

# Biblical ‘Perfection’: Is It Possible In This Life?

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The doctrine of Christian Perfection has been a cause of division among serious Christians everywhere throughout the history of the church. In the opening paragraph of his famous work “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” John Wesley wrote:

There is scarce any expression in holy writ, which has given more offence than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them; and whosoever *preaches perfection*, (as the phrase is,) 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>1</sup>

Though Wesley’s words may be a bit hyperbolic, they do serve to illustrate the intense debate that has taken place over the idea of perfection among believers in Christ. Various theologies have been put forward to interpret Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount as well as the many other passages in Scripture that deal with Perfection. However, many of the divisions concerning Perfection have arisen because those arguing the issue do not clearly define their terms. Before we examine the various approaches to Biblical Perfection, we must define three key terms in the debate—Sin, Sanctification, and Perfection itself. Only then will we be able to fully evaluate the arguments for and against Perfection.<sup>2</sup>

## Sin

People on all sides of the perfection debate agree that one’s understanding of sin is the key to interpreting God’s call for perfection. After all, it was sin that brought about the fall and destroyed whatever measure of perfection humanity enjoyed in Eden.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley, ‘A Plain Account of Christian Perfection’ *The Works of John Wesley* Vol. VI p.1

<sup>2</sup> Space does not permit a full word study on these terms here. For more on their meanings and usages as well as the other terms for sin in Scripture see the entries for these words in BDB, Holladay, BDAG, Kittel, and Harris et. al.

Consequently, one's idea of sin will determine one's idea of Biblical Perfection. Though many words are used in Scripture to describe sin, the two most common terms are the Hebrew **חַטָּא** and the Greek *ἁμαρτία* as well as their various grammatical forms. Both of these terms, at their most basic level convey the idea of failure or missing the mark. Stan Grenz notes, "Both the Old and New Testaments, despite subtle differences in emphasis, view sin fundamentally as failure. As both **חַטָּא** and *ἁμαρτία* suggest, sin is primarily 'missing the mark' or 'falling short.' It entails our inability to be what God desires us to be, our failure to fulfill God's intention for us."<sup>3</sup> Millard Erickson agrees that sin is seen primarily as missing the mark, but he qualifies it as being the "decision to fail, a voluntary and culpable mistake."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to quote Charles Ryder Smith as saying, "The hundreds of examples of the word's moral use require that the wicked man 'misses the right mark *because he chooses* to aim at a wrong one' and 'misses the right path *because he deliberately follows a wrong one*'—that is, there is no question of an innocent mistake or of the merely negative idea of 'failure.'"<sup>5</sup> This line of thinking represents a dividing line among theologians and scholars as to the nature of sin—is sin always contingent upon the will or is there such a thing as accidental or unconscious sin? Those who view sin as any mistake or error, whether conscious or not would agree with the words of John Calvin:

[W]e must repudiate the opinion of those who hold that all sins proceed from preconceived pravity and malice. We know too well from experience how often we fall, even when our intention is good. Our reason is exposed to so many forms of delusion, is liable to so many errors, stumbles on so many obstacles, is entangled by so many snares, that it is ever wandering from the right direction.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Grenz, Stan. Theology for the Community of God p.237 He goes on to conclude on p.243 that "sin is ultimately our human failure to live in community with God, each other, and the natural environment...Summarily stated, sin is the destruction of community."

<sup>4</sup> Erickson, Millard. Christian Theology, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. p.586

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Erickson concludes that sin is the lack of conformity to the moral law of God on p.596

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion, book II, ch.2, pp.243-244

For Calvin and others, sin is so all-encompassing and deceptive that even the Believer can never be free from it while in this world. However, not everyone would agree with Calvin. John Wesley taught that the Biblical picture of righteousness was faith working by love. Because of this, “he felt confident in narrowing his definition of sin to that of voluntary transgression of known law.”<sup>7</sup> Wesley, as well as many others recognized that humans are prone to all types of errors, infirmities, and mistakes, however, these were not properly to be labeled as sins unless they proceeded from rebellion against God’s will.<sup>8</sup>

Though Calvin’s argument appeals to many, it is based primarily on observation and experience, as he admits. However, in Scripture, as noted by Erickson and Ryder Smith, sin implies moral culpability against known law. In fact, the only time one finds the concept of unintentional sin in scripture is in regard to the Levitical law under the Mosaic covenant in Numbers 15<sup>9</sup>. But before we use this chapter as a proof-text for unintentional sin in the life of a Christian we must look at the overall Biblical context. Many of the requirements of the Levitical law were to be observed in order to demonstrate the Holy nature of God and to show the separation of the Israelites from the surrounding nations. These requirements were often of a dietary or cleanliness nature and could be transgressed unintentionally (such as accidentally eating a food that contained shellfish or pork or putting on a garment that contained mixed types of thread) quite easily. However, with the atonement of Jesus, God’s new covenant with his people was inaugurated. This new covenant as prophesied by Jeremiah and Ezekiel did away with the concept of obedience to external laws being the criteria for righteousness:

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<sup>7</sup> Deiter, Melvin, et. al., Five Views on Sanctification, p.227

<sup>8</sup> Wesley, ‘A Plain Account...’ Works IX, p.396. Wesley concedes that mistakes in judgment and practice are “deviations from the perfect law, and consequently need an atonement. Yet that they are not properly sins, we apprehend may appear from the words of St. Paul, ‘He that loveth, hath fulfilled the law; for love is the fulfilling of the law.’ (Rom. Xiii. 10.) Now, mistakes, and whatever infirmities necessarily flow from the corruptible state of the body, are noway contrary to love; nor therefore, in the Scripture sense, sin.”

<sup>9</sup> Though some may point to the incident with Sarah and Abimelech in Gen. 20 as an example of unintentional sin, the text goes out of its way to show how God prevented Abimelech from sinning because of ignorance.

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” (Ezek. 36:26)

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jer. 31:33)

In Jesus, God’s people are no longer led by external laws but by obedience to the two greatest commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, as communicated through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Under the New Covenant, unintentional mistakes in judgment or action are not regarded as sin by God if they are issuing from a heart that is fully devoted to Him and seeking to do his will in all things.<sup>11</sup>

### Sanctification

The second term that must be examined is sanctification. The term comes primarily from the Hebrew  $\text{שָׁדָף}$  and from the Greek  $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\iota\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega$  and means ‘to be set apart’ or ‘that which is set apart.’ In the Old Testament something that was sanctified was something that had been set apart for service to God and was considered ‘clean’ and able to be used in service to God. When applied to Israel, it meant that as a nation, Israel had been set apart by God to be his mediator of blessing to the nations, and because of this the Israelites were to reflect the moral purity of God in their behavior.<sup>12</sup> In the New Testament, “which everywhere rests on an OT foundation, the material element largely yields before the personal,”<sup>13</sup> that is, sanctification shifted from a description of ritual cleanliness to that of moral purity. The Atonement reconciled those who believe back to God, thus sanctifying them or setting them apart from all that is common, sinful, or profane. “Christ dwells in them as His temple, and will not suffer any impurity. Again,

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<sup>10</sup> See Jesus’ discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in John 14-16.

<sup>11</sup> This would certainly follow from Paul’s statement in Rom. 4:15, “Where there is no law there is no sin/transgression.”

<sup>12</sup> This is the essence of passages such as Lev. 19:2. cf. Harris, TWOT, p.1990: “...by definition, holiness is separate from all that is sinful and profane. God, therefore, calls man to holiness because he himself is holy.”

<sup>13</sup> Kittel, Gerhard, TDNT, p.100. Cf. Butler, Trent. Holman Bible Dictionary, p.1230-1231

therefore, purity of heart is a condition of sanctification.”<sup>14</sup> So far, there is not much debate about anything said above, however, the divide among Christians comes when we discuss the actual process of sanctification—is it progressive or instantaneous? Furthermore, is it total?—that is, can it ever be accomplished in this life?

Many scholars and teachers of the Bible divide sanctification into three stages. The first is usually referred to as *positional* or *definitive* sanctification, the second is *conditional* or *actual* sanctification, and the third is *eschatological* or *entire* sanctification.<sup>15</sup> Under this motif, the first aspect describes the initial salvation of the believer as God declares him or her justified, the second describes the ongoing conformity to Jesus throughout this life, and the final describes the state of the believer upon death and entry into God’s presence forever. However, scripture does not seem to delineate these different aspects of sanctification. John Murray states: “It is a fact too frequently overlooked that in the NT the most characteristic terms that refer to sanctification are used, not of a process, but of a once-for-all definitive act.”<sup>16</sup> While sanctification is sometimes talked about as an ongoing action, it is never seen as an incomplete action. Rather, the result is spoken of as ongoing or being perpetually sustained by God. However, in the vast majority of instances where sanctification is mentioned, refers to a completed action.<sup>17</sup>

### Perfection

The final term we must examine is Perfection. Translated from the Hebrew תְּמִיּוֹם and the Greek τέλειός, perfection in the Bible describes that which is whole, complete, mature, or unblemished. When used of people, perfection is used to denote a “spiritual wholeness and uprightness, especially as one is in right relationship to God... The root

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.112

<sup>15</sup> See Deiter, et. al., Five Views on Sanctification, pp.72-77, 115-126, 220-222; Anderson, Neil, Victory Over the Darkness, p.60-61. Also cf. Grenz, p.578.

<sup>16</sup> Deiter, et. al., p.72.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 20:32, 26:18, Rom. 15:16, 1Cor. 1:2, 6:11, Heb. 10:10-29, 1Pet. 1:2

idea connotes fellowship between God and his people and a right relationship with the One who is the model of perfection.”<sup>18</sup> Biblical perfection speaks of a mature, whole, obedient relationship with the Lord “rather than the Greek ideal of static and dispassionate knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> Perfection in scripture is that which “fulfills the end for which it was designed.”<sup>20</sup> It describes “an ideal state of spiritual wholeness or completeness. It is not a quality which is achieved by human effort alone, nor is it an end in itself. Christian perfection consists essentially in exercising the divine gift of love, for God, and for other people.”<sup>21</sup>

The division among Christians comes when we ask if Biblical perfection implies the absence of sin in the life of the Believer. And it is with that question that the rest of this paper will be concerned, for though there have been countless ways in which interpreters down through Church history have expressed the concept of Biblical perfection, they can all be grouped into four theological views: Perfection is 1) Attainable and Permanent, 2) Non-Attainable, 3) Attainable but not sustainable, or 4) Attainable and sustainable.

#### Attainable and Permanent

The first main view of Biblical Perfection is that it is both attainable by Christians and, once attained, is permanent. In this view, commonly termed ‘Perfectionism’, Christ is seen as having done everything necessary to perfect the believer, one must simply believe this and it becomes a reality for the believer.<sup>22</sup> Of the four views, this is the least common and is most easily recognized as heresy, primarily because of its inevitable link with antinomianism. It was this view of perfection that led Wesley to write and publish a tract entitled “A short view of the difference between the Moravian Brethren, (so called,)

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<sup>18</sup> Ewell, Walter A. ed., Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, p.839

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Deiter, et.al., p.124

<sup>21</sup> Butler ed., HBD, p.1093

<sup>22</sup> Perfectionists appeal to verses such as Hebrews 10:14: “*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*” However,

and the Rev. Mr. John and Charles Wesley.” In this work, Wesley noted the perfectionist teachings of the followers of Count Zinzendorf (who himself had had a significant impact on Wesley’s theology early in his ministry) and how they led to antinomianism among Christians.<sup>23</sup> Besides its antinomian tendency, the problem with this view is that it sees perfection as a spiritual plateau that one arrives at after conversion and shifts the focus of the Gospel from love of God and neighbor to the quest for this inward experience.

### Non-Attainable

Other Christians, seeing the errors of perfectionism, have viewed Biblical Perfection as being unattainable in this life. Many theologians would echo the sentiments of Calvin when it comes to the question of perfection:

To this we deem it sufficient briefly to reply with Augustine, that the goal to which all the pious ought to aspire is, to appear in the presence of God without spot and blemish; but as the course of the present life is at best nothing more than progress, we shall never reach the goal until we have laid aside the body of sin, and been completely united to the Lord. If anyone chooses to give the name of perfection to the saints, I shall not obstinately quarrel with him, provided he defines perfection in the words of Augustine, “When we speak of the perfect virtue of the saints, part of this perfection consists in the recognition of our imperfection both in truth and in humility” (August. Ad. Bonif. Lib. Iii. c. 7).<sup>24</sup>

Calvin felt that people who taught any other type of perfection “encourage[d] themselves in a carelessness diametrically opposed to the mercy of God.”<sup>25</sup> This remains the dominant view among Christians today—Perfection is seen as unattainable at best. Those who hold to this view usually do so because they feel that Scripture teaches believers are never fully cleansed of all indwelling sin in this life, which Calvin referred to it as the “residue of corruption in our flesh.”<sup>26</sup> They see Jesus’ words in Matt. 5:48 as only an ideal towards which we are to strive, but will never reach until the coming of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wesley, *Works*, pp.201-204

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Book III, ch. 27, p.188

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, ch. 20, p. 194

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> Deiter, et. al., p.49

Most theologians of this view would appeal first and foremost, as Calvin did, to common experience. R.C. Sproul writes: “The mainstream of Christianity however, has resisted the doctrine of perfectionism chiefly because we see the record of the greatest saints in biblical history and in church history who to a person confessed the fact that they, to their dying day, struggled with ongoing sin in their lives.”<sup>28</sup> While the truthfulness of this assertion rests upon what exactly Sproul means by ‘ongoing sin’, he and others who oppose perfectionism appeal to Scripture as well—the primary text being “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*” (1 John 1:8). Calvin asks, “Who can tolerate those new teachers who, by the phantom of perfect innocence, endeavor to dazzle the simple, and make them believe that they can render themselves completely free from guilt? This, as John declares, is nothing else than to make God a liar.”<sup>29</sup> Noting the apparent contradiction with John’s later admonition that, “*No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him...No one born of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God,*” non-perfection theologians point out that the verb for ‘sin’ is in the present active indicative which connotes an ongoing action. Therefore, what John is saying is that the believer does not ‘continue in sin’ or ‘habitually sin.’<sup>30</sup> In addition to 1 John 1:8, Jesus’ admonition for his followers to ask for forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer seems to imply that his followers will sin daily. Paul’s writings are appealed to as well by non-perfectionists. Passages such as Rom. 7:14-25, where Paul talks about his futile struggle against the flesh, Gal. 5:17 where the flesh and the spirit are seen as opposed to each other, and 1 Tim. 1:15 where Paul refers to himself as the chief of sinners are put forth as strong evidence that Paul denied the possibility of perfection or total freedom

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<sup>28</sup> Sproul, R.C., Now That’s a Good Question, p.243

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, Institutes, book III, ch.20, p.194

<sup>30</sup> Some recent Translations such as the ESV and TNIV follow this interpretation. Cf. Kaiser, Walter, et. al., Hard Sayings of the Bible, pp. 736-737, Grenz, pp.580-581, Erickson, pp.983-986.



from sin in this life. In fact, his words in Phil. 3:12-14 seem to close the door completely on the possibility of experiencing perfection in this life<sup>31</sup>:

*“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

Summing up his argument against the reality of Biblical perfection, Anthony Hoekema admits, “I do not believe that the Bible allows for the possibility of living without sin, even without willful sin, in this life.”<sup>32</sup> He later asks, “Does not God require us in His law to love Him with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves? Can any one of us keep this requirement perfectly?”<sup>33</sup> He goes on to speak of Christian motive:

Finally, how about the matter of motivation? Do we ever do anything from perfectly pure motives? Do we perform our “good works” *solely* out of love for God and the neighbor? Does nothing of self enter in? Isaiah complains, “*All our righteous acts are like filthy rags*” (Isa. 64:6). Was not Herman Bavinck right when he said, “In every deliberation and deed of the believer...the good and the evil lie, as it were, mingled through each other”? How, then, can believers claim to have a “uniform sustained victory over known sin?”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Grenz, pp. 579-581

<sup>32</sup> Deiter, et. al., p.49

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.188

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

In Hoekema's view, as well as many others, such victory over sin is "too good to be true."<sup>35</sup> However, the Believer is not to give up the fight, Hoekema argues. Though they must still battle against sin, and will continue to fall into it, they are "no longer its slaves. In the strength of the Spirit they are now able to resist sin".<sup>36</sup>

### Attainable But Not Sustainable

Not all theologians who argue against Perfectionism feel that Biblical Perfection is unattainable; they merely argue that it is unrealistic. Even as strong a Calvinist as R.C. Sproul feels Jesus commanded his followers to be perfect and "to mirror [God] in his moral excellence".<sup>37</sup> However, his answer to the question "can a person be perfect?" shows his belief that it is never accomplished:

Can a person be perfect? Theoretically, the answer to that is yes. The New Testament tells us that with every temptation we meet, God gives us a way to escape that temptation. He always gives us enough grace to overcome sin. So sin in the Christian life, I would say, is inevitable because of our weakness and because of the multitude of opportunities we have to sin. But on a given occasion, it is never, ever necessary. So in that sense, we could theoretically be perfect, though none of us is.<sup>38</sup>

Naturally, the question arises, "If the Holy Spirit lives in us, why can't we live perfect lives?" Sproul, clarifies his position:

Let me suggest to you that we can live perfect lives...What the New Testament teaches, as I understand it, is that once the Holy Spirit comes into my life, once I'm indwelt by the Holy Spirit, I have living within me the power to obey God. The Holy Spirit gives me the power to obey the commandments of God, and the New Testament says there is no temptation that has ever befallen me that isn't common to every person, and with the temptation God always provides a way of escape. I don't think anybody does, in fact, live a perfect life. But I think that God's grace makes perfection a possibility...But remember that the Holy Spirit is living in me, in R.C. Sproul; he's indwelling an imperfect creature, one who has not been totally cleansed of evil inclinations. So given the manifold opportunities to sin that I have and knowing that there's warfare with every one of those opportunities between what the Bible calls my flesh and the Spirit, statistically it's virtually inevitable that I'm going to sin and be far less than perfect.<sup>39</sup>

Baptist Theologian Millard Erickson agrees and says that "if it is possible by [the Holy Spirit's] enablement to avoid giving in to a particular temptation, then it must be possible

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.189

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.82

<sup>37</sup> Sproul, p.242

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.243

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp.245-246

to prevail in every case.”<sup>40</sup> However, he feels that “while complete freedom from and victory over sin are the standard to be aimed at and are theoretically possible, it is doubtful whether any believer will attain this goal within this life.”<sup>41</sup> But this shouldn’t discourage the Christian, say Erickson, for though “no one has ever reached the North Star by sailing or flying toward it, that doesn’t change that fact...that it is still the mark toward which we press, our measure of ‘northernness.’” Similarly, although we may never be perfectly sanctified within this life, we shall be in the eternity beyond and hence should presently aim to arrive as close to complete sanctification as we can.”<sup>42</sup>

### Attainable and Sustainable

While theologians like Sproul and Erickson see no problem with the unattainability of Biblical Perfection, others do—particularly those from the Wesleyan stream of theology. Wesleyan theologian Melvin Deiter states: “The words of Christ and the Apostles cannot be taken as only ideals that become a new kind of legalism that entices us to do better but denies to us any real measure of experienced integrity and wholeness in our relationship with God in love.”<sup>43</sup> It was John Wesley who popularized the doctrine of Perfection during the mid to late 1700’s and those who followed after him spread it far and wide. Wesley’s view of Biblical Perfection was that it was not only attainable, but once attained, it was possible to walk in it through the power of the Holy Spirit all the days of one’s life. Wesley’s definition of what he termed Christian Perfection was a relationship with God and others that is characterized from moment to moment by divine love. Because of his belief that all sin involved rebellion against the known will of God, Christian Perfection was seen as purity of intention and the

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<sup>40</sup> Erickson, p.985

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.986

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Deiter, et. al., p.31

dedicating all of one's life to God.<sup>44</sup> However, Wesley and others like him felt that Christian perfection was not instantaneous upon conversion (though he allowed that in some cases it could certainly be so), but was the result of a crisis event whereby after the Christian struggles with sin to no avail, he throws himself upon the mercy of God in faith and the remains of rebellion that created the conflict and depression in his walk with God were rooted out and his volitional capacity was totally cleansed from the effects of the fall resulting in a heart that was pure and desired nothing but to serve God in every way possible.<sup>45</sup> Though this could happen immediately upon justification, Wesley interpreted perfection a subsequent work because the author of Hebrews urged Believers to "go on to perfection" in Heb. 7:1.<sup>46</sup>

It was Wesley's firm belief that Biblical perfection excluded sin in the life of the Believer. Because his relational understanding of sin resisted the Hellenistic equation of sin with humanity,<sup>47</sup> Wesley was confident that Believers who were perfected were enabled to live free from sin entirely:

But even babes in Christ are in such a sense perfect, or born of God as...not to commit sin. If any doubt this privilege of the sons of God, the question is not to be decided by abstract reasonings...Neither is it to be determined by the experience of this or that particular person. Many suppose they do not commit sin, when they do; but this proves nothing either way. To the law and testimony we appeal. "Let God be true, and every man a liar." By His word will we abide, and that alone. Hereby we ought to be judged.<sup>48</sup>

He that is, by faith, born of God, sinneth not (1). By any habitual sin; for all habitual sin is sin reigning: But sin cannot reign in any that believeth. Nor (2). By any willful sin; for his will, while he abideth in the faith, is utterly set against all sin, and abhorreth it as deadly poison. Nor (3). By any sinful desire; for he continually desireth the holy and perfect will of God; and any tendency to an unholy desire, he, by the grace of God, stiflenth in the birth. Nor (4). Doth he sin by infirmities, whether in act, word, or though; for his infirmities have no concurrence of his will; and without this they are not properly

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<sup>44</sup> Wesley writes: "Question. What is Christian perfection? Answer. The loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies, that no wrong temper, non contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions, are governed by pure love." Works, vol.IX, p.394. Cf. Deiter, p.21, 27

<sup>45</sup> Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" Works, vol. IX, p.423. Cf. Deiter, et. al., p.19

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.441

<sup>47</sup> Ewell, p.842

<sup>48</sup> Wesley, "Thoughts on Christian Perfection" Works, vol. VI, p.6.

sins. Thus, “he that is born of God doth not commit sin:” And though he cannot say, he hath not sinned, yet now “he sinneth not.”<sup>49</sup>

Though Wesley believed perfection to exclude all sin, he acknowledged that the Believer could still be in error and some errors might lead to wrong actions, which others would see as sin; therefore, he refrained from using the term ‘sinless perfection’ though he did not object to its use.<sup>50</sup> He also sought to clearly distance himself from Perfectionists by proclaiming that Christian Perfection was in no way a spiritual plateau; his idea of perfection was one in always looked to a continual increase, “so that how much soever any man has attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to ‘grow in grace,’ and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his savior.”<sup>51</sup> For Wesley, the notion of ‘positional’ sanctification apart from actual sanctification was unfathomable; the whole purpose of Jesus’ atonement and God’s initial justification was to transform the sinner into a saint, not in a ‘positional’ sense, but in an actual sense.<sup>52</sup> This was God’s plan for, and promise to every one of His children.

#### A Proposed View of Biblical Perfection: Total Cleansing and Constant Abiding

Of the four basic views on the possibility of Biblical Perfection, the first three ultimately fall short of the Bible’s teaching on the subject. The view that perfection is attainable and permanent is unbiblical, as it divorces perfection from obedience. It also fails to recognize the necessity of constant abiding in Christ by the believer in order to maintain perfection.<sup>53</sup> The views that perfection is unattainable, or attainable not in actuality but in theory only, though probably the most widely held among Christians, fail to recognize the degree to which Scripture portrays perfection and freedom from all sin as

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<sup>49</sup> Wesley, “Salvation by Faith” Works, vol.V, p.11

<sup>50</sup> Wesley, “A Plain Account...” Works, vol. XI, p.442: “Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is ‘salvation from sin.’”

<sup>51</sup> Wesley, “Thoughts upon...” Works, vol. VI, p.5

<sup>52</sup> Wesley, “Justification by Faith” Works, vol.V, p.57

<sup>53</sup> See Ewell, ed., p.97 where R.E.O. White points out that “Though the Christian who has died with Christ is freed from the bondage of sin, and need not, ought not, and at his best does not sin, yet he must continually reaffirm his death with Christ and his yielding to God.”

God's plan for Believers. The following passages seem to require extreme exegetical gymnastics in order to avoid the conclusion that Believers and sin should be mutually exclusive:

Matthew 5:48 You, therefore, must be *perfect*, as your heavenly Father is *perfect*.

Luke 6:43 For *no* good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit.

John 8:34 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, *every one who commits sin is a slave to sin.*"

Aside from Jesus' words above, we must also deal with Paul's repeated teaching on the separation that should be evident between Believers and sin:

Romans 6:6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might *no longer be enslaved to sin*. 7 For he who has died is freed from sin...11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. 13 Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. 14 *For sin will have no dominion over you*, since you are not under law but under grace...16 Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, *you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?* 17 But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, *having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness*...22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life.

2Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come...21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that *in him we might become the righteousness of God*.

2 Corinthians 7:1 Since we have these promises, beloved, *let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect* in the fear of God.

Galatians 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, *and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh*.

Ephesians 4:22 Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and *put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*.

1Thessalonians 4:7 For God has not called us for uncleanness, *but in holiness*.

1Thessalonians 5: 23 May the God of peace himself *sanctify you wholly*; and may your spirit and soul and body *be kept sound and blameless* at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 6:11 But as for you, man of God, shun all this; aim at *righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness*...14 *I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach* until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ;

Furthermore, the author of Hebrews, as well as all of the other Apostles clearly taught that all believers, through the power of God's grace were to live free from sin in this life:

Hebrews 9:26 for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age *to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself*.

1 Peter 1:14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 *but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct*; 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." 17 And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, *conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile*.... 22 Having *purified your souls* by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart.

1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, *that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*. By his wounds you have been healed.

1 Peter 4:1 Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought, for whoever has suffered in the flesh *has ceased from sin, 2 so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer by human passions but by the will of God*.

1 John 2: 3 And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. 4 He who says "I know him" but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him *truly love for God is perfected*. By this we may be sure that we are in him: 6 he who says he abides in him *ought to walk in the same way in which he walked*.

1 John 3:3 And every one who thus hopes in him *purifies himself as he is pure*. 4 *Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness*; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 *No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him*. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous. 8 *He who commits sin is of the devil*; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil*. 9 *No one born of God commits sin*; for God's nature abides in him, *and he cannot sin because he is born of God*. 10 By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: *whoever does not do right is not of God*, nor he who does not love his brother.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The argument that John is speaking of 'habitual' or 'continuing' sin is unconvincing. Wesley comments: "Indeed it is said, this means only, He sinneth not *willfully*; or he doth not commit sin *habitually*; or, *not as other men do*; or *not as he did before*. But by whom is this said? By St. John? No: There is no such word in the text; nor in the whole chapter; nor in all his Epistle; nor in any part of his writings whatsoever." Works, vol.VI, p.6. See also Kaiser, et. al., pp.736-738 where Peter Davids writes: "The weakness of this position is that it depends on a grammatical subtlety which an interpreter cannot stress in other places in the NT where this tense is used...[John] is saying that if believers remain in Christ..., which means to stay in intimate connection with Christ, they will not sin."

1John 4: 17 In this is love *perfected* with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is *so are we in this world*.

1John 5: 3 For this is the love of God, *that we keep his commandments*. And his commandments are not burdensome...18 We know that *any one born of God does not sin*, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.

Jude 24 Now to him *who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish* before the presence of his glory with rejoicing,

These passages as well as many others seem to negate any claim that Biblical Perfection in this life is unbiblical or impossible. For the plain teaching of Scripture seems to be that upon justification, a Believer is sanctified, that is, cleansed of and set apart from all sin, and is filled with the Holy Spirit, which enables the Believer to experience intimacy with God in such a way that he or she can now be free from the power as well as the penalty of sin.<sup>55</sup> From Jesus' discussion in John 14-16 concerning the coming purpose of the Holy Spirit we find out that the Holy Spirit would fulfill the prophecies of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 so that, under the New Covenant, God will dwell with His people and guide them from within. Thus the Biblical portrayal of perfection seems to be one of total cleansing by God and constant abiding in Christ by the Believer which results in love for God and others and freedom from all sin.

However, the fourth view—that perfection is a later blessing in the life of the Believer—seems to be based more on experience than on Scripture and needs to be corrected. Justification and Sanctification both take place upon conversion.<sup>56</sup> Any appeal to Heb. 6:1 is unwarranted exegetically, for there the author is using the phrase ἐπὶ τὴν τελειότητα φερώμεθα (let us be moved on to perfect things) literally, not theologically. He is saying that the focus of the letter will now shift to the more mature matters of the faith, rather than dwelling on the elementary doctrines with which the

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<sup>55</sup> Deiter, et. al., p.115 Horton quotes Ralph W. Harris: "Sanctification is instantaneous, for the moment a person believes in Christ he is separated from sin and unto God."

<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that though the status and benefits of sanctification continue on in time (thus providing the basis for thinking of sanctification as an ongoing process), the actual sanctifying of something or someone is the result of an act performed by God at an initial point in time. This is true in both the OT as well as the NT. Cf. Exod. 29:43, 1Chr. 15:14, 2Chr. 29, Acts 20:32, 1Cor. 6:11, Heb. 2:11, 1Pet. 1:2



audience is well acquainted. Nowhere in Scripture is God's cleansing of the sinner upon repentance seen as anything but total. In fact, 1 John 1:9 makes this point explicitly: "*If we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from ALL unrighteousness.*"

Despite the above definition of Biblical Perfection and the passages cited, many Christians still feel that only upon death will the Believer achieve perfection. Noting this, evangelist George Smock responds: "If it is physical death that ultimately is going to bring us victory over sin, then that makes death our savior. What? Are we to believe that the penalty of sin becomes the destroyer of sin? No! Physical death is not our savior; Jesus is our savior. It is His death, His blood, that cleanses us from all sin."<sup>57</sup> Thomas Oden adds, "It would be an offense to God's sovereignty to assert that God the Spirit is impotent to save people wholly from their sins while soul and body are united."<sup>58</sup> But what are we to make of Paul's admitting that he is not yet perfect in Phil. 3:12? We must look at his words in their context beginning with the verses immediately preceding:

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order . . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible *I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* 12 *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect;* but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are *perfect* be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you.

As context makes clear, the perfection that Paul is denying to have obtained is *eschatological* perfection—the resurrection from the dead—when he will be completely perfect in his new body. It is important to note that three verses after this statement, the

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<sup>57</sup> Smock, George E., *Walking in the Spirit*, pp.27-28

<sup>58</sup> Oden, Thomas, *Life in the Spirit*, p.241 He goes on to say on p.228: "There is no arbitrary limit to what the Spirit can do with a consecrated human life who cooperates steadily with grace." Cf. Ewell, pp.840-841 where Shelton notes that the Augustinian "tendency to identify sinfulness with the physical world is an unnecessary vestige of Greek philosophy."

Apostle claims to be among those who are perfect (τέλειοι), that is, those who are Biblically perfect in the sense of being whole, mature, and free from sin.

But what of the other Pauline passages such as 1 Tim. 1:15 and Rom. 7:14-25? Again, context is the key. In 1 Tim. 1:15, Paul likens himself as “foremost” (πρώτος) among sinners because of what he has just noted in the previous verses—that he was a persecutor, blasphemer, and insulter of Jesus. This is a case of Paul using the Greek “historical present” tense to describe a past situation for the purpose of emphasis. The same can be said about his remarks in Rom. 7:14-25.<sup>59</sup> In fact, Hoekema, who we noted above firmly rejects the idea of perfection in this life, admits that though he formerly taught that this passage described Paul’s present Christian condition, he now sees the passage “as a description, seen through the eyes of a regenerate person, of an unregenerate person (e.g., an unconverted Pharisaic Jew) struggling to fight sin through the law alone, apart from the strength of the Spirit...[vv.14-25] therefore, elaborates on the condition of the unregenerate person described in verses 5 and 13.”<sup>60</sup>

Finally, what of 1 John 1:8 “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*”? As with all the other passages appealed to in order to deny the possibility of Biblical perfection, this one must be looked at in the overall context of John’s letter. Smock’s comments are insightful:

This verse applies to an individual claiming to have no sin for which God will hold him accountable, while he continues to sin. The ‘we’ speaking in this verse refers to the liars of verse six, those who claim to be Christians, but ‘walk in darkness’ (practice sin), and obey not the truth. It is also possible that John is rebuking those who claim to have never sinned and therefore have no need of a Saviour (sic). If, in chapter one, verse eight, John is teaching that Christians never completely overcome sin in this lifetime, then he is contradicting the immediate context, which teaches that Jesus’ blood cleanses from all unrighteousness, not to mention many other verses in his letter...It is preposterous to

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<sup>59</sup> See Oden, Thomas, Life in the Spirit, p.241 where he notes that Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Basil, Theodoret, Chrysostom, Jerome, Ambrose, Cyril of Jerusalem, Macarius, Theophylact, as well as most classical exegetes from the east all held to the past tense nature of this passage.

<sup>60</sup> Deiter, et. al., p.232 Interestingly, Hoekema goes on to say, “I believe, therefore, that the biblical description of the normal Christian life is found, not in Romans 7:14-25, but in Romans 6 and 8.” How he can maintain this and still argue against the possibility of living without sin is baffling to say the least.

think that an inspired writer would state his purpose: 'My little children, these things I write unto you, that ye sin not,' but preclude this as impossible.<sup>61</sup>

Even some of the most able exegetes continue to appeal to 1 John 1:8 as the definitive argument against Biblical Perfection as freedom from all sin. However, to do so is to ignore the rest of his letters as well as the uniform teaching of Scripture.

One final aspect of Biblical Perfection needs to be looked at. Does Biblical Perfection preclude any further growth, or is it an end in and of itself? Many have made perfection a goal to be aimed at by the Believer. However, this is not the case. As we saw in Paul's comments in Phil. 3, ultimate perfection—the resurrection from the dead—is our goal and it is towards that that we are to daily strive by persevering in our faith. Biblical Perfection, on the other hand, describes the completeness we experience in union with Christ, and is the normal state of the Believer as he or she abides in Christ. Biblical perfection marks the beginning, not the end, of the Christian life. For even though a Christian is perfected upon conversion, this perfection does not preclude growth in Grace, maturity, or knowledge of God. These will continue on into eternity as the Believer enjoys the light of God's presence in an ever-increasing way. However, in this life, the Believer will always be subject to the temptation of the old nature, or what Paul calls the flesh, which is continually trying to reestablish itself as the ruling force in the Believer's life. This is the battle Paul spoke of in Gal. 5 and is one that rages constantly in the life of those who are perfect. However, through abiding in Christ, the Believer is able to overcome all temptations and maintain a life of perfect obedience God. Biblical Perfection is not to be judged by whether or not a Believer walks in perfect obedience every day of his or her life; it is to be evaluated moment by moment. The Believer must take up the cross and die to self daily. Insofar as he or she does this, they are to be seen as perfect. If the Believer succumbs to temptation and falls into sin, all that is needed to

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<sup>61</sup> Smock, George E., *Grieve Not the Spirit*, pp.38-39 For similar interpretations, see the commentaries on the letters of John by John Stott in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* pp.81-82 and I. Howard Marshall in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* series pp.112-113.

restore them to perfection is that they confess their sin to God and repent of it; they are then forgiven of their sin and cleansed again from the unrighteousness that was a result of it. This is the Biblical Portrait of Perfection, what Oden calls sustained radical responsiveness to Grace<sup>62</sup>; total cleansing of sin by God and constant abiding in Christ by the Believer. This is the normal Christian life.

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<sup>62</sup> Oden, pp.231-235.

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