

Some Theological Considerations of Perfection

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I. Biblical Teaching on Perfection

The truth about perfection in Christian doctrine and experience is that which does justice to the biblical meaning and use of the word. The Bible teaches that the true Christian will grow both in grace and toward the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. He continually hungers and thirsts after righteousness. There is an earnest unashamed quest for spiritual holiness.

Since the Bible exhorts the believer in every age again and again to "be perfect," then obviously the experience it advocates is not something which lies beyond the experience of those to whom the Word was addressed. It must be possible within the framework of the Christian life here on earth, otherwise there would be no point to the Bible writers urging perfection upon believers. This exhortation belongs to believers in all ages and not only those who live just prior to the return of our Lord.

The only valid meaning to the words "perfect" and "perfection" is that which the Bible gives to it. It is therefore imperative that we study to grasp, as far as possible the Scriptural meaning and use of perfection and avoid arbitrary interpretations of our own.

Teleios

The most important word translated "perfect" in the New Testament is the Greek word "teleios." This word is derived from the substantive "telos" usually rendered "goal," "purpose," "end." The word has in mind a definite stage of spiritual development for Christians in all ages, for those living in the days of the apostles as well as those living today. Almost invariably the word describes the achievement of spiritual maturity, a Christian stability from which ones does not turn back, an unshakeable allegiance to the Living God.

Paul uses this word quite frequently when designating perfect or mature Christians in contrast with those who remain spiritual babes.

Do not be childish, my friends. Be as innocent of evil as babes, but at least be "grown up" [*Teleio*] in your thinking. (1 Cor 14:20 NEB)

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need some one to teach you again the first principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food; for every one who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature [teleion], for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity [perfection-teleios] (Heb 5:11-14; 6:1 RSV).

Here the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews recognizes there is a beginning to the Christian life. One must start with the ABC's of the Christian faith. As a new born babe he takes his spiritual food from other mature Christians. At this point the author is

seriously concerned because many of these Christians are still wearing the mental and spiritual garments of childhood. They are not growing. At a time when they ought to be perfect (mature) enough to instruct and lead others into the Christian faith, they still have to be treated like children.

Paul also felt this way about some of the members of the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 2:6 he declares that he "speaks wisdom among the perfect" (teleioi] full grown; but then he adds:

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? (1 Cor 3:1-3)

Paul contrasts spiritual babes in the church with those he designates as perfect or full grown mature believers. The immaturity referred to showed itself in the Corinthian church by their divisions, unfitting them to understand the deep things of God.

Paul declares that it should be the aim of every Christian minister from his day to our own to bring his flock to perfection, that is, to full maturity of Christian character, since God has provided these gifts to achieve this mature stage in life.

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come into the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [mature-teleios] man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11-13)

Again, the purpose and goal is Christian maturity and stability, a strength of allegiance that cannot be shaken. Paul uses this word translated "perfect" in the King James Version to describe, not sinless perfection of these believers in the churches at Corinth and Ephesus, but a stage of spiritual maturity that marks those who are steadfast in the faith under all circumstances.

Again in his Epistle to the Philippians, he classes himself among the "perfect" or spiritually mature and speaks wisdom among the "perfect."

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect [teleioi-mature] be thus minded. (Phil 3:13-15)

Because Paul has achieved this maturity, he is able to speak wisdom among the mature also. The aim of his apostolic ministry is to "present every man perfect [teleioi-full grown] in Christ" (Col 1:28). He describes his fellow worker Epaphros as

agonizing in prayer that the Colossian Christians may "stand perfect [teleioi] and complete in all the will of God" (Col 4:12).

In classical Greek this same word "teleios" is often used of persons who have reached adulthood, of animals full grown, of ripe fruit. For the Christian the ideal is Jesus Christ, a spiritual stature for which we must strive continually. The Word does not have in mind sinless perfection. The holiest saints, men like Paul, have been the first to declare their constant need of growth toward Christ, while affirming the sinfulness of their own natures. The perfecting and maturing process continues as long as life itself. The growing Christian makes continual progress toward the ideal in Christ.

With all the biblical counsel to be perfect, nowhere do we find the believer claiming to have reached sinless perfection even though he is designated as "perfect" [mature]. For such a claim is fraught with peril; not the least of which is a spiritual blindness that prevents one from being honest with oneself. There exists two opposite perils: Spiritual blindness and failing to be honest with oneself; the opposite, an easy tolerance toward sin.

From the Word of God it is this spiritual maturity and stability that is possible in this life. To teach from the Bible uses of this word that ultimate sinless perfection is possible to inherently sinful man here on earth is not supported by the Word of God, and is denied by the very nature of man himself. This does not deny that there is growth towards perfection. Sin does not reign, but it does remain in terms of the limitations of human nature as we know it on this earth. It takes into consideration, even after the close of probation, that as people grow old the arteries harden, the mental and physical systems slow down and therefore the responses are not what they were in the full strength of youth.

Furthermore, that the biblical use of the word "teleios" or perfect does not have in mind ultimate sinless perfection is seen where frequently believers are declared "perfect" at the point of achieving some single step toward the ideal. "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect [teleios] man" (James 3:2). "Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect [teleios] and entire, wanting nothing" (James 1:4). The perfect or mature man is described here as one who has complete control of his tongue, or who endures the trial of his faith without wavering. The believer who qualifies in anyone of these is designated in Scripture as a "perfect" or mature Christian. Such control and stability is proof enough that he is a mature, perfect, stable Christian. The achievement is not the same in all Christians. In some this "perfection" is marked by love for one's enemies (Matt 5:43-48), in others it is manifest in endurance and faithfulness under trial; in still others, it is seen in the control of the tongue.

In other words, the purpose of God in the life is spiritual maturity under all circumstances. Christ gave Himself to save us, the Holy Spirit to live in the believer that he might rise and grow to this Christian maturity. "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).

Paul, while asserting that Christ lived in him as a mature Christian, pressed ever forward to a loftier goal. Toward this goal the Holy Spirit continues to direct us through the whole of our lives. But there is no finality in perfection in this probationary life. For each upward step reveals spiritual heights still above us. The Christian's privilege is to

experience here and now what has been the privilege of Christians in all ages, namely the power of the Holy Spirit for continued growth and spiritual maturity. "Sanctification is the work of a lifetime." Yet along with this continued growth, we find rest amid toil and conflict as we travail in this body of sin and death until the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Katartizo

The second most important word translated "perfect" in the New Testament is the Greek word "katartizo" It means to be "fully equipped" for service in the work of the church and in the cause of God. Take note that Paul and other Bible writers are addressing the people of their own day and not simply those who were to live during the closing days of earth's history. In the following passages of Scripture this word is used.

A disciple is not beyond his teacher, but every one that is PERFECT [fully equipped] shall be as his master. (Luke 6:40)

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be PERFECT [fully equipped], be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you. (2 Cor 13:11)

May God PERFECT [fully equip] you in every good thing, in order to do His will. (Heb 13:21)

The God of all grace. . . after that ye have suffered a while, make you PERFECT [equip you], establish, strengthen, settle you. (1 Peter 5:10)

And he gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the PERFECTING [full equipping] of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. (Eph 4:11, 12)

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be PERFECT [fully equipped] thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim 3: 16, 17).

Whatever interpretation we give on the doctrine of perfection must be in harmony with the Word of God or else it is false. E. G. White insists on it, even for her own writings. In the following quotation she says:

Brother J would not confuse the mind by seeking to make it appear that the light God has given through the *Testimonies* is an addition to the Word of God . . . God has seen fit in this manner to bring the minds of His

people to His Word, to give them a clearer understanding of it.
(*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, 663)

The written *Testimonies* are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed. . . . The testimonies are not to belittle the Word of God, but to exalt it and attract minds to it, that the beautiful simplicity of truth may impress all. (Ibid., 665)

If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them (Isa 8:20).

II. The Close of Probation and Salvation by Grace

What does the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy teach concerning the close of probation? Some would have us believe that the merits of the atonement are no longer available as they were prior to the close of probation. That the cessation of Christ's intercession means that his saving power and forgiving grace are no longer available or needed. What does Revelation 22:11 actually mean relative to the close of probation? Consider various Bible translations of this verse:

New English Bible: " Meanwhile, let the evil-doer go on doing evil and the filthy-minded wallow in his filth, but let the good man persevere in his goodness and the dedicated man be true to his dedication."

American Translation: " Let the evil-doer do worse and worse, let the base grow baser and baser, let the upright man be more and more upright, and the man who is holy be more and more holy."

Phillips: "Let the wicked man continue his wickedness and the filthy man his filthiness; let the good man continue his good deeds and the holy man continue his holiness."

Good News for Modern Man: "Whoever is evil must go on doing evil, and whoever is filthy must go on being filthy; whoever is good must go on doing good, and whoever is holy must go on being holy."

The context of this verse in the book of Revelation is that man has been confronted with the final messages, warnings, and judgments of God. By these God has addressed all the peoples of the world and brought to bear the most solemn words and actions upon man's sinful situation. This verse in the last chapter defines the final attitudes of two great classes of mankind, the saved and the lost. Beyond the close of probation, man's eternal destiny is forever fixed. It is now too late to change.

The key word in the verse is the Greek word "eti" translated "still." He that persists in wickedness will do so still. He that clings to this filthiness will do so still. He that has chosen the way of Christ's righteousness will do so still. For the wicked, there will be no further help from God to turn him from his evil ways. The word "still" proclaims the finality of the choices that men have made. He that is filthy let him pollute himself yet more. He that is righteous let him do righteousness yet more. In each case, while the

one sinks to greater depths of evil, the righteous rise to greater heights of holiness. The close of probation is that decisive moment of time, when all that has gone into the making of men's lives will have determined their final destiny, to be wicked or righteous forever. If a man has loved evil to this point, then he must continue in it. God has no further provision for him to change. The Holy Spirit has been withdrawn from the wicked. Therefore change is impossible. For when the Holy Spirit is withdrawn, there is no chance to resist the evil within the heart or the Satanic forces without. The man is totally enslaved forever.

But the righteous have been freed from sin's slavery forever. Because they have chosen Christ, all opportunity and all gracious help from God will be given them to continue in the way of righteousness. The text speaks of the permanent bent of the life. The wicked are now beyond redemption. The righteous cannot be lost. The text does not speak of sinlessness. It speaks only of finality one way or another. For the lost, their sinfulness will increase more and more. For the saved, their holiness will increase more and more.

Mrs. White declares that probation closes for some every day. "Every day the probation of some is closing" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, 140). "Some are closing their probation; and is it well with them? Have they obtained a fitness for the future life?" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, 18). The question is not one of the maximum of sin's development on the one hand or the arrival at sinlessness on the other. Those for whom probation closes now involves increased wickedness and continuance in it, and for the righteous increased growth in righteousness and continuance in it. The issue is one of finality. So will it be when probation closes for all the world.

Speaking of the close of probation for the world, Mrs. White writes: "Every case is decided either for salvation or destruction" (*Early Writings*, 36); "The destiny of all will have been decided for life or death" (*The Great Controversy*, 490). (See also *The Desire of Ages*, 636). It is too late to change. The character is fixed. "The coming of Christ does not change our characters; it only fixes them forever beyond all change" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, 466). "Mercy no longer pleads for the guilty inhabitants of the earth." (*The Great Controversy*, 613)

The righteous manifest an unshakeable allegiance to Christ. "The final test has been brought upon the world and all who have *proved themselves* loyal to the divine precepts have received 'the seal of the living God.' Then Jesus ceases His intercession in the sanctuary above." (Ibid., 613, italics supplied).

To live without a Mediator does not mean to live without the righteousness of Christ, or without the Holy Spirit, or the saving grace of our Lord. Since all cases are decided for weal or for woe, the work of our divine Advocate is concluded. No further charges by Satan can be brought against the saints, for Christ has answered them all. The cases of the saints have all been called to the bar of heaven. Christ has successfully pleaded our cause and secured a judgment in our favor. Nothing can now reverse that verdict. There is nothing more to say. Excepting Satan and his host, there is perfect agreement throughout the universe as to Christ's verdict in favor of the saints. All questions have been answered regarding the future of the saints. No member of the Godhead needs to make any further defense on their behalf. All that remains is for Christ to return and for the saints to live and reign with Christ a thousand years (Rev 20:4-6).

Because of their unchangeable irrevocable standing before God, there is no further need for Christ to intercede with God for their salvation or for their redemption. The saints have been declared the legal heirs to the new earth. Their standing from henceforth is one of final justification and vindication before the bar of God and before a sinless universe. The fact that they have chosen without qualification, the righteousness of Christ, leaves only the actual conferring of that sinless nature and entrance into their eternal inheritance at the second coming of Christ, when this mortal shall put on immortality and this corruption shall have put on incorruption (1 Cor 15:52-54).

As we have clearer views of Christ's spotless and infinite purity, we shall feel as did Daniel, when he beheld the glory of the Lord, and said, "My comeliness was turned in me into corruption." We cannot say "I am sinless," till this vile body is changed and fashioned like unto His glorious body. But if we constantly seek to follow Jesus, the blessed hope is ours of standing before the throne of God spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, complete in Christ, robed in His righteousness and perfection." (*Signs of the Times*, March 23, 1888)

III. The Saints' Condition and Experience

What is the spiritual condition of the saints after the close of probation? Do the saints in any way reflect any conditions that belong to a state of sin? If so, is the atoning blood and merits of Christ still available?

Mrs. White describes the experience of the saints during the time of Jacob's trouble as having "a deep sense of their short-comings, and as they review their lives, their hopes will sink. . . . If the people of God *had unconfessed* sins to appear before them. . . they would be overwhelmed, despair would cut off their faith. . . . But while they have a deep sense of their unworthiness, they will have *no concealed wrongs* to reveal" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, 202, italics supplied).

As Satan accuses the people of God on account of their sins, the Lord permits him to try them to the uttermost. Their confidence in God, their faith and firmness will be severely tested. . . . They are fully conscious of their weakness and unworthiness. (*The Great Controversy*, 618)

Speaking of the saints in the time of trouble, Mrs. White writes:

Those who exercise but little faith now, are in the greatest danger of falling under the power of satanic delusions . . . and even if they endure the test, they will be plunged into deeper distress and anguish in the time of trouble, because they have never made it a habit to trust in God. The lessons of faith which they have neglected, they will be forced to learn under a terrible pressure of discouragement. (Ibid., 622)

It was by self surrender and confiding faith that Jacob gained what he had failed to gain by conflict in his own strength. . . . Thus it will be with those who live in the last days. As dangers surround them, and despair seizes upon the soul, they must depend solely upon the merits of the atonement. . . . In all our helpless unworthiness we must trust in the merits of the crucified and risen Saviour. None will ever perish while they do this. (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, 202, 203)

Two facts come clear from Mrs. White's statements: first, even some of the saints will find themselves lacking in faith after probation closes which will create for them greater anguish and conflict. But lack of faith belongs to a state of sin. "Lack of love and faith are the great sins of which God's people are now guilty." (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, 475). Certainly lack of love and faith do not belong to a sinless state. For this lack of faith was an essential aspect of the original sin of Adam and Eve. Obviously this very condition described by Mrs. White denies the claim that the saints will have reached sinless perfection. If the saints are really sinless, and free from what some call "original sin," how is it possible for them to reveal such inadequacy in faith? Such a claim is nowhere in the purview of Mrs. White's statements at all. The issue she sets forth has to do with "unconfessed sins," "concealed wrongs."

Second, salvation by grace and the merits of Christ's atonement still avails for the saints after probation closes. Believers still trust in the merits of Christ. The distinction some try to make between saving and sustaining grace before and after the close of probation is wholly unscriptural. The Bible knows nothing of it. Whatever may be meant by saving and sustaining grace, they do not come in separate packages, one before the close of probation and the other after, or that saving grace is for sinners and sustaining grace is for the sinless. Both are available at any time in the Christian life until the day of our Lord's coming.

The biblical use of the word "grace" is one. Grace is the eternal and free favor of God, manifested towards the guilty and the unworthy. Grace is entirely apart from every supposition of human worth and sinless perfection. Grace belongs where human sinfulness exists. It super-abounds over human unworthiness as experienced by the saints even after the close of probation. Sinners are the only persons with whom saving grace is concerned. Let us distinguish between grace as an attribute of Christ and grace as a method of salvation made possible by the sacrifice of Christ.

The limited and imperfect spiritual condition of the saints described by Mrs. White, requires the application of the atoning merits of our Lord and the availability of Christ's righteousness. The state of the saints is described as weakness, insufficiency, and worthiness. The corruption of the sinful nature is manifest in the saints while in this mortal body. Consequently, during the time of Jacob's trouble, fear and trembling, weakness and unworthiness reflect their own insufficiency and sinful state. Yet the eternal God is their refuge. Every moment they live by and are saved by God's marvelous grace. There is no evidence anywhere in Scripture or in the Spirit of Prophecy that indicates the slightest change in salvation by grace ministered daily to the saints.

Even after Christ's work of intercession ceases and all cases have been decided

God is not one step removed from us. Rather is He closer than He has ever been. If God's righteousness in Christ is available, then so is His saving grace. The implication that Christ is somehow, by the cessation of His mediatorial ministry, standing in a different relation to His people, is false. Those who think otherwise fail to grasp the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace beyond the close of probation. Paul gave it to us in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." What Paul experienced is no different for us today or any time prior to the coming of Christ.

Lurking uncomfortably near, beneath the false teaching on sinless perfection, is, that somehow this saving grace is not needed, that one must really have sinless perfection to be sure. This has always been the problem for those who will not settle for the acknowledgement of their actual sinful state. With the close of probation, suddenly we see our own strength turned around, converted into weakness as Mrs. White describes it, in order that we may no longer live as a law unto ourselves, but that there is a people who live by Christ alone. The experience of the saints after probation closes reveals conclusively that being saved is being shaken loose from the folly of implanting our ego firmly in the center. In spite of their claims to the contrary, the supporters of the sinless perfection doctrine clutch at it so that their weakness and unworthiness may end in power prior to the coming of Christ.

Salvation by grace is not a cure at all. The work of grace is not some magic charm. The apostle Paul learned that. It is not something that, with the close of probation, will guarantee that we will never have another spiritual problem. This is evident from Mrs. White's description of the state of the saints. Saving grace summons the saints to acknowledge their sinful state until the coming of Christ. Christ is saying to us, there is no way out, except to learn that His grace is sufficient in the midst of our weakness and sinful state.

What is sure about our finality after probation closes is not that our lives are now magically transformed into sinlessness above the strife and agony in the world and the attacks on the enemy. What does come through is that deliverance is made complete in our weakness. His grace does not spring us free from the weakness of our sinful state. Faith brings God's assurance and saving power in our weakness. But it is His strength and power, not our own. One cannot have it both ways. If a man is sinless then he is no longer under grace. If he is under grace, then it is because he is not yet sinless.

A word from Mrs. White may well deserve consideration as to improper methods and teachings.

There are those who pick out from the Word of God, and also from the *Testimonies*, detached paragraphs or sentences that may be interpreted to suit their ideas, and they dwell upon these, and build themselves up in their own positions, when God is not leading them.

You will take passages in the *Testimonies* that speak of the close of probation, of the shaking among God's people, and you will talk of a coming out from this people of a purer, holier people that will arise. Now all this pleases the enemy. We should not needlessly take a course that will make differences or create dissension. We should not give the

impression that if our particular ideas are not followed, it is because the ministers are lacking in comprehension and in faith, and walking in darkness. (*Selected Messages*, Book 1, 179)

IV. "Then Shall the Sanctuary Be Cleansed"

"And he said unto me, unto two thousand and three hundred days, then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." (Dan 8:14).

Let it be noted from the text and the Scriptural passage that the cleansing of the Sanctuary in Daniel 8:14 in no way can be identified with the human heart and mind. This sanctuary and this cleansing has nothing to do with the cleansing of human hearts and lives as some declare. Such a view is in complete contradiction with Mrs. White's clear statement on "What is the Sanctuary" in *The Great Controversy*, 409-422. She states this sanctuary to be the "true tabernacle" in heaven, to which the earthly sanctuary pointed (*The Great Controversy*, 417). That some teachers are in error is obvious from the fact that in Daniel 8, the defiling of the heavenly sanctuary is by the little horn in its taking away of the daily. The little horn treads down the sanctuary and the host.

How long shall be the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, and the transgression of desolation, to give both the sanctuary and the host to be trodden under foot? (Dan 8:13).

The answer to that is given in verse 14, "Unto 2300 days, then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."

The doctrine of sinless perfection is often based on this false interpretation of the "cleansing" of the sanctuary and the final atonement. If sinless perfection is to be realized by saints at the close of probation, then original sin must also be eradicated. This is done by making "sins of ignorance" (Lev 4) the equivalent of original sin which the final cleansing takes care of.

Both the Hebrew meaning of the word and the biblical context show how mistaken the advocates of such a view are in the use of Scripture. The words "sins of ignorance" refer to sins done inadvertently, unwittingly. (See Deut 19:4; Josh 20:3, 5; Num 35:11, 15; Lev 22:14). The Old Testament use of the term covers those inadvertent sins in contrast with those done with a high hand or defiantly. They have nothing to do with sin in the unconscious and man's natural state of sinfulness. The term "sins of ignorance" is far removed in time and meaning from any reference to original sin of the saints living in the last days.

We must be on our guard and much in prayer for divine guidance lest we come under the judgment of Christ when He said; "Ye do err not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matt 22:29).