

## Perfection: Con and Pro

The idea of Perfection, always a challenge to man in the fields of art and technology, has had a fashion of asserting itself periodically in the areas of religion and ethics. The past decade has witnessed a recurrence of interest in the idea, particularly in the realm of theology. There has been, in particular, an awakening of concern for the meaning of the theology of John Wesley at this point. It may be helpful, therefore, to assess some of the trends of the day which bear, negatively or affirmatively, upon this topic, with special reference to the light which this may shed upon a constructive emphasis upon the question in theological education.

The historic tension between Reformed theology and the theology of Wesley is, of course, projected into the contemporary scene. This is observable at two levels: first in the attitude of orthodox Calvinism toward Perfectionism, which it views as part of a much-feared Arminianism; and the second in the attitude of the Crisis Theologians. We will note these in order.

Anyone who has investigated the subject will realize that part of the tension between Calvinism and Wesleyanism at this point is a projection of personal failures of individuals as they sought to tread the "Path to Perfection." In some cases, these failures were attributed in considerable part to the foibles and failures of professing perfectionists. Certainly some Wesleyans have been unwise and extravagant in their mode of expression, no less than they have sometimes been inconsistent in practice. Now, the argument *ad hominem* against a doctrine is by no means the strongest or most convincing. Yet since we are made as we are, it is difficult to separate a teaching from the personalities of those embracing it.

There is, as well, an area of tension between Reformed theology and Wesleyanism which results from a misunderstanding

of meanings. As both Sangster and Flew have observed, the definition of the term 'sin' has stood between the adherents of these opposed theologies. Probably there has been a lack of patience on both sides. At the same time, the last word has not been said with respect to the definitions of such terms as: sin, righteousness, and (even) perfection.

One would be superficial, however, to hold that the differences between Calvinism and Wesleyanism at this point are mere differences in terminology. Even a casual study of Reformed theology will reveal that the system rests upon an acceptance of a limited atonement. This limitation is, to be sure, discussed chiefly with reference to its lateral spread, issuing in the teaching of an unconditional election of some and an equally unconditional reprobation of others. It ought to be noted, however, that the limited efficacy of the atonement *in depth* is an inherent part of Calvinism. The *Institutes* contain a great deal which admits only of interpretation in terms of anti-perfectionism.

This does not mean that many Calvinists are not appreciative of the values of perfection in Christian practice, nor that many do not strive with vigor after a life which is consistent, and in which the margin between purpose and practice is narrowed as much as possible. Many who would feel that a profession of perfection would lead to unbearable pride (and hence torpedo the very thing which it professes to love) are yet hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Many such are also possessed of deep ethical sensitivities. One gets the feeling at times that many adherents of Reformed theology live far in advance of the strict logic of their belief. Be this as it may, who can fail to appreciate those who endeavor, in the fear of God, to objectify in conduct a reverent and deep purposiveness at the point of the known divine will?

The Dialectical Theology seems, superficially at least, to bring into modern theology much of the content of the Reformed position. This does not mean that either Calvinists or Neosupernaturalists are happy with the statement that the theology of crisis is neo-Calvinism. Certainly the differences between the two are profound, particularly with reference to their respective views of Christian Revelation. While the two systems are united in their opposition to the Wesleyan teaching of Christian Perfection, one must take note at the outset that their objections grow out of somewhat different principles.

While Calvinism feels that even the elect must live in some uncertainty with respect to their salvation, and that to possess such a type of inner persuasion of salvation as a profession of even a relative perfection would imply amounts to presumption, Crisis Theology objects that Christian Perfection is impossible from the point of view of the essential nature of human life. While profound differences exist between Barth and Brunner on the one hand, and between the Continental adherents of the Dialectical Theology and the American exponents of it on the other, there is broad-gauge agreement throughout the loosely-knit group known rather popularly as Neo-Orthodox theologians at the point of the broken quality of all human life. This implies, so the teaching goes, that all finite existence is compounded of tension (perhaps better, dialectic). Our experience is problematic and fragmentary. Hence, any profession of even relative perfection would be completely unrealistic, growing out of naïveté, or more likely out of *pride*.

Now, none who have felt the pulse of contemporary Europe, or even of the brittle cynicism of much of American thought, can fail to feel the impact of the argument that man's life is shot through with contradictions. Nor is the pessimism of our time, overlaid as it is with a veneer of synthetic cheerfulness, merely the result of man's lost grip upon himself. There is a profound realism in the present overtone of the tragic quality of human life. However, it may be asked whether the

fragmentary quality of our finite existence precludes a relationship with God through grace in which the inward moral division of the individual may be united, and in which polarity which is native to man may not be resolved.

To answer this question would require a volume or possibly volumes. The position to which this writer is hospitable is, that while there is much of tension and polarity in human life, that there is available to the sincere Christian an inward and gracious purification, through which the condition of the split and forked will may be rectified, and by virtue of which he possesses a heart free to love God completely, and—does it seem rash to say it?—his neighbor as himself. And it ought to be recognized by those who are sympathetic to this view, that they may expect neither aid nor comfort from the "theology of tension" with its insistence upon a thorough-going schism in the whole of human experience.

Perhaps too much time has been spent upon the currents in contemporary thought which are inhospitable to the teaching of Christian Perfection. On the other side, it can be said that even in circles which would, by virtue of weakened views of Biblical authority, not normally be greatly interested in such matters as justification by faith, the witness of the Spirit, or the doctrine of sanctification, there is a growing sensitiveness to the qualities of life and character which have been historically associated with Evangelical perfectionism. The writer has known humanists who had a keen appreciation for those who sought to tread the Path to Perfection—an appreciation which was not dimmed by the vast differences between orthodox Wesleyanism and their own beliefs.

Doubtless many have found a great deal of the contemporary talk about *Values* to be somewhat dry and pointless. Certainly there are few better ways by which a young minister may put his congregation to sleep than by the means of sermons upon the "Objectivity *vs.* Subjectivity of Values," and the like. At the same time, it is significant that even in philosophical circles which are poles away from the positions

of historical Christianity, there is a growing awareness of the validity of the qualities of character for which Perfectionism has contended, and a growing appreciation of those who make these qualities the object of sincere and earnest quest.

Whereas a dozen years ago, many such circles felt that ethical perfection was a danger to man, and that it tended to set man against man by a stupid and private claim to possession of the absolute good, today there is an increasing revolt against moral relativism. This takes the form of an earnest attempt to distinguish between absolute and relative perfection, and in many cases of an unashamed quest for a moral holiness which is appropriate to man. This writer feels that a trend in this direction is discernible, even in the most unexpected places.

Those who are committed to the Wesleyan message, with its focal interest in Christian Perfection must, of course, be reconciled to the fact that at times they must walk relatively alone in the fields of both theology and philosophy. In this they will feel at home with the great Fellowship of the Saints as it has existed through the centuries. They will neither waver because of the number of those against them, nor settle into complacency because of the allies which the times may bring them. They may with profit, however, assess the forces which are both for and against the maintenance of the ideal of Perfection. Wisdom will dictate that they recognize the opportunity which favorable trends may afford them to "spread Scriptural Holiness in these lands."

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