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THE GOSPEL COALITION

EDITORIAL

Perfectionisms

— D. A. Carson —

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Most readers of *Themelios* will be aware that the word “perfectionism” is commonly attached in theological circles to one subset of the Wesleyan tradition. As far as I can tell, the numbers who defend such perfectionism today are rather depleted. They hold that progressive sanctification is not only desirable and attainable but, borne along by grace, can result in a life of sinlessness here and now: we do not have to wait for the glorification that all God’s redeemed people will enjoy at the *parousia*. A century ago the movement was often an extrapolation of Keswick theology, then in its heyday—a movement distinguishable from Keswick theology by its claim to attain a rather higher “higher life” than most within the Keswick fold thought they could achieve.

It is easy to imagine that everyone in the perfectionist camp is a self-righteous and pompous hypocrite, easily dismissed as a fool whose folly is all the more ludicrous for being laced with self-deception. Doubtless some self-designated perfectionists are like that, but most of the rather small number of perfectionists I have known are earnest, disciplined, focused Christians, rather more given to work and serenity than to joy. Certainly it is less discouraging to talk about Christian matters with perfectionists than with those who claim to be Christians but who rarely display any interest in holiness. In any case, the most comprehensive treatment of perfectionism, essentially unanswerable, is the large volume by B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, published in several formats (my copy was published by Presbyterian and Reformed in 1974).

There were species of perfectionism before Wesley, of course. Some connect the doctrine of entire sanctification with *theosis*; some tie it to various strands of the complicated and largely Roman Catholic history of “spirituality.” Moreover, there are uses of “perfectionism” in two other disciplines, viz. philosophy (going back to the classical period of Greek thought) and, in the more recent post-Wesley—indeed post-theology—world, the discipline of psychology. During the last three centuries of *Christian* discourse, however, the connection of perfectionism with one strand of the Wesleyan tradition is inescapable.

Yet I suspect that there is another species of theological perfectionism (though it is never so labeled) that owes no connection to Keswick or Wesley. Perhaps I can approach it tangentially. More than ten years ago a gifted pastor I know told me that at the age of fifty or so he was contemplating leaving pastoral ministry. Perhaps he would serve as an administrator in some sort of Christian agency. When I probed, I discovered that his reasoning had little to do with typical burnout, still less with a secretly nurtured sin that was getting the best of him, and certainly not with any disillusionment with the gospel or with the primacy of the local church. His problem, rather, was that he set extraordinarily high standards for himself in sermon preparation. Each of his sermons was a hermeneutical and homiletical

gem. Anyone who knows anything about preaching could imagine how much time this pastor devoted to sermon preparation. Yet as his ministry increased, as legitimate demands on his time multiplied, he found himself frustrated because he could not maintain the standards he had set himself. I told him that most of us would rather that he continue for twenty more years at eighty percent of his capacity than for six months at a hundred percent of his capacity.

One might dismiss this pastor's self-perceived problem as a species of idolatry: his ego was bound up with his work. Probably an element of self had crept into his assessments, but let us, for charity's sake, suppose that in his own mind he was trying to offer up his very best to the Master. Certainly he held to a very high sense of what preaching should be, and he felt it was dishonoring to Christ to offer him shoddy work.

Now transfer the perceived burden of this pastor to a more generalized case. Occasionally one finds Christians, pastors, and theological students among them, who are afflicted with a similar species of discouragement. They are genuinely Christ-centered. They have a great grasp of the gospel and delight to share it. They are disciplined in prayer and service. On excellent theological grounds, they know that perfection awaits final glorification; but on equally excellent theological grounds, *they know that every single sin to which a Christian falls prey is without excuse*. Precisely because their consciences are sensitive, they are often ashamed by their own failures—the secret resentment that slips in, the unguarded word, the wandering eye, the pride of life, the self-focus that really does preclude loving one's neighbor as oneself. To other believers who watch them, they are among the most intense, disciplined, and holy believers we know; to themselves, they are virulent failures, inconsistent followers, mere Peters who regularly betray their Master and weep bitterly.

Part of this pastoral dilemma can be thought of as a species of over-realized eschatology—not the over-realized eschatology Paul confronts in 1 Cor 4 that leads to pride nor the puerile over-realized eschatology of the health, wealth, and prosperity gurus, but a slightly different kind. It is the kind that knows glorification still lies in the future, but also knows that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, that Christians have been not only justified but powerfully regenerated, that the Spirit has been poured out upon us, that sin no longer has dominion over us, making every sin a damnable failure, utterly without excuse. Doctrinally, therefore, these believers know that perfection still lies over the horizon; experientially, precisely because they know the kingdom has been inaugurated, they can sink into bleak despair as they confront their own sins. It is not that, objectively speaking, they are worse than other Christians. Far from it: these are among the finest Christians I know. Those who criticize them have rarely thought as long and hard about sin and how to overcome it as these brothers and sisters have. They remain so uncomfortable with their wrestlings because they know they *ought* to be better.

Perhaps it is unwise to suggest that their problem should be thought of as a kind of perfectionism. Certainly it is not the perfectionism in some strands of the Wesleyan tradition, in which entire sanctification is judged to be attainable. Rather, this unhappiness, sometimes descending to despair, is the fruit of frustration that perfection is *not* achievable. Yet it springs not from generalized aspirations for utopia, but from biblical declarations of the power of the gospel placed alongside our own shortcomings. It springs from the conviction that, granted the power of the gospel, perfection ought to be a lot more attainable than it is.

It springs, in short, from panting after perfection; it is another kind of perfectionism. Immediately one must say that pursuit of perfection is at many levels a good thing, a needed thing, plausible evidence that the gospel is at work in our lives. Many is the mature Christian who is acutely aware of the ongoing

struggle with sin, yet who avoids the disabling despair of the few. Indeed, it has often been noted that the godliest of Christians are characteristically most aware of their sin, yet equally aware of the limitless measure of God's love for them in Christ Jesus. What is it, then, that makes the pursuit of God and of holiness the characteristic mark of many disciples yet so utterly debilitating for some intense and devout followers of Jesus?

At least two factors are in play.

First, the Bible itself speaks to this issue in various ways, and some of those ways are cast as stark antitheses. In apocalyptic literature, for example, there are faithful followers of Christ, and there are diabolical opponents. People wear either the mark of the beast or the sign of Christ; there is nothing in between. Similarly in wisdom literature: one follows Dame Folly or Lady Wisdom, but not both. That is why a wisdom psalm like Ps 1 casts the choice in absolute antithesis: *either* one does *not* walk in the counsel of the ungodly, stand in the path of sinners, and sit in the seat of mockers, while delighting in the law of the Lord day and night and meditating on it, finding one's life before God is like a well-watered fruit-bearing tree, *or* the wicked are simply "not so." The Lord recognizes and owns one path, while the other perishes. There is nothing in between. The Lord Jesus can preach in many different styles, but included among them is wisdom polarity: reflect on the antitheses at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. On the other hand, over against such antithetical presentations of holiness and sin, of faithfulness and unbelief, are the many narrative portions of the Bible where God's people are depicted with all their inconsistencies, their times of spectacular faithfulness and their ugliest warts. Abraham the friend of God repeatedly tells half truths; Moses the meekest man loses his temper and consequently does not get into the promised land; David the man after God's own heart commits adultery and murder; Peter the *primus inter pares*, the confessor of Caesarea Philippi and the preacher of Pentecost, acts and speaks with such little understanding that he earns a rebuke from Jesus and another from Paul. In such narratives there is no trace of the moral polarities of apocalyptic and of wisdom. There is instead an utterly frank depiction of the moral compromises that make up the lives of even the "heroes" of Scripture. In short, *the Bible itself* includes genres and passages that foster absolutist thinking and others that warn us to recognize how flawed and inconsistent are even those we recognize as the fathers of the faithful. Certainly we need both species of biblical literature, and most Christians see a sign of God's kindness in the Bible that provides us with both. The narratives without the absolutes might seem to sanction moral indifference: "If even a man after God's own heart like David can fall so disastrously, it cannot be too surprising if we lesser mortals tumble from time to time." The absolutes without the narratives might either generate despair ("Who can live up to the impossibly high standards of Ps 1?") or produce self-righteous fools ("It's a good thing the Bible has standards, and I have to say I thank God I am not as other people are."). We need the unflinching standards of the absolute polarities to keep us from moral flabbiness, and in this broken world, we need the candid realism of the narratives to keep us from both arrogance and despair. Most of us, I suspect, muddle along with a merely intuitive sense of how these twin biblical heritages ought to shape our lives.

The *second* factor is how we attach the cross of Christ to all this. The intensity of the struggle against sin easily generates boundless distortions when we do not return, again and again, to God's love for us manifested in the cross. There alone is the hope we need, the cleansing we need, the grace we need. Any pursuit of perfection that is not awash in the grace of God displayed on a little hill outside Jerusalem is bound to trip us up.