

## Is the Doctrine of Sinless Perfection Biblical?

By Pastor Don Grady

“Sinless perfection” is a term that often brings confusion. According to R.C. Sproul, an ancient heresy of the distinction between carnal and spirit-filled Christians is called “Perfectionism.” This teaches there is a class of Christians who achieve moral perfection in *this* life. To be sure, credit is given to the Holy Spirit as the agent who brings total victory over sin, but there is a sort of elitism in perfectionism —claiming those who have achieved it are somehow better than other Christians —or that others without it are not really Christians at all.

The problem is stated, “Can justified Christians achieve perfection through a sudden working of the Holy Spirit in their lives —and subsequently live in sinless perfection?” We know that humans, as image bearers of God, lost fellowship with Him through sin in the garden, but God provided for salvation by the incarnation, death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Through spiritual rebirth, God imputed the righteousness of Christ to all true believers. But does this mean men can achieve complete perfection or sanctification *during their lifetime*?

In the eighteenth century John Wesley popularized the doctrine of Christian Perfection – though he never used the term “sinless perfection.” Wesley’s view was that perfection was not only attainable, but the believer was able to walk in perfection through the power of the Holy Spirit all the days of his life. A feature of Wesley’s doctrine was that Christian perfection was not always instantaneous upon conversion —though it *could* be. This doctrine has caused division among Christians especially in the last three hundred years.

[ **M.J.:** Pastor Grady, opponents of this heresy correctly point out that it is merely mincing words to claim there's a difference —at least in human application —between the concept of perfection and sinlessness. Therefore, Full Gospel and holiness fellowships claiming they adhere to perfection —mean sinlessness is the standard. Since sinlessness in this life is not possible —the precise biblical understanding of *perfect* is necessary. Please share with us about perfection, especially from the New Testament perspective —the standard that applies to us. ]

According to Strong's Concordance, the word "perfect" in its various forms occurs 138 times in the Bible. The Hebrew word is "*tamiym*" and is defined as "without blemish, complete, full, perfect, sincere, sound, without spot, undefiled, upright and whole." The Greek word is "*teleios*" which means "of full age, mature, perfect". In Matthew 5:48 Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Paul says in II Corinthians 7:1, "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates the body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God." In Hebrews 13:20,21, the author says "Now the God of peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ...make you perfect in every good work to do His will..." *This is the perfection we have in this life: It is God working in us that produces any "perfection" we have.*

Great believers in the Old and New Testaments admit to being sinful — far from being perfect. The chief example is David, called "a man after God's own heart." Yet he sinned grievously. In Psalm 51:1-3, David confesses, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." In verse 12, he prays

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.” David did not think he’d lost his salvation, but he lost his joy because of his sin.

[ **M.J.:** Pastor Grady, you’ve drawn attention to another aspect of the error of perfectionism as practiced by cults and denominations that strive for their *own* perfection rather than having Christ’s perfection as theirs. These believers claim they lose and regain their salvation —over and over again— as they repeatedly sin and repent —sin and repent. Certainly, we cannot make light of this inner tension experienced by all believers. But those seeking this impossible perfection do not correctly understand how Paul addresses this conundrum for sincere believers. His great monologue in Rom 7 precisely addresses our problem as sinners, saved by grace. Please tell us what Paul says. ]

The apostle Paul was clear about his own sins and those to whom he wrote – especially the Corinthians. Though Romans 8:35-39 declares Paul is saved for eternity —as are all believers —in Chapter 7:14-20 he writes,

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that *it is* good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.

Paul ends this passage by answering his own questions: “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.”

[ M.J.: Pastor Grady, I hear you every week lead us through the much needed exercise of examining ourselves. This is the antidote to the problem of sinning but knowing our sin is not pleasing to God. We do not have to strive to be perfect in ourselves because John tells us exactly where is the *power* to remain in fellowship with Christ —though we stumble and fall, daily. Please remind our listeners of how we are to deal with our sin nature. ]

The Apostle John says in I John 1:7-10, (7)“But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ , his son, purifies us from all sin. (8) If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (9) If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (10) If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar, and His word has no place in our lives.”

**Verses 8 and 10 seem to clinch the idea that we cannot be without sin in this life.** John knew that people, including himself, sinned. They must confess their sins and be forgiven. The Lord Jesus Christ, in the model prayer which He gave to the disciples, made the same provision when He told them and us to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12)

[ M.J.: Thank you Pastor Grady for bringing this much needed correction of the error Christian perfectionism. We are perfect in Christ because He is perfect. ]