

What Do We Mean by Moral Perfection in Contrast to Perfectionism?

Perfection, as used in this book, refers to the *dynamic* life_pattern of persons who *increasingly* reflect the life of Jesus; such people are *trustworthy*_examples of genuine love to God and man. They have determined not to yield to rebellious, sinful desires and when they do slip, they, in their regret, fall back on the gracious arms of their Lord who offers everyone both pardon and power.

This life pattern is described in biblical terms such as “maturity,” “the stature of the fullness of Christ,” and “righteousness.” Thus, perfection, as we use the term, *does not* refer to a state in which a person is beyond temptation or the possibility of sin, any more than Jesus, man’s Example of perfection, was immune to temptations and self-indulgence. Neither do we mean that the perfection set before Christians suggests a state in which no illnesses arise or no mental mistakes, such as in mathematics, are made. Because God is fair, He does not hold people accountable for acting “out of character” when their mental abilities have been seriously damaged by old age, disease, or other disasters.

Perfection is here used in the same context as the following statement: “Moral perfection is required of all. Never should we lower the standard of righteousness in order to accommodate inherited or cultivated tendencies to wrongdoing. We need to understand that imperfection of character is sin. ... The heavenly intelligences will work with the human agent who seeks with determined faith that perfection of character which will reach out to perfection in action.”—White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 330-332.

The urgency involved in this term rests on such passages as: “When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.” (*ibid.*, p. 69).

“The very image of God is to be reproduced in humanity. The honor of God, the honor Christ, is involved in the perfection of the character of His people.”—White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 671.

In real and important theological and practical differences, perfection, as understood in the above quotations, is in contrast to the concept of *perfectionism*. The latter term, emphasizing an *absolute_point* beyond which there can be further development, grows out of Grecian philosophy and not the Bible. Perfection in

the biblical sense is simply Christlikeness—combining a relationship with God such as Jesus had, with the qualities of character that Jesus manifested. Such a relationship leads to the fulfillment of Revelation 3:21—“To him who overcomes, I will grant to sit with Me on My throne as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (NKJV).

Although perfection is a word not frequently so translated in English Bibles, the concept of moral perfection (that is, living a Spirit-empowered, *maturing* life with *increasing* habits of overcoming moral weaknesses (sin), an *increased* ripening of the fruits of the Spirit)—is the only goal held up to all in both the Old and New Testaments and in the writings of Ellen White. To hold that the goal is unrealistic is to doubt the divine power to sustain that which God has promised.

For biblical writers, the emphasis is on *direction*; the *pursuit* of perfection will last forever—*always growing* in knowledge and *nearing* the goal of reflecting the image of our Maker more fully. In other words, “*No Finish Line.*” The Lexus auto motto is pertinent: “The relentless pursuit of perfection.” On my computer are these words: “Pursue perfection but accept excellence.

One caution: those who focus on personal perfection as the primary goal in their lives are likely to experience less of it than those who make service to God and others their overriding concern.¹

In determining what the Bible writers and Ellen White meant by the concept of perfection (whether the actual word is used or not), it is always necessary to submit to a basic hermeneutic principle: Let the meaning be found in the context.

Excerpted from the book, *A Fork in the Road*, authored by Herbert E. Douglass

¹ I am indebted to David Larson for this emphasis.