by Gregory. Further in *On the Holy Spirit* he states “We shall answer nothing new, nothing of our own invention, though they [*the followers of Macedonius*] challenge us to it; we

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Danielou, (ed.) *From Glory to Glory* (New York: Scribner, 1961), p. 124

<sup>9</sup> LOM, II. 316, p. 135.

<sup>10</sup> George S. Bebis, “Gregory of Nyssa DE Vita Moysis: A Philosophical and Theological Analysis,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. XII, no. 3, Fall 1967, p. 369. Hereafter it will refer to as PTA.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Sheffield Brightman, “Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley in Theological Dialogue on the Christian Life” Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston University, 1969, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> See this Chapter, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection, The Fathers of the Church: Saint Gregory of Nyssa – Ascetical Works* Vol. 58 (translation by Virginia Woods Callahan Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967), pp. 91-122.

<sup>14</sup> We exclude two books to account his bible-quotations because Gregory concentrates upon The Exodus and Numbers to interpret and explain the Life of Moses.

shall fall back upon the testimony in Holy Scripture.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, he bases himself thoroughly on the Bible as the authentic source in his writings. In that sense it is no wonder that Gregory was a great lover of the Bible. The scriptural word provides an indispensable foundation for Gregory of Nyssa.

## B. Comprehending and Interpreting Philippians 3:13-14

The principal text in *De Vita Moysis (the Life of Moses)* concerning Christian perfection in the life of virtue is Philippians 3:13 & 14, quoted 5 times.<sup>16</sup> In his other treatise, *On Perfection*, he explores Christian perfection as being ‘the essential activity of the true Christian imitating the nature of God’<sup>17</sup> without quoting Philippians 3:13 & 14 as core passages for his own theological thinking and form, and at the end he emphatically presents the idea of Christian perfection as the perpetual progress in connection with the subject “glory for glory.”<sup>18</sup> Gregory however did not add a peculiar comment on these texts themselves, even if he cites these verses in conjunction with the necessary context in which he emphasizes his ideas. We can see Gregory’s comprehension and interpretation of Philippians 3:13 & 14 in such contexts. With synthesizing all contexts where he quotes Philippians 3:13 & 14, we may know how he understood and interpreted them as keynotes, for his theoretical purpose.

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<sup>15</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.* Vol. 5 (Eds. By Philip Schaff and Henry Wace Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), p. 316. Italic is mine.

<sup>16</sup> Phil. 3:13 was cited 3 times and the rest was 2 times. Both verses were mostly mentioned not a whole verse but a part of the verse according to Gregory’s purpose. *On Perfection* emphasizes that Christian perfection never to stop growing in knowledge and goodness of God with 2 Cor. 3:18 “glory for glory,” without citing Phil. 3:13 (p. 122).

<sup>17</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18; Gregory of Nyssa *On Perfection*, op. cit., p. 122. Jean Danielou, *From Glory to Glory* p. 69.

Gregory's use of Philippians 3:13 in combination with the essential theme of Christian perfection was certainly not something new among the Cappadocian fathers such as Basil and Gregory of Nazianzen in his time.<sup>19</sup> Moreover he was not the first Christian theologian to speculate about the idea of contemplation and perfection in relation to philosophical language and terms, by interpreting Philippians 3:13.<sup>20</sup> If so it is natural that Gregory's theological conception and philosophical thought could come from his social and intellectual environment of his teachers and his theological heritage. Such form of theological thought was inherited through the influence of his older brother Basil as teacher.<sup>21</sup> Gregory's thought in connection with the subject of perfection in virtue was greatly influenced by earlier Church fathers<sup>22</sup> like Clement and Origen. Hence his theological and philosophical ideas harmonized with theirs, and a technical language was naturally constituted. One of the characteristic features of Gregory's Christian perfection is precisely "its philosophical contents and form of expression."<sup>23</sup>

To examine the background of the use of this verse in church fathers could allow us to determine how the fathers comprehended and interpreted this text of Philippians 3:13 & 14 in their theological writings to better understand Gregory's own theological idea and structure. Of course it does not mean that Gregory follows thoroughly their ways.

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<sup>19</sup> Ronald E. Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relationship between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1975), p. 243.

<sup>20</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.*, Vol. 5, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks Otis, "Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. XII (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 99-103.

<sup>23</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works*, p. 71.



With this heritage in mind, we attempt to interpret Phil. 3:13 which Gregory has thought as a keynote of “the prototype of a gradual process of purification of the soul.”<sup>24</sup>

Basil uses Philippians 3:13 in order to set forth his doctrine of the spiritual life in relation to the necessity of monastic life as follows:

Therefore let the beginning contain within itself a zealous striving forward toward a successful accomplishment. Indeed, that most noble athlete Paul, wishing us not to rest secure in the good deeds of our past lives, but to push forward daily, says: ‘Forgetting the things that are behind, and stretching forth myself to those that are before I press towards the mark, to the prize of the supernal vocation.’ For such is the whole life of man – not to be satisfied with what has been, but to be nurtured not so much on the past as on the future.<sup>25</sup>

Clement discusses the meaning of being perfect in conjunction with Philippians 3:12-14 as follows:

And it occurs to me to wonder how some dare call themselves perfect and Gnostics, with ideas of themselves above the apostle, inflated and boastful, when Paul even owned respecting himself, “not that I have already attained, or am already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ...but this one thing I do, forgetting the things that are behind, and, stretching forth to those that are before...And yet he reckons himself perfect, because he has been emancipated from his former life, and strives after the better life, not as perfect in knowledge, but as aspiring after perfection.”<sup>26</sup>

In his *Stromateis* the verse is alluded in combination with improvement of virtue.

The soul which is ever improving in the knowledge of virtue and the increase of righteousness, should obtain a better place in the universe, straining forward in each step of advancement towards the habit of impassibility, till it come to a perfect man to the excellence at once of knowledge and inheritance.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> PTA, p. 369.

<sup>25</sup> *Saint Basil: The Letters* (translated by Roy Joseph Deferrari London: The Loeb Classical Library, 1961-1962),

<sup>26</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, II (Grand Rapids: Reprinted 1967) P. 222.

<sup>27</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, II, p. 525.

Origen in his 17<sup>th</sup> Homily on Numbers alludes to Phil 3:13 in connection with a description of the spiritual life as a continual journeying.

If you want to know the difference between houses and tents, this is the distinction. A house has fixed foundations, is made to last and stands on a particular site. Tents are where people live when they are traveling and have not reached their journey's end... Those who devote themselves to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom have no end to their labors. How could there be an end, a limit, where the wisdom of God is concerned? The nearer a man comes to that wisdom, the deeper he finds it to be, and the more he probes into its depths, the more he sees that he will never be able to understand it or express it in words. Travelers, then, on the road to God's wisdom have no houses, because they have not yet reached their goal. They have tents, which they carry with them on their perpetual journeys, their never-ending travels; and the further they go, the more the road before them opens out, until it stretches to infinity. Everyone who has made any progress in knowledge or had any experience of it knows that when the soul attains to clear sight or knowledge of spiritual mysteries, she uses it like a tent and stays in it. When another of her discoveries comes up for inspection and she proceeds to consider this other thing, she picks up her tent and goes with it to a higher spot and, leaving her senses at peace, dwells there in spirit. Thus she finds fresh spiritual experiences accessible to her in consequence of her previous ones. So it is that pressing forward the whole time, she seems to be always on the road and under canvas.<sup>28</sup>

As we have seen, Basil, Clement and Origen's treatises all concentrate on one point marked by the word *epektasis* for the contemplative life. For them in their treatises the very significantly important term is *epektasis* in all cases. The *epektasis* is necessary to describe the conception of the perpetual ascent of Christian perfection. Such treatises surely contribute on a more important level to formulating Gregory's conception of Christian perfection.

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<sup>28</sup> Origen, *Homilies* XVII, 4 (translated by W. Mitchell London, 1955), pp. 303-304.

For Gregory the most significant word of these verses is “ἐπεκτεινόμενος”<sup>29</sup> (a verbal form of *epektasis*) which can translate as “stretching forward” to attain a profound goal.

In *De Vita Moysis* Gregory employs the main text Philippians 3:13 in order to distinguish clearly between the conception of perfection by the senses and perfection in the case of virtue as followings:

The perfection of everything that can be measured by the sense is marked off by certain definite boundaries. Quantity, for example, admits of both continuity and limitation, for every quantitative measure is circumscribed by certain limits proper to itself. The person who looks at a cubit or at the number ten knows that its perfection consists in the fact that it has both a beginning and an end. But in the case of virtue we have learned from the Apostle that its one limit of perfection is the fact that it has no limit. For that divine Apostle, great and lofty in understanding, ever running the course of virtue, never ceased *straining toward those things that are still to come*. Coming to a stop in the race was not safe for him. Why? Because no has Good a limit in its own nature but is limited by the presence of its opposite, as life is limited by death and light by darkness. And every good thing generally ends with all those things that are perceived to be contrary to the good.<sup>30</sup>

Here the Greek word which best sums up Gregory’s thought of Christian perfection in virtue is *epektasis* which means the continuous striving forward to deeper stages of the Christian life in virtue.<sup>31</sup> It is best understood within the context of Philippians that we find throughout Gregory’s work. This forward-looking view of the Christian life lies at the heart of Gregory’s theology in that it represents a movement of perpetual ascent towards God whom we can never attain.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Chang Whan Park, (ed.) *Greek-Korean Lexicon* (Seoul, Korea: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1965), p. 163; George Ricker Berry, *Berry’s Greek-English New Testament Lexicon with Synonyms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> LOM, I. 5, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> LOM, I. 7, p. 31. II. 219, p. 111.

<sup>32</sup> LOM, I. 8 & 9, p. 31.

Consequently Gregory's conception of perpetual ascent is captivated by the original notion of *epektasis*, which runs throughout most of his writings. In this conception he develops the continuous growth of Christian perfection pursuing the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, through putting forth the life of Moses as a model for our life,<sup>33</sup> and as "the pattern of the continuous spiritual progress."<sup>34</sup> So Christian perfection is "not marked off by limits,"<sup>35</sup> "nor stopped in place but it stretches out with the limitless."<sup>36</sup> Through constant changing in grace, Gregory indicates turning points and a calling of sanctification to transform us when pursuing Christian perfection.<sup>37</sup> This, for him, is the calling of a Christian who is ever moving toward Christ-likeness. With the rhetorical question, "what then are we taught through what has been said?"<sup>38</sup> Gregory greatly challenges us "to be called as the servants of God"<sup>39</sup> - "To have but one purpose in life: to be called servants of God by virtue of the lives we live."<sup>40</sup> All those who believe in God in Jesus should be making progress toward holiness just as "the life of Moses did ascend the highest mount of perfection"<sup>41</sup> in the participation of God's knowledge and goodness.<sup>42</sup> Christian life is a life of growth and maturity much like Jesus' life itself.<sup>43</sup> This is the intentional interpretation of Gregory with his understanding of *epektasis* as related to "the goal to win the prize for which God has

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<sup>33</sup> LOM, I. 15, p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> PTA, p. 369.

<sup>35</sup> LOM, I. 8, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> LOM, I. 7, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> LOM, II. 320, p. 137.

<sup>38</sup> LOM, II. 315, p. 135.

<sup>39</sup> LOM, II. 315, p. 135.

<sup>40</sup> LOM, II. 315, p. 135.

<sup>41</sup> LOM, II. 319, p. 317.

<sup>42</sup> See *METOYΣIA ΘEOY: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* by David L. Balas, S. O. Cist (Romae: Libreria Herder, 1966).

<sup>43</sup> Eph. 4:15 "speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." It is quoted from the New International Version (NIV), 1984.

called” the saint “heavenward in Christ Jesus”<sup>44</sup>, according to Philippians 3:13 and 14, and to the metaphor of the most noble athlete. Gregory’s interpretation of *epektasis* invites a Christian’s life to become a “purpose driven life”<sup>45</sup> as “having but one purpose in life.” Philippians 3:13 -14 as “the core of Gregory’s spiritual theology and mysticism”<sup>46</sup> provides a creative spirituality and power to Gregory himself participating unceasingly in the knowledge of God by grace. Gregory’s spirituality of the *epektasis* is a long obedience in the same direction and a vital resource to renew our reality in the world. Furthermore such a conception of *epektasis* makes us acknowledge the grace of God, in Jesus Christ, that reverses our lives’ being in despair for not having a goal as “the servant of God.” It is the motivated power to go forth into the future life. In that respect Gregory seems to demonstrate a purpose-driven interpretation toward an unceasing growth in God’s knowledge and grace, especially in giving “proof of his victory over the other,”<sup>47</sup> and “making him [Moses] safe in an ark so that when he is given to the stream he will not be drowned.”<sup>48</sup> Here Malherbe and Ferguson speak of Gregory’s central theme of the whole treatise.<sup>49</sup> Seeing their footnote about Phil. 3:13 in that case I was really amazed. But the action of Moses’ mother in placing him “safe in an ark” is significant for the essential thought of Gregory on ascending perfection because it speaks of the “progress

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<sup>44</sup> Phil. 3:14 (NIV).

<sup>45</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here for?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2002). This book is a guide to a 40-day spiritual journey that will enable us to discover the answer to life’s more important question: What on earth am I here for? By the end of this journey we will know God’s purpose for our life and will understand the big picture. See *On Perfection* Gregory of Nyssa, op. cit., p. 95. Gregory speaks of “keeping with your purpose in life” in relation to perfection (p. 95).

<sup>46</sup> Albert C. Geljon, *Philonian Exegesis in Gregory of Nyssa’s De Vita Moysis* (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2002), p.66.

<sup>47</sup> LOM, I, 5, p. 56.

<sup>48</sup> LOM, I, 7, p. 56. Malherbe and Ferguson note here an allusion to Phil. 3:13.

<sup>49</sup> See notes 11 on book 1, p. 149.

in pressing on to the Good,”<sup>50</sup> without “disobedience to the divine will.”<sup>51</sup> Perpetual Christian perfection is not a mere change of position, nor a simple mutation in the spiritual journey, it is a real transforming desire, created “by the renewing of mind,”<sup>52</sup> to imitate the image of God much more and participate into the knowledge of God in the grace of Jesus. Such a dynamic transformation tends to recreate in the faculty of soul a spiritual “gene” receptive to “photo-taxis”<sup>53</sup>, which is the tendency to follow definite directions given by the incarnate Word and toward God as the Source of light. The spiritual photo-taxis may create an ascending spiral to grow in love as a particular grace in Jesus, step by step, without end. To create a motivation of a renewed heart toward the next better stage is a real function of the word, *epektasis*, in conjunction with Gregory’s systematic notion about perfection as being actually the way to Christian perfection. In the interpretation of Philippians 3:13 Gregory’s idea of Christian perfection is absolutely not the conception of “a radical and an instantaneous work” but that of “a gradual work.” He puts a new wine into a new wineskin by accepting a gradual work of Christian perfection as dynamic spiral structure in Christian virtuous life. The word *epektasis* in the hermeneutic of Philippians 3:13, for Gregory, indicates the unending longing of the soul toward God. thus the word plays a key role in the treatise<sup>54</sup>

Briefly, Gregory’s use of Philippians 3:13 as a main source for the genuine conception of Christian perfection comes, from the usage of the verse in Origen’s Homilies on Numbers more than from anywhere else.

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<sup>50</sup> LOM, II. 238, p. 116.

<sup>51</sup> LOM, I. 22, p. 59.

<sup>52</sup> Rom. 12:2.

<sup>53</sup> It actually has a biological meaning as migration toward the source of light in the organization of plant. But I remold photo-taxis in order to apply its principle to the law of spiritual growth as the perpetual perfection.

<sup>54</sup> LOM, II. 225, p. 113. LOM, 242, p. 117.

## 2. The Nature of Christian perfection

According to Gregory's "forward-moving system" as a theory in the virtuous life we may raise more questions than answers: what is the real perfection which Gregory truly wants and deserves to express in his life? How is it possible? Is it a philosophical theory rather than a practical one? What kind of a Christian perfection does he build upon Philippians 3:13 and 14, through the examples of Moses' life.

### A. Christian Perfection as Perpetual Progress

In book I of the *De Vita Moysis* Gregory sets forth an idea of Christian perfection as a dynamic spiral creating the imitative desire for God.<sup>55</sup> In fact the conception of the spiral structural system, as constantly knowing God, in his treatises on Christian perfection is repeatedly presented everywhere else in the framework of his ascetical theology.<sup>56</sup> However Jaeger says that "Christian theology...started at the moment when Christianity began to take issue with the ideas of the Platonic philosophy of the time and

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<sup>55</sup> LOM, I, 4, p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> His ascetic writings as a *cantata* are in general as follows: *De instituto Christiano, On the Christian Profession, On Perfection, On Virginity, the Life of Macrina and De Vita Moysis*. Bebis admits *De Vita Moysis* as an ascetic life. Brightman classifies *On Perfection and De Vita Moysis* as the Exegetical category (his Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1969, pp. 81-82). Malherbe treats *the Life of Moses* as the mystical aspects as followings: *On the Lord's Prayer, On the Beatitudes, On the Titles of the Psalms, Homilies on Ecclesiastes and On the Canticle of Canticles* (LOM, p. 2). In my opinion in order to classify in detail, the *Life of Moses* will be treated as Gregory's hermeneutical-ascetic work because of maximizing ascetic practices through "hermeneutical conversion" as transforming the conception of Christian perfection as dynamic from a philosophical conception of perfection as static. W. Jaeger and George S. Bebis admits *De Vita Moysis* as the ascetic life. See "Gregory of Nyssa's "De Vita Moysi": A Philosophical and Theological Analysis" by Geroge S. Bebis, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* Vol. XII, no. 3, Fall 1967, 369.

to take on the form of dogma, doctrine and system.<sup>57</sup>...Theological and philosophical evidence coincide.”<sup>58</sup> Here we can acknowledge that Gregory’s attempt to conceptualize Christian perfection demonstrates his debt to the Hellenistic philosophical-cultural life<sup>59</sup> as the main current trend of his age.<sup>60</sup> His theology reflects Hellenic striving for a philosophic understanding of what we believe.<sup>61</sup> Hence, in that sense, Bebis says, “Gregory attempts to bridge the existing gap which separates Greek philosophy and Christian faith.”<sup>62</sup> Yet Gregory sought to shift the focus for understanding the tension between the growth as dynamic and crisis as static in relation with the intended perfection.

### 1) Hermeneutical Conversion<sup>63</sup>: From Philosophical Conception to Christian Conception

As to the relation between philosophy and theology according to Gregory, Harold Cherniss’ *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*<sup>64</sup> is still valuable. Cherniss states in his book, that “the strongest link between Plato and Gregory and the most important characteristic of the system of the latter for the history of Philosophy is the acceptance by

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<sup>57</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macrius* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1965), p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> PTA, p. 369.

<sup>60</sup> John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, op. cit., pp. 57-63. Indeed philosophical conceptions and philosophical categories have become property in the age of the early great Fathers of the Church, especially “Justine claimed with power and clarity that he had found in Christianity “the only sure and profitable philosophy. Similarly, clement of Alexandria called the Gospel “the true philosophy.”...Among the early examples of these, Origen is certainly outstanding” (pp. 58-59).

<sup>61</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works*, p. 73.

<sup>62</sup> PTA, p. 372.

<sup>63</sup> The term “Hermeneutical conversion” is not my particular thought but Charles Kannengiesser’s idea. See “the Church as Interpretative Community” *the Coursepack, THEO 655 – Christology* (ed. Charles Kannengiesser Montreal: Concordia University, 2004), pp. 11-17.

<sup>64</sup> Harold Fredrik Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1930).



him of the fundamental metaphysical ideas of Plato and his constant adherence thereto.”<sup>65</sup> Although Gregory made considerable use of various Hellenistic schools<sup>66</sup> as vehicles to express Christian teaching, he does not accept the Platonic notion of perfection<sup>67</sup> that is static as opposed to a dynamic movement, in other words, contradicting a transforming spiral. In a word, Plato’s “static ideal” in the ascetic life is not consonant with “the kind of dynamism in the systematic interpretation of the economy.”<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, in order to stress the importance of theoria and imitation of divine perfection in the opening treatise of *De Vita Moysis*, Gregory here slightly teases those who rivet their gaze upon the charioteers and mime their gestures, “leaning forward and flailing the air with their outstretched hands instead of with a whip,”<sup>69</sup> as if they might help speed the teams along. That statement seems to depart from the Platonic conception of perfection, and to formalize his own conception to strain constantly for the “prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus”<sup>70</sup> in the divine race. To keep with his own notion of a continual pilgrimage, Gregory imports significantly the word *epektasis* in his treatise. By using the conception of *epektasis*’ found in Philippians 3:13 in combination with the notion of Christian perfection, Gregory breaks with a strong philosophical position – namely that ‘stability is perfection and that alteration is for the worse.’<sup>71</sup> Balas calls that a “Christian transposition of the Platonic tradition.”<sup>72</sup> In that sense Gregory’s essential motifs in his ascetic treatises are “theological and therefore his Platonism is no longer Platonic but

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>66</sup> PTA, pp. 369, 371. For Gregory employs Platonic terminology in presenting and explaining his theological thought.

<sup>67</sup> LOM, I. 1, p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2000), p. 127.

<sup>69</sup> LOM, I. 1, p. 29.

<sup>70</sup> Philippians 3:14. It was quoted from King James Version (KJV). LOM, I. 1, p. 29.

<sup>71</sup> LOM, II. 2, p. 55. See a note #2 of Book II.

<sup>72</sup> David L. Balas, *ΜΕΤΟΨΕΙΑ ΘΕΟΥ*, op. Cit., p. 9.

Christian.”<sup>73</sup> Consequently, he goes beyond the Hellenistic philosophical notion and purpose in perfection, and then envisages the conception of perfection in a Christian position – that “the perfection of human nature consists in its very growth in goodness.”<sup>74</sup> Gregory sees perfection itself in terms of constant progress for which the mark is “*epektasis*.”<sup>75</sup> For Gregory the nature of perfection is really not “a static becoming,” nor “a stagnant aspect,” neither “an unmoved system,” but “a dynamic becoming,” “a constant transforming structure and system.” For “just as the end of life is the beginning of death, so also stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil.... For it has been pointed out that what is marked off by boundaries is not virtue.”<sup>76</sup> Namely, according to the nature of his perfection theory, the static perfection cannot become any more perfection. Since “good has no limit in its own nature,”<sup>77</sup> when the same principle applies to perfection in virtue, Gregory’s understanding of Christian perfection is the constant ascending and limitless transformation until participation into nothing other than God.<sup>78</sup> In consequence, for Gregory progress of Christian perfection in virtuous life is never-ending. His creative spiral-conception of perfection in virtuous life is his most notable contribution to theology.

## 2) Distinct Conceptions Between Latin and Greek Terms

Particularly today, the very name “perfection” seems to draw the scoffs of many. This doctrine seems to become a kind of fossil in the history of Christian doctrine. Hence

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<sup>73</sup> PTA, p. 373.

<sup>74</sup> LOM, I, 10, p. 31.

<sup>75</sup> Jacques Fontaine et Charles Kannengiesser (editors), *EPEKTASIS: Melanges Patristiques Offerts Au Cardinal Jean Danielou* (No Place: Beauchesne, 1972).

<sup>76</sup> LOM, I, 6, p. 30.

<sup>77</sup> LOM, I, 5, p. 30; LOM, I, 7, p. 31.

<sup>78</sup> LOM, I, 7, p. 31.

when people (even many Christians or especially as an internet generation) hear the words Christian and perfection together, the word “impossible” immediately jumps to mind. However, in connection with such phenomena, James I. Packer, in his book, *God’s Plans for You*,<sup>79</sup> states that ‘contemporary Christians lost the way of sanctification’ as Christian perfection. Here we acknowledge the necessity to rediscover the road toward the profound Christian perfection that Jesus and his true “disciples”<sup>80</sup> teach in the Bible. We distinguish the conception of perfection when using a Latin word or a Greek word for our particular purpose which we establish a theological dialogue between two theologians.

### i. Latin Word *perfectio*

On the one hand, the word ‘perfection’ driven from the Latin word *perfectio* is basically related to the perfection of the “gods” and “the goddesses” in the sense of mighty<sup>81</sup> from beginning. It means one who is simultaneously perfection in all regards – in temper, thought, word, and deed related to the life of one’s self and that of others. In that sense perfection is commonly a divine attribute indicating the real mighty power of the gods.<sup>82</sup> In general, because of the ultimate religiosity of the human being, most people have been used to this conception or they have relatively admitted this conception when

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<sup>79</sup> James Innell Packer, *God’s Plans for You* (translated into Korean by Ok Bai Chung, Seoul, Korea: Tyrannus Press, 2002), pp. 185-195.

<sup>80</sup> Here the meaning of disciples is not a narrow sense that includes Jesus’ twelve disciples only but rather a broad sense that contents all those who truly believe in and faithfully follow Jesus. In fact, the meaning of disciples in the New Testament was transited, as I stated. There are many cases in the New Testaments, especially Acts. See Acts 6:1-2 “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing,...So the Twelve (Jesus’ disciples)gathered all the disciples (who sincerely believe in and truthfully follow) together...” There are Acts 6:7, 9:10, 11:29, 18:23, and so on.

<sup>81</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (trans. & ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VIII, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 68; Steven W. Manskar, *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley’s A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Nashville, TN.: Discipleship Resources, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> Bromiley op. cit., p. 68.

they hear talk about perfection, even if they live in different cultures. Essentially, in that sense, human beings are not capable of attaining such perfection because human beings are 'open beings,' not 'closed being' and can be easily changed and altered. That means humankind is not the perfect Being as the Originator, but an imperfect being as a reflected being, not the real essential Being. Gregory does not completely exclude the Latin conception in grafting Christian identical perfection, because he says as following:

Three things characterize the life of Christ: action, word, thought. For thought is the beginning of every word; second, after the thinking, is the word which reveals through the voice the thought coined in the soul; and action has the third rank after mind and thought, bringing what is thought to action.... the graceful bearing of our life coincides with our thoughts which are put into motion in accordance with Christ. This, therefore, is perfection in the Christian life in my judgment, namely, the participation of one's soul and speech and activities in all of the names by which Christ is signified, so that the perfect holiness....is taken upon oneself in the whole body and soul and spirit."<sup>83</sup>

Rather here could be given the possibility of "an ideal becoming", by seeing the restoration of the image of God (*imago Dei*) in human beings. Yet he does not accept an ideal becoming in his own theory without understanding that the human being's full salvation is related to the conception of Christian perfection as "perpetual ascent." He looks for a really practical and devotional identity for Christian perfection in the divine race.

## ii. Greek Word τέλειος

The word perfection comes from the Greek words, τέλειος and τελειόσις. When these words appear in the scripture the English word frequently used to convey their

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<sup>83</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, op. cit., pp. 120-121.

meaning is *perfect, perfection* or *to be made perfect* in the sense of “completeness of Christian character.”<sup>84</sup> Here, we will treat only a few cases for our special purpose.

In the New Testament the word τέλειος often means as “totality” in conjunction with God’s love and goodness, “whole” in connection with the will of God, and “undivided” relationship with God.<sup>85</sup> When these meanings are applied to human beings these meanings distinctly manifest the “concrete condition” of human beings as having “the heart” toward God.<sup>86</sup> In some sense the word τέλειος in link with the conception of the perfect man in philosophy conveys an ethical meaning in a value-system.<sup>87</sup> Perfect man (τέλειος άνθρωπος), is one who has gradually attained “firm and true views, insight and philosophical knowledge, and goodness”<sup>88</sup> in the views of philosophers, when one once stays in God’s proximity and reaches up to “true Being”<sup>89</sup> alone who is ó τέλειος (the perfect) as “the self-sufficient and most perfect God.”<sup>90</sup> Namely, the word τέλειος means gradually to participate into the knowledge and goodness of God. That is to imitate gradually and truly the nature of God and to be assimilated to God. In that way Gregory grafts the meaning of the Greek τέλειος upon Christian perfection as the gradual spiral system as followings: “We are assimilated to Christ...For we are no longer lords of

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<sup>84</sup> Berry op. cit., p. 148; See Matthew 5:48; LOM, I. 9, p. 31.

<sup>85</sup> Bromiley op. cit., pp. 73-74. See Matthew 5:48, 19:20 and Col. 4:12. We should understand Mat. 5:48 in the context of love for enemies and then can fully comprehend what Jesus really says in these sentences “Therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect.” The rhetorical questions, “Are not even the tax collectors doing that? and Do not even pagans do that?” mean that they do love “in part.” Consequently the disciples of Jesus must be “total” in their love, even their enemies. Especially as to the question of young man, “What do I lack yet?” in Matthew 19:20, Jesus answered, “if you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor.” the rich young man heard that and went away sad. The rich young man is not “undivided” in the relation to God. Here the meaning of “being perfect” should be an “undivided” relationship with God.

<sup>86</sup> Bromiley op. cit., pp. 73-74.

<sup>87</sup> Bromiley op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>88</sup> Bromiley op. cit., p. 69. Especially this is the case of Plato.

<sup>89</sup> LOM, II. 23, p. 60.

<sup>90</sup> Bromiley op. cit., p. 69.

ourselves, but the possessions of Him who, having bought us, is the Master of His own. Truly, the will of the Master will be the law of our life.”<sup>91</sup>

Another meaning of this term, τέλειος in the usage of the cultural-biological prospect is suggested as “full-grown” or “mature” or “adult” in connection with human beings and animals.<sup>92</sup> Such interpretation of perfection in human beings describes a growth of character within a meaningful purpose so that it remains “ethically” limited to the positive usage in a value-system.<sup>93</sup> This conception is commonly used in both non-biblical realm and Biblical realm. However in the notion of “its very growth in goodness”<sup>94</sup> Gregory would accept the particular conception of a “maturing” in recreating Christian perfection in order “to make progress within the realm” of what he seeks.

Consequently, as a result of the theological revival called Middle-Platonism during the early centuries<sup>95</sup> of Christianity, the more personal relationship between humans and God in Jesus as the conception of Christian perfection was able to be related to a doctrine of salvation based on interior piety as the Hellenic theological categories. The true image of Christian piety in the personal relationship with God creates a fresh perpetual conception of perfection: “Moses has ascended above all created things.”<sup>96</sup> That

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<sup>91</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, p. 104.

<sup>92</sup> Bromiley op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>93</sup> Bromiley op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>94</sup> LOM, I, 10, p. 31.

<sup>95</sup> I mean these are 1<sup>st</sup> to the beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, just prior to the Edict of Milan. For by proclama of Constantinople the great the church has been rapidly expanded in quantity but in the quality of faith has been gradually decreased. During the primary centuries the quality of faith was excellently forged through various persecutions. The trained faith as the experiencing God through the word and prayer had gained an intimate relationship with God, by professing personal faith and inspiration of salvation, in any critical situation. Such persons had pursued to follow the way of God and to grow in grace of Jesus. In that respect Christian perfection could be developed.

<sup>96</sup> R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology: An Historical Study of the Christian Ideal for the Present life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 152.

is actually the goal to make the on-going ascent a form of perfection, which Gregory enthusiastically pursues in his own treatises as *De Vita Moysis* and *De Perfectione*.

For Gregory himself *theoria* as an allegorical hermeneutics is not “simply the Platonic condition of mind; neither is it the Aristotelian definition of the philosopher’s life. For him, *theoria* springs from the religious and historical experience of the Church and has Biblical roots (hence the life of Moses as a prototype of the Christian contemplation), and aims at the salvation of the whole man in Christ and through Christ.”<sup>97</sup> Gregory does look at the nature of the profound Christian perfection as not an abstract, static, speculative condition of the human soul, but as the scope of the ever deepening participation of the knowledge of God in Christ. Gregory adopts a real meaning and an ultimate goal of Christian perfection in Moses’ life as “the prototype of Christ,” and he applies the principle by remolding it in his cultural contextualization to his own treatises. Here we can recognize how Gregory’s conception of Christian perfection could be interwoven in two realms, one being the Greek philosophical culture, and the other biblical contexts. In his treatises, he redevelops the conception of Christian perfection under the dynamic relationship between harmony and strong tension among the Latin term, the Greek word, and Scriptural language.

## B. Attainment of Christian Perfection

Presenting as a central theme, the perfection of human nature consisting in its very growth on God’s goodness,<sup>98</sup> Gregory tries to establish the necessity for an evenly balanced role between the two factors of divine grace and human effort in Christian

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<sup>97</sup> PTA, p. 387.

<sup>98</sup> LOM, I. 10, p. 31.

ascetic perfection. He denies on principle the conception of a perfection that could be attained by human effort alone.<sup>99</sup> He postulates a strict reciprocity between the effect of grace and human works. For the grace of God cannot enter a soul that rejects salvation as an ascetic new life in Jesus Christ, and the power of human virtue is not by itself sufficient to elevate the form of divine life, if the soul that does not partake in the grace of Jesus Christ. Even those who are justified by faith in the grace of Jesus cannot attain the perfection which is the Divine Good, for this good, as the attribute of God, "has no limit."<sup>100</sup> In that sense Gregory clarifies distinctly, "It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection, since perfection is not marked off by limits."<sup>101</sup> However he also opens the gate of some other side of perfection as follows:

We should show great diligence not to fall away from the perfection which is attainable but to acquire as much as is possible: To that extent let us make progress within the realm of what we seek. For the perfection of human nature consists in its very growth in goodness.<sup>102</sup>

He pursues not only "the eternal process" here but also at the same time "the degree" of perfection as a step of perpetual process. The eternal progress is attainable not "immediately at a moment" but "gradually" for a long time, as is shown in the life of Moses. Moreover the degree of perfection is not a static state but a dynamic state to move forth through the Holy Spirit. In that sense, "the conception of the degree" of perfection in Gregory's works is a very significant element, and should be emphasized. In common, however, most scholars who study Gregory and his work seem to have the tendency to ignore this point.

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<sup>99</sup> LOM, I, 8, p. 31.

<sup>100</sup> LOM, I, 6, p. 31.

<sup>101</sup> LOM, I, 8, p. 31.

<sup>102</sup> LOM, I, 10, p. 31.



According to Gregory the Holy Spirit<sup>103</sup> was the means of the incarnation - “he became the stonecutter of his own flesh, which was carved by the divine finger, for ‘the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin and the power of the Most High overshadowed her.’<sup>104</sup> ...The Holy Spirit is called “finger” in many places by Scripture.”<sup>105</sup> But now “grace”, as being not found in men, “...flourishes through the Spirit.”<sup>106</sup> “The foremost part of the soul” can certainly reach “the depths of God” “by the Spirit.”<sup>107</sup> Grace and the Holy Spirit in ascent perfection perform the role of link between steps or stages. For him the Holy Spirit is the only criterion of perfection as the “eternal progress”<sup>108</sup> that he recognizes. In consequence, the classical concept of perfection in achievement is challenged by the redefinition of Gregory’s perfection, through “hermeneutical conversion.”<sup>109</sup> Hence the goal of perfection in virtue is now different: Gregory of Nyssa replaces the old static conception as an unchanging state with the creative-dynamic conception of a continuous progress in relation to spiritual reality in virtue. Gregory’s Christian perfection is the idea that there is a higher dynamic-faithful state and assimilation to God than that of mere faith itself. For Gregory the progress of Christian perfection in virtuous life is never-ending in this world and the world to come. Precisely

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<sup>103</sup> Gregory mentions rarely the Holy Spirit in *De Vita Moysis*. See Book II, 181 & 187 pp. 100, 102. But he constitutes the doctrine of the Holy Spirit by the treatise against the followers of Macedonius who was a very eminent Semi-Arian doctor. On the Holy Spirit, he confessedly states “the Holy Spirit is of the same rank as the Father and the Son, so that there is no difference between them in anything to be thought or named, that devotion can ascribe to a Divine nature. We confess that, save His being contemplated as with peculiar attributes in regard of Person, the Holy Spirit is indeed from God, and of the Christ, according to Scripture.... We shall answer nothing new, nothing of our own invention, though they challenge us to it; we shall fall back upon the testimony in Holy Scripture about the Spirit” (315-16). See *On the Holy Spirit Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.* Vol. 5 (Eds. By Philip Schaff and Henry Wace Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995).

<sup>104</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>105</sup> LOM, II. 216, p. 111.

<sup>106</sup> LOM, II. 187, p. 102.

<sup>107</sup> LOM, II. 215, p. 110.

<sup>108</sup> LOM, II. 219, p. 111.

<sup>109</sup> Charles Kannengiesser, “the Church as Interpretative Community” *the Coursepack, THEO 655 – Christology* (ed. Charles Kannengiesser Montreal: Concordia University, 2004), pp. 11-17.

speaking, Gregory's 'eternal progress' of Christian perfection would be really one of "hermeneutic conversion." Gregory's hermeneutical conversion creates a profoundly new status for the profound Christian ideal of perfection in his time.

### 3. Gregory's Christology on Christian Perfection: *De Vita Moysis* and *De Perfectione*

Since the post-resurrection event of Jesus the Christian Community had focused on the earthly life of Jesus and work of Christ.<sup>110</sup> The person and work of Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of God's elect inevitably relate to God's redemption of mankind. The study and interpretation about the person and work of Jesus Christ, that is, Christology as "the messiah network"<sup>111</sup>, is inevitably related to the three-dimensional titles which the "triple office [*munus triplex*]" : "King," "Prophet," and "Priest"<sup>112</sup> presents. The Messiah network describes a tendency focused on the possibility of discerning a potential Christology in the works, the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, with scope of a functional Christology. The relationship between Jesus and Christ in contemporary Christology seems to be strained – sometimes to the breaking point.<sup>113</sup> Bebis maintains however that a significantly important aspect of Gregory's *De Vita Moysis* is "the Christological and

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<sup>110</sup> Acts 2:36b – God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (NIV).

<sup>111</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, "Neo-Platonism in Contemporary Christian Spirituality," *Neo-Platonism and Contemporary Thought Part Two* (ed.) R. Baine Harris, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002, pp. 363-381), p. 365. The word Messiah means "the anointed One." In the time of the Old Testament Kings, (Judge 9:8), priests (Exodus 28:41) and prophets (1Kings 19:16) were anointed.

<sup>112</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1983), Book 2, Chapter 17, pp. 425-432; Calvin demonstrates beautifully Christ's threefold office "in name only, not in reality." It is a solid ground that "the office which he [Christ] received from the Father consist of three parts" (p. 425); Gerald O'Collins S.J. *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 26.

<sup>113</sup> Schubert M. Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1982). He gives an example of divorced Christology: "Christology from below" – grounding the christological assertion in Jesus' unique self-understanding; "Christology from above" – grounding the christological formulation in experience of Jesus by faith community (p. 66).

soteriological basis and orientation.”<sup>114</sup> Hence “through the Christological and soteriological perspective” *De Vita Moysis* and *De Perfectione* as ascetical treatises could be better comprehended and evaluated.<sup>115</sup> Therefore Gregory’s central and most significant concern in *De Vita Moysis* is related to the most profound Christian ideal of perfection by presenting Christ “hidden and veiled” in the Old Testament through Moses as “the prototype” of Jesus Christ, and that by the methods of a typological hermeneutics and an allegorical exegesis. In *De Perfectione* Gregory attempts to propose how a Christian can achieve perfection in line with the very significant names of Christ that the evangelists of the New Testament describe in their writings. Thus perfecting our life is becoming “a participant in the revered name.”<sup>116</sup> From that point of view he imparts the names of the divine Master for all virtues in conjunction with the life of Christ, and then he defines what Christian perfection is in relation to the significant names of Christ as follows:

This, therefore, is perfection in the Christian life in my judgment, namely, the participation of one’s soul and speech and activities in all of the names by which Christ is signified, so that the perfect holiness, according to the eulogy of Paul, is taken upon oneself in the whole body and soul and spirit, continuously safeguarded against being mixed with evil.<sup>117</sup>

We will examine how Gregory understands Christology in his ascetic treatises in relation to the profoundly “eternal progress” as Christian perfection, and then how his Christological comprehension really affects on the spiral structural system for a constant

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<sup>114</sup> PTA, p. 375.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>117</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, op. cit., p. 121.

progress as Christian identical perfection which he recognizes in *De Vita Moysis* and *De Perfectione*.

### A. Christology in *De Perfectione*

In spite of its abstract title, it is a fact that one of this work's characteristics is to be thoroughly permeated by Christ, the great Model of perfection, since the central portion of this treatise was composed of a detailed analysis of about thirty references to Christ in the writings of evangelists and of Paul, the Apostle who knew more than any other person who Christ is.<sup>118</sup> This treatise has highly been regarded "as Gregory's Christology because he provides us with a systematic commentary on each of the terms"<sup>119</sup> that Paul the Apostle applied to Christ in his letters. The Christological character of this treatise concentrates upon the significance of the name of Christ for ourselves as we are stretching out toward the goodness of God in Jesus (Philippians 3:13). According to how the evangelists of the New Testament name Jesus Christ in their letters, Gregory attempts to demonstrate the diverse Christological names and meanings.<sup>120</sup> Each Christological name provides for us a certain indication of "the unspeakable greatness of the gift."<sup>121</sup> Here we can participate in the royal power of Christ and then be sharers of the greatest and the most divine names. Hence Gregory speaks of "our life" as the

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<sup>118</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, p. 94.

<sup>119</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfectione*, p. 94.

<sup>120</sup> Gregory represents about 30 names of Christ in *On Perfection* (pp. 96-97) as follows: "the power of God and the wisdom of God, peace, light inaccessible, sanctification and redemption, great high priest, Passover, a propitiation, the brightness of glory and the image of substance, maker of the world, spiritual food, spiritual drink and spiritual rock, water, foundation of faith, corner stone, image of the invisible God, great God, head of the body of the church, the firstborn of every creature, first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep, firstborn from the dead, firstborn among many brethren, mediator between God and men, only-begotten Son, crowned with glory and honor, Lord of glory, beginning of being, King of justice and King of peace, and ineffable king of all, having the power of the kingdom."

<sup>121</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, p. 97.

continuous growth in the particular knowledge of God in Jesus and he calls it “a testimony of it [*the name of Christ*].”<sup>122</sup> For his name is in keeping with his own nature. If “the man of God is to be perfect”<sup>123</sup> it is necessary for the Christian life to illustrate all the interpretative titles signifying Christ. The mark of a true Christian is to be one on the road to the pure and divine life, for lovers of virtue represent a pledge of all the good qualities combined with Christ.

In his treatise *De Perfectione*, Gregory presents his own Christology, beginning with the profound Christian identical perfection with “Our good Master, Jesus Christ.”<sup>124</sup> In ‘our good Master, Jesus Christ’ that refers to both, the person and the work of Jesus, we as believers in Jesus have the particular “authoritative name” of “Christian,”<sup>125</sup> when we recognize the true significance of the name of Christ. “In our prayers when we call upon the Lord of all by this name we may comprehend the conception that we are taking into our soul.”<sup>126</sup> By these names, as the good Master or the Lord, we can express clearly what sort of person we should be. “For he [Paul, the Apostle], most of all, knew what Christ is, and he indicated by what he did the kind of person named for Him, imitating Him.”<sup>127</sup> Hence Gregory does not separate the person and work of Jesus Christ, but rather has in mind the completely whole Being as the accord of the person and work of

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<sup>122</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, p. 98. Italic is mine.

<sup>123</sup> 2 Timothy 3:17; Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, p. 99.

<sup>124</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, op. cit., p. 95

<sup>125</sup> The term Christian given at Antioch was first appeared in Acts 11:26 in the New Testament. Here the very significant importance is the Christian which means “those who follow Christ” as his official title, not Jesuits which means those who follow Jesus as a personal proper name. We should ask “Who gave such name to disciples at Antioch?” According to IDB (*The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*) that name could be given not by other Christians but by “Roman polices as officials in Antioch or by Roman populace in the sixties” (Vol. 1, p. 572). Such phenomena may be arisen by “their cultural practice” that is preferred “the official title” to “a personal proper name,” as the same way as Minor Asian cultural practice. Yet Christians themselves did not use commonly that name until the second century. They preferred “disciples,” “brothers,” “saints,” and “believers” rather than “Christians.”

<sup>126</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, p. 96.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

Jesus Christ, by quoting the statement of Paul, even though Christ is used as a title, not a proper name.

Of course we cannot exclude the possibility that Gregory deals differently with Christology in this teleological treatise because here he has a peculiar goal to assist one for stretching out the perpetual perfection. Gregory, in *De Perfectione*, does not focus on questions of the essential deity of Jesus Christ conveying the most important messianic categories of the classic patristic formulation as the Son of God and the Son of man with which we should necessarily treat in Christology.<sup>128</sup> Instead he prefers his own Christological terminology related profoundly to a conception of Christian perfection understood in line with the Christological titles. It is one of his Christological emphases to create a motivation of the soul looking for the goodness and knowledge of God through the spiritual partaking, not an ontological partaking; He does not refer directly to very significant confessional titles as the Son of man, the Son of God and so on. At this point, his Christological treatise of *De Perfectione* would be missing certain crucial aspects that the evangelists focus on in the New Testament.

If it is so, why does Gregory not elaborate upon these important categories of the classical formation of messiahship here? As I have slightly touched on before, there is the question of context. It may be inevitably related to the development of Christology, to his motivation and purpose to write this treatise, to the root of messianic Christological connotation, and to one who receives this treatise. Here most of all we should recognize

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<sup>128</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1996), p. 13. Dunn insists the title Son of God in Christology is significance as being of “inescapable importance” (p. 13).

that this discourse is described as “a letter characterizing the true Christian”<sup>129</sup>; a receiver of the letter could be the faithful, beyond having a mere faith. The receiver seeks the guidance towards what is good through deeds rather than words. In that way Gregory sets forth a true significance of the name of Christ whom a genuine Christian must imitate and follow to participate in knowledge, goodness and grace of God. Such contexts shall differently focus on the exploration of who Jesus is and what he does. So in this treatise Gregory emphasized the more practical and dynamically devout life than a theoretical or a political messiahship in connection with the spiral structural system of perfection. Practical and dynamic devout life is indeed proper to the context of liturgical worship, and spiritual formation. Here the primary focus is not on the quest of meaning, but rather on the celebration of the infinite divine beauty through the practical contemplation and liturgical concerns to access a privileged communication of the essence of God. As to the root of messianic Christological connotations, on the other hand, we must mention the confessional Christological phrases are necessarily related to the terms and meanings of the political climate of that time, especially lord and sons of god.<sup>130</sup> These terminologies were not particularly designed for the Kingship of Jesus only on the political level in the world, but rather for the greatest political rulers as the sovereignty or the superior to establish greatly their power in their nations and other regions.<sup>131</sup> However Christians and the Church might adopt such conceptions later for the special purpose and properly apply to the messianic concept of Jesus in Christian environments and Church’s peculiar context. Hence there is a high possibility that Gregory may neglect to present the

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<sup>129</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, p. 93.

<sup>130</sup> Gerhard Kittel, (ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. III (translator and editor by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1984), p. 1041; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>131</sup> Gerald O’Collins S.J. *Christology*, p. 139.

elements and images of socio-political messiahship as the cultural-horizontal Christology in connection with a particular purpose of Christian perfection in this discourse because he prefers to elaborate the profoundly spiritual devout level in creative Christological terminologies to other cultural sense or level. In brief, Gregory's considerations on Christ's names primarily center on the progressive partaking in mystical union with God as a process of continuous progress and growth. For all that, it does not mean that he excludes a social sanctification of true Christians in the world, but rather that he insists upon the importance of aspects of the Christology for the spiritual life of Christians:

Knowing Christ as the true light, inaccessible to falsehood, we learn this, namely, that it is necessary for our lives also to be illuminated by the rays of the true light. But virtues are the rays of the Sun of Justice, streaming forth for our illumination, through which we lay aside the works of darkness, so that we walk becomingly as in the day, and we renounce those things which shame conceals. By doing all things in the light, we become the light itself, so that it shines before others, which is the peculiar quality of light.<sup>132</sup>

### 1) One Jesus Christ, Not Two

Contemporary Christology in this pluralistic and post-modern age has often separated the whole person of Jesus.<sup>133</sup> While repudiating the profound synthesis and unity of two natures as human being and divine being Christ in Jesus, the functional Christology often disrupts the essential wholeness of Christology. It is like a soul without a body; without Christ the ontological Christology is Christianity without the resurrection

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<sup>132</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Perfectione*, p. 103

<sup>133</sup> Ki-Moon Lee, *The Christian Encyclopedia* Vol. II, (Seoul, Korea: Christian Literature Press, 1981), p. 1221. See *Dogmatics* vol. I: *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, Emil Brunner, translated by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), p. 303. "In the primitive Church, reflection upon "saving history" (*Heilsgeschichte*) ceased very early; nothing shows this more clearly than the fact that in the development of the "threefold office" of Christ, and indeed His work as a whole, plays a very subordinate part.... The work of Christ as a whole is obscured by the development of the doctrine of His Person" (p. 303).



itself. It is like a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other is a corpse. In that sense we feel keenly the necessity of “a new hermeneutical conversion” in the field of Christology for the theology of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Here we face a very important text that is directly related to the question, which Jesus asks to his disciples on the way, “Who do you say I am?”<sup>134</sup> And then Peter answers, “You [Jesus] are the Christ” [*Christos* in Greek; the Messiah in Hebrew].<sup>135</sup> Peter’s answer, “Jesus is the Christ,” is actually not the production of his particular contemplation about what Jesus himself did for us, but the confession by the special inner inspiration<sup>136</sup> formed through getting acquainted with the real Jesus himself. Accordingly, Jesus in two realms as Christology and Soteriology should be simultaneously identified with both being and doing even though the purpose of study is who Jesus is or what Christ is. To follow Jesus-centered-Christology as the unity of being and doing in Jesus is not to mean the repeat of the old thought as the fossil, but the communication with the attitude of the early Apostle Church by the help of contemporary language and thought. That is to mean an ecclesial togetherness, not an ecclesial apartness in the biblical message and perspective.

At this point, Gregory’s Christology, as appeared in *De Perfectione*, challenges contemporary Christology as a divorced state between Jesus and Christ, for he repudiates any bifurcation between the person and the work of Jesus according to a classical axiom “*agere sequitur esse*” (action follows being).<sup>137</sup> While denying all knowledge of his being,

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<sup>134</sup> Matthew 16:15-16

<sup>135</sup> Mark 8:29.

<sup>136</sup> Matthew 16:17f– “For this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”

<sup>137</sup> Gerald O’Collins S.J. *Christology*, p. 20; Gregory of Nyssa, *De Perfectione*, p. 96.

to reflect on the activity of Christ would be “to attempt the impossible.”<sup>138</sup> Gregory does reject there are “two Christs.”<sup>139</sup> Therefore His Christology never tolerates any divorce or any bifurcation between Soteriology and Christology, and between systematic reflections on Christ’s doing and such reflection on his being while proposing a purely functional Christology or a distinctive ontological Christology. In that sense Gregory greatly contributes to the contemporary approach of Christology in connection with the profound Christian identical perfection as “eternal progress.”

### B. Christology in *De Vita Moysis*

Gregory not only represents Christology of Christ’s important names through the New Testament in *De Perfectione* but also “not-yet-publicized Christology” as a hidden Christology through the Old Testament in *De Vita Moysis*, by the typological hermeneutics or the allegorical hermeneutics as *theoria*. However he does not employ and meditate on Christ’s various names the same way as in *De Perfectione*. In the allegorical hermeneutics of Gregory, Moses is “the prototype” or the symbol as the image of Jesus Christ. In that sense we can see the incarnation, virgin birth, and two natures and work of Christ occupied a prominent place. Through depicting the deeper contemplative and ultimate holiness as a new inner power and dynamic in an ascending spiral structural

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* Book V, §5, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.* Vol. 5, pp. 179-181. Gregory describes that “there are not two Christs or two Lords, but one Christ and one Lord, and that the Divine nature, after mingling with the Human, preserved the properties of each nature without confusion, and declares that the operations are, by reason of the union, predicated of the two natures in common, in the sense that the Lord took upon Himself the sufferings of the servant, and the Humanity is glorified with Him in the honour that is the Lord’s, and that by the power of the Divine Nature that is commingled with It, the Human Nature is made anew, conformably with that Divine Nature Itself” (p. 179).

system Gregory finds the specific six figures<sup>140</sup> of the incarnation in the story of Moses. By these figures, or types, he is able to emphasize the perpetual virginity of Mary,<sup>141</sup> both the preexistence and divinity of Christ who had no human origin,<sup>142</sup> and Christ's taking sin for us and transforming our nature.<sup>143</sup> Through such figures, Gregory sees the incarnation of Jesus associated with the primitive Christological affirmation qualifying Jesus for the messianic "*munus triplex*" (triple office) at his exaltation.<sup>144</sup> Gregory introduces "the veiled-Christ" of Jesus as a christologically significant moment for his personal identity through the contemplation in depth of letter-transcendence in *De vita Moysis*. For the letter-transcendence as *theoria* takes on "a new meaning"<sup>145</sup> produced in truly high goodness of God, since Paul says that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life; not of the letter but of the Spirit."<sup>146</sup>

Gregory presents various terms of Christological elements in the *theoria* hermeneutics of *De Vita Moysis*.<sup>147</sup> His *theoria* as 'typological and allegorical'<sup>148</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Six figures are "the burning bush, Moses' rod changed into a serpent, Moses' hand becoming leprous, the manna, the tabernacle, and the tablets of stone."

<sup>141</sup> LOM, II, 21, p. 59.

<sup>142</sup> LOM, II, 175, pp. 98-99.

<sup>143</sup> LOM, II, 30-34, pp. 61-62.

<sup>144</sup> Romans 1:3-4

<sup>145</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, reprinted 1999 in paperback), p. 104.

<sup>146</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:6 (NIV)

<sup>147</sup> There are Christological elements as follows: "the true Lamb" (II, 95), "the Word as Logos" (II, 140), "Christ as the Rock" (II, 136, 244, 248), "the Lord" (II, 134), the Only Begotten God" (II, 175), "Christ as the Source of hope" (II, 248), "Christ as Absolute Virtue" (II, 244), "the Lord Jesus" (II, 262), "Son of Man" (II, 277), "Christ as Manna" (II, 139), "the tabernacle as the incarnation of Jesus" (II, 174), Christ of the cross as the brazen serpent" (II, 273), "Jesus of the cross as the outstretched arms of Moses in prayer" (II, 78), and "Christ Jesus" (II, 321). George Bebis deals with Gregory's Christological elements in the inner mystical meaning of ascetic theology (PTA, p. 375).

<sup>148</sup> K. J. Woollcombe distinguishes the definition between typological and allegorical terms in the hermeneutics: typology as "linkages between events, persons or things within the historical framework of revelation"; allegory as "the search for secondary and hidden meaning underlying the primary and obvious meaning of a narrative" (p. 40). It is an article to suggest a proper hermeneutics of the Bible in the horizontal hermeneutics' field. See "Biblical Origins and Patristic Development of Typology" *Essays on Typology* by Geoffrey William Hugo Lampe (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 39-75.

hermeneutics is not something new in the history of Christian interpretation,<sup>149</sup> but rather was generally accepted by the Church of his time. However new Christological insights sprang from his “inner mystical meaning of ascetic theology”<sup>150</sup> and the contemplation of the Divine through the word “*epektasis*” in conjunction with Gregory’s essential perfection structural system as the way to Christian perfection. Thus Gregory exerted much beneficial influence on those who pursue a Christian perfection in Asia Minor. In that sense Jean Danielou<sup>151</sup> and George Bebis rightly point out the profound Christological spirituality of Gregory’s works: “Christ and salvation through Christ are central and most important concerns of Gregory in his *De vita Israel Moysis*.”<sup>152</sup> Moses himself is the symbol of Jesus Christ, when the whole community of Israel reached the wilderness of Sin which is between Elim and Sinai, after they had crossed the Red sea; after the water had been sweetened for them, and after the supplies from Egypt ran completely out, they grumbled against Moses and Aaron. At that time God rained down “Manna” as bread from heaven for them.<sup>153</sup> Here Gregory interprets manna as follows:

The bread which came from heaven is not some incorporeal thing. For how could something incorporeal be nourishment to a body? Neither ploughing nor sowing produced the body of this bread, but the earth which remained unchanged was found full of this divine food, of which

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<sup>149</sup> See “History of Biblical Interpretation” *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* by Henry A. Virkler (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 13<sup>th</sup> Printing, 1994), pp. 47-74. He says “This allegorization sprang from a proper motive – the desire to understand the Old Testament as a Christian document” (p. 59). Further he shows how Clement of Alexandria and Origen interpret the Bible: “He [Clement] theorized there are five senses to Scripture – historical, doctrinal, prophetic, philosophical and mystical – with the deepest riches available only to those who understand the deeper senses” (p. 59); “Origen believed that even as man consists of three parts – body, soul, and soul – so too Scripture possesses three senses. The body is the literal sense, the soul [is] the moral sense, and the spirit [is] the allegorical or mystical sense” (p. 60). I think Gregory of Nyssa could admit the tradition of biblical interpretation which was commonly accepted by the Church of his time, and which preceded him, especially as Origen’s.

<sup>150</sup> PTA, p. 375.

<sup>151</sup> Jean Danielou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique: Doctrine Spirituelle de Gregoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1940), pp. 99-110.

<sup>152</sup> PTA, p. 375.

<sup>153</sup> Exodus 16.

the hungry partake. This miracle teaches in anticipation the mystery of the Virgin. This bread, then, that does not come from the earth is the Word. He changes his power in diverse ways to suit those who eat. He knows not only to be bread but also to become milk and meat and greens and whatever else might be appropriate to and desired by the one who receives him<sup>154</sup>

He sees a figure of the incarnate Word as born of the Virgin. It is his incarnational Christology. This is a *theoria hermeneutics* of Christ as 'the Word becoming flesh,'<sup>155</sup> and as 'the bread of life.' His *theoria* is not only related to the interpretation of "the Word," "the true bread from heaven" and "the bread of life" as a self-identification which Jesus claims in John 6: 32, 35, but it is also related to St. Paul's teaching about "making his message strong meat for the more mature and greens for the weaker and milk for little children."<sup>156</sup> Thus Gregory maximizes his very central theme as the perpetually spiritual and mutual ascent of Christian perfection in conjunction with the word *epektasis*, which means "straining toward." Consequently, through the inner mystical meaning of *theoria hermeneutics* he sees the Christological image hidden in the manna by the method of *theoria hermeneutics*. He seeks to reproduce the real meaning of which Jesus speaks of about what the Scriptures testify.<sup>157</sup> In that sense he brings a fresh insight into meanings beyond the range of the literal, in order to reach at the goodness and knowledge of God. As I have said already, some interpretations<sup>158</sup> referring to the incarnation seem to have originated with Gregory, not following the Christian interpretational tradition before him.

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<sup>154</sup> LOM, II. 139-140, p. 88.

<sup>155</sup> John 1:14

<sup>156</sup> LOM, II. 140; Romans 14:1-3; I Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12-14.

<sup>157</sup> John 5:39 – "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me." Here the Scriptures mean the Old Testament only, not the New Testament.

<sup>158</sup> For instance, there are the burning bush (II. 20); the changing of Moses' rod into a serpent (II. 26-27, 31-34); the building of the tabernacle (II. 174); and the tablets of stone (II. 216).

Gregory also introduces the three moments of Moses' experience of God, so called Moses' triple theophany: God appeared by the light in the burning bush; through the smoky cloud at Mount Sinai; Moses sees the back of God through cloud in the cleft of rock.<sup>159</sup> In the third theophany, Moses desires to attain the glory of God because of having found favor and continuously rekindled his desire to seek God more. In Exodus 33, we find how Moses enthusiastically progresses in pressing on to the highest Good as the vision of God. Moses never is satisfied since there is no limit to the Good. At that moment God says:

You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live. Then the Lord said, there is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.<sup>160</sup>

Gregory here attempts to interpret variously the rock mentioned in Scripture, and referred to in as many as 18 spiritual meanings which the rock intimates allegorically.<sup>161</sup> Moses' entrance into the rock is to have the same special importance as 18 theoria meanings mentioned above. Especially that rock is the most comfortable shelter and place or the safest house to Moses who is resting, who is shadowed by the hand of God, and who "dwells in the shelter of the most High" in connection with Psalm 91:1. In fact, Moses sees safely and eagerly the back of God through the hole in the rock that is the way to

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<sup>159</sup> Exodus 3:4-5; 19:18; 33:20-23. It is worth noting that Gregory has different statements made in conjunction with the Sinai theophany, when we follow the New International Version. The order is different.

<sup>160</sup> Exodus 33:20-23 (NIV).

<sup>161</sup> LOM, II, 247, p. 118. Gregory interprets the rock meaningfully: "pleasure of paradise" (Gen. 2:15), "eternal tabernacle" (2 Cor. 5:1), "mansion with the Father" (Jn. 14:2), "bosom of the patriarch" (Lk. 16:22), "land of the living" (Ps. 26:13), "water of refreshment" (Ps. 22:2), "Jerusalem which is above" (Gal. 4:26), "kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:44), "prize of calling" (Phil. 3:14), "crown of graces" (Prov. 1:9), "crown of pleasure" (Prov. 4:9), "crown of beauty" (Isa. 62:3), "pillar of strength" (Ps. 60:4), "pleasure on a table" (Isa. 65:11-14), "councils of God" (Prov. 25:4), "throne of judgment" (Lk. 22:30), "place of name" (Deut. 12:5), and "hidden tabernacle" (Ps. 26:5). Quoted from LOM, II, 247, p. 118.

reach at the highest Good. By the *theoria hermeneutics* the rock is to play a very significant role and the unique function to save the life of Moses who faces death, and to protect him through all dangerous things in the process of Christian perfection. In that sense the rock could be capable of performing the Savior's function and meaning in connection with the life of Jesus. It is Gregory's soteriological Christology. In particular, such hermeneutics is relevant as the name Jesus means "saving his people from their sins." Hence *theoria hermeneutics* clearly draws out the spiritual meaning and Christological function hidden in the Old Testament since St. Paul interprets the rock as Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:4. Hence Gregory sees how to follow God in the perpetual perfection through the rock as Christ since "good does not look good in the face, but follows it."<sup>162</sup>

In his treatment of Christian perfection why does Gregory employ variously and treat profoundly christological phrases in *De vita Moysis* and *De Perfectione*? This question leads to the central importance of Christology in the spiritual life, according to the thought of Gregory.

### C. Effect of Christology upon Christian perfection

In treating Gregory's Christology the most significant question is: 'Why does he concentrate on Christological approaches in the framework of ascetic theology?' What is Gregory's main interest and intention in these treatises? If so, how does Christology exert an effect upon the profound Christian perfection in the contemplation of the Divine?

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<sup>162</sup> LOM, II. 253, p. 120.

Christian perfection actually commences with a personal profession that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Son of God. For each one who is justified by faith in Jesus, and called “reborn” or “regeneration,” pursues sanctification as the proper work of Christian perfection. Christian perfection is really “the work of new formation,” as the new growth in one’s recreated-life. In that sense Christian perfection could be called “an evangelical myth.”<sup>163</sup> Hence accepting and interpreting of Jesus Christ is related to knowing about the person and work of Jesus. Depending on how much one knows and participates into the knowledge of God in Jesus Christian perfection can become more dynamic transforming. To know systematically, and interpret and clarify theologically the person and work of Jesus is Christology. Thus an understanding of Christian perfection and an understanding of the person and work of Christ are linked together.

### 1) Clarifying Our Personal Identity

In fact, Christology clarifies the personal identity of believers as us who profess Jesus as our Lord, for “understanding, accepting and interpreting Jesus” Christ as Son of God “immediately touch upon our personal identity, deepest needs and final destiny.”<sup>164</sup> The question of our own identity is ultimately linked with the question of God as the true Life. We spontaneously raise the basic issues, as searching God in relation to our entire existence, as follows:

What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behavior, and what is sinful? What end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgment? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation, which

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<sup>163</sup> James I. Packer, *God's Plans for You* op. cit., p. 187.

<sup>164</sup> Gerald O'Collins S.J., *Interpreting Jesus* (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 2.



embraces our entire existence from which we take our origin and towards which we tend?<sup>165</sup>

In these terms our own identity merges with the particular grace of God in Jesus. Whoever has this personal identity in Jesus ultimately seeks more and more the meaning of one's existence and the nature of one's ultimate goal, and then longs for growing and participating into the knowledge of God without ceasing. Hence to answer Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?"<sup>166</sup> is in effect to state who we think we are, through the confession of our faith as our Christological identity. In that respect, according to Gregory's conception, such Christological identity is to rekindle the desire to attain the height of Christian perfection in divine virtue, and the enthusiasm to belong to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Christology, in the ascetic theology, creates the ardent hope to reach the depths of God in the eternal process. Such hope "always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived."<sup>167</sup> Each one of the Christological terms, however, provides for us special meanings to strain toward what is ahead in Christian perfection.<sup>168</sup> In conclusion, Christology for Gregory clarifies personal identity as a spiritual energy-event to climb continually to the step above and never to cease to ascend the highest mount of perfection.

## 2) Creating an Ardent Love and Intimacy to Stretch out

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<sup>165</sup> Gerald O'Collins S.J., *Interpreting Jesus*, p. 2.

<sup>166</sup> Mark 8:29. Matthew 16:15

<sup>167</sup> LOM, II, 231, 114.

<sup>168</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, p. 97.

We as Christians long for and desire to find how to have an ardent love and abundant intimacy, as the most basic necessity, with God in Jesus and then to experience “our real home” in the reality of the faith community. Our Christological identity as the unity of divinity and humanity in the one person of Jesus Christ, at this very moment, creates intimacy as the loving relationship with God who first loves us, not that we first love Him.<sup>169</sup> For Jesus as the Son of God “had always loved those who were his own in the world, and he loved them to the very end.”<sup>170</sup> Consequently, “our good Master, Jesus Christ bestows on us a partnership in His revered name.” Likewise we dwell in love of God with our Christological confession, “Jesus is the Lord.” Our soul can experience creative and satisfactory intimacy with God in grace and love of Jesus. Our soul is transformed through His abundant intimacy as Paul no longer seems to be thinking, speaking and living, but Christ himself seems to be living in Paul.<sup>171</sup> It is a transmission geared to go toward a mutual Christian synthesis, to harmonize the flexibility between a new discovering of reality and creative insights. Such synthetic insights through our Christological identity lead us to the new dimension of reality, as a new direction linked all in one. Here we can enjoy rich intimacy and ardent love, as an endless-motivation to transform our soul in goodness, with God in ourselves. To create the pure love and intimacy with God is to guide us as real Christians, and to start a next process of recreating the perpetual growth in the goodness of God. Therefore in connection with Christian perfection, Christology is to play a significant role by creating pure love and enough intimacy with God in order to “stretch out”<sup>172</sup> toward the next stage.

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<sup>169</sup> 1 John 4:19 “We love because he first loved us” (NIV).

<sup>170</sup> John 13:1f. It is quoted from Today’s English Version (TEV).

<sup>171</sup> Galatians 2:20. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection* op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>172</sup> Philippians 3:13.

Gregory's Christology is a synthesized Christology, which focuses on who Jesus is in himself as the incarnational or ontological Being, and which equally focus on the Soteriology. Such Christology in the *De Vita Moysis* and *De Perfectione* constitutes an identification of eternal progress of perfection, by participation in true being, in order to reproduce the knowledge of the life-giving nature in the ascetic theology through a hermeneutical conversion over the graduated ascent – a “stretching out” to the source of eternal Light.

## Chapter 2

### John Wesley<sup>1</sup>: The Way of Christian Perfection: Love

They are all comprised in this one word, Love.  
In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness!  
... The one perfect good shall be your one ultimate end.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter 1 we have treated Gregory's perfection as "the eternal progress" in the spiral ascending system, through hermeneutical conversion, especially based on Philippians 3:13-14. Christian perfection of John Wesley was also based upon Philippians

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<sup>1</sup> Since I have known John Wesley as the founder of Methodist Family in the Christian world I have never heard his middle name as Benjamin. About two years ago, one day I had at my hand a book, *John Wesley: an Autobiographical Sketch of the Man and His Thought, Chiefly from His Letters* and then began to read that. "John Benjamin Wesley was born June 17, 1703" written by Ole E. Borgen, I found that and wondered with that. So I began to research whether his statement is really correct or not, with a question, 'why did the most recent biographers, studying Wesley's life and thought, not mention such important element in their books?' Richard P. Heitzenrater spoke of Wesley's middle name a little and supplied manifestly a clear point in his book, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley: John Wesley his own Biographer*, vol. 1, as follow: "one of John Wesley's preachers heard him repeat this tradition and recorded it in an early published history of Methodism: "I have heard him[John Wesley] say, that he was baptized by the name of John Benjamin; that his mother had buried two sons, one called John, and the other Benjamin, and that she united their names in him[John Wesley]." The author, Jonathan Crowther, went on to say, "But he never made use of the second name"" (pp. 37-38). Heitzenrater constantly insists that "The tradition of Wesley's middle name is manifestly false and can be so proved from copies of baptismal records preserved in Samuel Wesley's own hand!" (p. 38). However it must be recognized we rely on very slim evidence for information about the early life of John Wesley. Especially, as to his birthday "Two days" settled in the same month emerged as June 28 and June 17. But that is not a great problem in his biography, for the difference of 11 days is arisen in the relationship between the Julian and Gregorian calendars. The answer lies in the recognition that the British did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1752. by this time, the discrepancy was up to 11 days, and so Parliament corrected the calendar by that amount in the same year. That's why his birthday emerged. However Wesley celebrated his birthday on June 28 in his later life. See *Questioning the Millennium: A Rationalist's Guide to a Precisely Arbitrary Countdown* by Stephen Jay Gould (New York: Harmony Books, 1997), pp. 141-149. Also as to his family name his grandfather was originally Westley. He was of an English nonconformity and puritan heritages. When he refused to use the *Book of Common Prayer* during the summer of 1661, he began to suffer increasing difficulties. He was ejected from his parish. After that, even though he was recovered, his family name was changed by bearing of his father, Samuel from Westley to Wesley.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: the Epworth Press, 1<sup>st</sup> published in 1952, reprinted 1960), p. 7. Hereafter it will be referred to as PACP-L (London).

3: 12-15<sup>3</sup> even though, for Wesley, there were many other significant biblical passages.<sup>4</sup> Since 1725, Wesley attempted to embrace the doctrine of Christian perfection, but he did not focus on that greatly. However, Wesley preached Christian perfection several times on this text during the first quarter of 1741, since Gibson, Bishop of London, directed him to publish Christian perfection toward the whole world. Throughout the rest of Wesley's life, he concentrated on advocating and teaching Christian perfection. After all, Wesley's Christian perfection<sup>5</sup> became one of the most distinctive doctrines of Wesleyan tradition, one of his most characteristic teachings,<sup>6</sup> "the ultimate end"<sup>7</sup> as "the goal"<sup>8</sup> of all Christians who are justified by the faith in the saving grace of Jesus, "the centerpiece" of his religious thought,<sup>9</sup> preached, taught and fought by Wesley for most of his life, and "a history of his thoughts and writings on the subject over the course of forty years."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From January to April, 1741 Wesley preached Christian perfection based upon Philippians 3:12-15, at Bristol, Kingswood, London, and Newcastle since Dr. Gibson, Bishop of London, had told Wesley "if this be all you mean, publish it to all the world...I answered, "My Lord, I will"; and accordingly wrote and published the sermon on Christian perfection" (*The Works of John Wesley* third Edition: Complete and Unabridged 14 Volumes, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books House Company, reprinted 1996), vol. 11, p. 374. Hereafter it will be referred to as WJW.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Ezek 36:25, 26, 29; Matt. 5:48, 6:13, 22:37; Deut. 30:6; Psalm 130:8; John 3:8, 17:20-21; Romans 8:3-4; 2 Corinthians 7:1 Ephesians 3:14-19, 5:25 and so on. Moreover Wesley believes that such passages as Luke 1:69-75, Titus 2:11-14 and 1 John 4:17 indicated that this sanctification took place before death.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley does not use precisely a particular terminology for Christian perfection in his writings. William Sangster, hence, speaks of its name as the followings: "It is sometimes called 'sanctification' and sometimes 'entire sanctification'; sometimes 'Christian perfection', 'holiness' or 'perfect love.' Wesley preferred the last term" (op. cit, p. 27). But Cox argues, "Wesley had no particular fondness for the term perfection" (*John Wesley's Concept of Perfection* Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1968, p. 72).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, Harald Lindstrom takes sanctification as Wesley's central teaching and the basis for understanding his theology. See *Wesley & Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, Reprinted 1960).

<sup>8</sup> Albert C. Outler, (ed.) *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 251; Steven W. Manskar, *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley's A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* Modern-Language Version and Notes (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2003), p. 8. Hereafter it will be referred to as MLV (Modern-Language Version).

<sup>9</sup> Timothy L. Smith, "A Historical and Contemporary Appraisal of Wesleyan Theology," *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology: Biblical, Systematic and Practical* Vol. I (ed. Charles W. Carter, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1983, pp. 73-101), p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> Albert C. Outler, op. cit, p. 251.

Wesley was adamant on the point that if perfection is a human possibility at all, it must at least be possible in the span of human life and, consequently, correlated with the whole process of Christian maturation and hope. He not only rejects the phrase, “sinless perfection” but also “never uses that phrase, in order to avoid the appearance of contradicting myself.”<sup>11</sup> Articulating precisely his conception of Christian perfection in one sentence, he says that is ‘freedom’ from ‘sin’ properly so called.

William Sangster says, however, “Most students who have taken in hand a study of modern holiness movements have traced their origin to Wesley’s teaching.”<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Warfield speaks of the influence of Wesley’s Christian perfection in the modern Protestant world: “It was John Wesley who infected the modern Protestant world with this notion of...entire sanctification.”<sup>13</sup> William Lecky maintains Wesley “has had a wider constructive influence in the sphere of practical religion than any other man who has appeared since the sixteenth century.”<sup>14</sup> Wesley’s greatness is widely recognized as “the most influential man in modern history” in this late 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>15</sup> and as “an extraordinary leader of men and a constructive religious genius.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore it is of particular significance to compare the thinking of the two theologians, Gregory and Wesley, on the subject of Christian perfection.

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<sup>11</sup> MLV, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> William E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection: An Examination & Restatement of John Wesley’s Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth, 1984), p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> It was quoted by Sangster, *The Path to Perfection*, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> William E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (London: D Appleton and Co., 1879), p. 631.

<sup>15</sup> John Wilkins Sigsworth, *World-Changers: Karl Marx and John Wesley* (Belleville, Ont.: Easingwold Publications, 1982), p. i.

<sup>16</sup> J. Ernest Rattenbury, *Wesley’s Legacy to the World* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1929), p. 9.

*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*<sup>17</sup> of John Wesley intended to present what and how Wesley understands Christian perfection in his historical setting and faith-culture. In this chapter, I will explore this key text and examine the nature of his Christian perfection. Firstly, I will examine how Wesley comprehends and interprets the text Philippians 3:12-15 by centering on his sermons, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, and *an Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*.<sup>18</sup> Secondly I shall explore how Wesley understands Christology in relation to Christian perfection.

### 1. Philippians 3:12, 15 – The Biblical Foundation of Christian Perfection In John Wesley

John Wesley speaks of how people thought about Christian perfection of that time in the introduction of his sermon<sup>19</sup> as follows:

The word perfect is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them; and whosoever preaches perfection, that is, asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man or a publican.<sup>20</sup> ...Rather, they insisted that there is no perfection on earth and vehemently attacked my brother and me for affirming the contrary.<sup>21</sup>

In that light we could surmise about what the trend and reflection of Christian perfection in his time were. However, in spite of such environment and its climate, Wesley speaks

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<sup>17</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Halifax, Montreal and Toronto: William Briggs, No date of Publishing). Hereafter it will be referred to as PACP-T (Toronto).

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: the fifth edition, 1778). In 1754 Wesley sets to work in earnest writing his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. He wants the *Notes* simply to give them the sense of what the Scriptures actually say in order to help preachers who were not educated with Greek and Hebrew. Hereafter it will be referred to as ENNT.

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley preaches many times on the same subject but the texts are different: Philippians 3:12-15; Hebrews 6:1 and Romans 2:29.

<sup>20</sup> "Christian Perfection", *Wesley's Standard Sermons: Consisting of Forty-four Discourses*, published in Four Volumes in 1746, 1748, 1750, and 1760 (Fourth Edition, 1787), II Vols. Edward H. Sugden, (ed.) (London: the Epworth Press, 1951), p. 150. Hereafter it will be referred to as WSS.

<sup>21</sup> MLV, p. 13.

about the necessity of Christian perfection with a rhetoric question, “are they not found in the oracles of God?”<sup>22</sup> Then he reemphasizes that the propriety of Christian perfection based upon the Scriptures should be preached: “Whatsoever God hath spoken, that will we speak, whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear.”<sup>23</sup> So here it is necessary that we see what kind of sources Wesley uses in order to theologize and vindicate Christian perfection all his life long.

### A. The Source of Wesley’s Understanding of Christian Perfection

Every thinker has an authentic source in order to found a theory which can be proved as one’s hypothesis through data. For Wesley the Bible is the theological real data, which determines him and his thought. When he was about 80 years old he wrote these reflections concerning his early life:

From a child I was taught to love and reverence the Scripture, the oracles of God; and, next to these to esteem the primitive Fathers, the writers of the first three centuries. Next after the primitive church, I esteemed our own, the Church of England, as the most scriptural national Church in the world.<sup>24</sup>

The primary source in his theological and doctrinal writings is the Bible itself.<sup>25</sup> As he himself puts it, “In 1730 I began to be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book] to study, no

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<sup>22</sup> “Christian Perfection”, WSS, vol. II, §2, p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> “Christian Perfection”, WSS, vol. II, §2, p. 151.

<sup>24</sup> “Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church,” WJW, vol. XIII, §1, p. 272.

<sup>25</sup> Chongnamh Cho, *John Wesley’s Theology* (Seoul, Korean: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1989), p. 58. See Chapter 3: The Bible and the Doctrinal Standard, pp. 57-94.



book but the Bible,”<sup>26</sup> in 1746. This means, “I began to regard the Bible as the primary source for doctrine and ministry.”<sup>27</sup> He asserts the same is still true of Methodists in 1787.

From the very beginning, from the time that four young men united together, each of them was *homo unius libri* – a man of one book. God taught them all to make his “word a lantern unto their feet, and a light in all their paths.” They had one, and only one rule of judgment with regard to all their tempers, words, and actions, namely, the oracles of God. They were one and all determined to be Bible-Christians. They were continually reproached for this very thing; some terming them in derision Bible-bigots; others Bible-moths-feeding, they said, upon the Bible as moths do upon cloth. And indeed unto this day it is their constant endeavor to think and speak as the oracles of God.<sup>28</sup>

Wesley used “Bible-bigot” for himself in his own journal, June 5, 1766 as follows:

I hang out no false colors; but show you all I am, all I intend, all I do. I am a member of the Church of England; but I love good men of every church. My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible-bigot; I follow it in all things, both great and small.<sup>29</sup>

In 1728 Wesley determined “to make the Bible his chief study,”<sup>30</sup> and from the year 1729, also commenced “not only to read but to study the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion.”<sup>31</sup> He thus did not attempt to deal with his doctrine of Christian perfection without biblical hermeneutics in his sermons, through a fourfold pillar as a “quadrilateral”<sup>32</sup>: Scripture, reason, experience and tradition. In fact, Wesley defends his doctrine of Christian perfection in it:

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<sup>26</sup> John Telford, (ed.) *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley A.M.*, Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, 8Vols., (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), vol. IV, p. 299. Hereafter it will be referred to as Letters.

<sup>27</sup> MLV, p. 13. Wesley does not that his reading was limited to only the Bible. Instead he means that Scripture is the sole measure of Christian belief and practice. Wesley was a voracious reader.

<sup>28</sup> “On God’s Vineyard”, WJW, vol. 7, §I.1, p. 203.

<sup>29</sup> Nehemiah Curnock, (ed.) *The Journal of Rev. John Wesley* 8vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1909-1916), vol. 6, p. 321.

<sup>30</sup> Timothy L. Smith, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>31</sup> PACP-T, §5, p. 6; WJW, vol. 11, §5, p. 367.

<sup>32</sup> In fact, this term was not used explicitly in Wesley’s writings. In order to describe the fourfold authority in Wesley’s thought, Albert C. Outler was the first to use the word, “quadrilateral”. The quadrilateral as Wesley’s theological method seems to be generally admitted by Wesleyan theologians since Wesley

If there be anything unscriptural in these words, anything wild or extravagant, anything contrary to the analogy of faith [*analogia fidei*], or the experience of adult Christians, let them smite me friendly and reprove me; let them impart to me of the clearer light God has given them.<sup>33</sup>

Here Wesley rejects believing anything contrary to Scripture or reason, affirming only what is reasonable in light of the Word. Thoroughly he maintains both the truths revealed in Scripture and the solid principles drawn from Scripture, as in the creeds and biblically-grounded theology. In that sense Wesley was a “preeminently biblical theologian.”<sup>34</sup> He often insists Christian perfection is a very scriptural doctrine while he explains that with citations of related Scripture. In the year 1764, upon a review of the total subject, he wrote down the sum of what he had observed as following: “There is such a thing as Christian perfection, for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.”<sup>35</sup> Further Wesley believed that the doctrine of Christian perfection was in Scriptures. He says:

What is there here which any man of understanding, who believes the Bible, can object to? What can he deny, without flatly contradicting the Scripture? What retrench, without talking from the word of God?<sup>36</sup> ....In conformity, therefore, both to the doctrine of St. John, and the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion: A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin.<sup>37</sup>

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defends his doctrine of original sin as “The Doctrine of Original Sin, according to Scripture, Reason and Experience.” Donald Thorsen thinks of “the quadrilateral” as “a heuristic tool for investigating Wesley’s understanding of theological method and religious authority” (p. ix). But Campbell argues this fourfold view cannot be directly attributed to John Wesley. See “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral – in John Wesley,” in *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (Ed.) Thomas A. Langford (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991, pp. 75-88), p. 86; “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth”, in *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (Ed.) Thomas A. Langford (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991, pp. 154-61), pp. 160-161; *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a model of Evangelical Theology* by Donald A. D. Thorsen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990); Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: the Epworth Press, 1992). See chapter XI the Path to Perfection (pp. 381-437).

<sup>33</sup> “Principles of a Methodist”, WJW, vol. 8, §13, p. 365.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy L. Smith, op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>35</sup> PACP-T, §26, p. 106.

<sup>36</sup> PACP-T, §6, pp. 8-9.

<sup>37</sup> PACP-T, §12.2, p. 19.

These citations represent how well Wesley's use of the Bible is illustrated in his keynote doctrine of Christian perfection. William Sangster, as to the biblical quotations of Wesley's sanctification, had counted how often Wesley cites the scripture in his book, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, in order to analyze quotations. According to Sangster Wesley quoted 195 times from the Scripture: 23 times were from the Old Testament; the rest of them from the New Testament.<sup>38</sup> He quoted frequently Deut. 6:5 and 30:6 to define what Christian perfection means and to answer the question, "what is implied in being a perfect Christian?", then explained in detail and plain that as "The loving God with all your heart, and mind, and soul,"<sup>39</sup> and that as "circumcising our heart". With quotation of Ezek. 36:25 Wesley makes extensive use of that passage as a promise that eventually sin would be completely vanquished.<sup>40</sup> Within those citations he produces what the conception of holiness as Christian perfection is: the state of present cleansing from all sin. Consequently, Wesley discovers the conception of Sanctification in the Bible as the ground of all.

In fact, Wesley employs "the quadrilateral" method to theologize and transform unlocking insights into his own thought. It was referred to as "a heuristic tool for investigating his understanding of theological model and religious authority."<sup>41</sup> But Wesley has not gone beyond the Bible as the sole criterion and as *sola Scriptura*. It does not mean that Wesley was a biblical literalist. It rather means that the Bible is primary while the other three have roles to play as well. Therefore no one can deny that there is

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<sup>38</sup> Sangster, William E. *The Path to Perfection: An Examination and Restatement of John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, First published 1943, Reissued 1984), p. 36. In addition, his analysis of NT is as following: 29 times from the Synoptic Gospels; 74 times from Paul's Epistles; 34 times from the Johannine Writings; 8 times from the Gospel of Matthew; 8 times from The Epistle to Romans. If repetitions were included 24 times from OT; 224 times from NT.

<sup>39</sup> PACP-T, §17, p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> PACP-T, §17, pp. 33-35.

<sup>41</sup> Donald A.D. Thorsen, op. cit., p. ix. See Chapter 4: "The Authority of Scripture" in relation to Scripture.

anything other than the Bible as the source of his dynamic theological ideas and integration.

Before going on, it will be better to attempt to see his life in the middle of his 20s and to understand Christian perfection properly and precisely as resulting from a 'radical change'<sup>42</sup> through some authors. In his PACP-T Wesley mentions concretely what he read diversely and widely when he was in his 20s, and how much he was affected by those books and authors, especially by Jeremy Taylor, Thomas a Kempis, and William Law. From Taylor he takes the lesson of "purity of intention" and resolves to dedicate "all his life to God"<sup>43</sup>; from A Kempis the lesson of "inward religion, the religion of the heart" and of "simplicity of intention and purity of affection" and to give "all my life to God"<sup>44</sup>; from Law the lesson of "the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian and to be all-devoted to God: to give Him all my soul, my body and my substance."<sup>45</sup> For all their diversity, these three sources actually taught him the same thing: that the Christian life is devotion [*devotio*], the consecration of the whole man in love with God and neighbor in the full round of life and death. After his radical change through classics and readings, consequently, classics gave over the first place to the Bible as the primary. Likewise, Wesley lays down himself thoroughly on the Bible as the authentic source in his own sermons and treatises. The Scriptural word provides a central foundation for John Wesley. Especially, with regard to Christian perfection Wesley says, "It [Christian

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<sup>42</sup> Most Wesleyan theologians and pastors admit the conversion of John Wesley was as on May 24, 1738. Especially, Rattenbury distinguishes two dimensions of conversion as an intellectual conversion and an evangelical one in his book, *The conversion of The Wesleys: A Critical Study* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938, pp. 69-100). But Maximin Piette argues that his conversion "took place fourteen years before the famous conversion of 1738" (p. 244). See *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (Maximin Piette, London: Sheed and Ward, 1979, pp. 232-244).

<sup>43</sup> PACP-L, §2, p. 5; WJW, vol. 11, §2, p. 366.

<sup>44</sup> PACP-L, §3, pp. 5-6; WJW, vol. 11, §3, pp. 367-367.

<sup>45</sup> PACP-L, §4, p. 6; WJW, §4, p. 367.

perfection] is again and again mentioned in Scripture...this is the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Those are his words, not mine: Ye shall therefore be perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.”<sup>46</sup>

## B. Comprehending and Interpreting Philippians 3: 12 & 15

Before treating this section I will describe briefly a setting in Christian lives of England's church in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in order to understand better why Wesley would preach Christian perfection by quoting an introductory comment on Christian perfection and a preface on his Christian perfection as follows:

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.... So also sanctification is what God does in us, to mature and fulfill the human potential according to his primal design. Few Christians had ever denied some such prospect, in *statu gloriae*; few, in the West at least, had ever envisioned it as a realistic possibility in this life. Those few were obscure exceptions like Robert Gell and Thomas Drayton - or William Law in a very different sense.... “And whoever 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.”<sup>47</sup> .... [Nevertheless] Wesley's encouragement to his people to go on to perfection and to expect to be made perfect in love in this life aroused lively fears that this would foster more of the self-righteous perfectionism already made objectionable by earlier....The Bishop [Edmund Gibson] felt entitled to a direct account of Wesley's teaching, since the Methodist movement was headquartered in his diocese, even if not within his jurisdiction.... ‘I [Wesley] told him, without any disguise or reserve [what I meant by perfection?] When I ceased speaking, he said, Mr. Wesley, if this be all you mean, publish it to all

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<sup>46</sup> PACP-T, pp. 88-90.

<sup>47</sup> “Christian Perfection”, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Work of John Wesley*, vol. 2: Sermons II, 34-70 (Frank Baker (chief ed.); edited by Albert C. Outler, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), §1-2, p. 99. Hereafter it will be referred to as BE.

the world. If anyone then can confute what you say, he may have free leave. I answered, My Lord, I will, and accordingly wrote and published the sermon on Christian Perfection, [*based on Philippians 3:12, 15*].<sup>48</sup>

However in order to explain plainly and communicate his understanding of Christian perfection Wesley employs many scriptural passages which are interwoven with God's Kingdom that is like the "perfection because He [Jesus] was at the centre of it."<sup>49</sup> By restating the necessity and motivation, Wesley pursues to account for the meaning of Christian perfection, with the rhetoric questions and answers as following:

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.... We may not therefore lay these expressions aside, seeing they are the words of God, and not of man.... We may and ought to explain the meaning of them.<sup>50</sup>

So he goes back to the text Philippians 3:12&15 in order to cultivate clearly the text for a Christian perfection. Here Wesley seems to see two antitheses: one kind of "impossible impossibility"; and another kind of "attainable possibility." In verse 12, without mentioning the object in the text itself Paul speaks of himself, not perfect or not yet obtained: "as though I were not already perfect."<sup>51</sup> Paul has not yet arrived at the stage where what is perfect sets in. By this perfection Paul apparently does not seem to mean the glorification as following with "the resurrection from the dead,"<sup>52</sup> but to pursue

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<sup>48</sup> BE, vol.2, p. 97. Italics are mine.

<sup>49</sup> R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology: An Historical Study of the Christian Ideal for the Present Life* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> BE, vol.2, §2-3, pp. 99-100.

<sup>51</sup> Philippians 3:12 (KJV).

<sup>52</sup> Philippians 3:11 (RSV).

continually “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ,”<sup>53</sup> the full-grown communion with Christ, and “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus”<sup>54</sup> to which he has not yet attained. Namely, these are the “spiritual and moral maturity and perfection which he has not yet obtained.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, on the other hand, Wesley discovers that Paul now speaks of himself and others who are perfect [mature] in verse 15,<sup>56</sup> after his emphatic statement in verse 12. At this point Wesley sees and understands that verse as following:

And this is the more needful to be done because in the verse already repeated the Apostle speaks of himself as not perfect: ‘Not’, says he, ‘as though I were already perfect.’ And yet immediately after, in the fifteenth verse, he [Paul] speaks of himself, yea, and many others, as perfect. Let us, as many as be perfect, be thus minded.<sup>57</sup>

On the surface these statements of Paul seem to be in contradiction to verse 12 which he states before. So Wesley attempts “to remove the difficulty arising from this seeming contradiction”<sup>58</sup> and to give light to the obscure in his sermon, ‘Christian Perfection.’ Wesley thinks about Paul’s real intention only in this text, for the Scriptures cannot be contradicted themselves. Consequently, he goes beyond contradiction and represents two dimensions of Christian perfections in the context of passages: firstly, “in what sense

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<sup>53</sup> Ephesians 4:13 (NIV).

<sup>54</sup> Philippians 3:8 (NIV).

<sup>55</sup> Jac J. Muller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), p. 121.

<sup>56</sup> In order to compare with other versions I introduce some versions as follows: These are the verse 15a - “*All of us who are mature* should take such a view of things” (New International Version); “*We who are called perfect* must all think in this way” (Jerusalem Bible); “Let us therefore, *as many as be perfect*, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded,” (King James Version); “Let *those of us who are mature* be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded,” (Revised Standard Version); “*All of us who are spiritually adult* should think like this,” (Phillips Modern English); “I hope *all of you who are mature Christians* will see eye-to-eye with me on these things,” (Living Bible); “Let us then keep to this way of thinking, *those of us who are mature*” (New English Version); “*All of us who are spiritually mature* should have this same attitude” (Today’s English Version) and “Let us therefore, *as many as are perfect*, be thus minded” (John Wesley’s Translation, in ENNT).

<sup>57</sup> “Christian perfection”, BE, vol. 2, §3, p. 100.

<sup>58</sup> “Christian perfection”, BE, vol. 2, §4, p. 100.

Christians are not”<sup>59</sup>, this seems to be related to the verse 12, as the perfection which does “not belong to this life”<sup>60</sup>; and secondly “in what sense they are perfect”<sup>61</sup>, that seems to be related to the verse 15, in which Paul did demonstrate how Christian perfection could be attained in his life. As to verse 12, Wesley’s hermeneutics of “Christians are not perfect” appears from “both experience and scripture.”<sup>62</sup> Wesley mentions that Christians are not perfect in ‘knowledge’<sup>63</sup>, ‘ignorance’<sup>64</sup>, ‘mistake’<sup>65</sup>, ‘temptation’<sup>66</sup>, and ‘infirmities’<sup>67</sup> in this life. Such ideas help us recognize greatly the necessity of Jesus Christ as the Mediator and “the great Physician”<sup>68</sup> in our inmost souls in relation to the prospect of salvation.

His two dimensional interpretation of this text represents an eminent insight and discernment for his time, for most people did not admit the two realms in the hermeneutics of Philippians 3:12 and 15; as we have seen before. Such penetration is not his genuine invention, but he follows the idea of interpreters before him. Hence Flew presents “that a relative perfection is attainable in this life is part of Origen’s thought...The prophets and the apostles attained to perfection in this life. Especially he [Origen] does hold up Paul, who shows that there are two kinds of perfection.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “Christian perfection”, BE, vol. 2, §I, 1-9, pp. 100-105.

<sup>60</sup> “Christian perfection”, BE, vol. 2, §I, 8, p. 104.

<sup>61</sup> “Christian perfection”, BE, vol. 2, §II, 1-30, p. 105-121.

<sup>62</sup> “Christian perfection”, WSS, vol. II, §I, 1, p. 152.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. §II, 4, p. 153.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. §II, 8, p. 155.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. §II, 7, p. 155.

<sup>68</sup> “The Doctrine of Original Sin, According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience”, WJW, vol. 9, §4, p. 194.

<sup>69</sup> R. Newton Flew, op. cit., p. 155.



In that respect Paul really attempts to represent the twofold perfection in the text of Philippians 3:12 and 15 here<sup>70</sup>: firstly, the absolute perfection, which is reserved for the future as the final destiny of believers<sup>71</sup>; secondly, a relative and progressive perfection<sup>72</sup> which he regards as realizable by his own convert. In verse 12, Wesley understands that Paul did not only mean the “preposterous” perfection, but also perfection as “only the difficulty of attaining”<sup>73</sup> in this life. “Only the difficulty of attaining” is to imply not only the “impossible possibility”<sup>74</sup> but also the “continual possibility”<sup>75</sup> to attain in the present world. However Wesley does not think that Christian perfection is impossible forever. His thought could not be bound with the verse 12. His creative analysis and positive attitude presses himself carefully to move forth toward the next stage. He believes that a Christian perfection is attainable in this life.

In order to conceptualize his idea and formulate a theory firmly, however, Wesley’s view was based upon the verse 15 “let us, as many as be perfect, be thus minded.” Precisely speaking, that is a relative and perpetual perfection attainable now in this life. He emphatically focuses on Christian perfection which one is able to attain ‘now’ in the present life. For Wesley, verse 15 seems to mean that Paul advocates specifically a relative and progressive perfection which he expects of every Christian, for Paul uses a similar picture which means to “fit for races, strong in faith”<sup>76</sup> as well as the word in Acts 20:24 is used to alluding to a race or a course. Wesley quotes the Epistle to

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<sup>70</sup> R. Newton Flew, *op. cit.*, pp. 52; 155; William E. Sangster, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>71</sup> Philippians 3:12-14; 1 Corinthians 13:10.

<sup>72</sup> Philippians 3:15; Colossians 1:28, 3:14, 5:12; 1 Corinthians 2:6; Ephesians 4:12-13.

<sup>73</sup> ENNT, p. 641.

<sup>74</sup> Paul A. Holloway, *Consolation in Philippians: Philosophical Sources and Rhetorical Strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 140. Actually, this phrase is from Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 71-83.

<sup>75</sup> Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* p. 153.

<sup>76</sup> ENNT, p. 641.

Philippians in his PACP 10 times but, not unnaturally for his purpose, the stress falls on 3:15. For Wesley the key word is τέλειος as “mature” or “perfect” in verse 15, and it is a plain statement that perfection is possible on this earth as if Paul here numbered himself among the perfect. Here Wesley does not apparently take the meaning of the Latin word “*perfectio*”, which is fundamentally related to the perfection of the “gods” and the “goddesses” in the sense of mighty from beginning, and which means the simultaneous perfection in all regards as tempers, thought, word and deed,<sup>77</sup> but rather the meaning of the Greek word τέλειος which means “mature” or “perfect” or “full-grown” or “adult” in the usage of cultural-biological prospect.<sup>78</sup> Such conceptions are used in the biblical realm.<sup>79</sup> However in the notion of “growing in grace”<sup>80</sup> Wesley would accept the particular conception of a “mature” recreating of the profound Christian perfection. He says the notion of a mature in this way: “This is the glorious privilege of every Christian, yea, though he is but a babe in Christ. But it is only of grown Christians it can be affirmed, they are in such a sense perfect.”<sup>81</sup> With the notion of gradual-profound growth of Christian perfection he conveys the conception of “adult”: “we are not now speaking of babes in Christ, but adult Christians.”<sup>82</sup>

In particular, for Wesley the attainable perfection in verse 15 is essentially a principle of dynamic growth in grace and in the full-knowledge of Jesus, not a mere static or a fixed-state or an unmoving stage. In that respect, this text is one of the essential loci concerning Wesley’s Christian perfection attainable in this present world. The Christian

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<sup>77</sup> Bromiley, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>78</sup> Bromiley, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>79</sup> Ephesians 4:13; 1 Corinthians 3:1-2; 1 John 2:12-17.

<sup>80</sup> PACP-T, p. 3; PACP-L, §15, 2, p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> PACP-T, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> PACP-T, p. 5.

perfection as being an attainable and relative perfection in this life is a progress towards the goal of the final destiny. As to his interpretation and comprehension of Philippians 3:12 and 15 with the profound Christian perfection, it is clear that Wesley neither holds that it implies perfection in knowledge, nor a perfect fulfillment of legal perfection, but that it implies simply loving God with all the heart and life.

## 2. The Nature and Property of Christian Perfection

Grow in the grace and knowledge of  
our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ  
2 Peter 3:18a (NIV)

If the important point of Martin Luther's theology<sup>83</sup> in the faith-culture setting of his life is justification, the main point of John Wesley's theology is sanctification in relation to salvation in the context of the "3R's" in 18<sup>th</sup> century England.<sup>84</sup> Wesley, in connection with Methodist's three main doctrines: repentance, faith and holiness, explains that justification by faith in the grace of Jesus is as "the door" of religion and 'sanctification' by love is as "religion itself."<sup>85</sup> Such statements are driven by his presupposition about human beings as in the following: "the original human nature was not like the present, but different."<sup>86</sup> Namely, all mankind is under the fall of Adam.<sup>87</sup> His

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<sup>83</sup> Flew says that "at a first review of Reformation doctrine there was no room for any doctrine even of a relative perfection in this world" (op. cit., p. 244).

<sup>84</sup> The first is the age of Reason; the second the age of Industrial Revolution and the third the age of Revival. Namely, it is to mean a radical changing age.

<sup>85</sup> "The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained", WJW, vol. 8, §VI, 4, p. 472; J. Telford, *Letters of John Wesley* 8 Vols. (London: the Epworth Press, 1931), vol. 2, p. 268. Repentance is like "the porch of religion" (p. 268). Such presentation is very different from Luther's placing of Justification by faith even though Wesley was affected by Major Reformers.

<sup>86</sup> Plato, *The Republic and other Works* "The Symposium" (translation by B. Jowett, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Anchor Books, 1989, pp.317-365), p. 335.

<sup>87</sup> ENOT, p. 14.

doctrine of Christian perfection is inseparable with one's sin and God's image [*imago Dei*] as a particular grace in human being, for "by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God."<sup>88</sup> This statement makes clear that for Wesley, fallen humanity stands in a definite need of both, forgiveness and healing, as "therapeutic concerns."<sup>89</sup> In that sense Wesley's Christian perfection could be understood through the soteriological and christological perspective. Hence his doctrine of Christian perfection will "stand or fall within the framework of his teachings on sin and grace."<sup>90</sup>

In that respect what is the true picture of Wesley's Christian perfection as the core of his theology? At this point we naturally reach to the pinpoint to be highlighted by exploring what the essence and property of Christian perfection is, and how to attain that in this life, especially, in connection with two realms as a victory over sin and love filling in the heart.

#### A. A Negative Sense of Christian Perfection as Man's Victory over Sin

After saying a pleasant opening statement as the following: "Let us strongly and explicitly exhort all believers to go on to perfection,"<sup>91</sup> Wesley adds a rhetorical question, "Shall we defend this perfection, or give it up?" In an insistent tone he goes on stating

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<sup>88</sup> "Working out our own Salvation", WJW, vol. 6, §II, 1, p. 509.

<sup>89</sup> Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1994), p. 67. Such conception is more likely a characteristic element of Eastern Christianity (p. 67). John Wesley called original sin a "deadly poison", and then called Christ as "the great Physician" in his book, *Doctrine of original sin according to Scripture, reason and experience* (WJW, vol. 9, pp. 193-194).

<sup>90</sup> Leo George Cox, *John Wesley's Concept of Perfection* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas city, 1968), p. 28.

<sup>91</sup> PACP-T, p. 3.

that “We all agree to defend it [perfection], meaning thereby (as we did from the beginning) salvation from all sin.”<sup>92</sup> For him Christian perfection means here ‘the freedom’ from all sin<sup>93</sup>, both as an inward and an outward sin. Certainly such a view of Christian perfection is conceived by him still in a very passive sense.

At the fourth conference, June 16, 1747 when someone asked the question, “Is there any clear scripture promise of this, that God will save us from all sin?”, Wesley answered “There is ‘He shall redeem Israel from all his sins.’”<sup>94</sup> With the quotation of Ezek. 36:25 and 29, Wesley makes extensive use of that passage as a promise that eventually sin would be completely vanquished.<sup>95</sup> Within those citations he produces what the conception of holiness as Christian perfection means: the state of present cleansing from all sin. Wesley stresses that we are “saved from all sin before the article of death,”<sup>96</sup> because “Jesus saves people from their sins. He saves them not only from outward sins but from the sins of their hearts.”<sup>97</sup> But some say “Not till death, not in this world.”<sup>98</sup> With a quotation of 1 John 4:17<sup>99</sup> Wesley speaks on the contrary: “Beyond all contradiction, the apostle is speaking about himself and other living Christians, whom he clearly affirms are like their Master not only at or after death, but ‘in this world.’”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> PACP-T, p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> Romans 6:18

<sup>94</sup> Psalm 130 :8 ; PACP-L, §17, p. 35. James M. Gustafson says, “Wesley relies on more distinctly moral language – new intention, freedom from sins” (p. 98). Here Gustafson describes the notion of Christian ethics in connection with a dynamic maturity, because of working out in a transformation of our entire personality. But Gustafson, at the same time, has a tendency to restrict and minimize the conception of Wesley’s Christian perfection with insisting that Wesley’s Christian perfection is ethical. See *Christ and the Moral Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 63-65.

<sup>95</sup> PACP-T, pp. 33 & 35.

<sup>96</sup> PACP-T, p. 16.

<sup>97</sup> PACP-T, p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> PACP-L, §12, p. 16.

<sup>99</sup> “Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world” (NRSV=New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>100</sup> PACP-L, §12, p. 16; PACP-T, p. 9.

Consequently, Wesley discovers the conception of Christian perfection as the victory over sin in the Bible as the ground of all.

In fact, such a conception could seem to be rooted in the point of view of re-emphasizing how the present state of God's image in fallen human beings.<sup>101</sup> Wesley says that "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints, from the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores... And this account of the present state of man is confirmed by daily experience."<sup>102</sup> This phenomenon echoes very much in his sermons which stress God's justice as a starting point for understanding God's love. At that time Wesley makes people see their present state and recognize the necessity of God's love through Jesus Christ. When people see their sin they intend to restore their original image of God in themselves. But they are powerless to restore the image of God in themselves.<sup>103</sup> Here Wesley stresses that humankind needs Jesus Christ as the Son of God to take and restore the present nature of human beings.

In the second conference,<sup>104</sup> while answering the question, "When does inward sanctification begin?" Wesley insists that it begins "In the moment a man is justified."<sup>105</sup> Hence he says that from the moment of justification "a believer gradually" not only "dies to sin"<sup>106</sup>, but also lives to righteousness and "grows in the grace"<sup>107</sup> of Christ. Consequently, that "dies to sin" postulates a 'new creature' based upon Jesus' act of

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<sup>101</sup> "Original sin", WSS, Vol. II, § II, 2, p. 215.

<sup>102</sup> "Original sin", WSS, Vol. II, § II, 1-2, p. 215.

<sup>103</sup> I Timothy 2:5; Romans 8:3. "Original sin", WSS, vol. II, §2, 3, p. 216.

<sup>104</sup> It was held August 1, 1745. See PACP-L, §17, p. 33; MLV, §17, p. 29; WJW, vol. 11, §17, p. 387.

<sup>105</sup> PACP-L, §17, p. 33; MLV, §17, p. 29; WJW, vol. 11, §17, p. 387.

<sup>106</sup> Roman 6:11; PACP-L, §17, p. 33; WJW, vol. 11, §17, p. 387; MLV, §17, p. 29.

<sup>107</sup> PACP-L, §17, p. 33; MLV, §17, p. 29; WJW, vol. 11, §17, p. 387.

reconciliation.<sup>108</sup> Actually, one belongs now to God even if one lives in the world<sup>109</sup>; one has no longer anything to do with sin; and one pays no more attention to sin. Now is the time to defend the new creature of life against sin. Sin has no longer any business with us. Now “sin has no more dominion over” one who is “not under the law.”<sup>110</sup> But sin is still in front of one’s door as long as one lives in the world. Hence we live in the strain relationship between ‘the law of sin’ and ‘a new creature’ in the grace of Jesus, as St. Paul himself says: “What a wretched man I am!” In order to remove it we should attempt to belong now to God through Jesus Christ; that is a way to be a real Christian. That’s why Wesley claims that “all real Christians or believers in Christ are made free from outward sin,”<sup>111</sup> because of being “the servants of righteousness.” At this point a part of Wesley’s definition of Christian perfection is that “a Christian is so far perfect as he does not commit sin.”<sup>112</sup> Here the question will be instantly and reflectively arisen as follows: What does it mean “not to commit sin”? What sin does Wesley mean? Wesley defines the meaning and the sort of sin which a Christian does not commit:

(1) All transgressions need the atoning blood of Christ. This includes sins as they are properly understood (a voluntary transgression of a known law) and so-called sins (those involuntary transgressions of a divine law, known or unknown). (2) I believe there is no perfection in this life exempt from these involuntary transgressions. This is so because they are a natural consequence of the ignorance and mistakes that characterize human morality....(4) I believe that a person filled with the love of God is still subject to these involuntary transgressions. (5) You may call such transgressions sins, if you please. I do not, for the reasons mentioned above.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Romans 3:25

<sup>109</sup> John 17:14, 16.

<sup>110</sup> “Christian Perfection”, WJW, vol. 6, §II, 3, p. 7; WSS, vol. II, §II, 3, p. 158.

<sup>111</sup> WSS, vol. II, §II, 4, p. 158.

<sup>112</sup> “Christian Perfection”, §20, WSS, vol. II, p. 169.

<sup>113</sup> MLV, §19, p. 39; WJW, vol. 11, §19, p. 396; PACP-L, §19, p. 45.

This means that a Christian is free from sin properly so called in that he does not willfully violate any known law of God. Further, as to the principle of love in action, Wesley speaks of the fact that “if love is the sole principle of action this is not sin.”<sup>114</sup> Here the question will be immediately arisen: If one lives without sin does not this exclude the necessity of the Mediator? At least does one stand no longer in need of Christ in His priestly office? Wesley, however, speaks firmly that one is not free from sin improperly so called (commonly used mistakes) in this life, and that one still stands in need of the atoning blood on account of these sins. Hence Wesley re-emphasizes “In every state we need Christ in the following respects”:

Whatever grace we receive, it is a free gift from Him. We receive it as His purchase, merely in consideration of the price He paid. We have this grace, not only from Christ, but in Him. For our perfection is not like that of a tree, which flourishes by the sap derived from its own root, but, as was said before, like that of a branch, which, united to the vine, bears fruit; but, severed from it, is dried up and withered. All our blessings, temporal, spiritual and eternal, depend on His intercession for us, which is one branch of His priestly office, whereof therefore we have always equal need. The best of men still need Christ, in his priestly office, to atone for their omissions, their shortcomings (as some not improperly speak), their mistakes in judgment and practice, and their defects of various kinds, for these are all deviations from the perfect law, and consequently need atonement.<sup>115</sup>

On the other hand, to share in the grace of Christ means to partake of his life. Wesley says death to sin means to “live unto God”<sup>116</sup> in Christ as being the “glorious eternal life.”<sup>117</sup> “If the love of God fills all the heart, there can be no sin therein.” Restoring God’s image in Jesus Christ is Christian perfection as the victory of human beings over sin in the negative sense. Such a negative sense of Christian perfection may come from

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<sup>114</sup> PACP-L, §19, p. 45.

<sup>115</sup> PACP-L, §19, p. 44.

<sup>116</sup> Romans 6:11, ENNT, p. 479.

<sup>117</sup> Romans 6:11, ENNT, p. 479.



Wesley's particular intent to maximize the keen necessity of salvation through Christ. Hence he fully reemphasizes the notion of the present state of mankind in relation to the conception of sin, for he thoroughly concentrates upon the work of Christ in connection with the profound Christian perfection. Therefore such a notion of Christian perfection indicates how Wesley understands the nature of any soteriological prospect.

### B. A Positive Sense of Perfection as Perfect Love

I will only cite here a part of the hymns concerning Christian perfection as "perfect love"<sup>118</sup> that is "the essence of it":

And pure, and full of faith and love.

Oh that I now, from sin released,  
Thy word might to the utmost prove,  
Enter into Thy promised rest,  
The Canaan of Thy perfect love.

Now let me gain perfection's height!  
Now let me into nothing fall,  
Be less than nothing in my sight,  
And feel that Christ is all in all!<sup>119</sup>

Likewise, the notion of Wesley's Christian perfection is not only a negative and necessary conception of Christian perfection as a therapeutic concern<sup>120</sup> of God's image in the present human nature, but also a bright and dynamic notion of that as more transformation of Christian life in this world. Hence we might elevate and create a well-

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<sup>118</sup> PACP-T, p. 88. In the year 1764, upon a review of the whole subject, Wesley writes down the sum of what he had observed.

<sup>119</sup> PACP-L, §16, pp. 31-32.

<sup>120</sup> PACP-T, pp. 14; 87.

synthesized<sup>121</sup> conception between two realms in treating his Christian perfection as an advance in grace, knowledge, and love<sup>122</sup> through God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Wesley, however, treats mainly two focuses in his sermon on "Christian perfection": "In what sense Christians are not perfect; in what sense they are perfect."<sup>123</sup>

Apparently he re-emphasizes that in the conclusion of the first part:

Christian perfection, therefore, does not imply (as some men seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus, every one that is holy is in the Scripture sense, perfect. Yet we may, lastly, observe that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no 'perfection of degrees',<sup>124</sup> as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase. So that how much so ever any man has attained, or in how high a degree so ever he is perfect he has still need to "grow in grace" and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.<sup>125</sup>

Here Wesley looks forward with a positive sense of Christian perfection as "perfect love" and as implying a progressive ascent. In the last sentence of this quotation Wesley may admit the conception of climbing the top of the mountain as Moses did in his life. As to the nature and properties of Christian perfection he re-stresses that "Our first conception of it was, that it is to have the mind which was in Christ, and to walk as Christ walked; to have all the mind that was in Christ," and "to have a heart so all-flaming with the love of

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<sup>121</sup> See *The Path to Perfection* by Sangster, pp.93-103.

<sup>122</sup> WSS, vol. II, §I, 9, p. 156.

<sup>123</sup> BE, vol. 2, pp. 97-121.

<sup>124</sup> In England of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries there was the notion of the ladder of perfection. The conception of 'perfection of degrees' is "threefold: the first is of love to God above all and to our neighbor as ourselves; the second is...when the saints are wholly dead with [Christ] to sin; the third is *perfectio patriae*...with Christ after his ascension and glorification" (Thomas Drayton, *The Provision, or Condition of the Promises*, 1657, p. 38). Wesley selects for a perfection of love, to God and neighbor, and apparently ignores the other two. This is a secondary source (See BE, vol. II, notes 49, p. 104).

<sup>125</sup> WJW, vol. 6, §I, 9, pp. 5-6; WSS, vol. II, §I, 9, p. 156.

God.”<sup>126</sup> Here the notion of perfection is more practical, dynamic and devotional perspectives in the positive sense in order to draw near to a mature as the gradual stage. Such conceptions are to make us partakers of the image of God in ‘righteousness and true holiness’ through the recovery of God’s love in Jesus Christ. In that sense Wesley calls Christian perfection “the second blessing”<sup>127</sup> in his letter to Sara Crosby,<sup>128</sup> for he recognizes that the gradual transformation is the primary referent “going on from grace to grace.”<sup>129</sup> Furthermore his idea of perfection linked with the conference of 1759 is clearly placed as follows:

Q (Question): What is Christian perfection? A (Answer): The loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. This implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love.<sup>130</sup>

Such positive statement is repeatedly echoed<sup>131</sup> in his PACP from the first conference, June 25, 1744: “Q: What is implied in being a perfect Christian? A: Loving God with all our heart, and mind, and soul.”<sup>132</sup> For him Christian perfection is filled with the love of God “in this life.” The essence of true perfection is to restore the image of God in human beings by an entire union of sanctifying grace in Jesus Christ. In this respect Christian

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<sup>126</sup> PACP-L, § 15, p. 30; MLV, § 15, p. 24. See properties of Christian perfection of which Wesley speaks (PACP-T, p. 88).

<sup>127</sup> PACP-T, p. 77. It will be understood by the correlation between faith and promise of the Holy Spirit in relation to salvation. James I. Packer mentions a critical comment about that. See *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1992), pp. 110-112.

<sup>128</sup> “Letter to Sara Crosby” (14 Feb. 1761), WJW, vol. 12, pp. 353-354. Wesley mentions that “five in one band received a second blessing” (p. 354); Letter to Thomas Olivers (24 Mar. 1757), *The Letters of Rev. John Wesley* (Telford), vol. 3, p. 212.

<sup>129</sup> “The Scripture Way of Salvation”, WSS, vol. II, §I, 8, p. 447; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, p. 177.

<sup>130</sup> PACP-L, §19, p. 42.

<sup>131</sup> In the fourth conference June 16, 1747, an active statement of Christian perfection appeared as “to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul” (Deut. 30:6). However a positive meaning of Christian perfection for Wesley is repeated in many times in his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. See PACP-L, §17, pp. 35, 37.

<sup>132</sup> MLV, §17, p. 29. Deuteronomy 6:5.

perfection is “love which thinks of nothing, seeks nothing, and desires nothing, but God.”<sup>133</sup> This love is pure love that Paul calls “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”<sup>134</sup> In an ultimate sense, “Christian perfection is pure love filling the heart and governing all the words and actions...pure love reigning alone in the heart and life, this is the whole of Christian perfection.”<sup>135</sup> Here Wesley identifies Christian perfection with “love”<sup>136</sup> as the sum of Christian sanctification. Hence he insists that in love is “perfection, and glory, and happiness! The royal law of heaven and earth is this.”<sup>137</sup> Consequently, Wesley’s own typical definition of Christian perfection consistently places the primary emphasis on “perfect love” to be able to create the inward dimension, described in such terms as “the life of God in the human soul, a participation of the divine nature,...or the renewal of our heart after the image of God who creates us.”<sup>138</sup> As we have seen already, by using the immense deposits of “Love” that is flowing like a great tide through the Old Testament and New Testament, in order to centralize all scattered-conceptions of Christian perfection which he has decided to explain better, from beginning to ending, he shows clearly the central axis to represent what his notion of Christian perfection is in relation to the christological and soteriological perspective representation. In that sense this love is interrelated to faith: faith-filled work with the energy of love.<sup>139</sup> Consequently, without faith, no human being is sanctified; no human being is sanctified until one believes.<sup>140</sup> While faith is a free gift of God, love is

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. MLV, §13, p. 19.

<sup>134</sup> Ephesians 4:13.

<sup>135</sup> PACP-T, pp. 32-33.

<sup>136</sup> PACP-L, §6, p. 7

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Journal (13 Sept. 1739), BE, vol. 19, p. 97.

<sup>139</sup> Galatians 5:6

<sup>140</sup> “The Scripture Way of Salvation”, WJW, vol. 6, §III, 3, p. 49; WSS, vol. II, §III, 3, p. 453.

synergistic activities.<sup>141</sup> Likewise, Wesley's Christian perfection has two wings: one is to fly up toward the glory of God; and the other is to fly down toward the recovery of the human being through the incarnate love. Therefore his notion of the profound Christian perfection is really more dynamic, as it implies the creative power to transform not only our souls looking for the goodness and knowledge of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, but also our lives and environments through the real change of our lives dominated by Christ Jesus as the King. At that point the nature of Christian perfection is a mainspring to reform the England which was under social, political, religious, cultural and economical evils of many kinds in all fields, by the immoral state of the nation and the spiritual coldness of the state church and society. Here Christian perfection as "love" can be at once profoundly theological and at the same time ethical.<sup>142</sup> That is why Wesley's Christian perfection is like a "world-transforming gift"<sup>143</sup> to establish the kingdom of God in this world.

### C. Attainment of Christian Perfection

Wesley's most difficult polemical issue<sup>144</sup> concerning Christian perfection may be about the attainment of perfection. For there were very different understandings as the following shows: "Some say, 'This cannot be attained till we have been refined by the fire of purgatory.' Others, 'Nay, it will be attained as soon as the soul and the body part.'

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<sup>141</sup> "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion", WJW, vol. 8, §9, p. 5.

<sup>142</sup> Sangster, op. cit., p. 103.

<sup>143</sup> John Wilkins Sigsworth, op. cit, p. 146.

<sup>144</sup> Especially, Wesley struggles with Calvinist for salvation in relation to 'free grace' and 'predestination'

But others say, 'It may be attained before we die: a moment after is too late.'<sup>145</sup> However, the attainment of Christian perfection is actually inseparable from its very conception, for its conception has totally reflected its propensity and property. At this point, we have seen already above about the nature of Christian perfection, that Wesley's conception of Christian perfection implies 'freedom from all sin' and 'pure love'<sup>146</sup> of God filling the heart. His conception comes from the balance and harmony of restoring the real image between God's attribution and human beings in their present state. In that sense we will attempt to examine when and how to attain Christian perfection. If it is attainable in this life, upon what reference of scripture is this based?

### 1) A Gradual Attainment

Wesley pictures the process of salvation as beginning with "the prevenient grace"<sup>147</sup> as the gift of God's grace. At the fourth conference, when he responded to the question, "Is there any example in Scripture of persons who had attained to this?", Wesley's reply is that "Yes; St. John and all those of whom he says, Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world."<sup>148</sup> Consequently, through suggesting a biblical model, he insists that Christian perfection is attainable in this world as an actual Christian lives. Hence "this is plain, sound, scriptural experience."<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> PACP-T, p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> PACP-T, p. 21.

<sup>147</sup> "Working out our own Salvation", WJW, vol. 6, §II, 1, p. 509. It is the gift of God's grace even though given to every human being. It is not "natural conscience" (p. 512). It is the initial grace to be able to response to God, by the free will of human being.

<sup>148</sup> 1 John 4:17; PACP-T, p. 19; PACP-L, §17, pp. 37-38.

<sup>149</sup> PACP-T, p. 51.

When explaining the attainment of Christian perfection, with the rhetorical questions, "Is the change gradual or instantaneous?... Should we, in preaching, insist both on one and the other?"<sup>150</sup>, he answers that "Certainly we should insist on the gradual change; and that earnestly and continually."<sup>151</sup> Further he goes on fully accounting for what the meaning of the word "gradual" in Christian perfection is in relation to salvation as follows:

And the rather, because constant experience shows, the more earnestly they expect this, the more swiftly and steadily does the gradual work of God go on in their souls; the more careful are they to grow in grace; the more zealous of good works, and the more punctual in their attendance on all the ordinances of God: whereas just the contrary efforts are observed whenever this expectation ceases. They are saved by hope, by this hope of a total change, with a gradually increasing salvation.<sup>152</sup>

In Wesley's terms an attainable Christian perfection would be fundamentally gradual in process, not only because of an identification of salvation with a therapeutic transformation of the sin-distorted human life,<sup>153</sup> but also because of being "a gradual work of God in the soul."<sup>154</sup> What he speaks here about is not justification, but rather the life after justification, because in the process of salvation, sanctification is "a thorough change of heart and life from sin to holiness"<sup>155</sup>

Speaking of "little children" in the interpretation of Matthew 18:3, Wesley explains that "the first step towards entering into the kingdom of grace is to become as

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<sup>150</sup> PACP-T, p. 3.

<sup>151</sup> PACP-T, p. 3.

<sup>152</sup> PACP-T, p. 4.

<sup>153</sup> Such a conception could be coming from very early Greek and later Orthodox theologians who have considered gradualness to be essential to its nature. Western understanding of salvation has focused on the legal act of pardon, which can be a momentary transaction. Wesley was influenced by both of these understandings of salvation.

<sup>154</sup> PACP-T, p. 58.

<sup>155</sup> Acts 3:19, ENNT, p. 358.

little children.”<sup>156</sup> Such a transformation of a person’s character would seem to entail a gradual progress, not a fixed state of experience. Such an interpretation is taken place in 1 John 2:12 & following verses. Through an allegorical interpretation of the words as “little children”, “young men”, and “fathers” appearing in 1 John 2:12 & following verses, Wesley concludes that “there are several stages in Christian life, as in natural life; some of the children of God being but new-born babes; others having attained to more maturity.”<sup>157</sup> He speaks of Christian perfection with the conception of a continual growth: “you are perfect men, being grown up to ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’”<sup>158</sup> Hence Newton Flew notes, quoting A. H. Francke: “There were three stages in the progress towards Christian perfection as the goal, corresponding to the growth in human life from childhood to youth and youth to manhood. He did not claim that sinlessness was a mark of maturity.”<sup>159</sup>

Such a conception is not driven apparently from the Latin word “*perfectio*” which basically related to the perfection of the “gods” and “the goddesses” in the sense of mighty<sup>160</sup> from beginning. His double conception of Christian perfection not only means “death to sin”, but also more “the impartation of divine love”<sup>161</sup> filling our heart in our daily life. That is not to fix a merely justified state by faith, but also a dynamic state, as a new stage in response to the divine will, that works by divine love in the grace of Jesus.

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<sup>156</sup> Matthew 18:3, ENNT, p. 74.

<sup>157</sup> WJW, vol. 6, §II, 1, p. 6; WSS, vol. II, §II, 1, pp. 156-157.

<sup>158</sup> WJW, vol. 6, §II, 1, p. 6.

<sup>159</sup> Flew, op. cit., p. 276-77.

<sup>160</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (trans. & ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VIII, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 68; Steven W. Manskar, *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley’s A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Nashville, TN.: Discipleship Resources, 2003), p. 6. But people may reject the term, perfection in reference to any person or things because it is not understood properly and because, in general, to be perfect often signifies to be blameless and irreproachable.

<sup>161</sup> Timothy L. Smith, op. cit., p. 78.



Wesley emphasizes the necessity “to grow in grace and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.”<sup>162</sup> Consequently, he says, “Certainly we must insist on gradual change; and that earnestly and continually.”<sup>163</sup> The experience of Christian perfection as the beginning of the life of growth in holiness, rather than the culmination of its mature graces, became thereby the focal point of the Christian life.

In short, Wesley’s gradual conception in profound Christian perfection is not only “the growth in grace,”<sup>164</sup> but also the growth “in the image of God”<sup>165</sup> and “from grace to grace”<sup>166</sup> through “the impartation of divine love as the source of the power.”<sup>167</sup> Wesley desires “to spread this scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>168</sup>

## 2) An Instantaneous Attainment

Wesley does not understand a moment of work as an instantaneous event as in his Journal of 22 April 1738 as the followings:

I could not comprehend what he [Peter Bohler]<sup>169</sup> spoke of an instantaneous work. I could not understand how this faith should be given in a moment: How a man could at once be thus turned from darkness to light, from sin and misery to righteousness and joy in the Holy Ghost. I searched the Scriptures again, touching this very thing, particularly the Acts of the Apostles: But, to my utter astonishment, found scarce any instances there of other than instantaneous conversions; scarce any so slow as that of St. Paul, who was three days in the pangs of the new birth. I had but one retreat left; namely, “Thus, I grant, God wrought in the first age of

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<sup>162</sup> WJW, vol. 6, §I, 9, pp. 5-6; WSS, vol. II, §I, 9, p. 156.

<sup>163</sup> “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others,” WJW, vol. 8, p. 329.

<sup>164</sup> “The Scripture way of Salvation”, WSS, vol. II, §III, 5, p. 454.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> “The scripture way of Salvation”, WSS, vol. II, §I, 8, p. 447.

<sup>167</sup> Timothy L. Smith, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>168</sup> “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others,” WJW, vol. 8, p. 299.

<sup>169</sup> He, as a leader of Moravian, affects on Wesley at the middle of 1730s. But later the two men could not stand together because of their different color of faith.

Christianity; but the times are changed. What reason have I to believe he works in the same manner now?"<sup>170</sup>

Even in his early life he does not believe in an instantaneous attainment of Christian perfection, even if he defends the instantaneous character of justification in salvation. Maddox speaks about Wesley's attitude for the instantaneousness of Christian perfection in his book as follows:

"Protestant" readings of Wesley have often seized on these affirmations as evidence that his Soteriology was fundamentally Western – focusing on 'momentary' transition in juridical status.... Wesley integrated characteristic Western concerns into his more central therapeutic understanding of salvation.<sup>171</sup>

However he accepts the significance of an instantaneous beginning of the Christian life, and insists on an instantaneous perfection in his PACP:

But as to the circumstances, is the change gradual or instantaneous? It is both the one and the other... therefore, whoever would advance the gradual change in believers, should strongly insist on the instantaneous.<sup>172</sup>

Here the motivation that Wesley defends the instantaneous nature of Christian perfection is to have shown concern for the theological implications more than for the psychological dynamics, especially, that there is always a "last moment" before death. Hence Wesley says that "in some this change was not instantaneous. They did not perceive the instant when it was wrought. It is often difficult to perceive the instant when a man dies; yet there is an instant in which life ceases."<sup>173</sup> In the year 1764 his opinion about the subject of instantaneousness seems to be like "the rock" in the nature of Christian perfection,

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<sup>170</sup> "Journal 22 April 1738" WJW, vol. 1, p. 91.

<sup>171</sup> Maddox, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>172</sup> PACP-T, pp. 3; 4; "Minutes of some late Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others (1768)" WJW, vol. 8, Q. 56, p. 329.

<sup>173</sup> "Plain Account of Christian Perfection", WJW, vol. 11, §26, p. 442; PACP-T, p. 34.

because of his saying: "No one can deny this."<sup>174</sup> Such a notion may be based upon the conception of Christian perfection as the "salvation and freedom from all sin". In that sense the nature of instantaneousness that Wesley emphasizes here is to focus on the gift of God rather than on the elements of human achievement in the nature of Christian perfection. This confirms clearly his own claim, Christian "perfection is received by simple faith in God's gift, consequently in an instant."<sup>175</sup> Here his stressing of the instantaneous nature of Christian perfection is particularly related to its impact on gradual responsive growth prior to this event. Consequently, this attainment is to mean the full restoring the image of God in the human being at the last moment of life, through the love of God filling soul and heart.<sup>176</sup>

In conclusion, the nature and property of Christian perfection are understood and interpreted comprehending who Jesus as the whole being is and what Christ as the son of God does in connection with the notion of Christian perfection. A gradual or an instantaneous attainment of Christian perfection thoroughly depends upon "the will of God" and "the whole work of God"<sup>177</sup> through Jesus Christ, not upon the will of human beings. This clearly links his understanding of Christian perfection to his Christology. So we now come to that transition.

### 3. Wesley's Christology on Christian Perfection: *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*

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<sup>174</sup> MLV, p. 83.

<sup>175</sup> "Letter to Charles Wesley (27 Jan. 1767)", Letters, vol. 5, p. 39; "Letter to Ann Loxdale (12 July 1782)", WJW, vol. 13, p. 131 and Letters, vol. 7, p. 129.

<sup>176</sup> PACP-T, p. 3.

<sup>177</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 220.

As a starting point one should state that Wesley's understanding of Christology is bound to his basic comprehension of God's attributes as "love" that desires to restore the creature, and as "justice" that must punish the sinner, an understanding from which derives his analysis of the present human situation.

Hence in Christology, his primary focus is definitely not the "Jesus of history", but Jesus as "the Christ", "the Saviour of the world."<sup>178</sup> His statements are to intimate the proper recognition and presupposition of what the original nature and the present nature of human beings are. The present human nature is not like the original nature that has 'a mind to praise and love' God as one's Creator, but it is a "different one."<sup>179</sup> Namely, there was "the whole art of communion"<sup>180</sup> between God and human beings in once; but it is now lost. Hence the humankind's need for Christ Jesus to take "sin"<sup>181</sup> away as the original cause which demolishes the particular communion between God and humans and that he restores the present human nature as the lost-image of God. Consequently, God's justice and love are fully harmonized in the penal substitution of Christ on the cross for the sin of human beings. Here one may see Wesley's two particular aspects of Christian perfection as "freedom from all sin"<sup>182</sup> and "love filling the heart,"<sup>183</sup> namely, through Christ's priestly and kingly work.<sup>184</sup> Precisely speaking, however, his essential christological concern is with the "threefold office"<sup>185</sup> of Christ Jesus in connection with

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<sup>178</sup> "Letter to a Roman Catholic", WJW, vol. 10, §7, p. 81. As to the Saviour of the world, Wesley emphasizes "Christ is for all". But he does not insist the "universal salvation", nor divine-determinism, but rather the "universal atonement".

<sup>179</sup> Plato, "The Symposium", *The Republic and other works* pp. 334 & 335.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, p. 334.

<sup>181</sup> Wesley defines sin as "disobedience" in one word, Genesis 3:6, ENOT, p. 15.

<sup>182</sup> "Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, From the year 1725, to the year 1777", WJW, vol. 11, §25, Q. 11, p. 418.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, Q. 12, p. 418.

<sup>184</sup> Wesley identifies the priestly office with justification; other two with sanctification. See PACP-T, p. 48,

<sup>185</sup> See "Letter to a Roman Catholic", WJW, vol. 10, §7, p. 81.

his ascetic theology. In that way Wesley sets forth the true significance of love of Christ whom a real Christian must imitate and follow in order to grow and participate in knowledge, love and grace of God. Such a context does not concentrate on the examination of who Jesus is, but what Christ does for us. Hence through his functional Christology Wesley intends to create the possibility for a more practical and dynamically devout life, rather than to produce a theoretical or an abstract picture of the “triple office [*munus triplex*]”: King, Prophet, and Priest.

In his book, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*,<sup>186</sup> he mainly uses the Christological terminology “Christ” in having in view of a functional work rather than using the other name, “Jesus” for the whole person” in connection with his two natures.

We will see how Wesley understands Christology in his ascetic treatise in relation to the profoundly “gradual growth” of Christian perfection and then how his christological understanding affects his spiritual system about a dynamic growth of Christian sanctification, as he recognizes it in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.

#### A. Christology in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*

In general, it was admitted that Wesley’s message is a Christ-centered vision, proclaiming the synthesized genuine gospel between God’s justice and love, through the Christ Jesus, in relation to the two realms as salvation and sanctification in his theological framework. His message is totally founded on the Christological ground as the work and person of Christ who is the incarnate Son of God, especially in connection with Christian

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<sup>186</sup> Wesley represents about 58 names of Christ in PACP. Of course, there are many repeated-names. But most names are related to the work of Christ Jesus. The name, Jesus itself is one time. There are other names: the Lord (12times); Jesus Christ (9); the Son of God (3); Jesus the Lord (1); the holy One (1); the Son of man (1) and Jesus Christ His son (1).

perfection as “a dynamic transforming system” in the present nature of the human being which is unlike the original one. In order to restore the image of God [*imago Dei*]<sup>187</sup> as the peculiar gift of the Creator in the present human nature and to continually go on keeping the recovered image of God in Christ Jesus, Wesley summarizes the message which he wants his preachers to proclaim: “Christ dying for us” and “Christ reigning in us.”<sup>188</sup> This is a very clear formulation of his point of view about Christology. It shows the two pillars of many of his christological statements about the work of Christ. As we have seen before, such Christological statements correspond to his picture revealing the nature of the profound Christian perfection which he designed for the world. In that sense, the christological character of this treatise as the keynote of Christian perfection concentrates upon the significance of the messiah figure of Jesus Christ for ourselves as we are growing up in the knowledge, love and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Further Wesley apparently speaks about the messianic web as follows:

The holiest of men still need Christ, as their Prophet, as the light of the world. For he does not give them light but “from moment to moment”: The instant he withdraws, all is darkness. They still need Christ as their King; for God does not give them a stock of holiness. But unless they receive a supply “every moment,” nothing but unholiness would remain. They still need Christ as their Priest, to make atonement for their holy things. Even perfect holiness is acceptable to God only through Jesus Christ.<sup>189</sup>

In conjunction with the interpretation of profoundly scriptural Christian perfection, it is obvious that Wesley makes the connection between Christian perfection and a moment-

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<sup>187</sup> Wesley describes the threefold image of God in human being: the natural image; the political image; and the moral image. First two images are partly lost; the moral image is wholly lost. Here Wesley thinks of the loss of the more significant moral image when he emphasizes human depravity. See “On the Fall of Man”, BE, vol. 2, §II, 6, p. 410.

<sup>188</sup> “Letter to Charles Wesley (28 December 1774”, Letters, vol. 6, p. 134.

<sup>189</sup> “Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, From the year 1725, to the year 1777”, WJW, vol. 11, §25, Q. 9, p. 417; PACP-T, p. 48.

to-moment dependence on Christ. He emphasizes thoroughly the Christ-centered living not only by entrusting Christ Jesus as ruling in us by a “moment-to-moment,” but he also stresses the significant communication with God through believing in Christ as the Saviour for us at “every moment” in relation with the perpetual moment of Christian perfection as an ascending dynamic system, for “even fathers in Christ are not impossible to draw back; they who are sanctified may fall and perish.”<sup>190</sup> That is why Wesley insists to pursue the continuously gradual growth in the grace and love of God through Christ Jesus as the Prophetic Sustainer. Here we can see the fundamental principle, as God’s decree, which is how God manages his beloved ones in this world, only through Jesus Christ as the Mediator. That is the same principle which God uses when he supplies manna “every day” to the community of Israel in the wilderness, except the Sabbath day. In the New Testament when Jesus teaches us the prayer in Matthew 6, Jesus also speaks of the same principle according to which God acts for Israel in the wilderness: “Give us ‘today’ our ‘daily’ bread.” At that point such a statement manifests God as the Provider for us. Yet of most important significance is how and through whom God provides now all things for us. Wesley understands that this principle can be applied to one who goes on a spiritual pilgrimage for the knowledge and goodness of God through Jesus Christ alone. Hence Wesley insists on God’s grace, supplied “every moment” through Christ Jesus alone as our King and Prophet in the quest for Christian perfection considered as a system of perpetual renewal. That is what he calls “the growth in the grace of God” and also “the advance from grace to grace”<sup>191</sup> in the recovered image of God in the present human nature by Christ as the Lord of Grace.

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<sup>190</sup> Hebrews 10:9; Ibid, Q, 21, p. 422.

<sup>191</sup> “The Scripture Way of Salvation”, WSS, §I, 8, p. 447.

Seeing an analysis of the christological terminology which Wesley uses in the PACP<sup>192</sup> it will be very explicit that his Christology concentrates on the work of Christ Jesus for his particular designed-purpose in order to explain plainly the notion of Christian perfection for all people. From the opening page of PACP Wesley commences with the definition of Christian perfection which is related to Christ as the atonement for sin. In fact, the atonement of Christ becomes really “central” in his mature comprehending of the meaning of Christ in connection with Christian perfection and justification. For Wesley the atonement of Christ demarcates the distinguishing point between the Deism of his day and true Christianity.<sup>193</sup> He declares Christ’s atonement as the most significant Christian doctrine of all in his particular faith-culture setting. Here we may understand why he emphasizes the work of Christ in all his treatises through his personal confessional statement as follows: “If there be none made perfect in love yet, God has not sent me to preach Christian perfection.”<sup>194</sup> Consequently, Wesley’s Christology is fundamentally related to his own conscious mission to proclaim “Christ as dying for all” and “Christ as living in us.”

Yet the atonement of Christ is not the whole work of the messianic Christology, but rather a part of that, even if he emphasizes it as “God’s ultimate agenda in order to recover the Divine-likeness in our lives.”<sup>195</sup> The division of Christ’s one mediatorial office into a threefold, prophetic, priestly and kingly work, has a prominent place in

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<sup>192</sup> See notes 186. There is in detail.

<sup>193</sup> “Letter to Mary Bishop (7 February 1778)”, Letters, vol. 6, 297-298. As to the deism and the revival of 18<sup>th</sup> century in England, A. C. McGiffert writes: “It is often asserted that in the controversy of the eighteenth century in England the victory was won by the orthodox apologists over both the deists and skeptics. Nothing could be further from the truth....That religious faith and devotion still survived and flourished was due, not to the apologists, but to altogether different influences, of which the great evangelical revival was the most important” (p. 243). See *Protestant Thought Before Kant* (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1936).

<sup>194</sup> PACP-T, pp. 39-40.

<sup>195</sup> Maddox, op. cit., p. 97.



Wesley's theological thinking framework. Explicitly Wesley sets forth his view concerning Christ as the Triple Officer in the following quotation:

I [Wesley] believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Saviour of the world, the Messiah so long foretold; that, being anointed with the Holy Ghost, he was a Prophet, revealing to us the whole will of God; that he was a priest, who gave himself as sacrifice for sin, and still makes intercession for transgressors; that he is a King, who has all power in heaven and in earth, and will reign till he has subdued all things to himself.<sup>196</sup>

For Wesley that will be the formula of Christ's triple office.<sup>197</sup> These statements may emphatically identify the content of Christ's triple office: in brief, the priestly office emphasizes a function of the atonement and intercession of Christ; the prophetic office focuses on a function of teacher of both the law and the gospel; and the kingly office concentrates upon a function of dominion and victory of Christ. Explaining the threefold office of Christ in connection with Christian perfection Wesley implicitly identifies the prophetic and kingly offices while the priestly office relates to justification. In order to emphasize Christian perfection he tends to commence with the priestly office.<sup>198</sup> For him this is an unusual way to use the order of Christ's triple office.<sup>199</sup> By his formula of triple office of Christ Wesley presents the doctrine of Christian perfection that Christ makes possible in this life. In that regard Deschner speaks of Wesley using the Christology of

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<sup>196</sup> "Letter to a Roman Catholic" (July 18, 1749), WJW, vol. 10, §7, p. 81.

<sup>197</sup> "Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, From the year 1725, to the year 1777", WJW, vol. 11, §25, Q. 9, p. 417; PACP-T, p. 48. In the three offices of Christ, Deschner speaks of "some indication of the Trinitarian background of the doctrine" (p. 74). His idea is fresh. But his short explanation for that is not enough, but confusing. See *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* by John Deschner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1988)

<sup>198</sup> John Deschner, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>199</sup> In order to express such centrality and unity, John Deschner suggests that "the priestly office will be presented last, as the climax...the order we shall use will be: prophet, king, and priest" (p. 79). If we understand this order in the light of dramas, movies and documentaries which are televised in the TV, radio and theater, Deschner's suggestion could be right. I will follow Deschner's way. But if we understand that order in the light of the priority order of works, Wesley's order is better than Deschner's, for the priestly office is basic for the other two.

the triple office “for his leading theological interests,”<sup>200</sup> and that is correct and a good point.

However through his Christology Wesley accentuates and highlights the doctrine of Christian perfection as a transformation creating “a real change” for the quality of lives and restoring the image of God in present human nature. Wesley’s Christology places the motifs for restoration in the foreground of the doctrine of salvation. Hence Wilson says that Wesley emphasizes “a Christology that made real the experience of Christian perfection”<sup>201</sup> in the present world.

In conclusion, Wesley identifies a real Christian as growing in grace and love of God through the power and presence of Christ as an integral element of Christology itself which means both, Christ and Logos. For Wesley Christology is “central” in his notion of Christian perfection and “essential” to every other doctrine.<sup>202</sup>

### 1) One Christ

Wesley speaks about the divine-human person in poetic works as follows:

Very man, and very God,  
Thou hast bought us with Thy blood:  
Two distinguished natures we  
In thy single person see,  
God and man in thee alone  
Mix inseparably One.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Deschner, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>201</sup> Charles R. Wilson, “Christology: The Incarnate Word of God”, *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology: Biblical, Systematic and Practical* vol. 1, (editor by Charles W. Carter, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1983), p. 351.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>203</sup> Gregory Osborn, (ed.) *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* vol. 7, p. 241.

Such union is according to the decree of God to save the fallen human beings. Hence Wesley understands the incarnation of Christ as “remedy” for ungodly human beings, in line with the Chalcedonian formula.<sup>204</sup>

Particularly, as to two natures in one person, Wesley frequently condemned Arianism and Socinianism in his writings, as since “William Whiston others had attempted to revive Arian teachings”<sup>205</sup> in eighteenth century England. Wesley wrote in very strong terms that “Bishop Browne thought, Arianism and Socinianism were the flood which the dragon is in this age pouring out of his mouth to swallow up the woman: Perhaps it may.”<sup>206</sup> But Wesley did distinguish between the two: “For, whereas [Socinians] deny Christ to be any God at all, [Arians] do not, they only deny him to be the great God.” Such a critical writing defends the church’s received doctrinal tradition in the special theological climate of Wesley’s time, and represents the true faith in his age.

However Wesley confirms also the unity of the two natures in one person according to an interpretation of scriptural teaching and in maintenance of the Apostles’ Creed. For Wesley one Christ affects vividly his teaching of a gradual Christian perfection in the revival movement through personal experiences in Christian lives.

## B. Effect of Christology upon Christian Perfection

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<sup>204</sup> Charles Kannengiesser (Ed.), *Christology* (Montréal: Concordia University, 2004), p. 220. This is a Coursepack of THEO 655 for 2004 winter.

<sup>205</sup> Ted, A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), p. 79.

<sup>206</sup> “Letter to a Member of the Society (September 16, 1774)”, WJW, p. 296.

Wesley says, "They do not need Christ to reconcile them to God afresh; for they are reconciled. They do not need him to restore the favor of God."<sup>207</sup> Do these statements really mean that we do not need Christ in order to explain a scriptural Christian perfection after justification by faith? What do these sentences really imply? What does Wesley want to insist on here? We will examine the effect of Christology upon the doctrine of Christian perfection.

### 1) The Real Transformation of Our Lives

Paradoxically, to emphasize how much Christology influences the theology of Christian perfection as a gradual transformative dynamic, Wesley says that "The holiest of men still need Christ,...Even perfect holiness is acceptable to God only through Jesus Christ."<sup>208</sup> Here he shows how important Christ Jesus is for Christian perfection. In fact, this quotation is like a motif for a gradual Christian perfection in relation to Christology. Without Christ Jesus no one can attain Christian perfection forever; without Christ Christian perfection is absolutely impossible, but with Christ it is very possible in this life. Hence Christ Jesus is the essential core of an attainable Christian perfection in this world. In that light it can be said that Christian perfection begins with Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour, and ends with Christ Jesus as Son of God. Consequently, Christ Jesus' communication touches human hearts and creates the process of the spiritual transformation, "from grace to grace", in the human beings as "new creatures in

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<sup>207</sup> "Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, From the year 1725, to the year 1777", WJW, vol. 11, §25, Q. 11, p. 418.

<sup>208</sup> "Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, From the year 1725, to the year 1777", WJW, vol. 11, §25, Q. 9, p. 417.

Christ”<sup>209</sup> through the Holy Spirit. John A. T. Robinson says, it is “an entirely different mode of living-in-relationship from anything known in the world”...and “simply to be the embodiment of this new being as love.”<sup>210</sup> Such a real transformation in our lives generates “the inner richness”<sup>211</sup> of the proper nature of the whole Christian perfection which means “pure love reigning alone in the heart and life.”<sup>212</sup> Hence Christology helps us attain a personal perfection in relation to Christ as the King in our daily life. In that light the word “Christ” denotes “the ultimate depth of all our being, the creative ground and meaning of all our existence”<sup>213</sup> in the Christological understanding. Truly “a real change” is “an actualizing process”<sup>214</sup> of Christian perfection in the realm of Christology.

While implying sanctification as well as holiness, love and freedom Christian perfection also means freedom from self-will, from evil thought and from all inward and outward sins through the realm of Christology. As I have said before, for Wesley the christological formula of two natures in one person is applied to Christian perfection as a dynamic transformation to create “a new creature in Christ.” For him two natures here may seem to become two wings: a personal holiness as a vertical dimension and a social holiness as a horizontal dimension in Christian perfection, as a process seeking holiness through his Christology. In particular, Albert Outler interprets a social holiness of Wesley in connection with evangelism. He says, “For Wesley, the essence of faith was personal and inward, but the evidence of faith was public and social.... The Christian community

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<sup>209</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17 (New Marked Reference Bible).

<sup>210</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Honest To God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), p. 82.

<sup>211</sup> Charles Kannengiesser (Ed.), “Scripture and Spirituality in Ancient Christianity”, *Christology* (Montréal: Concordia University, 2004, pp. 420-426), p. 422.

<sup>212</sup> PACP-T, p. 33.

<sup>213</sup> Robinson, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>214</sup> Charles Kannengiesser (Ed.), *Christology* p. 424.

must be committed to social reform.”<sup>215</sup> Further he believes, “Wesley gathered his converts into societies....Wesley organized his converts into societies.”<sup>216</sup> Consequently, Wesley argues for not only a personal Christian perfection, but at the same time social Christian perfection with the two natures of Christ through his christological interpretation. Here Wesley re-emphasizes the vital balance between personal perfection and a social perfection as follows:

Solitary religion is not found [in the Gospel]. ‘Holy solitaries’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than ‘holy adulterers.’ The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; No holiness but social holiness. ‘Faith working by love’ is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection....And in truth, whomsoever loves his brethren, not in word only but as Christ has loved him, cannot but be ‘zealous of good works.’ He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them....And at all opportunities he is, like his Master, ‘going about doing good.’<sup>217</sup>

In fact, by Christology, Wesley aimed at Christian perfection in love in this life. This love is the great medicine of life: the love of God and all humankind, only through Christology as the Christ and Logos. In conclusion, we could say, Wesley uses a functional Christology as the work of Jesus Christ in a view of salvation in order to maximize Christian perfection as a transformation of our lives and attempt to reform the Church and nation. Such Christology in the *A Plain Account of Christian perfection* constitutes a passport to gradual progress to perfection, by growing in grace and love of God through a christological hermeneutics in his particularly theological climate. In a

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<sup>215</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), p. 25.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>217</sup> John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739); Albert C. Outler, “Foreword”, in *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley’s Ethics* (by Leon O. Hynson Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Corporation, 1984), p. 9. This is a secondary source.

word, his Christology is like the source and foundation of a profoundly perpetual spiral in his ascetic theology.

## Chapter 3

### Conclusions: Comparing Gregory with Wesley

Some conclusions have been already indicated while presenting the theological dialogue on Christian perfection between Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley. Here I shall make a global conclusion about their theological dialogue. In that conclusion I shall present and interpret Christian perfection in the light of their dialogue, but in respecting each one's uniqueness. Through presenting both of their theologies, I shall compare Gregory with Wesley and analyze his thought in the light of the dialogue. First, I will present the similarities and the differences by comparing and analyzing the results as discovered in our investigation through the theological dialogues between Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley on Christian perfection.

As we have seen already, I will analyze a theological dialogue of Gregory and Wesley in the "quadrilateral" category: Scripture, Interpretation, Christian perfection and Christology.

#### 1. Comparing Gregory with Wesley

##### A. The Bible

As in any theoretical project, laying down a cornerstone of the planned building is the most important work of a theologian. We cannot over-emphasize the importance of such a foundation. In that light both Gregory and Wesley, would have declared the



significance of a formative biblical foundation. For them the Bible is “the theological real data,” which determine them and their thought for their faith and lives because they consider the Scriptures as “the oracles of God”<sup>1</sup> or “the divine word”<sup>2</sup> in their treatises and their lives; particularly, in 1730 Wesley himself desires to be “*homo unius libri*” [a man of one book]. Of course it does not mean that he does not need other books; rather that he concentrates on one book, the Bible. As to Christian perfection he describes it as a scriptural doctrine. For him the Bible is the primary source and criteria. In the same way, Gregory “found in the New Testament the inspiration and principles of the spiritual life.”<sup>3</sup> Dunstone says that “philosophy is subordinated to the Scripture.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, Gregory was well versed in the philosophical thought of his day. But the thrust of his thought and the center of his real concern are Christian rather than Hellenistic.<sup>5</sup> Actually, Gregory transforms his philosophical culture into a Christian and Biblical theology. In other words, Gregory focuses on one book, the Scripture. In Gregory’s time, though philosophy was like the best flower of many plants and their best fruit, Gregory finds the principles for it in the Bible and he makes all flowers and fruit subordinate to the Scripture. Thus it may be right to say that Gregory also was “*homo unius libri*” as well. Even if their methods to be “*homo unius libri*” were different in their respective faith-culture, Gregory and Wesley were indeed “men of one book.” They would not object to each other’s perspective on the

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<sup>1</sup> “On God’s Vineyard”, WJW, vol. 3, §I. 1, p. 504; “A Letter to Mrs. Barton (19 February 1777)”, Letter, vol. 6, p. 256; 1 Peter 4:11, ENNT, p. 769. LOM, II. 316, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Danielou, (ed.) *From Glory to Glory* (New York: Scribner, 1961), p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> Sister Mary Emily Keenan, S.C.N, “De Professione and De Perfectione: A Study of the Ascetical Doctrine of St. Gregory of Nyssa”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 5, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950, pp. 167-207), p. 205.

<sup>4</sup> A. S. Dunstone, *The Atonement in Gregory of Nyssa* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1964), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woods Callahan, (trans.) *The Fathers of Church: Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works* vol. 58, (Catholic University of America Press, 1967), pp. 76-84.

Bible as the theological rock, but rather co-possess the conception, authority and nature of the Bible.

They are not only greatly acquainted with the Bible itself, but also eminent biblical scholars. For their interpretation of the Bible, while Gregory attempts to use “a *theoria*” to maximize the deeper meaning of a text for spiritual life, Wesley also strives for insights into meanings beyond the range of the literal and a form of *theoria* as allegorical interpretation in his treatises. Here through biblical interpretations, Gregory pursues a practical and ascetical purpose to know and participate into the knowledge and goodness of God in Jesus, not obscure theory; Wesley also aims at the *praxis* of Christian faith and shows concerns about growth in the grace of God in Jesus. Both attempt to introduce a biblical “plain<sup>6</sup> truth for all”<sup>7</sup> on Christian perfection.

## B. Interpretation

Interpreting the key text, Philippians 3: 12 -15, to set forth their doctrine of the spiritual life, Gregory necessarily emphasizes on the word *epektasis* which can translate as “stretching forward” to attain a profound goal, while Wesley essentially focuses on the word *teleios* which can translate as “mature” or “perfect” or “full-grown” or “adult” to grow gradually toward the final destiny as God’s glory presented in the life of Moses. We see here different perspectives on what Christian perfection is in Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley’s theological systems. Yet, this does not mean that one or other’s interpretations is wrong. Rather, each approaches Christian perfection from a different perspective and from different presuppositions, and each provides normative criteria for

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<sup>6</sup> LOM, II. 45.

<sup>7</sup> “Preface to the Sermons”, WSS, vol. I, §3, p. 30.

understanding the various dialects in highlighting positions and counter-positions. Thus, rather than being contradictory, the differences between Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley on Christian perfection are complimentary. We see in each, a process of coming to know and to participate in the unrevealed knowledge and word of God, which allows one to discover “a process of self-transcendence”<sup>8</sup> which comes through Jesus Christ alone. Hence “the most urgent need for Christians today” in the transformation of our lives, of which Charles Kannengiesser says: “It is a need for structures of thought, for a new meaningfulness in Christian self-understanding, not for changing beliefs and liturgies.”<sup>9</sup> This is an eminent insight hitting the mark which we seek in pluralism and postmodern era. However, the interpretation of the Scriptural word furnishes an essentially significant formative influence on Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley on Christian perfection.

### C. Christian Perfection

In order to reach the central point at the heart of this thesis we pass through a difficult and gradual process to grasp the meaning of our life within the new grace and love of God in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of Christian perfection is of special significance for the two theologians in their lives. Gregory makes an important contribution in providing theological and spiritual support for the quest for perfection. Hence he is referred to as “the greatest of all the Eastern teachers of the quest for perfection” by a Wesleyan eminent scholar.<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of Christian perfection is one of the most distinctive doctrines of Wesleyan tradition and its most characteristic teachings. “Most

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Kannengiesser (Ed.), *Christology* p.425.

<sup>10</sup> Albert C. Outler, (ed.), *John Wesley*, p. 9.

students who have taken in hand a study of modern holiness movements have traced their origin to Wesley's teaching."

While Wesley employs many terms<sup>11</sup> to describe the nature of the profound Christian perfection, Gregory keeps the word "*epektasis*" to denote the nature of a "gradual and eternal perfection." Both Gregory and Wesley admit explicitly that Christian perfection is "both" 'unattainable' and 'attainable' in this life. This statement can/may make others surprise or wonder about their thinking systems. It remains one of the most challenging features of their respective theologies. For Gregory it is a certain fact that the nature of Christian perfection which is attainable in this life<sup>12</sup> may be merely de-emphasized by Gregory scholars until today, because they have put a special accent on the conception of "unattainable" or of an "impossible" perfection in this world, or because they have neglected to examine the commandment of Jesus in Matthew 5:48 of which Gregory has spoken. While insisting that Christian perfection is "unattainable" or "impossible" in this life, he warns us "not to disregard"<sup>13</sup> the commandment of Jesus, "Therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect."<sup>14</sup> Hence Gregory says that "the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness."<sup>15</sup> Here he redefines Christian perfection from another point of view, and then he affirmed that perfection is "attainable" in this life. For Gregory the commandment of Jesus to His disciples to be perfect is the keynote of the attainable Christian perfection in this world. It

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<sup>11</sup> There is a twofold category: one from the Scriptures; the other from theological ones. For the Scriptures, there are "circumcision of the heart (Deut. 30:6); "redemption from all sin" (Ps. 130:8); cleansing from all filthiness (Ezek. 36:25); and "delivering out of the hands of our enemies" (Lk. 1:68-69). For theological ones, there is "entire sanctification," "Christian perfection," "perfect love," "freedom from all sin," and "purity of the heart."

<sup>12</sup> LOM, I, 10, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> LOM, I, 9, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 5:48.

<sup>15</sup> LOM, I, 10, p. 31.

is not really a new conception of that perfection, but rather “a hidden fact” or “an undeveloped conception” as old as his writing. For the practical purpose it might be new to them and others. That is there is need for a more balanced study of Gregory’s thought today.

Basically, Gregory understands Christian perfection in terms of virtue as “goodness” and “the Good”.<sup>16</sup> For him Christian perfection is nothing other than an accomplishment of virtue. While virtue has to do with right moral actions, the maturity of virtue is essentially related to God’s Nature as Goodness, which is a moral attribute of God. Since the chief virtue is reverence and having the proper notions about the divine nature which is infinite goodness and the divine goodness transcends all cognitive thought, no virtue has a limit in its nature.<sup>17</sup> In that respect, Gregory affirmed that the course of perfection, consequently, has no end in this life: it is “impossible for those who pursue the life of virtue to attain perfection.”<sup>18</sup> With the notion of “*epektasis*” Gregory’s understanding of Christian perfection is to participate into the knowledge and goodness of God through Jesus Christ, perpetually and gradually.

Therefore we can see that Gregory speaks about Christian perfection in two ways, each of them based on a different context. When Gregory talks about “attainable” Christian perfection, it is in terms of growth in the divine goodness and right moral life. When he speaks of “unattainable” Christian perfection, he emphasizes the possibility and necessity of perfection paradoxically because it is based on the infiniteness of God’s goodness into which human beings are to participate without ceasing. His conception of Christian perfection in a twofold way suggests that his presupposition for Christian

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<sup>16</sup> LOM, I. 5, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> LOM, I. 47, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> LOM, I. 6, p. 31.

perfection comes from two different conceptions of God: one being God's Attribute as Goodness; another one being God's Essence as Eternity. When compared with Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection, Gregory's perfection is more personal contemplation as focusing on Jesus. Of course, it does not mean that Gregory's perfection does not include the notion of social holiness.

The most distinctive marks of Christian perfection that Wesley emphasizes is perfect purity of the heart, perfect love of God and neighbor, and perfect rejoice in Jesus Christ. These conceptions are related to the theologically problematical issues with which Wesley deals in order to concretize and maximize "attainable" Christian perfection in this life: sin, love and rejoicing or happiness. More theologically speaking, the triple conception may be closely related to the central metaphor of the image of God in human beings, and related also to the triple christological office of Christ Jesus. While Wesley interprets God's image in three ways<sup>19</sup>: the moral image; the natural image; and the dominion image, perfect purity of the heart is like the full recovery of the moral image through Christ's priestly office; perfect love is like the full recovery of the natural image through Christ' prophetic office; and perfect happiness is like the full recovery of purpose of God's creation for human existence through Christ's kingly office.<sup>20</sup> Here Wesley affirms that the attainable Christian perfection in this world is fundamentally gradual in process without limitation because of the identification of salvation with a therapeutic transformation of the sin-distorted human life. In this light "neither is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no perfection of degree, as it is termed; none which does not

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<sup>19</sup> "The Image of God", BE, vol. 4, pp. 290-303.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, §2, p. 292.

admit of a continual increase.”<sup>21</sup> Christian perfection is not the perfection of an “established” perfect degree but “toward” the perfect degree. It is a dynamical transforming perfection in the spiral structural system, not fixed state. The Christian perfection Wesley insists upon is the perfection of growing in the midst of infirmities in the present life. Such interpretation of Christian perfection shares with the notion of therapeutic which the eastern fathers emphasize in the order of salvation. Especially Gregory and Wesley co-possess many fundamental notions of Christian perfection, except the notion of instantaneousness and of social holiness – peculiar to the eighteenth century revivalist.

Wesley’s Christian perfection is not only a personal holiness but also social holiness. It is like a great flower and fruit on his theory of Christian perfection because social holiness is a dynamic power of reformation to establish the kingdom of God in this world. Albert Outler says, “For Wesley, the essence of faith was personal and inward, but the evidence of faith was public and social.... The Christian community must be committed to social reform.”<sup>22</sup> This insistence on social holiness calls on Christians to be dynamic transformers through love in grace of Christ Jesus. That is why “Wesley gathered his converts into societies.... Wesley organized his converts into societies.”<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection is theological and at the same time ethical in the system of salvation. His Christian perfection might well be an ideal for those who desire to build a new society in the present time.

#### D. Christology

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<sup>21</sup> “Christian Perfection”, WJW, vol. 6, §I. 9, pp. 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 26-27.

Wesley's thought is basically "the faith working by love," a thought which comes from the two conceptions of God's love and justice that is the Attribute of God. Hence Wesley has to emphasize Jesus Christ as the Triple Officer on Christian perfection in the present human nature. While Gregory concentrates on Jesus Christ as the whole Being in connection with Christian perfection, Wesley focuses on Christ Jesus who works for us and in us. When Gregory attempts to see Jesus Christ through an ontological prospective in relation to Christian perfection, Wesley sees Christ Jesus who transforms and restores us in the present time by a functional Christology. Gregory focuses on a personal contemplation and on a dynamic spirituality through meditating who Jesus Christ is, as he presents many names of Jesus Christ in *On Perfection*, when Wesley concentrates on a meditation of what Christ Jesus did and does for us, presupposing a confessional spirituality. These differences are driven from the conception or notion of how they understand God in Jesus Christ. God whom Gregory experiences in his life is eternal and good; God whom Wesley experiences in his reality and context is justice and love.

Why is Jesus Christ so significant in their lives and in their doctrine of Christian perfection? Why do they employ variously and treat profoundly Christology in their treatises in connection with Christian perfection?

For Gregory, Christology clarifies the person identity as a spiritual energy-event to climb continually from step to step, never to cease to ascend the mount of perfection as Moses did in this life. Such a Christological vision begins to create intimacy as the loving relationship with God who first loves us. Hence Christology is to play a significant role by creating pure love and intimacy with God in order to "stretch out" toward the next stage on Christian perfection.



For Wesley, Christology is a necessary tool to transform our real lives in our reality, and generates “the inner richness”<sup>24</sup> of the proper nature of the whole Christian perfection which means “pure love reigning alone in the heart and life.”<sup>25</sup> Consequently, Christology leads us to attain a personal perfection in relation to Christ as the King in our daily life, and denotes “the ultimate depth of all our being, the creative ground and meaning of all our existence”<sup>26</sup> in the Christological understanding. Therefore for Wesley Christology is “an actualizing process”<sup>27</sup> of Christian perfection in the realm of Christology.

The Christologies that Gregory and Wesley develop in their teaching on Christian perfection is not contrary to each other but an inter-complementary relationship for each other. For the Christian perfection which Gregory and Wesley seek focus essentially on the work and the person of Jesus Christ, and that is Christology.

## 2. Conclusion:

Both Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley, laid down the Scripture as the same Rock and Keynote in order to theologize their theories on Christian perfection, even if each one had a very different faith-culture in his setting in life, and despite gap of fourteenth-centuries between them. Wesley’s therapeutic notion of a transformed-conception in the *ordo salutis* [order of salvation] is one specific aspect; but it is not a Wesleyan conception; it is rather coming from the Eastern Church through a revival of

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Kannengiesser (Ed.), “Scripture and Spirituality in Ancient Christianity”, *Christology* (Montréal: Concordia University, 2004, pp. 420-426), p. 422.

<sup>25</sup> PACP-T, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Robinson, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Kannengiesser (Ed.), *Christology* p. 424.

Christian Antiquity in seventeenth-century England, rather than originating in the Western Church.

Both theologians focus on Christology in order to understand better and emphasize vividly a distinctly Christian perfection. For Gregory and Wesley the relationship between Christian perfection and Christology is like an inseparably intimate relation between its root and its branch in a tree.

Very often, Christian perfection had been explained in terms of a perfected state,<sup>28</sup> not a dynamic process. The conception of Wesley's Christian perfection is a renewal of the Church's notion of gradual perfection. On Christian perfection, we have seen already, Gregory and Wesley share common ground on Christian perfection as the notion of a continuum of stages, both of "moments" and of "a dynamic progress". In that sense the connection between both theologians is dialogue in terms of affinity of ideas.

Therefore it can be said that Wesley learned the intimate correlation of Christian doctrine and Christian spirituality. Immersed in the piety and spirituality of the early Christian fathers like Gregory of Nyssa,<sup>29</sup> Wesley's teaching about Christian perfection is an ecumenical theology which synthesizes the two theologies of our eastern and western past. At the same time it is a dynamic spirituality to transform persons and societies in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Wesley believed that patristic Christianity<sup>30</sup> best

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<sup>28</sup> H. Ray Dunning, "Christian Perfection: Toward a New Paradigm" *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, Spring 1998, 151-163, p. 157.

<sup>29</sup> See "John Wesley's Interests in the Early Fathers of the Church" by Albert C. Outler, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage* (ed.) by Thomas C. Den and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 1991, pp. 107-108. Lindstrom argues that Wesley "unfortunately did not elaborate" (159-160). See *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* by Harold Lindstrom (London: Epworth Press, 1946). I think because he wrote this book before the 1960's.

<sup>30</sup> "On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel", BE, vol. 3, §II, 3, p. 586; WJW, vol. 7, §II, 3, 424. "This is the religion of the primitive Church, of the whole church in the purest ages. It is clearly expressed even in the small remains of Clemens Romanus, Ignatius, and Polycarp. It is seen more at large in the writings of Tertullian, Origen, Clement Alexandrinus, and Cyprian. And even in the fourth century it was

represented the original vitality and piety of the Christian faith. Gregory of Nyssa and John Wesley are both great spiritual revivers and theologians who had distinctly and vividly manifested God's sovereignty through Jesus Christ in their two faith-cultures so different in time and space.

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found in the works of Chrysostom, Basil, Ephram Syrus, and [*pseudo-*] Macarius" (p. 586). Italic is mine. For the study of the relationship between Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius, see *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* by Werner Jaeger Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1965.

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