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Paul's "Perfection"



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Many alleged Bible contradictions can be answered logically by noting that two or more passages of Scripture may refer to the same word (or idea), but use the word in different senses. If a man leaves home during the middle of flu season and tells his wife, "I am thankful I'm not sick," but then turns to his son, who just ransacked the living room while looking for his toy light saber, and says, "I am sick of seeing such a mess," no one would accuse the father of being dishonest. He obviously used the word "sick" in two different senses. English-speaking Americans living in the twenty-first century understand the flexibility of language. American use of the word "bad" is a prime example of the elasticity of our language. Bad literally can mean "bad" (as in the "bad dog" who ate a student's homework), or it can mean the very opposite: bad can mean "good." A basketball fan watching a player make ten 3-pointers in one game may truthfully say: "That guy is bad!"—meaning, he is a very good basketball player. Unfortunately, critics of the Bible's inspiration accept the freedom of language in today's world (and they often take such freedom themselves), but they will not allow the ancient biblical writers the same liberty.

Instead of trying to understand the flexibility of the ancient languages and their figures of speech, skeptics are quick to cite what they feel are blatant contradictions. For example, in Philippians 3:12, the apostle Paul wrote that he had not yet been "made perfect" (ASV), but then, just three verses later, he indicated that he was "perfect" (3:15). It is alleged that Paul contradicted himself while encouraging his brethren to persevere through this life. The truth is, however, Paul used similar Greek words—translated as "perfect"—in different senses. The former "perfection" is a faultlessness and excellence that cannot be expected in this life. Paul had not yet attained a state of **total holiness and dedication** where no additional progress would be possible or needed. The "perfection" or "maturity" of Philippians 3:15 was "used to mean mature in mind, as opposed to one who is a

beginner in a subject" (Barclay, 1959, p. 81). Paul had not begun the Christian race only recently; rather, he had been running courageously for some time. He thus was "perfect" or "mature" in this sense.

A second reason such a charge can only be based upon ignorance (or lack of concern for the facts) is because when Paul denied that he had been "made perfect," he used the **perfect tense** of the Greek verb *teteleiomai*. The perfect tense suggests an action in the past with permanent completed results. The apostle therefore was affirming that he had **not yet arrived** at a permanent state of perfection. Within the context of Philippians 3, his comment that he had "not yet become perfect [*ouch hoti ede teteleiomai*]" likely "means that he has not yet attained the final thing, the victor's prize of the heavenly calling in Christ Jesus" (Schippers, 1971, p. 62; cf. Philippians 3:9-11). In verse 15, however, Paul employed the adjective *teleioi*, which means "full-grown" or "mature." According to Greek scholars Moulton and Milligan, this word is used in the Greek papyri of those who have obtained maturity (1963, p. 629). Furthermore, Paul used this word in 1 Corinthians 14:20 and in Ephesians 4:13, in obvious contrast to immaturity. So, while Paul **denied** that he had completely attained perfection, he **affirmed** his spiritual maturity. There is no contradiction. Although the same stem (or "root word") is used (*teleios*), he was using the word in different senses—as is evident not only from the context, but also from the tense in which the words are found.

REFERENCES

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