

**THE LAW OF LOVE AND FINAL GENERATION PERFECTION:
SEEING THE BIG PICTURE**

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INTRODUCTION

I was born in the 1950's along with what George Knight describes as "one of the thorniest problems in Adventism---the ongoing struggle that began . . . in reaction to the Evangelical/Adventist dialogues and the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*."¹ Over the ensuing years, the theological issues involved in this "problem" contributed to the division of my family of origin, similarly to the way they are still tending to polarize the church today. My life-long personal quest for an understanding of the issues involved in this "thorny problem" has been greatly aided by my study in and for two classes—Theology of the Old Testament from Dr. Roy Gane, and The Works of Christ from Dr. Martin Hanna.

THE TENSION

I have always wanted to understand the root of the issues that sprout above ground as divergent views on *law, grace, objective and subjective justification, sanctification, Christian perfection*, particularly the final generation perfection that was taught by M. L. Andreasen and espoused by my mother. They believed "that there will arise a generation of God's people in the end-time who will overcome sin completely and demonstrate to the universe that it is possible to live a sinless life."²

Roots aside, if one climbs far enough up on the hierarchy of ideas, there must be one which could shed light on the appropriate meeting ground between those who are "making a list and checking it twice" and those who don't seem to take discipleship and spiritual growth seriously, instead simply resting on their knowledge of "the truth."

¹ Leroy Moore. *Questions on Doctrine Revisited!* (Ithaca, MI: AB Publishing, 2005) p.7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 256.

In the old Indian fable of the blind men and the elephant,³ several blind men attempt to describe an elephant based on the limited part of it that they could feel. However, even if these blind men had been able to have their sight restored, if they had been unwilling to move from their current position around the elephant, they would probably have had very little additional light to shed on the subject of “elephantness.” Only by moving back (or up) far enough to take in all the “views” from which the elephant was being described by their fellows, would it have been possible for them to see the big picture and come to understand the elephant more completely.

Likewise, I believe that we Christians would understand better the issues involved in our “theological wars” if we were to back up far enough to take in the “biggest picture” God has made available to us.

THE BIGGEST PICTURE

The biggest picture to which we as humanity have access is: God is Love. According to Roy Gane, under the concept of “God is Love” everything else fits hierarchically.

Behind and above the [covenant promises and their fulfillment⁴] is God’s character, which is to be emulated by human beings. In Lev 19:2, God said to the Israelites: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” God’s holiness can be regarded as the sum of his attributes, but in this context in Lev. 19, God is clearly speaking of his holy character which governs his relationships. We know this because the rest of Lev 19 consists of a series of laws governing divine-human and human-human relationships. How can human beings be holy as God is holy? By becoming like him in character by coming into harmony with the

³ Gordon Saxe (1816-1887) wrote a poem based on this fable.

⁴ There is a difference of opinion among scholars about whether there is or is not a unifying theme to the Old Testament. Many claim it is simply historical. Kaiser (*Toward an Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) argues that the central concept is God’s covenant promise, but then he finds it hard to cover the wisdom literature with this overarching concept. It seems not to tie in as well as the other books with the theme of covenant promise. Gane, however, by seeing love as the unifying concept, comfortably takes in the wisdom literature since it centers around principles governing loving relationships.

principles of his law which express his moral nature. It is significant that verse 18 refers to the most basic principle of God's character and therefore of his law: love (cp. Exod 34:6-7; 1 Jn 4:8).

From God's love flow (1) his desire for intimacy with those whom he has created, (2) his plan for the well-being and restoration of human beings (Ps 103), and (3) God's law, i.e. all principles governing relationships between intelligent beings having free choice (cp. Mt 22:36-40; Rom 13:8), without love they destroy each other.⁵

The skeleton of the Bible is the covenant that God made with humanity—the promises inherent in the relationship between Creator and created beings. The entire Bible is about this relationship. Key theological points that we dogmatically try to nail down are simply specific elements of the whole. It takes the whole Bible to teach us the “big picture” of God's love and desire for loving relationships between Himself and us, and between us and our fellow beings.

THEOLOGICAL CENTER

According to Gane, the theological center of both the Old and the New Testaments, the element that unifies them, is God's character of love. In the Old Testament God described to Moses the essence of His character in Exodus 34:6-7. “Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin’” (NASB). In the New Testament, John refers to love as the essence of God's character in 1 John 4:8. “The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (NASB).

In Psalm 144:2 David refers to God as “my lovingkindness” [H2617 *Checed*]. According to “Lexical Aids to the Old Testament” there is division of scholarly thought as to whether or not “the passages [using this word] ascribe God's *checed* to His covenants or to His everlasting love. Love is a covenant word, and God is love (1 John

⁵ Roy Gane. *Love at the Heart of Old Testament Theology: Syllabus for OTST520 Theology of the Old Testament*, 1996. p. 5.

4:8, 16).”⁶ Dr. Gane seems to bring this division together when he maintains that covenant is a “legally binding relationship contracted between two people/parties” and that God’s covenant of love with humanity began at creation and covers His entire relationship to humanity. God’s everlasting love is the *basis* of His covenant.

LAW IS BASED ON LOVE

The Psalmist refers to God’s love as the reason for His saving forgiveness. “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him” (Psalm 103:10, 11, NASB). And in the New Testament, John shows that God’s love is the reason He sent His Son (John 3:16-18) through whom we are forgiven—“being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed” (Rom. 3:24-26, NASB).

The Old Testament law is based on love. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5, NASB).

“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:18, NASB). This concept of law being based on love was stated similarly by Jesus in the New Testament, recorded in John 13:34 and 15:12-17.

The apostle John, in 1 John 2:3-11 articulated it this way, combining *love*, *keeping the commandments*, and even the concept of *perfection* all in the same passage:

By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

⁶ Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, Lexical Aid to the Old Testament.

Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard.

On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.

The one who says he is in the Light and *yet* hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes (NASB).

SUBJECTIVE IMPLICATIONS

Gane describes the implications that God's objective, overarching covenant of love (albeit with various phases and reworkings throughout history) has on our subjective experience as humans.

The NT draws out and builds upon ideas expressed in the OT. The connection between God's holiness (Lev 19:2) and his love (Lev 19:18, which is an aspect of his holiness, indicates that sanctification, i.e. becoming holy, is accomplished by growth in holiness. This idea is strongly implied in Philipp 1:6, 9 [*For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. . . . And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment," NASB] and 1 Thess 3:12-13 ["and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also *do* for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints," NASB]. Growth in holiness = growth in love. The basic question is not "how do I keep the external requirements of the law," but "how do I become loving"?

How do I love when I have no love to give? How do I grow in love? By faith, by accepting Christ's sacrifice, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4-7; compare Jn 3:3-21; Acts 2:38), who changes our minds, attitudes, and characters by pouring into our hearts that element which is otherwise out of reach for sinful human beings: love (Rom 5:5).

Love is the basis of God's character (1 Jn 4:8), and therefore the basis of God's law, which expresses his character (Matt 22:36-40). Therefore, the gift of love from God, the source of all love, is a gift of obedience, i.e. living in harmony with God's law (cp. Rom 8:1-17, esp. vs. 4). *Obedience to God is a gift of grace!* We don't have to propel our spiritual lives under our own steam (having a sense of "self-steam"); "for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phillip 2:13). What excuse can there be for disobedience? Obedience is a gift, just as justification/forgiveness (Rom 3:24-26) and repentance (Acts 5:31) are gifts. All we do is to accept them!

The last paragraph demonstrates something highly significant: sanctification is by faith. We are sanctified as we grow in love and that can only happen by receiving love from the Holy Spirit by faith (Rom 5:5). Therefore, sanctification is by faith.⁷

Love being the central concept in the Bible, it relates to all the divergent views mentioned earlier, the roots of which I wish to understand: law, grace, justification, sanctification, and Christian perfection. Step by step, Gane's line of thought goes like this:

1. God does not simply have love. It is the essence of His being. "*The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love*" (1 John 4:8, NASB).
2. Because He loves, He gave His only Son. Love is not a theoretical concept that can be separated from action. God's character expresses itself through action. "*For God so loved*

⁷ Gane, p. 7.

the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NASB).

3. We are saved by this loving action of grace (giving His Son) through faith. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8,9, NASB).*

4. Genuine faith works through love. Without works of love, faith is dead (or it isn't faith at all and the salvation dynamic in three above isn't at work). *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love” (Gal 5:6, NASB). “If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless” (James 1:26, NASB).*

5. Therefore, love fulfills the Law, because love is the basis of the Law. *“Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8, NASB). “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.’” Matt 22:36-40, NASB).*

6. We are to be holy as God is holy—perfect as God is perfect (Gen 17:1; Matthew 5:43-48). *“Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. Lev 19:2, NASB)*

The rest of the chapter after this injunction is a series of laws governing relationship with God and mankind by love indicates that holiness here is in terms of holy character which works by love.

7. Therefore, Christian growth (toward perfection) is growth in love. This reinforces the Lev. 9 connection between holiness and love. Holiness is the sum of God's characteristics, and God is love, so by becoming more loving, we become more holy (grow toward perfection).

8. How do we come by this love that indicates that we are gaining perfection? The Holy Spirit pours it into our hearts. So love, the basis of obedience, is a gift of grace!

*“and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Rom. 5:5, NASB)*⁸

BOTH GRACE AND LAW BASED ON LOVE

“Notice the integration here between God’s grace and his Law. Both are based upon love. It is the integration between grace and Law which gives the Seventh-day Adventist message its distinctive power. But in order to get the message across to the world, we must integrate love and obedience in our lives. People should know us as loving, caring people who are grateful for God’s grace and concerned about the well-being of others. Our obedience to God will not seem so strange if it comes packaged in love!”⁹

Alden Thompson also discusses the relationship between law and grace in his book *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* But he does not take his explanation back quite as far as Gane does—to the very essence of God, and to creation—but he states that grace has always come before law, meaning the written articulated laws with which God has endeavored to show us Himself and what He wants for us. Thompson states:

God’s willingness to reveal his law is part of his gracious activity on our behalf. But since laws come in the imperative mode they can so easily get our backs up. We simply don’t like to be told to do something, even if it is for our own good. But as I have reflected on the way that God has dealt with human beings, I have discovered that he is quite aware of the nasty barbs that accompany law. If we will look at the larger picture of God’s gracious activity we can see just how sensitive he has been to our need. . . .

This beautiful aspect of God’s way with man can be summarized in the phrase: “grace before law.” Now that may sound strange to those of us who are accustomed to thinking of law as something which condemns,

⁸ Gane, p. 8.

⁹ Ibid.

something which must be followed by the good news of saving grace. In that way of thinking, law is, of course, bad news. Furthermore if that is the way I insist on looking at law and grace, I will never make peace with law; it will always rub me the wrong way. . . . When God comes to us, his first approach is not law, but grace. Before we ever do anything for him or even in response to him, grace is there as his free gift.¹⁰

Thompson cites the following verses for further clarification on the fact that law and grace both are based on love:

“For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. . . . For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10, NASB).

“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15, NASB).

“For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?” (Deut. 4:7, 8, NASB).

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2, NASB).

Often those most concerned about gaining Christian perfection are the first to lament when they sense that law and grace are not in balance. This concern, however gives a wrong impression of what grace and law really are and how they relate to one another. Any obedience to the law, or perfection, on our part all happens in the context of God’s grace and His covenant of love with us, His wanting to be in relationship with us. Any part of the law of God is a “spelling out” of what a relationship of love between us and God, and between us and our fellow humanity looks like. And all of this happens in an environment of grace—both God’s initial and on-going acts of love toward us.

¹⁰ Alden Thompson, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* Gonzalez Florida: Pacesetters Bible School, Inc., 1989. p. 68, 69.

Grace is not only provided to forgive our past sin and future failures, but it is also the empowering, administered by the Spirit, for us to will and to do of God's good pleasure—that we should become like Him. And, He is love.

We are justified, made right (perfect) with God by grace through faith. A quick look at Paul gives us a dynamic view of faith which actually consists of obedience: “[T]hrough whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5, NASB); “[B]ut now is manifested . . . according to the commandments of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations leading to obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:26, NASB).¹¹

Objective justification has been supplied for all, along with the lever called faith (which acts as obedience to the law of love) that we must activate to release the gift into our own lives. Subjectively, we must choose to activate the lever supplied to us freely in order to access our personal justification by grace as well as the grace power to continue abiding in Christ (John 15:4), growing consistently in love (the essence of God and His revelation of Himself in His law), being perfected as we grow.

Jesus said that, “[i]f anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned (John 15:6, NASB). So, the opposite of growing in perfection while abiding in Christ through faith (obedience), would be detaching from Him and withering up and dying.¹²

The commands (law) of God (the explanation of how love works) are themselves a gift of grace. Thompson states: “But given conditions in a distorted human environment, the external law is a gracious condescension to the needs of immature creatures. Just as uncultured and uncouth children need more overt and explicit directions in the schoolroom, so human beings need more specific instructions to compensate for

¹¹ Obedience of faith in the real world is also referred to by Martin Hanna as the axiology, or contextual aspect of righteousness by faith—the praxis.

¹² Tests to know whether we are dead or alive in Christ are delineated in John, according to Ivan Blazen in “Justification by Faith and Judgment According to Works,” BRI, 2006:

1. Believing and confessing Christ (chaps. 2:22; 4:2, 3, 15; 5:9-13).
2. Abiding in Christ (chaps. 2:24, 25, 28).
3. Keeping God's commandments (chaps. 2:3-5, 17; 3:21-24; 4:21, 5:2, 3).
4. Walking as Christ walked (chap. 2:6).
5. Doing the right and avoiding sin (chaps. 2:29; 3:6, 7, 10).
6. Loving one another (chaps. 2:7-11, 3:11-17; 4:7, 8, 11, 16, 17, 20, 21; 5:2, 3).
7. Not loving the world (chap. 2:15, 16).

their lack of maturity. We can illustrate this process of greater specification by means of a simple diagram, based largely on the implications of Romans 13:8-14 and Matt 22:36-40.

1 Command

Love

2 Commands

Love to God Love to Fellowman

10 Commands

Commands 1-4 (Decalogue) Commands 5-10

Many Commands

The additional commands in law and prophets which are
Applications of the 10, the 2, and the 1

He continues, “Given our difficulties in living comfortably with law, it is interesting to note the hints in both Testaments that God’s ideal would be to eliminate the imperative in favor of the indicative. The clearest statement of this ideal is found in the New Covenant promise in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Here God looks forward to the time when the law will be written in the heart and it will no longer be necessary for each man to command or teach his neighbor, for everyone will know the Lord. Thus in the mature experience the imperative has been entirely transposed into the indicative. No external code threatens to arouse the natural combativeness of the human heart, for the heart is in harmony with the divine will.¹³

The divine will, as we have noted above, is unselfish, unconditional love (OT *chesed* and NT *agape*) to God and one another.

PERFECTION BASED ON THE LAW OF LOVE

¹³ Alden Thompson, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Gonzalez, FL: Pacesetters Bible School, Inc., 1989), pp. 59, 60.

We've established that God's law is a transcript of His love. He has provided the gift of faith for us to take hold of the grace that empowers us to grow in that love ourselves. What, then does *perfection of character* mean in the light of this understanding of the law of love?

J. R. Zurcher has done an excellent job of outlining this in his small book, *What Inspiration Says About Christian Perfection*.

As noted earlier, both the Old and the New Testaments give the imperative to be *perfect*. In Gen. 17:1, is the record of the Lord appearing to Abram, declaring Himself and telling him to walk before Him and be perfect (H8549 *tamiym*). In Matthew 5:48 is also the injunction to be perfect (G5046 *teleios*).

“The real problem is not so much a matter of knowing whether perfection is possible or not as it is to determine how the Bible writers understood the word “perfect” and its derivatives.” Zurcher notes that “the original text of both testaments has about 800 appearances of the word ‘perfect,’ only 100 of which have been translated by using the word “perfect.”¹⁴ This would indicate that there is much more to the concept than “meets the eye” in English.

In Psalm 19:7 we are told that the “law of the Lord is *perfect*. Zurcher states that “[b]ecause the law of the Lord is perfect, it is indeed a law of love that governs the perfection of the relationships that should exist between human beings and God and between human beings themselves.”¹⁵ That, of course, sounds like a very similar concept to what we have learned from Gane and Thompson. This time the word *perfection* is explicitly added.

Zurcher believes that “to understand that God's perfection refers to His merciful relationships with His creation already constitutes an initial clarification of the biblical meaning of the concept of perfection. This relationship is the perfect expression of God's character, and it is in this particular sense that Jesus exhorted Christians to ‘be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matt. 5:48). . . . [H]uman perfection dwells not

¹⁴ J. R. Zurcher, *What Inspiration Has to Say About Christian Perfection*. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002), p. 17, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

within human nature, but in the substance of our relationship with God and with our neighbor.”¹⁶

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES OF *PERFECTION*

Noah is the first person for whom the adjective *perfect* (*tamim*) is used. Gen. 6:9 states that Noah was *perfect* in his generations. We know from later in Noah’s life that Noah had at least one fault that resulted in unhappy consequences in his relationships. Zurcher states that “Noah was *perfect* because his integrity toward God was total. In any case, these qualities do not concern Noah himself, his human nature, but rather the way he ‘walked with God.’”¹⁷

Abraham’s perfect faith, also referred to as *tamim*, began later in life than Noah’s but was also about his walk with God—from that point forward. It doesn’t take too much digging to realize that although God called him His friend, Abraham didn’t do everything “perfect”ly in our usual understanding of the word.

Job was also “perfect (*tamim*) and upright” (Job 1:1, KJV). Once again, according to Zurcher, “[t]hat does not mean at all that Job was without sin, any more than Noah or Abraham, although his friends were unable to accuse him of any fault whatsoever. Job himself did not claim to be righteous or innocent. On the contrary, as he himself said: ‘If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse’ (Job 9:20, KJV). . . . What then constitutes Job’s perfection? As with Noah and Abraham, it was his relationship with God, his integrity and uprightness before Him, his absolute confidence in God, and in particular, his steadfast faith toward Him of who he was to say after his trial: ‘My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you’” (Job 42:5, KJV).¹⁸

And then we come to David. David’s heart was *perfect* (H8003 *shalem*) with the Lord, even though his hands were too bloody to be allowed to build a temple for God. “God alone knows what a person is really like, what spiritual desires motivate him or her, such as sincerity, uprightness, integrity, a need for righteousness, a hunger for truth, and

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 24, 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

an absolute trust in God’s goodness.”¹⁹ These characteristics and David’s beautiful way of expressing these things for the benefit of others are the very reasons that he “stands out as a model of perfection despite his weaknesses and failures.”²⁰ And, when he was faced with his own sin “David’s repentance was perfect, just as was his submission to God’s judgment. His request for forgiveness and his confidence in God’s goodness were also both perfect.”²¹

One last flawed example of perfection comes to us from the Old Testament pages. King Asa’s heart was fully committed (*shalem*) to the Lord all of his life (1 Kings 15:11-14). His life, however, was not faultless either. According to Zurcher, “[t]he idea of perfection depicted here is relative. It can comprise intended perfection and desire to act for good and truth that does not always achieve its goal. Thus it can even lack something without causing the person involved to lose the praiseworthy title. . . . It is important, therefore, to emphasize that Scripture never describes perfection as consisting of a sinless nature.”²²

“The meaning of perfection therefore does not describe a natural state, but a manner of life in close relationship with God, and in a frame of mind that includes such characteristics as sincerity, uprightness, integrity, as well as all the other spiritual characteristics translators have thought necessary to capture the nuances contained in the original Hebrew words *tamim* and *shalem*.”²³

JESUS’ TEACHING ON *PERFECTION*

The Old Testament examples of *tamim* and *shalem* were about living in close relationship with God—of being in harmony with the first and greatest commandment. The teaching of the New Testament, in contrast, put most emphasis on the second great commandment which is “like unto it” —loving our neighbor as ourselves.

In the Gospels, the word *perfect* (*teleios*) is found three times and all in Matthew. “There it describes relationships with God and humanity.”²⁴ At the conclusion of Jesus

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 33.

²³ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 36, 37.

comments on the law (Matt 5:48) He gives the imperative statement that causes much misunderstanding to surface readers: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (NASB). However, Jesus was contrasting this with the legalistic manner in which the Pharisees kept the law, not exhorting us to be like them. Continually He referred His listeners to the fact that their *perfection* had to exceed keeping the letter of the law and actually be a matter of the heart, just as we have seen described in the Old Testament examples.

When Jesus' same command is recorded in Luke, the word *merciful* is used. These concepts do not in any way contradict one another, but are probably two different synonyms for the word *shalem* which Zurcher considers more than likely the word that Jesus actually used.²⁵

The story of the rich, young, ruler also sheds some light on the New Testament use of the concept of *perfection*. The young man wanted to know what he lacked (Matt 19:20). Jesus told him in verse 21 to go and sell all he had and follow Him, if he wanted to be complete (*teleios*). This young man already kept the letter of the law. If he had been living in the "last generation before Jesus comes" he might well have considered himself ready for the sealing. But Jesus knew that the young man's heart was not complete. As quoted earlier, "God alone knows what a person is really like, what spiritual desires motivate him or her, such as sincerity, uprightness, integrity, a need for righteousness, a hunger for truth, and an absolute trust in God's goodness."

"It is important to note that according to Jesus, perfection is not a static state, but a dynamic of love. The progression of the verbs used in his declaration [to the rich young ruler] proves it completely: 'If you want to be perfect, *go, sell* your possessions and *give* to the poor . . . Then *come, follow* me.'"²⁶

PAUL'S TEACHING ON *PERFECTION*

Paul presents the idea of *perfection* as a relative idea that relates to steps in growing up to spiritual maturity—the perfecting (G2677 *katartismos*) of the saints (Eph.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

4:12, KJV). He uses the word *perfect* (*teleios*) on several occasions to describe newly converted believers who hadn't had time to do much growing in spiritual maturity yet.

He calls the Philippian believers "perfect" (*teleios*) even though some of them did not yet agree with him on certain issues (Phil 3:15, KJV). He goes on to state that he does not consider himself to have obtained, or to be "perfect" (*teieloo*) (Phil 3:12). Paul is "confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will perfect (*epiteleo*) it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6, NASB).

The New Testament teaches that, for those desiring perfection, the first step is to be born again (John 3:3, 5, 7), becoming a new creature in Christ (Gal 6:5). A person is justified and thus "perfect," however "perfect" also is a matter of continuing to grow in Christ, "perfect" at each step. Paul wrote to the Corinthians saying, "Stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults (*teleios*)" (1 Cor. 14:20, KJV). "Our prayer is for your perfection (*katartisis*---indicates process in progress²⁷). . . . Be perfect (*katartizo*)" (2 Corinthians 13:9, 11.)

New Testament perfection is a matter of continuing to grow after being born again, all a gift of grace, accessed by the gift of (the obedience of) faith. Jesus summed up this growing metaphor when he said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NASB). The sap that keeps us growing on the vine is the Holy Spirit, and the fruit that we will bear as evidence of our continuing perfection are the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Gal. 5:22, 23, KJV). These are the fruits that make possible loving relationships with God and our fellow humanity—what the law of love is all about—the essence of God's character, the foundation of His covenant.

JOHN'S TEACHING ON *PERFECTION*

In John's teaching on perfection it is imperative to understand the difference between *sin* and *sins*. The word *sin* describes "the power of sin" that makes human beings slaves to sin. "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed," (Rom

²⁷ Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, Lexical Aid to the New Testament.

6:17, NASB). This is a power within the human nature that impels humanity to commit sinful acts. These acts are sins. Through the power of the Spirit, it is possible to resist the temptation to commit sins. But the power of inborn sin in the human nature will be with humanity forever. “So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. . . . but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (Rom. 6:23, 24, NASB).

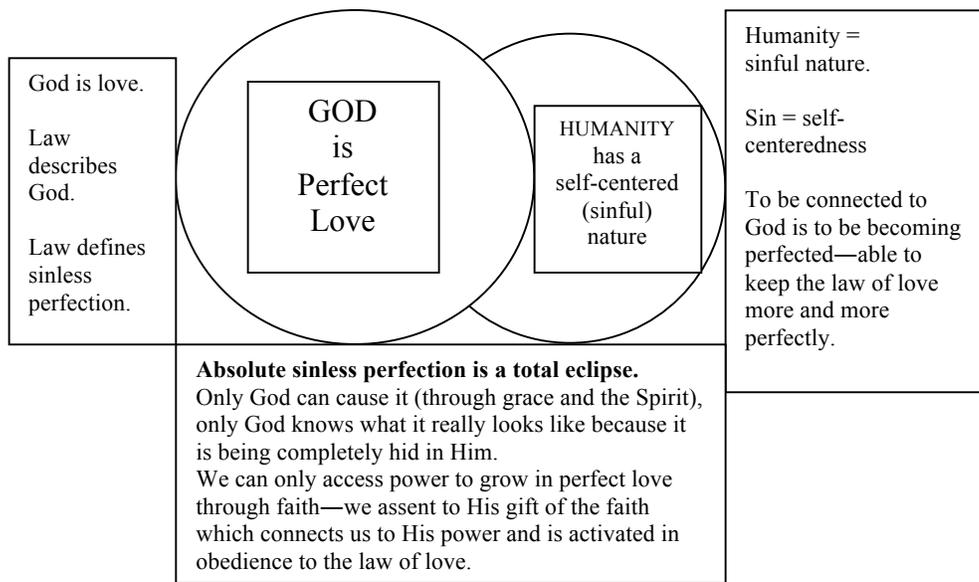
Because sincere Christians often don’t understand this differentiation, they are prone to fall into “perfectionism” that isn’t founded on Scripture.

At first glance it can seem as if John is stating that perfection requires a sinless life. In 1 John 3:4-6 he states that “[e]veryone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that He appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in Him is no sin. Whosoever abides in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.” In verses 9 and 10 and 1 John 5:18 he makes even more pointed statements. However, the same epistle also states what can seem like the opposite position. Among other things, he states, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. . . . If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives: (1 John 1:8-10, KJV). But with careful study one realizes that John makes a distinction between humanity’s sinful nature and the attitude of the child of God toward sin.

Zurcher points out that “[t]he distinction that John thus recognized between the attitude of the Christian who no longer wanted to sin and the reality of a sinless life, Paul also makes between relative perfection of the ‘perfect’ ones and the absolute perfection that is yet to come.”²⁸ The fact that we are sinners should not keep us from reaching toward perfection. John also makes clear in his writing the connection between love, law and perfection. He states that “if we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12, KJV). Just as God’s perfection is evident in His grace and mercy toward humanity, so our love for God and our neighbors is the visible sign of our growth in perfection.

²⁸ Zurcher, p. 59.

HOW IT COMES TOGETHER



THE ELLIPSE OF TRUTH

In the book *Messenger of the Lord*, Herbert E. Douglass includes an appendix describing how truth, in any area of thought, should be defined by an ellipse rather than a circle. Truth, he says, has a subjective and an objective part, which are the two foci in the ellipse. When anyone defines truth as only the one circle, he or she will inevitably be arguing against those who define truth as the other circle.

Biblical (theological truth), Douglass maintains, combines the objective circle of transcendence (God's revelation of Himself which in this paper we have defined as perfect love), and the subjective circle of immanence²⁹ (the human response to God and

²⁹ Herbert E. Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, on-line at www.whiteestate.org, Appendix P.

His law of love—namely, humanity’s accepting the love action of grace and growing more and more into God’s likeness of perfect love).

So, the truth about human perfection binds together the objective will of God, which is our transformation into His likeness of love, and our subjective response of obedience through faith and continual growth in the capacity to love Him and each other. God’s loving grace begins to perfect (transform) our selfish (sinful) human natures as we comply with that transforming grace through faith (which we have already noted that Paul refers to as obedience in Rom 1:5 and 16:26,³⁰ this also being a gift from Him through which we access the power of His grace).

Ivan Blazen discusses this concept using the visual image of two pillars rather than the two points on an ellipse. He bases this conception on Romans 3:1-8. “First, God is faithful, that is, He keeps His promises to human beings, even though they have broken their promises to Him (verses 1-4). Second, there is no excuse in God’s faithfulness for human sin, no encouragement to its continuance (verses 5-8). These two points may seem to be in tension with each other, but for Paul they exist in unity and must be said together.” Blazen sees these two pillars being God’s justification (considering us perfect) of the ungodly by faith, and judgment according to works³¹ (the works of love according to the law of love which we should be growing in our ability to keep [do]).

Jesus himself, recorded in Matthew 25:31-46, described the judgment as an evaluation of the works of love that His followers have been actively involved in. Those who have fed the hungry, given water to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison—in other words, filled their lives with selfless acts of love are ready (perfect) for life in His eternal kingdom. Those who have neglected these acts of love are not, no matter how many other acts of piety (or trying to be perfect) they have performed.

Leroy Moore, in *Questions on Doctrine Revisited!* makes these connections among love, law, and perfection even more specifically apply to the doctrinal issues with which I started this paper. In his introduction to this book, George Knight also talks about the “poles of truth.” He states, “each party in a debate needs to integrate the correct ideas held by the opposition with the truths it has been defending. Only when both poles of

³⁰ Ivan Blazen, “Justification by Faith and Judgment According to Works,” (BRI, 2006) p. 6.

³¹ Ibid., p. 2.

truth are united can people hope to arrive at the closest approximation of God's truth and will."³²

In his chapters on the concept of "Final Generation Perfection," Moore claims that "[t]he key to Day of Atonement perfection is not a supreme attempt to become sinless, but a focus on Christ and surrender to Him, leading to at-one-ment with God, as revealed in love for and unity with each other."³³ He goes on to explain that sin involves a choice to separate from the source of love, therefore, behavior is not itself the problem but evidence of separation from the source of righteousness (perfection), without which we cannot truly obey. Adam's problem was not simply that he sinned, but that sin changed his instincts to focus on himself, leaving all his affections self-centered with no natural capacity for true love. Sin, then, was not primarily disobedient acts, but self-centeredness that is the root of pride, selfishness, and a plethora of other sinful behavior.³⁴

God wants to, and is able to keep us from sinning (see Jude 24), but He can only do that as we keep focused on (connected to) His perfection (love), rather than on ourselves and our attempts to become perfect (keep the letter of the law). "He is our perfection from the moment we receive Him until the end. But only as we focus upon Him can we receive that perfection by absorbing His love, which alone provides the motivation for true obedience."³⁵

"To focus on overcoming sin is to focus on our sinful selves, not upon the Sinless One."³⁶

"We are considered perfect at every step so long as we remain connected with Him by faith in *His* righteousness [absolute perfection] not our own. Indeed, to *claim* His righteousness [perfection] we must *disclaim* our own.

"Yes we are to seek perfection, not simply claim it; yet never as the basis of salvation or of security, but to glorify Him by revealing His character."³⁷

³² Moore, p. 7.

³³ Moore, p. 258.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

Ellen White has much to say about perfection, but as with Scripture, the biggest picture must be considered before the individual quotations are used to debate with one another. However, in general “Ellen White’s focus is not so much on individual perfection as that of the church . . . And we are challenged to overcome on ever deeper levels by seeking that divine love that alone can give victory over our instinctive pride and selfishness, sins that underlie every other. . . . [H]ow we treat those who oppose us is the measure of our perfection.”³⁸

“To grasp Ellen White’s final generation perfection we must see ‘Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church’ (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, 69) in light of her concluding comments in the same book:

At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known . . . The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is *a revelation of His character of love*. . . . In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 415-416, emphasis mine).³⁹

Hopefully, before too much more time passes, God’s Adventist children will step back far enough, or look high enough to see the big picture that brings their theological differences into focus, particularly in the area of how to live as Christ would have us live so that we can glorify Him and vindicate His character of love and grace and experience the unity in love that Jesus prayed for in John 17.

As Moore states, “Unless we approach perfection from principles of love in the two tables of the law, we instinctively identify our conflict over truth as the other’s problem, thus failing to see that God permits differences to draw us together in earnest prayer for light and truth as we listen thoughtfully, each submitting to the test of Scriptural truth.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., p. 269.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 261.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 270.

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