

**James Erskine’s Critique of
John Wesley on Christian Perfection**
Randy L. Maddox

In the October 2012 issue of the *Proceedings* I published an inventory of correspondence between James Erskine and John and Charles Wesley that is held at The National Archives of Scotland.¹ The Archives holds only a list of the items, with short descriptions, not the actual manuscripts. I noted at that time that the current location (and full content) was known for only two of the items, both acquired by David Laing, a Scottish antiquary, and donated to Edinburgh University Library.

Shortly after this inventory appeared in print, I discovered the location of one of the most intriguing items on the list. It is an extended set of reflections by James Erskine on a sermon he heard John Wesley deliver on January 1, 1749, at the West Street Chapel in London, using as his text Genesis 17:1, ‘I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect’ (AV). Wesley apparently devoted the sermon to defending the possibility of Christian perfection in this life, leading Erskine to focus his reflections (filling nine legal-size pages in manuscript) on contesting this possibility. Wesley does not mention this occasion in his published *Journal*, but he records preaching on Gen. 17:1 at West Street on this date in a manuscript sermon register.² There is similar record for use of this text in 1746, 1753, and 1755—all on January 1, which suggests it was a favored text for New Year’s day. We have no record of Wesley’s use of Gen. 17:1 as a text between 1755 and 1787 (records are sketchy in this period). However, starting in 1787 Wesley uses it several times a year, throughout the calendar.

Wesley never published a sermon using Genesis 17:1 as his text. Neither did he comment on the focus of sermons on this text in his *Journal*. Thus, Erskine’s reflections are of interest in part because they give some detail of Wesley’s argument on this occasion. The reflections are also of interest in demonstrating how Erskine, while sympathetic with the work of the Wesley brothers, understood his Calvinist convictions to rule out the possibility of Christian perfection in this life (or limit it to the instant of death).

I located Erskine’s manuscript reflections among a set of uncatalogued Wesleyan related items in The Manuscript and Rare Book Library of Emory University.³ The transcription which follows adapts Erskine’s original in three ways: it follows modern rules of capitalization and punctuation, corrects misspellings and archaic spellings, and expands all contractions.

¹Randy L. Maddox, ‘Correspondence between James Erskine and John and Charles Wesley’, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, vol. 58, no. 6 (October, 2012), 264–75. Readers can find biographical details on Erskine and his relation to the Wesley brothers in this essay.

²For this and following citations, see the register of Wesley’s preaching compiled by Wanda Willard Smith, <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/research-resources/register>.

³To be distinguished from their catalogued set of Wesley Family Papers (MSS 100); this manuscript was in their Wesleyan Collection (MSS 101), Box 1, Folder 1. My transcription is published with permission of The Manuscript and Rare Book Library of Emory University.

**Some Observations on Mr. John Wesley's Sermon Preached by Him
1 January 1748/9 on Genesis 17:1⁴**

I having not only heard but seen, and I humbly hope have in some measure felt, that the power of God has accompanied and still accompanies his ministry and his brother's, Mr. Charles, I cannot but have much respect and love for them. And this cannot but incline me to listen favourably to what they deliver in their office as ministers of the New Testament. And all this has for several years produced more intercourse between them and me than I have had with several other clergymen of my acquaintance. Yet they maintain some opinions, and use some expressions and ways of speaking and explaining, which hitherto I have not seen good ground for. And no esteem or favour for any men whomever can persuade me to receive their opinions or modes of speaking or explaining, but only the evidence of truth as it shall humbly appear to me on due examination in the presence of God. And I know that these thy⁵ friends expect no more, and would as much as any blame the person who should receive anything as true and right because said by them. They preach, or earnestly in public and private urge home on the conscience, the great and essential doctrines of the gospel, and labour therein incessantly with more than ordinary success. Why then should I take offence at some differences, even as to material points? And how can I, notwithstanding thereof, but honour, love, and endeavour through grace to profit by them, whom I see the Lord honours to bring many to receive Jesus Christ as offered to us in the gospel, and as they have received him so to walk in him? And nothing that to me appears sinful is required to hold communion with them in the ordinances of the gospel; their administration whereof I have often known attended with great grace and power from on high as aforesaid.

I am only here to make my poor observations on that part of the aforesaid sermon which was about the attainableness of what he calls sinless perfection in this life, which is one of his opinions that I have not yet seen ground to embrace.

At hearing the sermon, he seemed to me to talk of this point more intelligibly than he formerly used to speak or write of it. I cannot tell whether it might not have partly proceeded from this, that he came not to particulars in the explication of it. But supposing an opinion intelligible, yet for all that it may be insufficiently proved, and I was not then satisfied that the arguments he used for it were good. I have since considered deliberately that which, according to the best of my apprehension and memory, he then said on this subject. And I write my humble thoughts [so] that I may lay them before him, that if he pleases to oblige me so much, he may

⁴Erskine wrote in the margin: 'Written very soon after hearing this sermon.' The manuscript is a group of five leaves; on the back (page 10) is written: 'Observations on the sermon preached by Mr. John Wesley, at the chapel in West Street near the 7 Dials, London, the 1st of January 1748/9, on Gen. 17:1, written very soon after hearing this sermon preached.'

⁵Ori., '~~my honoured~~' changed to 'thy'. [There are scattered instances where text has been marked out and replaced. I note only those which are more than corrected mistakes or mere alternative wording.]

give me his own farther thoughts on the question and what he delivered about it in that sermon.

He seemed to allow that the greatest saints in the patriarchal and Jewish states of the church did not attain to sinless perfection; and proved it as to the first by Job, and as to the other by Hezekiah and David. Job is expressly called a perfect man, and yet he sinned grievously under his severe afflictions. So did Hezekiah, who is said expressly to have been the best of all the kings of Judah, and particularly in his great unwillingness to die when Isaiah from the Lord bid him set his house in order. And David, expressly called a man after God's heart⁶ (what can be stronger?), sinned much and greatly, and even at his death showed a spirit of revenge against Shimei—to whom he had sworn not to put him to death, and yet in his last instruction to Solomon bid him bring down Shimei's hoary head to the grave with blood.⁷ And it not appearing that David had any special warrant for this (as some without sufficient evidence say he had), if a professed Christian should now at his death show such a spirit of revenge, it would be a great stretch of charity to think well of him. Yet none who reads the Scriptures can doubt that David on his death was conveyed to Abraham's bosom.

Here then Mr. Wesley allows that a man's being expressly called 'perfect', or by some appellation equivalent, does not prove that he was sinlessly perfect, but that the words must be taken under some limitation, though they be not restrained in the text. And it being allowed that none under the Old Testament could be sinlessly perfect though expressly called perfect, then the command in the text,⁸ and other such, though expressly and unliedly⁹ given, must be restrained to such perfection as they could attain to, since they could not arrive at sinless perfection. Or else they must be understood (as some other divines do) for what they ought, though they could not in this life be; for what they ought incessantly to press after, and come near to as they can, though in this life they never can fully attain it. If it be thought that there are other such texts in the Old Testament which are not to be restrained, it is incumbent on Mr. Wesley to produce them, and the reasons for excepting them from the general case. For the words of Scripture are not to be taken now this and then another way *ad libitum*.¹⁰ Till that be done, no argument can be

[Page 2]

brought by him from the Old Testament for his opinion of sinless perfection.

And since such express appellations and precepts in the Old Testament are to be restrained, it is also incumbent on Mr. Wesley to show why they are not to be so

⁶Cf. Acts 13:22; 1 Sam. 13:14.

⁷Cf. 1 Kings 2:9.

⁸I.e., in Gen. 17:1.

⁹The spelling is fairly clear in the text; the meaning is less clear—perhaps something like 'not open to error'.

¹⁰'at one's pleasure'.

restrained in the New. The language of God in both is much the same, though in different tongues. And his commands in both, when applicable under both of these his dispensations, are the same; and when otherwise to be taken in the New than in the Old, when abrogated or enlarged or limited, I suppose we are expressly told so in the New Testament, or have it by good consequences from what we are plainly taught in the New Testament, and not left to grope or wander in the dark after our own conceits and suppositions, and from thence to infer a different meaning of the New Testament words from the like in the Old. And till this be done, I do not see how Mr. Wesley can argue from such appellations or precepts, or other such expressions, in the New Testament any more than in the Old. And this the rather because, so far as I remember, there is not any mere man called perfect in the New Testament. What is said of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6) comes nearest to it. They are said to be righteous before God, and walking in all his commandments and ordinances blameless. But though this be said in the New Testament, it is said of two that were under the legal dispensation, which was not then abrogated and succeeded by the gospel. And therefore, according to Mr. Wesley's own acknowledgment, it is to be limited. And indeed it must be limited from the text, for notwithstanding of this testimony for Zechariah, he then sinned by unbelief, and for that was struck and remained dumb several months (ibid., v. 26 and v. 64). And it may be considered whether our Lord's rebuking the ruler for calling him good, though he knew him not [to] be God but took him for a mere man,¹¹ does not show his disapprobation of giving such appellations to any mere human creature. But to speak particularly to this text would lead me farther than my present business requires. And it is fitter for me here to notice these farther parallels between the Old and New Testament as to this matter. In the Old we read of the sins of the most eminent saint; so do we in the New. In the Old we are expressly told that all are sinners; so are we in the New. And whatever method be taken to restrain these texts will, I humbly conceive, afford the like for restraining such as may be adduced on the other side. I do not here enter on the consideration of any of those texts, because that were to enter on the question itself and my intention here is only to consider what Mr. Wesley delivered on it in that sermon.

But as to the limiting such texts in the Old yet not in the New Testament, as spoken to above, it will be said that there is a strong reason of the difference—namely, that no saint before Christ could be so great as the saints under the full revelation of the gospel. Answer: I will not dispute this, but it requires some explication to avoid mistakes. For our Lord says (Matt. 11:11) 'Among them that are born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist; notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.' He that is least under the gospel fully revealed by Christ and those he employed to preach and write his doctrine, and has it in his mind and heart, is greater than John the Baptist. But nothing follows from this for Mr. Wesley's opinion, unless it could be proved that one could not be greater than John [the] Baptist in what our Lord calls 'the kingdom of heaven' if he attained not to sinless perfection. But this cannot be proved, and seems not to be true. There are many

¹¹Erskine wrote in the margin: 'Mark 10' and 'Luke 18'.

degrees between these two, and by no reason nor logic can it follow that he is not greater who really is so by one or several degrees, if he be not greater by the highest. And a concession of Mr. Wesley's own, which we shall presently see, shows the contrary—for he allows that everyone in the kingdom of heaven is not sinlessly perfect, yet it is plain by our Saviour's words that even such are greater than John [the] Baptist.

Hitherto we have only examined Mr. Wesley's concessions. But I humbly conceive it has also been shown that these concessions go farther than perhaps he intended, and wound his cause very deep.¹² Let us next consider his other concession just now hinted at, and then state the precise point of difference between his opinion as delivered in that sermon and the doctrine of the Church of England and almost all other Protestant (i.e. not popish) churches, and lastly humbly examine the arguments he brought in that sermon for his opinion. I say almost all other not popish churches because the Quakers among us, and I suppose some Mennonites and Anabaptists abroad, maintain¹³ this doctrine of perfection even to a higher degree than Mr. Wesley seems to do. And several of the popish monastics, and mystics, and quietists seem to do so too. And the Socinians and high Arminians do also maintain that a Christian may in this life perfectly fulfill God's law. A strange mixture of <protege¹⁴> to be for the same opinion concerning sinlessness here! But their agreement therein, I humbly appeal,

[Page 3]

may be accounted for by their agreement in other points not so obviously observed (for extremes often meet), which it is not my present business to attempt. I beg leave only to observe that (except it be Dr. Gill, a learned London minister before the Restoration) I do not know any but Mr. Wesley and some of his friends who thoroughly maintain and strenuously urge the doctrine of grace in the substantial thereof, and yet maintain this opinion of perfection; which none else that I know of do maintain but such as are reckoned Pelagians or else enthusiasts, or near to one or other of these seeming extremes. Therefore Mr. Wesley is not for this to be reckoned like any of the two, but to maintain their opinion on better principles, and principles which appear more adapted to support it; which nevertheless I have not yet seen that they do, but much rather the contrary. But leaving this short digression, I proceed to the matter in hand.

Mr. Wesley seemed to allow (and from daily and common experience it must be allowed) that under the gospel new converts, and such as are not yet grown up to the full stature in Christ, may and do sin. But he said that 'fathers in Christ' might attain to live sinless. If they sought after it in faith and in faith prayed for it, the want of will is the reason they attain not to it.

¹²Ori., '~~to the Heart~~' changed to 'very deep'.

¹³Ori., '~~seem to maintain~~'.

¹⁴The word is indistinct, at the bottom of the page; this seems the most likely match to visible letters.

Then those who have not yet arrived to be fathers in Christ, though greater than any Old Testament saint, yet in this are much in the same case with them—they sin, they are not sinlessly perfect. And as to fathers in Christ, it strikes me with amazement to hear Mr. Wesley say the reason why so few of them do attain to sinless perfection, when yet they might, is that they do not seek after it and pray for it in faith. Is it possible that such as may deservedly be called ‘fathers in Christ’ can be so negligent and lazy, so cold and unconcerned, in a thing so eminently for the glory of God in his gospel and for the higher benefit of his own soul that it could partake of on earth, as not to seek after it and pray for it? Is it possible that such can seek after and pray for it, but not in truth, though his great rule is to do everything by faith, and in faith his joy and confidence is that his life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3) and that the life he now lives in the flesh is by faith in the Son of God?¹⁵ Can such a man be so reluctant to act faith for the most important of all things in this life? One would rather incline to think so unhappy a person scarcely a real Christian, or at best but a weak infant, a very bruised reed or smoking flax not yet well kindled. But some reason must be thought of why, since advanced Christians may attain to sinless perfection, we neither read nor see such as did. We read of none such in the New Testament, and the contrary of the greatest, as Paul, Peter, etc. And to suppose that others of whom the contrary is not said were sinlessly perfect is *gratis Dictum*,¹⁶ and against all probability, since we know no good reason to prefer them so highly to men more eminent in the gospel than they, and at least as eminent. Suppositions are not proofs, which I wish the perfectionists did not so often forget. Can we expect instances of it now, where we read of none in those times?

But supposing that we had instances of it then, how comes it that we see none now? We still, to the praise of his glorious grace, see instances of his grace and of his divine power in his gospel ordinances, confirming to us the truth and reality of such things we read in the New Testament, and that were before hand prophesied and foretold by the Spirit of God, by whose effectual working they were brought to pass. Is his hand shortened? Is the efficacy of gospel grace? Are the operations of the Holy Ghost in working and carrying it on? Are they ceased, as many say all miraculous operations are? It surprized us to hear this asserted lately by a bishop in a Christian church, and asserted in order to condemn the Methodists; but surely Mr. Wesley, who among others has confuted that bishop, will not say so.¹⁷ Mr. Wesley gave a reason, which for what I have already said I humbly think is not good, why so few attain to it. I have neither seen

¹⁵Erskine wrote in the margin: ‘Col. 3:17’ and ‘Gal. 2:20’.

¹⁶A ‘free’ or ungrounded assertion.

¹⁷Erskine is almost certainly referring to Richard Smalbroke’s *A Charge Delivered to ... the Clergy* (London: Knapton, 1744), 7–10; to which Wesley replied in *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I (1745), V.4, in Frank Baker (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 11, Appeals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 141ff.

nor heard nor read of any who could on solid grounds be thought to have attained to it. I have heard of some, who I suppose are still alive, that pretended to be such to their Christian acquaintances and friends. Persons of knowledge, judgment, experience, and really gracious had not that opinion of them, and thought they were inferior to others who were far from pretending so high. I know too that some who have been Quakers, but now are with Mr. Wesley of the Church of England, say they know instances of such. But so far as I know they have never produced these instances and showed them to be indeed such. O that I ever had known or now did know any really such! It would rejoice my soul. Since it is quite otherwise, I cannot but earnestly wish that all who think they have known such would seriously lay to heart whether their own sentiments of the heart of man in this life, and of the extent and spirituality of God's Word, and of perfect holiness, be not exceeding imperfect.

Yet I humbly hope I have known those who, in the Apostle John's sense in his first epistle, were indeed 'fathers in Christ'; though they neither thought themselves, or by other real and friendly Christians were thought to be, sinlessly perfect. I cannot doubt but such persons did always in faith earnestly seek after and pray for all holiness, and still for more and more, and never stopping at any degree but always going on, as we read the Apostle Paul did (Phil. 3:12, 13, 14). If it be said that yet they have not expressly in faith endeavoured and prayed for sinless perfection, since they did not attain to it; I answer, I may well suppose, and with reason, that they prayed and endeavoured for all holiness, and for the most part without reflecting on or thinking of any distinction, because so do all the real Christians I have ever been acquainted with. They pray in faith against all sin, and as in the Ambrosian hymn called *Te Deum*: 'Vouchsafe O Lord to keep us this day without sin.' Such prayer offered up in faith, though not expressly for sinless perfection, I humbly conceive none will venture to say but they may accept it and answer it to the full, and even more than was expressly asked or thought of. And that such prayer, and particularly as to being kept from falling and being established in the gospel, may and will be accepted, heard, and granted, humbly appear to me from Eph. 3:20, Rom. 16:25, Jude 24, see also Isa. 65:24. But perhaps it will be said that, supposing sinless perfection was not expressly excluded in the time of such prayer, yet the person not believing it attainable, it was not included nor at all prayed for. I answer, such a saint praying earnestly and in faith to be kept from all sin and for all holiness, and sinless perfect holiness being the restless longing desire of his soul which can never be satisfied till attained unto, though he thinks it not attainable till death and fully in heaven, where on that as on other accounts he earnestly longs to be, yet it would be rash to venture to say that, for the mistake of his judgement and not knowing that this earnest desire of his soul might be now obtained, these his prayers may not be answered above what he could expressly ask or think of, and he obtain (if it could be obtained) in this life that sinless perfection he so much pants after. That he might and would is agreeable to the foresaid texts, and to the infinite goodness and bounty of God in Christ in other such

cases; and to deny this would involve us in great difficulties and mistakes in many cases in practical Christianity and the life of faith.

I shall add but one other observation on this. Since it is not at all credible that first-rate Christians do not in faith seek after and pray for sinless perfection in this life, if they believe it attainable; and it being as little credible that the prayers of faith of such Christians have not been heard and granted in such a matter; yet it being owned that very few (and as far as I know, none) have attained to it; how can we but conclude that either it is not at all attainable or that such Christians have not in faith sought and prayed for it because they found

[Page 5]

not a divine warrant for such faith, and a divine warrant is necessary for divine faith. This is the most charitable and reasonable construction that I see can be put upon it. But it reduces the number of first-rate Christians that ever were or now are of Mr. Wesley's opinion to be very few or none.

I should next, according to what I above proposed to do, state the precise point of difference. But that will better appear after stating his arguments. And these were two.

1. The sufficiency of power and grace in our blessed Lord Jesus for this great salvation from all sin even in this life. But Mr. Wesley is a more accurate reasoner than to argue *a posse ad esse*, and from the absolute possibility of a thing to infer that it actually is. Therefore I suppose he adduced this as a consideration to remove a prejudice and obviate an objection which some might thence have made against his opinion, but not as an argument to prove it actually true. There can be no doubt of our Lord's power and grace. The question only is about his being pleased thus to exert the same in this life. And we may in this respect compare the saints in this life and their present habitation together, this earth and the heavens we see round about it. We are sure by revelation that this earth and these heavens will be burnt and purified, and that in their place or stead there will be new heavens and a new earth, wherein will dwell righteousness, and there can in no wise enter into the great city thereof, the new Jerusalem, anything that defileth. This our Lord's power and grace could just now bring to pass. And just now his power and grace could make us as clean as our habitation is to be made. But it follows not that therefore it is already done. We see it is not done. And we are not told that either of them will be done in this life, but at the end of this life. And we and our habitation are spoken of as much alike in this respect (Rom. 8:9–23 with 7:24), which rather makes against than for Mr. Wesley's opinion.

2. His other argument was to this effect: No sin or sinful person can enter into heaven, and therefore everyone must be sinlessly perfect before he be admitted there. Now when shall they be made so previously to the admission into glory? It must either be in this life or in the portal of death, for immediately after death they will be carried into heaven; except you feign a purgatory or some middle state wherein they are to be made sinless and perfect, and afterwards carried into heaven. It cannot be in the point

of death, for that point is like a mathematical point, having no parts, and is indivisible. Therefore it must be in this life. And since it must be in this life, you must allow it some time. And if but a minute, why may it not also be for an hour, or a day, or week, or month, or for a year or years?

Now let us see wherein lies the precise difference betwixt this opinion and the common doctrine of the Reformed churches. This last I shall take from the *Shorter Catechism* of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, Question 37: ‘What benefit do believers receive from Christ at death? Answer. The souls of believers are *at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory ...*’¹⁸ Mr. Wesley agrees with them that the souls of believers do from the death of the believer immediately pass into glory, and that when they enter into that glory they are perfect in holiness. But they say that such [a] soul is made thus perfect at the death of the believer. And he says that it is before his death, and therefore in this life—from whence, by way *sorites*,¹⁹ he infers that a believer may for a considerable time be sinlessly perfect in this life. Which is contrary to the doctrine of the Reformed churches which we have in the foresaid *Catechism*, Question 82: ‘Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God? Answer. No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandment of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.’ And in the 15th Article [of the] Church of England: ‘Sin (as St. John saith) was not in him’ (Christ). ‘But all we the rest, although baptized and born again in Christ yet offend in many things; and if we say we have no sin, we deceive our selves, and the truth is not in us.’

Let us next humbly examine Mr. Wesley’s second argument aforesaid against this doctrine of the Reformation. So far as it agrees with this doctrine as above there is now no dispute with him. But wherein it differs therefrom it is founded on four suppositions which he has not at all proved, and which to me humbly appear not to be true. And when I have endeavoured to show this, I will next endeavour to show that his own former concessions are not consistent with this argument of his, and the only one I remember he adduced in that sermon for a positive direct proof of his opinion.

[Page 6]

1. It supposes, but he has not offered to prove, that a believer’s soul cannot be made perfect in holiness in an instant, a mere point, the very point of death. And to say that a point is without parts and indivisible, as the mathematicians define their point, is but a wittyer’s jest and not a solid argument as to any real existence. No mathematician ever said that some point did or could actually exist; though very fit to be supposed in *pure mathematics*, but not literally taken in *mixed mathematics*, which deal in real existences. It is not fit for creatures of our narrow capacities and faculties

¹⁸The phrase placed in italics was written in larger letters than surrounding text. I have used italics to show this emphasis.

¹⁹I.e., a chain syllogism.

to hu<nt>²⁰ after and entertain subtleties unnecessarily that do not enlighten us in our way but bewilder and perplex us—and like an *ignis fatuus*²¹ lead among briars, bogs, and pits—especially in divine matters, and more especially when we could not have known their truth but by revelation. It is sufficient here if I show that this blessed change in [the] soul of a believer may be wrought in an instant, in the smallest conceivable point of duration. For which I humbly offer these two arguments: (1) In so small a point the soul was brought into existence, according to any ideas we have. For we (at least I, or any I ever conversed with or read) have none of any midst between not-being and being. The soul, as all creatures else, once did not exist; then it did exist. What kind of point of duration was it in which from nothing it came to be something? Do you have any notion of it but as a very instant? I suppose not. Those who deny the *preexistence* of the soul, or that it comes *ex traduce*,²² say that *creando infunditur et infundendo creatur*.²³ And this has long been the commonly received opinion in our Western world. These men, whether their opinion be true or not, must think this creation and infusion to be instantaneous. But all who allow the soul to have been created, and brought from nothing in whatever part of duration, must hold it to have been instantaneous. Why then may not a less thing be brought to pass instantaneously? It is less to make perfect a soul wherein work is already solidly and really begun and advanced than to make that soul to be when it had no being, to make it something, and what it is, when it was nothing. And is it so great a matter to render perfect a soul already very good, a soul that already is regenerated and became a new creature, is grown up in Christ, and that is even a father in Christ, by the mighty working of the Holy Ghost? Is this, I say, so great a matter that the same Holy Spirit cannot complete his own divine work in an instant? Pardon me to say that this seems a gross absurdity, and to such our little subtleties often lead us. (2) A work of the same kind, but greater, shall be done instantaneously, and therefore so may this be. And being of the same kind, and for the same end and purpose, so it probably will be. By 1 Cor. 15:50–54, with 1 Thess. 4:15, we learn that the believers who shall be on the earth when our Lord comes to judge the world and carry all his saints to full and endless glory with him shall not die. But because flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, they shall be changed *in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye*.²⁴ And their corruptible shall put on incorruption; and their mortal, immortality. One cannot doubt but that then also their souls shall be changed, and all that was corruptible or sinful therein shall put on incorruption and perfection, for then shall they be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall they ever be with the Lord. Since so complete and perfect a change shall be made on the whole man, soul and body, *in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye*, why should you think that the soul alone cannot be

²⁰A fragment of the page is missing, but the word seems clear.

²¹A flitting phosphorescent light sometimes seen in marshes.

²²I.e., the soul of the child comes ‘by transfer’ from its parents.

²³‘It is created as it is poured out and infused into the creature’; i.e., the soul is created in the instant it is joined with the body.

²⁴This phrase placed in italics here and the next two instances was written each time in larger letters than surrounding text. I have used italics to show this emphasis.

made sinless and perfect, according to its then state, *in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye*? The apostle does not here entertain us with subtlety and pretended mathematical point, but solidly and substantially as things themselves are really to be. But if any will yet be so curious and over-subtly inquisitive as to insist on his indivisible mathematical point of death which has no parts, and ask whether that point be in this life or the next, before death or after it (since it must be one or other of them and cannot be any way reckoned in both, or one side of it before and the other after death, since it is indivisible and has no parts), I beg leave to ask him whether the point of duration of the soul's creation was before this life or after it? And whether the point, the moment, the twinkling of an eye of the foresaid blessed and grand change of the whole man is to be in this life

[Page 7]

or the next? And when he falls on a good answer to these queries, he will find it as good an answer to his own.²⁵

2. This argument supposes what Mr. Wesley did not prove, nor so far as I yet see can be proved, that death is a precise point—or, to avoid that subtlety, is instantaneous. If you take death for the soul's local departure from its habitation, the body, why may not the soul linger at the door, as the man when acting in this world might linger in the door of his house when going abroad? Again, a man may lay in his house, or in a machine that he actuates, till it be taken to pieces and be no more house or machine, but a mere heap of materials. If you take death to be the ceasing of the organical connexion and influence between soul and body, then death seems not for the most part to be instantaneous. In few diseases, and in few deaths by outward force, is it so. It is evident to common observation that for the most part the body does not die at once but gradually, and animal life wears out of it like the flame of a candle dying away in a socket. Before all animal life seems wholly to cease, we often see strong animal motions in the body. But whether or not, or how far, the person has then what we call sensation, we in many cases do not know. Yet we say not that the man is then actually dead, nor yet that he is alive, but that he is in the pangs of death. It is not easy to determine whether the man be dead when the animal motion remains yet there is no sensibility. Or when all animal motion, all heat, and everything belonging to animal life ceases. Nor whether in either of these cases the soul has locally departed from the body or not. The ceasing of the organical connexion and influence between body and soul, either wholly or in the most essential parts of it, wherever the soul then locally be, whether you call it strictly death or life, if it be such that death in the strictest sense must inevitably follow, and that the reciprocal operations of body and soul on each other never can again recover to anything that can be called animal and rational life but by a miracle, it is fully enough in the present case. For in this state that

²⁵Erskine strikes out five lines of text closing this first point, and rewrites them as the beginning of his second point.

seems to be neither life nor death. There is a duration not instantaneous, wherein the soul may be made perfect. If I be asked why I form so nice cases, I will beg leave to answer that it is not because I have pleasure in them, but to meet the subtleties used on the other side, and show why I think them not true nor conclusive. My purpose in the former number was to show that the soul might be made sinlessly perfect at the very point of death, though it were but an instant; and in this to show that, for the most part at least, it is more, and maybe considerably more, than an instant. Each of these seems to me to overthrow the argument. And we need not take the words ‘at death’ in the foresaid 37th Question for the precise point of death in the strictest sense, but for about the time of death as above; and such a way of speaking, taking ‘at’ more laxly for ‘about’, frequently occurs in good authors and in common conversation.

3. This argument supposes it to follow, but has not proved the consequence, that if the soul in any point of time in this life may be made sinlessly perfect, it may likewise be made so in larger portions of time—yea, for a day, a week, a month, a year, or years. For a proof we have a question put: Why may it not be so, since all these times are in this life? If therefore a sufficient difference be assigned, a sufficient reason why it may be in the one and not in the rest, the reason implied in the question will be sufficiently answered. If you take death only to be the soul’s local departure from the body, and call the time ‘life’ wherein the organical connexion is ceased or impaired as above, then in that time the body, having no influence on the soul, is not a bar to its sinlessness, which cannot be said of the former time of life. And if the connexion be not wholly broken, yet in the essential parts of it, then the influence of the body

[Page 8]

on the soul is so far gone that it cannot disturb the soul nor draw it to sin, which till then cannot be said. There was a remarkable passage of a husband and wife who, being very devout and earnestly wishing to be quite free from all entanglements of every fleshly affection, did voluntarily part and went into different monasteries, where they lived with great strictness. The husband becoming very old, and his life being but a mere breath which departing hovered on his lips, the wife came from her monastery to take her last leave of him. After good discourse and just going away, she bowed down and kissed him, and the dying old man, with the very small remainder of strength he had, said to her—*abi, abi, restat adhuc scintilla!*²⁶

4. This argument justly supposes that on death the soul presently passes to heaven, and being perfect is received there. But it also supposes, which it proves not, that this passage is instantaneous. For if it be not instantaneous, there is a time wherein it may be made perfect before it gets into heaven— even according to Mr. Wesley’s notion that it cannot be instantaneously made perfect, and therefore [he] says it²⁷ must be made so in this life. But it may be made perfect in this passage, which is not instantaneous. I say not that in this passage it will be made perfect. Nor is it the

²⁶‘Go [away], go [away], the spark [of attachment] remains even yet!’

²⁷Ori., ‘in’; likely an error.

doctrine of the foresaid Question 37. It is a query I have now nothing to do with. But it may be then perfected according to Mr. Wesley's notion, if the passage be not instantaneous, which is enough to answer this argument. I believe it is true that this passage is not instantaneous but takes some time, because of its length, even for a spirit to travel it. We know by Dan. 9:23–24 that an angel so exalted as Gabriel, though made to fly swiftly, took some time, though a short time, to fly from heaven to earth. It cannot take less to fly from earth to heaven. And farther, we know not whether the angels employed to convey souls to heaven be as exalted as Gabriel and can do as much as he. And yet we have reason to apprehend that in their carrying souls to glory they may meet with opposition and retardments from the prince and power of the air (through which region they must pass), as the Scripture calls the devil. For that he opposes the angels in executing their duty we see in this same book of Daniel.

5. Let us now try whether Mr. Wesley's concessions are consistent with this argument, or rather whether this argument be consistent with them; for the concessions being mostly good, the argument must be bad if it be inconsistent with them. Mr. Wesley yielded that none of the patriarchal or Jewish saints were sinlessly perfect in this life, and yet on their death went straight to heaven. And he yielded that under the gospel new converts, Christians not fully grown up, did sin; and that even some fathers in Christ were not sinlessly perfect, because they sought it not and prayed not for it in faith. Yet he denies not that all such Christians, though sinfully imperfect in this life, go immediately to heaven when they die. And he claimed this great privilege of sinless perfection in this life only to such fathers in Christ as sought after it and prayed for it in faith. And for this reason: because they must go sinlessly perfect to heaven, and therefore must be made so in this life. Then when were the Old [Testament] saints made perfect? When was David, who on his death bed not only had such a spirit of revenge in him but did all he then could to execute his revenge, and by what seems an evasion and eluding his own promise and oath? We read not of his amendment in this particular, but what we read of him immediately after is, 'so David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David'.²⁸ And if he had changed to a better mind, he would have countermanded his revengeful instruction to Solomon. And then Solomon probably would not have fulfilled it. Which yet he did, having first laid a trap for Shimei, as if he had intended that his being put to death should not be attributed to his old offence (for which he had the king's oath that he would not slay him) but to a new offence just then committed. And it would appear that David intended some such contrivance should be used, for on mentioning his own oath, which seemed to secure Shimei in succeeding reigns as well as his own (as the oath of Israel to the Gibeonites secured them under succeeding rulers²⁹), he adds, 'for thou art a wise man, and knoweth

²⁸1 Kgs. 2:10.

²⁹Cf. Joshua 9.

what to do unto him; but his hoary head bring thou down to the grave with blood' (1 Kings 2:1–10). When then was David made sinlessly perfect, even in his heart, sentiments, and inclinations, if not in the point or in the pangs of death, when death had laid so sure hold of him and all his faculties and powers that he could not return to life but by a miracle, and when the bystanders and witnesses of his dying could not perceive what was working in his soul separating gradually from his body, and could not perceive his advancing to and attaining sinless perfection? So it is also now under the gospel, when many believers are dying who had not been sinlessly perfect. The witnesses of their death, to the last gasp of breath that they can perceive, see imperfection still in them, as some remains of impatience, some former misapprehensions and prejudices, etc. But they see not what is wrought in the soul when outwardly the connexion of it with the body is, to their apprehension, gone or just a going. What then do these witnesses think? Do they conclude or fear that he is not to go to heaven, because they see he is not sinlessly perfect when they think he is out of life and dies? O no! God forbid that real Christians were in so woeful [a] case, and brought to sorrow for dead saints, who really were saints, as those without hope! And this would indeed make the gate of heaven so strait that much fewer than our Lord has told us of could enter in thereat,³⁰ and that many would be excluded to whom our blessed Saviour will say, 'Enter ye into the joy of your Lord'.³¹ I gladly own that some saints die with hardly any remains of sin perceivable by the witnesses observing their death. And every such instance is the rejoicing and comfort of a Christian's heart. But all who are really in Christ, and therefore go really into his glory, do not die so. When can these be made sinlessly perfect, if not at such time as I above argued as to David and need not repeat? And there having been and still being such instances, as Mr. Wesley according to his concessions must acknowledge, this argument cannot be thought conclusive.

I thought to have subjoined an argument against sinless perfection in this life, and some remarks on adding this epithet 'sinless' to 'perfection', etc. But these not particularly touching this sermon but the whole cause itself, I forebear to say any more at present and to lengthen this long paper. God of grace and truth, lead us into all truth by thy grace which is in Jesus!

A clean copy of this was sent to Mr. Charles Wesley under a sealed cover,³² wherein was wrote as follows

³⁰Cf. Matt. 7:14.

³¹Matt. 25:21, 23.

³²So this manuscript is Erskine's personal draft, not the copy mailed to Charles Wesley.

Dear sir,

The paper from which the inclosed was copied was for that purpose put in the hands of an honest Christian friend last Tuesday morning. He brought me not the copy which you now have under this cover till late yesternight; having, it seems, been much taken up with his own affairs. If your brother and you will take the trouble to read and consider it, I entreat to know your judgements of the contents, which though differing from your opinions, yet I humbly hope are not expressed with self-confidence, nor unsuitably to the respect and love which I bear to you. To find on solid grounds what is God's truth is all the aim of, dear sir,

Your most affectionate friend and
humble servant,

London. Monday morning,
16 Jan. 1748/9

James Erskine