

Is “Christian Perfection” Scriptural?

By J. Sidlow Baxter (1967)

THE phrase, “Christian perfection” might well suggest a triumphant culmination; but it is a misnomer. It was coined by John Wesley. During forty years he used it and preached the doctrine which it represented, despite the fact that it aroused more opposition than any other aspect of his teaching. In Sermon 40 he tells us why he clung to it.

“Some have advised [us] wholly to lay aside the use of those expressions [‘perfect’ and ‘perfection’] ‘because they have given so great offence’. But are they not found in the Oracles of God? If so, by what authority can any messenger of God lay them aside, even though all men should be offended?”

But *are* those expressions found in Scripture? And *is* Wesley’s doctrine of “Christian Perfection” truly Scriptural? Believing, as I do, in Wesley’s unimpeachable sincerity, I would be the last man ever to suggest “special pleading” on his part; yet the way he appropriates or handles some of his supposed proof-texts is as innocently gratuitous as it is utterly sincere. I mention just one instance here. In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he thus appropriates Matthew 5:48 (“Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”):

“They wanted, they sought, occasion against me; there they found what they sought. ‘This is Mr. Wesley’s doctrine! He preaches perfection’ He does: yet this is not his doctrine any more than it is yours or anyone else who is a minister of Christ. For it is His doctrine, peculiarly, emphatically His! It is the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Those are His words, not mine: *Ecece oi2v i5ueiç ré~.Zetot &a7zee 6 t5,acZv 6 e’vtoiç 3i3~avoic r~Aetdç.* ‘Ye shall therefore be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.’ And who says ye shall not; or at least, not till your soul is separated from the body? It is the doctrine of St. Paul, the doctrine of St. James, of St. Peter and St. John; and not otherwise Mr. Wesley’s than as it is the doctrine of every one who preaches the pure and the whole gospel. I tell you, as plain as I can speak, where and when I found this. I found it in the oracles of God, in the Old and the New Testament when I read them with no other view or desire but to save my own soul.”

Now it is obvious that our Lord, exhorting that long-ago mixed crowd in Galilee, before Calvary and Pentecost, could not possibly have meant “perfect” in the Wesley sense of eradication and entire sanctification. There is not a syllable in the context to suggest so; nor would those people have understood it even if that *had* been what He meant, for the Spirit was not yet given at Pentecost, nor were the people of that promiscuous multitude what we would call “born again” persons. Nor could our Lord have meant perfection in the strict meaning of our *English* word, “perfection”. Nor does the Greek adjective, *teleios*, in itself mean perfection. And even if the Greek word *had* meant perfection, our Lord did not use it to exhort those people to a *complete* human perfection, but only in one particular way, i.e. In impartiality of kindness to friend and foe alike, even as God sends the rain “on the just and on the unjust”. If John Wesley was determined to make this text serve his doctrine of “Christian perfection”, then in all consistency should he not have acknowledged that the text calls us to be perfect *even as God* is—which is an impossibility?

In our English New Testament (Authorized Version) the words “perfect”, “perfected”, “perfecting”, “perfection”, “perfectly”, “perfectness”, occur a total of sixty times. These translate to us a variety of Greek words, which may be classified as follows:

1. The adjective *ré2eioc* (*telelos*) with its noun and other forms; also (twice) *bu~eMco* (40)
2. The verb *,~a-ra~ri~w* (*katartizo*) and the two noun forms. (9)
3. The noun *dx~l~9eta* (*akribeia*) with adjectival and adverbial forms. (7)
4. The noun *6,~o~A,~eta* (*kolok~ëria*)~ (Acts 3:16, physical wholeness). (1).

5. The adjective ~rto~ (*artios*) (2 Tim. 3:17, “complete”, A.S.V.). (1)
6. The verb ~A,~ów (*pleroo*) in its passive participle=“fulfilled” (Rev. 3:2). (1)
7. The verb *ôtaath~w* (*diasozo*) in its aorist passive form (Matt. 14:36). (1)

The big query is: Do these Greek words hold out the possibility of a present moral perfection in the strict meaning of our English word, “perfection”? (sorry, the authentic Greek characters were not available to my computer TP)

To begin with, we can delete number 7. That verb does not mean to make perfect, but to preserve or save or keep safe. In the only place where the King James version translates it as “perfectly” (Matt. 14: 36) both E.R.V. and A.S.V. drop it.

Equally we may discard number 6. The verb and its cognates all have the idea of *full*, but never of perfect. Out of all its many occurrences, only once is it translated as “perfect” and even there the E.R.V. changes it to “fulfilled”. Similarly we may exclude number 5. It definitely does not mean perfect. Its central idea is that of being freshly ready. Its only occurrence is 2 Tim. 3: 17, and both E.R.V. And A.S.V. Translate it, “complete”.

Again, number 4 may be eliminated. Its only occurrence is Acts 3:16, where it refers to physical soundness. It comes from *holos* which is translated 42 times as “whole” (e.g. “the whole city”), 66 times as “all”, once as “altogether”, twice as “every whit”, and once as “throughout”. Its main idea is wholeness or altogetherness. Nowhere does it refer to moral condition except twice in an adjectival form:

“That ye may be . . . *entire*, lacking in nothing” (Jas. I: 4).

“Your spirit and soul and body be preserved *entire*, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).

In the first of these two texts (Jas. I: 4), as the context shows, the entireness is that of *faith* developed through endurance of *trial*. It has absolutely no reference to an inwrought condition of holiness. In the second (i Thess. 5: 23) the entireness is that of area: “spirit and soul and body”, not of moral perfection. The words, “without blame”, and “sanctify you wholly” will come up in connection with the word *teleios* (number 1).

As for number 3, *akrzbeia*, it may be dismissed at once. None of its seven occurrences refers to our human moral nature. Nor does the word mean perfection, but *exactness*; and in most of its seven occurrences the E.R.V. And A.S.V. Alter the translation accordingly.

So is it with number 2. That it should have been translated anywhere by our English word, “perfect”, is misleading. Its force is that of a thorough repairing or readjusting, as is shown by the way it is elsewhere translated, i.e. “fitted”, “framed”, “mending”, “prepared”, “restore”.

Of course, there is a popular (as distinct from exact) way of using our word “perfect”, as when we say, “It was a perfect meal”, or “He has perfect health”, or “He makes a perfect husband”, not to mention slang uses such as “perfect misery”. Therefore some of the above Greek words may perhaps be allowably translated by our English word, “perfect”, so long as it is understood that our word, “perfect”, is not to be taken in its *strict* sense.

The trouble is, however, that the average reader of our English New Testament, not knowing Greek, assumes that our word, “perfect”, represents a *Greek* word meaning perfect in the *strict* sense; and thus a wrong idea of New Testament teaching on holiness is given. Little does the average English reader suspect that our New Testament word, “perfect”, in its various occurrences, represents *seven* different Greek words, in over a dozen different forms, not one of them meaning perfection in the *strict* sense.

But now it is time to examine that Greek word *-raetoç* (*teleios*) which, in its several grammatical forms, is translated no less than forty times as “perfect”, “perfection”, etc. This adjective, with its kindred noun, verb and

adverbial forms, derives from a primitive verb, *tello*, which means to set out for a definite point or goal, but with emphasis on the point aimed at as a limit. From this the noun, *telos*, means a termination-point or accomplished end; a completion or fulfilment or issue. Thus our Greek adjective, *teleios*, carries the meaning of *completed*, entire, fulfilled, full-grown. Only in those modified senses does it mean perfect.

An interesting confirmation of this is, that *teleios* was a word associated with the old Greek mystery cults, where (says Lightfoot) it “seems to have been applied to the *fully instructed* as opposed to novices.” Philo also (B.C. 20? —A.D. 42?) and the Alexandrian philosophical Judaists used it considerably. Philo distinguishes between the “fully initiated” (*teleioi*) and the merely “advancing” (*proko~tontes*). He allegorises Jacob into typifying the latter, and Israel the former! In ordinary common use, *teleios* meant “full-grown”, or “grown men”, in contrast to “children”.

The very fact that it and its cognates are translated, “of full age”, “finish”, “performance”, “accomplish”, “expire”, will settle it that *teleios* in itself does *not* mean perfect in a fixed or strict sense. Whether in any given instance it *implies* perfection in the strict or absolute sense has to be decided by the context.

So now, from the 40 instances where *teleios* is translated “perfect”, let us pick out the 16 places where it refers to *human* condition or possibility; for those are the occurrences which specially concern us. They are as follows:

(1) Matthew 5:48, “Be ye therefore *perfect*, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” The paragraph teaches *impartiality* in kindness to both neighbours and enemies. Although we are so ear-tuned to the usual translation that any alteration sounds strange, a true rendering (with the word, “impartial” in italics) would be, “Ye therefore shall be entirely *impartial*, even as your heavenly Father is entirely so.”

(2) Matthew 19:21, “Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be *perfect*, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor. . . This has no real bearing on inwrought holiness, but rather to a legal righteousness through a fulfilling of the Law. The rich young ruler had apparently kept the Law “to the letter”. Our Lord now tests him as to implementing the *spirit* of it: “If thou wilt be *complete*”, i.e. To the true limit of fulfilment.

(3) 1 Corinthians ~: 6, “Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are *perfect*”. All later versions translate this as “full-grown” or “mature”.

(4) (5) Philippians 3:12 and 15, “Not as though I . . . were already *perfect*”. “Let us therefore, as many as be *perfect*. . . “ If anything could show that the Greek word does not mean perfection, this twice-occurrence does, in which Paul says he both *is* and is *not* “perfect”. There is no contradiction, but only a contrast between a *future* completion through resurrection, and a *present* completeness through justification. The fact is, verse 15, “Let *us* . . . “ connects right back to verse 3, “*We* . . . glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh”. All the intervening verses (4—14) are in the singular “I”, with Paul himself as the illustration of “no confidence in the flesh” (4—8), glorying in a *present* completeness in Christ (~, io), and in a *future* completion through the coming out-resurrection (11—14).

(6) Colossians I: 28, “That we may present every man *perfect* in Christ”. The presenting is at the return of Christ, our “hope of glory” (27). Here, the truer translation would be “complete”, instead of “perfect”.

(7) Colossians 4: 12, “*Perfect* and complete in all the will of God”. If we follow the Revised Text, the true rendering here is, “Complete and fully assured in every will of God”. There is no thought of outright perfection.

(8) Hebrews 6:1, “Let us go on unto perfection”. Here, again, the idea is that of going on to a point of full development. The E.R.V. And A.S.V. Margins give “full growth”.

(9)(10) Hebrews 10:14 and 12:23, “For by one offering He hath *perfected* for ever them that are sanctified” (10: 14). “The spirits of just men who have been *perfected*” (12: 23). These are the only two places, so far, where (as it seems to me) the use of our English word, “perfected” is warranted by force of context. The Greek verb, in itself, still means no more than completion; but inasmuch as it here refers to the completion of a faultless sacrifice *for ever*, completion equals perfection. So does it in 12:23, since in those “just men” it refers to the full accomplishment of a purpose consummated *in heaven*.

(11) James 1:4, “Let patience have her *perfect* work, that ye may be *perfect* and entire . . . “ A better translation would be, “Let endurance have its complete effect, that you may be complete and entire”, i.e. free from deficiency.

(12) James :2, “If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man (*anēr*) and able to bridle the whole body”. The very fact that James here uses the word, *an-r*, for man (= a male of full age and stature) indicates the sense of “perfect”. If any man stumble not in word, he is the complete gentleman, or the *thoroughly manly man*, “able to bridle the whole body”.

(13 to 16). “But whoso keepeth His Word, in him verily is the love of God *perfected*” (1 John 2:5) “If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is *perfected* in us” (4:12) “Herein is our love made *perfect* . . .” (4:17). “There is no fear in love; but *perfect* love casteth out fear” (4:18).

Context settles it that the first of these (2: 5) means *our* love of God; so the sense is, “In him love for God has become complete”. I have hitherto regarded the other three verses (4: 12, 17, 18) as meaning *God’s* love, but Alford and others weightily insist that it is *ours*. Thus verse 12 says that “love of Him is *completed* in us”; and verse 17, “Love is completed in this, that we have boldness about the day of judgment”. Moffatt delightfully gives the sense of verse 18, “Love in its fulness drives all dread away”.

Of course, all these four verses *imply* that God’s own love is “shed” within us (Rom. 5:5), and that it is the originating cause of *our* new loving (“we love because *He* first loved: 1 John 4:19); but his new love in our hearts is not merely God’s own love loving Him back, it is our own human love, cleansed, renewed, enriched, permeated and enkindled by His; so that *we* do indeed love *Him*; yes, and love others in a new way, with the love of God Himself also expressing itself *through* our love. However, whichever way we read the verses, our English word, “perfect”, in its strict meaning, has no rightful place.

I have just read again Wesley’s famous sermons, number 40, “Christian Perfection”, and number 76, “On Perfection”. Knowing Greek as he did, one wonders why he clung so doggedly to either the phrase or the word. Number 40 begins, “There is scarcely any expression in holy writ which has given more offence than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear.” His reply is, “Whatsoever God hath spoken, that will we speak”, as though the English version, not the Greek original, were the final authority! He sums up the first part of his sermon, “Christian perfection, therefore, does not imply . . . exemption from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus, every one that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect. Yet we may lastly observe that neither in this respect [i.e. Holiness] is there any absolute perfection on earth.” That is surely a doctrine of *imperfect* perfection.

John Wesley is the last man one would ever want to charge with sophistry; yet one cannot help feeling, in Sermon 40, that his fine eagerness outruns his judgment, as though to help God’s Word say a bit more than it actually does. The way he gets round 1 John 1: 8, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves”, by making it mean no more than “sinned” as in verse 10, and then informing us that neither verse says that *we do* sin now, is cute even if not convincing! To argue from Luke 6: 40 (“Every one who is perfect shall be as his master”) that Christians are made “free from all sinful tempers” because our Master, Jesus, was free from all such, is certainly strange, since the “master” or “teacher” in Luke 6: 40 is not our Lord Jesus, but the “blind guide” who leads “every one that is perfected” (i.e. Fully taught) of him, “into the pit”! His comments on certain other texts (e.g. Mark 7: 21 and John 1:7 are equally naïve; but he eventually gets to his interim conclusion, namely, that Christians “are now in such a sense perfect as not to commit sin, and to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers.”

There are other sincere inconsistencies. Though Wesley is at pains to convince us that by Christian perfection he means “no more than . . .” he yet in fact means “*much* more than”. For instance, in one of his letters he says that it is “loving God with all our heart, and serving Him with all our strength”; to which he adds, “Nor did I ever say or mean any *more* by perfection than thus loving and serving God”. Yet he *did* mean more, much more. Wrapped up invisibly in that simple manifesto of his is his doctrine of eradication; the complete destruction of the “old nature”, the utter extinction of “inbred sin”, the instantaneous cleansing away of all evil thoughts and tempers—all based on a misunderstanding of Romans 6: 6, 1 John 1:7, and on an inadequate view of sin.

This, however, should always be borne in mind, that although we may disallow phrases like “Christian perfection”

because not truly Scriptural, we do not thereby negate the reality of the blessing itself which the phrase misnames. Nor must we ever forget Wesley's magnificent emphasis that the *essence* of entire sanctification is the infilling love of God begetting in the heart of the Christian believer pure love to God and man. Nor do our frank comments on the aforementioned features of Wesley's teaching betoken any less admiration for that glorious man of God. The more we reflect on Wesley, the more do we see his greatness of stature. What millions of us owe to him, under God, tongue simply cannot tell.

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