

ILLINOIS LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

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There are individuals who profess they are Christians and claim they do not sin but rather lead a pure life of complete holiness. Therefore, in this month's Topical Bulletin the questions to be considered in view of the Holy Bible are: ***What is the doctrine known as perfectionism? Is perfectionism a doctrine supported by Holy Scripture?***

Perfectionism is that doctrine which holds that freedom from all sin is possible in this life; that is, once one becomes a true Christian one no longer sins in thoughts, words, or deeds, and one's original sin has been eradicated. Perfectionism teaches that complete sanctification of life is attainable in this present evil world.

Perfectionism is taught by Roman Catholicism, Unitarians, Arminians, Mormons, Methodists, the Salvation Army, and others. For example, the Roman Catholic decree of Trent uses particularly this argument: "The baptized have been made the beloved of God. Therefore God does not hate anything in the regenerate, but they are innocent, spotless, pure, harmless. And consequently the concupiscence which remains in the regenerate does not have the nature of sin." [From the Examination of the Council of Trent, Part 1, Martin Chemnitz; section V, pg. 356, Concordia Publishing House] "The Mormon doctrine of salvation involves not only faith in Christ, but baptism by immersion, obedience to the teaching of the Mormon Church, good works, and keeping the commandments of God (which) will cleanse away the stain of sin." [Journal of Discourses, vol. 2, pg.4, as quoted in The Kingdom of the Cults, pg. 216, Walter Martin, Bethany House Publishers] The Methodist Wesley declared: "I believe a person filled with love of God is still liable to involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you call sins if you please; I do not." [Wesley, as quoted in Strong, Systematic Theology, pg. 878; as quoted in Christian Dogmatics, J. T. Mueller, pg. 399, Concordia Publishing House]

The Holy Bible is quite clear in defining exactly what sin is:

"Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. [And] whatsoever is not of faith is sin." (1 John 3:4; Romans 14:23 KJV) Note well that Holy Scripture plainly informs us that ANY TRANSGRESSION OF GOD'S HOLY LAW IS SIN; and, ANY THOUGHT, WORD, OR DEED THAT IS NOT A FRUIT OF FAITH IN CHRIST IS SIN. Therefore, ONLY a Christian can do a work that is good in God's sight; and, such good works of Christians are only good in God's sight because they are cleansed of their imperfections by Christ Jesus whose perfect righteousness is imputed to the believer. Yes, in themselves, even the believer's best and finest works are still sin since Isaiah 64:6 relates: "we are all as an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." Nevertheless, because of the believer's faith in Jesus Christ, his or her works done in accord with God's Word are "spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." (1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 11:6 KJV)

Those who teach perfectionism appeal to certain Scripture passages which they take out of context or fail to look at carefully. For instance, perfectionists quote 1 John 3:9, which says, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” However, perfectionists fail to observe the double emphasis supplied by the twice-used phrase, *born of God*— that very phrase emphasizing the fact that the Christian according to his new-man, his regenerate self, *doth not commit sin*. Furthermore, the Christian does not *commit sin*, does not deliberately and wilfully sin, since *God’s seed remaineth in him*, that is, the Holy Spirit and His Word dwells in the Christian. Nevertheless, the Christian still has original sin, and according to the Christian’s old Adam, the Christian’s sinful flesh, he or she still falls into sin daily, for 1 John 1:8-10 states: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” Additionally, Jesus teaches His followers to pray: “And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.” (Luke 11:4 KJV) If Christians actually no longer sinned in any manner, and no longer had original sin, Jesus would not have taught us to continue to ask for forgiveness!

Perfectionists also quote Philippians 3:15, which says, “Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.” The perfectionists fail to note the previous verse in which the Apostle Paul writes: “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:14 KJV) Thus, the Christian presses toward perfection in sanctification of life while already possessing perfect justification by faith in Jesus Christ, being declared perfectly righteous by God for Jesus’ sake.

Those holding to perfectionism teach that since Jesus commands perfection one must be able to attain perfection of life and cease sinning while dwelling in this world, for Jesus says: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48 KJV) Looking at Matthew 5:48 in the original Greek it is important to observe that it is NOT a command Jesus gives since the Greek verb εσθε (translated in English as “Be”) is NOT in the imperative mode but in the indicative mode of speech— the indicative mode stating a condition as fact. Now, to dwell in a state of perfection requires that sinful human beings be clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ, which is only personally received by grace through faith in Him without the deeds of the Law, “Even the righteousness of God *which is* by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth *to be* a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” (Romans 3:22-28 KJV) Take it to heart that sanctification of life follows justification by God-given faith, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10 KJV)

So, sanctification of life is an ongoing process for the Christian throughout his or her time in this

world. Sanctification of life occurs only when the believer by daily sincere repentance and faith humbly begs God to forgive his or her many sins of thought, word, and deed for Jesus' sake; and then, in the strength of his or her God-given faith, the believer renews the fight against temptations and sin while striving after holiness. Yes, life in this world is a daily battle for every true Christian— a fight against his or her sinful flesh, the world, and the devil. It is as the Apostle Paul describes in the following words given by inspiration of God: “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. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? 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.” (Romans 7:14-25 KJV)

Accordingly, the Lutheran Confessions rightly remark: “Since we receive in this life only the first-fruits of the Spirit, and the new birth is not complete, but only begun in us, the combat and struggle of the flesh against the spirit remains even in the elect and truly regenerate men; for there is a great difference perceptible among Christians not only in this, that one is weak and another strong in the spirit, but each Christian, moreover, experiences in himself that at one time he is joyful in spirit, and at another fearful and alarmed; at one time ardent in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another cold and weak.” [Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, II, 68]

“We reject... Also, that man, after he has been born again, can perfectly observe and completely fulfil God's Law, and that this fulfilling is our righteousness before God, by which we merit eternal life.” [Formula of Concord, Epitome, II, of the Free Will, 12]

Realize that it's dangerous to hold to the doctrine of perfectionism since saving faith can only dwell in a contrite heart which by daily repentance and faith lays hold on Christ and His merits to cover sin and again receive forgiveness. The true believer never denies his or her sinfulness (both original sin and actual sin) but always confesses sin and turns again and again from sin to the Savior, Jesus Christ. Consider the example of David the sweet psalmist of Israel, who writes: “Blessed *is he whose* transgression *is* forgiven, *whose* sin *is* covered. Blessed *is* the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit *there is* no guile. When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah.” (Psalm 32:1-5 KJV) Perfectionists are like the self-righteous Pharisee rather than the penitent publican: “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men *are*, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as *his* eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man

went down to his house justified *rather* than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” (Luke 18:11-14 KJV)

Be sure to remember that our inability to perfectly keep God’s Law is not to be used as an excuse not to strive to live life to the glory of God in holiness, for Romans 6:1-6 states: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also *in the likeness of his* resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.”

Therefore, in gratefulness to God for His grace and mercy shown to us in Christ Jesus, let us daily and sincerely repent of our sins; let us keep our full trust and confidence in Christ Jesus as our personal Savior and Lord; and, let us strive to live in full accord with God’s Word, honoring our Lord with our lips and life in thankfulness for the forgiveness of sins and salvation He provides without any merit or worthiness in us.

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