



# FEED MY SHEEP

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## Can We Be Perfect in this Life?

For the sake of those who may read this monograph some months from now without the benefit of the cover letter, a word of explanation will be helpful. In this issue we will continue our studies on sanctification at the point where we left off two issues ago. In the last issue we deviated completely from the topic of sanctification to share with you some of our understandings and spiritual discernments of recent events. (We trust all of you understand that we never make any claims to infallibility or that any such discernments are without error.)

A primary theme of that last FMS was that under the sovereignty of God there are no such things as coincidences. The great difference in substance in that issue of FMS from all others was done with the deliberate intent to introduce such things to those of you who have never heard of them. We will probably not ever put such things in the FMS anymore. But for those of you who are interested in such things we hereby announce that we will publish an occasional letter dealing with those types of things.

It will not be sent to the FMS mailing list. Rather, we will have an entirely separate mailing list for those wishing to receive the new publication (as yet unnamed). So if you wish to receive it, you must write us and request to be on that mailing list. For now, simply refer to the "discernment letter." It will be published only when there are some things to report and as time permits. In other words, it will not be published monthly, but occasionally.

### Historical Arminian-Pentecostal views

In our last discussion of sanctification we had left off while discussing Arminian theory vis à vis sanc-

tification. Specifically, we noted how John Wesley taught about "the second work of grace" which brought about "entire sanctification." To be entirely sanctified is to be completed, to have been made perfect. Thus, Wesley taught perfectionism, but like almost all others who teach perfectionism, Wesley redefined the term. He also redefined sin as voluntary transgression of known law. That's not the Bible definition and, as we noted before, such word games tend to confuse and enslave the flock. That is why one can find people at the local church level who insist that they do not sin, meaning they have attained to absolute perfection while still in their mortal body.

At the same time, others in the local church which teaches entire sanctification (perfectionism) may find themselves continually depressed because they know that they cannot attain such absolute perfection. From our perspective, at least the latter are more honest about their spiritual condition. The former, the "sinless saints," apparently have achieved what the apostle Paul admitted that he did not achieve in his lifetime.

**Philippians 3:12 Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.**

**13 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,**

**14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.**

It must be noted that Wesley himself never claimed to have personally achieved sinless perfection. He held that even the perfected Christian (using

his definition of “perfect”) committed sins of omission and should seek God’s forgiveness regularly. Wesley’s followers became known as Methodists and many offshoots of Methodism exist today, with such stark contrasts as between the politically Far Left, social(-ist) gospel-teaching United Methodists and the (generally apolitical) Pentecostal Holiness denomination.

In the middle of the 19th-century the Holiness movement arose, based largely on the teachings of Wesley but carrying them further. They used the term “second blessing” to describe a second experience after conversion which brings about perfection. Charles Finney and Andrew Murray were prominent in the Holiness movement. While it is certainly true that there are further blessings of the Spirit beyond conversion and that all Christians should strive for perfection in this life, nonetheless there were some in the Holiness movement who went to the extreme of claiming that sinless perfection was achievable in this life.

In the earliest years of the 20th century the Pentecostal movement sprang largely out of the Holiness movement. For the Pentecostals, speaking in tongues was considered to be the initial evidence that one had received the second blessing. Some even went so far as to say that one was not truly saved until he had received the second blessing and had spoken in tongues. At some point, the experience of the second blessing began to be called the baptism with (or “in”) the Holy Spirit or the filling of the Holy Spirit. These were all departures from the teachings of John Wesley.

Some Holiness Pentecostals (Here we are not speaking solely of the small Pentecostal Holiness denomination mentioned above, but of a broader category comprising a number of denominations.) believed in a second work of grace which removes original sin and thereby allows for perfect holiness to be achieved in this life. The doctrine of original sin is generally understood to mean that the sin committed in the Garden of Eden is inherited by all mankind. We disagree. We do **not** inherit sin from our first parents. It is the **result** of their sin—mortality—which we inherit, which in turn causes us to be imperfect, that is, sinners. (We derive this in part from Romans 5:12, correctly translated. (See the Concordant Version. We have taught about this topic in great detail in our *Sovereignty of God* tape series. Ten tapes in Album A-101, \$33 ppd.) Hence, in our view, the lack of original sin in our souls does not open the door to perfect holiness in this life.

Moreover, some Holiness and Pentecostal groups held that the second blessing conveyed an *instantaneous* entire sanctification (perfection), and that this baptism in the Holy Spirit equipped and empowered them for public witness. Others, notably the Assemblies of God and the Foursquare denominations, hold to progressive sanctification and deny that sinless perfection is attainable in this life.

### **The Keswick movement**

Another movement which emerged in the mid-19th century was the Keswick (pronounced with a silent *w*) movement. Named for a resort town in England, the Keswick movement has held annual conferences since 1875 for the purpose of promoting practical holiness. It has drawn its leaders, speakers and attendees from a broad Christian spectrum, including Anglicans, Baptists and Presbyterians, among many others. Since no Keswick leader has written a theological work on the Keswick doctrines (indeed, who could with such an amorphous, diverse group?), many have charged the movement with teaching and holding to positions that only some of its teachers have held to. (Does this not sound like the so-called Christian Israel Identity movement in that respect?) Such is bound to happen with any spiritual movement which is neither a denomination nor a doctrinal system.

Hence, the Keswick movement has come under fire for teaching human perfectibility in this life. Again, the problem seems to be one of definitions of terms. Some of its teachers have indeed followed the Wesleyan and Arminian example of redefining the terms *sin*, *law* and *perfection*. These terms are downgraded to a lower (unscriptural) standard, which then allows that some Christians can achieve “perfection” this side of the grave.

On the positive side the Keswick conventions have brought great hope to many Christians who have despaired of ever living a victorious Christian life. All Keswickians seem to agree that every Christian has the right to live a life filled with the Spirit. Being “full” of the Spirit is held to mean “controlled by” the Spirit. Those with willingly obedient hearts are said to be led by and filled with the Holy Spirit. We find no problem with that, so long as “a victorious Christian life” does not mean sinless perfection in this life.

### **Biblical analysis of the perfection doctrine**

To this point we have merely scattered a few Scriptures regarding perfectionism, but let us now

make a more thorough Scriptural examination of the perfectionist position. First, in synopsis of the Pelagian-Roman Catholic-Arminian-Wesleyan-Holiness et al.'s *modus operandi* of redefining terms, especially *sin, law and perfection*, we simply answer that one cannot do that and remain true to the Word of God. So redefining *perfection*, for example, to mean something less than perfection is confusing and destructive to the body of Christ. It perverts the meaning of words; it thereby perverts The Word, and leads Christians to have a higher opinion of themselves than they ought (Rom. 12:3). Therefore, let us allow the word *perfect* to continue to mean *perfect* (i.e., sinlessness, as in the life of Jesus Christ), and let us proceed to examine the arguments of those brethren who actually claim sinless perfection.

Recall from FMS #17 how I met a young Christian man about 23 years ago who claimed that he was now perfect and no longer sinned. I do not recall which denomination he belonged to, but his scriptural basis for the belief in his own present perfection was 1 John 3: 9.

**1 John 3:9 Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.**

One can readily see how a baby Christian could interpret this and come up with the doctrine of his own perfection. He thinks: "well, I am born again; therefore, I cannot sin." Had I been a more mature Christian myself at that time, here is how I could have helped him see the error in this thinking. First, we see only two possible ways that this verse could be interpreted.

Number one: either it has to mean that a true Christian does not make a practice of sinning; i.e., that he does not sin habitually, meaning that sin is not the dominant practice in his character and behavior. Or, number two, it has to mean that whoever is born of God (i.e., is a true Christian) is actually perfect and never sins anymore. Furthermore, if this verse does refer to absolute perfection, then it cannot simply mean that a true Christian *may* not sin, but that all true Christians never sin! Who could suggest such a posterous idea!

Aside from the commonsense recognition of our own human frailty, even after conversion, there are several other reasons why this cannot refer to perfection in this life. In fact, as translated in the New American Standard, the NIV and other translations, the Greek construction does allow for the meaning of "does not practice" or "continue to" sin in 1 John 3:9. The idea of "practicing sin" is set in contrast to

"practicing righteousness" in 1 John 2:29 (NKJ):

**29 If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.**

Moreover, the context of John's epistles clearly shows that (1) he was writing to true Christians, not unbelievers, and (2) John understood that as Christians, we all still sin from time to time.

**1 John 2:1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:**

John addresses his readers as "my little children," obviously written to believers, not pagans. He admonishes these Christians not to sin, but then he immediately follows that up by telling them that if they *do* sin—clearly recognizing that Christians *can* sin, then Jesus is our advocate. Just a few sentences before that (1 John 1:8-10), John had clearly pointed out that not only *can* Christians sin, but Christians *will* sin. And, if we may paraphrase him, he emphasized this strongly by declaring a person a liar who says he is perfect and sinless.

**1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**

**9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

**10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**

Another reason why some Christians believe they can achieve perfection in this life is because they have taken the English word *perfect* to mean sinless perfection when the Greek word translated such do not necessarily mean sinless perfection. Let us demonstrate with a few examples.

**Colossians 1:28 Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:**

The Greek word in these examples is τέλειος *teleios* {tel'-i-os} and although it can mean sinless perfection, it also allows the meanings of "finished, brought to its end, consummate human integrity and virtue" and especially meaning "mature" and similar terms. Paul is expecting to present his disciples to the Father not as being actually sinless Christians, but as being mature Christians. In the next example, the word *perfect* comes from a different Greek word: ἄρτιος *artios* {ar'-tee-os}.

**2 Timothy 3:17 That the man of God may be**

**perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.**

*Artios* does not have reference to moral and ethical purity and perfection, but means “fitted,” as with a special aptitude. In this case Paul prays for Timothy that through Tim’s study of the Scriptures, he may be thoroughly suited, trained, and instructed to perform his tasks for the body of Christ. A third Greek word, *καταρτίζω* *katartizo* {kat-ar-tid'-zo}, is also translated as *perfect*, as in this example:

**Hebrews 13:21 Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom *be* glory for ever and ever. Amen.**

This Greek word seems to have some of the meanings of both of previous Greek words. On the one hand, it can refer to being fitted, equipped or prepared for certain works; but it also can have reference to ethical perfection and to making one what he ought to be. But here again, this is understood in the sense of Christian maturity, not sinless perfection; i.e., striving for perfection, going as far as one can go in this life.

We regret that space does not permit a more extensive analysis but the bottom line is that although *teleios* (see next paragraph), and questionably, *katartizo*, can mean sinless perfection, it does not necessarily have to mean that; and in most cases, it simply means “mature” or “full grown,” or “complete” in the sense of “as far as one can go towards a goal,” but not necessarily meaning sinless perfection.

There are a very few cases where the word *perfect* seems to actually be referring to sinless perfection. Naturally, our brethren who hold to the doctrine of perfectionism put great weight on the following as proof texts. Jesus speaks this command to His followers:

**Matthew 5:48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.**

While not using the word perfect, the same command was phrased with different words to the ancient Israelites in Leviticus 20:7 and in

**Leviticus 11:44 For I *am* YHWH your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I *am* holy:**

And then repeated by the apostle Peter in

**1 Peter 1: 15 But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; 16 Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.**

This looks like pretty strong evidence for the perfectionists. Jesus did indeed command us to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. His is indeed sinless perfection. And Yahweh did indeed command His people to be holy as He is holy — again, sinless perfection, no doubt about it. With these passages in mind, those who maintain that we can achieve sinless perfection argue that God would not command us to be perfect if it were not possible for us to be perfect. While that sounds like a reasonable assumption, it is simply not true.

How do we know? We have the Word of God on it. Consider again the case of the ancient Israelites. God unquestionably commanded them to be obedient to his laws, statutes, and judgments. He desired perfect obedience. That was His will. But the Israelites failed miserably for forty years. Then, at the end of the wilderness wanderings, God told them through Moses that even though He commanded and desired perfection from them, He also had made it impossible for them to achieve it. Notice carefully:

**Deuteronomy 29:4 Yet YHWH hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day.**

That verse is pregnant with meaning and begs meditation. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Furthermore, how can one obey when one has not heard? Oh, sure, the Israelites had physically heard all the laws, statutes and judgments – mostly through Moses, acting as God’s spokesman. But they had not really heard. God told Israel that, spiritually speaking, they were blind and deaf and did not possess a heart to understand. They could not possibly keep the covenant. To top it off, He told them it was not really their fault! Why? Because it was God Himself who blinded them, made them deaf and dulled their hearts – they couldn’t do otherwise than to fail to keep the covenant. Of course, in the overall picture of the sovereignty of God, it was God’s will that they obey, but it was part of His over-riding plan that they fail!

*Feed My Sheep is a part of the teaching ministry of James W. Bruggeman and is sent out freely upon request. The tithes and gifts of those who are fed by it make it possible for us to continue in ministry. Gifts may be sent to P.O. Box 6388, Asheville, NC 28816.*