

The Perfection Concept in the Epistle To the Hebrews *

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of perfection has long intrigued the moral philosopher as well as the theologian. Plato's ethics envisaged the final attainment by man of moral perfection through *eros*. Immanuel Kant's postulate of immortality was based on the idea that moral value is potentially complete. Some of our contemporaries, for instance, Wilbur Marshall Urban, stress a teleological ethics that contemplates completeness in full self-realization.

Perhaps the moral theorist generally has thought beyond his own time, but he has also rendered a practical service for his time. Though the practical interests of politics and economics, for instance, often try to ignore moral requirements, the ethical thinker is generally on hand to show that eventually they must find that any security they have is a moral security.

Recently science seems to have shocked most of the thinking world into a realization that humanity's problem today is essentially a moral problem. Perhaps it is not rash to infer, therefore, that the confusion of our post-war world is primarily a moral confusion. If this is true what can Bible instructors do to help correct this situation?

They can do what many of them are doing. They can help an otherwise literate world turn again to the Scriptures with eyes to see and ears to hear

the great moral pronouncements and to understand the moral provisions found particularly in the ancient prophets and in the New Testament. The Bible is always contemporary; therefore, the present study approaches the Epistle to the Hebrews in the confidence that a message for our day may be found.

In 1889 Brooke Foss Westcott opened the preface to his commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews with the statement: "Every student of the Epistle to the Hebrews must feel that it deals in a peculiar degree with the thoughts and trials of our own time."¹ Three years later he concluded the preface to his second edition with the observation: "The more I study the tendencies of the time in some of the busiest centres of English life, the more deeply I feel that the Spirit of God warns us of our most urgent civil and spiritual dangers through the prophecies of Jeremiah and the Epistle to the Hebrews. May our Nation and our Church be enabled to learn the lessons which they teach while there is still time to use them."²

Was Westcott's hope fulfilled? Apparently not. Within twenty years World War I broke and subsequent events are familiar to us all.

McNicol, writing of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the *Biblical Review* for October, 1930, on the eve of the recent world conflict, declares, "The message of this unknown, but clear-

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¹ Westcott, Brooke Foss: *The Epistle To The Hebrews*, p. v.

² *Ibid.*, p. x.

sighted, first century leader was never more needed than it is today."

The present study foregoes treatment of many interesting and rewarding topics and concerns itself with a somewhat neglected emphasis in the epistle, viz., the concept of perfection and its ethical implications.

THE IDEA OF *teleiosis*

Mr. Westcott suggests that "The idea of *teleiosis*, consummation, bringing to perfection, is characteristic of the Epistle."³ Christians have often if not generally faltered at the thought of perfection. It is awe-inspiring, as awe-inspiring as the atomic bomb. Perhaps it even more real and more weighted with significance.

In the epistle the Greek word *teleios*, ordinarily translated perfect or perfection, appears in one form or another sixteen times. The whole family of words connected with *teleios* is found here: *teleios* (5:14, 9:11), *teleiotes* (6:1, elsewhere only in Col. 3:14), *teleioun* referring to Christ (2:10; 5:9; 7:28) and to men (10:14; 11:40; 12:23).

The noun *teleiotes* is quite common in classical Greek. According to the Liddell and Scott lexicon it "means having reached its end, finished, complete. . . . It is used in reference to animals as full-grown, to persons as complete or accomplished." Thayer says it means "brought to its end, finished, wanting nothing necessary to completeness; perfect."

In the epistle the idea is related particularly to Christ and to his followers. First, he himself is "perfected" as indicated in the three passages, 2:10; 5:9; and 7:28. Second, he "perfects" others, noted in three more special passages, 10:14; 11:39, 40; 12:23. The writer also seeks to show that whereas man should be perfect (5:14; 6:1) he could not become so under the

Old Covenant provisions (7:11,19; 9:9; 10:1).

Space here permits only a summary of a rather extended investigation of these various passages. The whole argument leads to the conclusion that:

(1) In spite of sin God's purpose and plan for man's moral perfection is ultimately and effectively achieved through Christ as Redeemer.

(2) The writer also holds that in order for Christ to become the Saviour He must follow the tedious and painful process of encountering and overcoming sin at every possible point in human experience.

(3) Furthermore, the perfection of the believer is a sort of paradox. Though perfect in Christ, his achievement is a continuing process. The teaching of this phase of the epistle might well be thought of as the "perfection paradox."

THE STANDARD FOR MAN

In outlining these provisions of redemption the author indicates God's standard or goal for man. Furthermore, he reasons that this standard is within reach and that responsibility for its attainment is upon man himself. In chapter two, verses six through eighteen, the standard is presented and Christ is shown to have met fully all specifications and in so doing has made it possible for every man to do the same. Elaboration of this point must also be omitted from this report. But it should be noted that right here in this second chapter there seems to be suggested a metaphysical basis for a teleological Christian ethics of self-realization.

In his Fondren Lectures of 1945, recently published, Edgar S. Brightman emphasizes the distinction between an ideal and a value, pointing out that an ideal is not a value but a goal. A value is the goal attained or the extent of its attainment. In Hebrews 2:6-18 we see man's exalted

³ Westcott, *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

goal or destiny. But we see more. We see Jesus as Son of Man attaining that ideal. *That is value.* And for us that value, according to the author of the epistle, seems to lie in the fact that his accomplishment makes it possible for all men to achieve in like manner through Him. One of the chief purposes, if not the chief purpose, of this epistle, therefore, seems to be to show that though the Old Covenant under the Law could not free man from the power and condemnation of sin, the "more perfect" covenant through Christ makes victory over sin, as well as freedom from a sense of its guilt, a present and continuous reality in the life of the believer. Jesus Christ is at once man's *Ideal* and man's *Value*. Through man's identification of himself with Christ the moral quality of Christ's own being is imparted. The writer of the epistle cites Jesus as the perfect embodiment of God's ideal for man and concludes that through this "perfected" One all men may find moral completion a present and at the same time a progressive reality.

Thus through the use of the word-family of *teleios* and a few related terms the author seeks to show that the *Perfect Offering* (7:26-28; 9:14, 15, 26; 10:10) of the *Perfected One* (2:10; 5:9; 7:26-28; 10:10) *Perfects the Believer* (6:1; 7:25; 9:14, 15; 10:10, 14; 12:23).

THE PERFECTION PARADOX CLARIFIED

In his comprehensive work, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, William Ernest Hocking, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, proposes an idea that throws light on this discussion and deserves far more attention than it has received. He speaks of religion as "anticipated attainment." Says he, in comparing art and religion,

Art is long; religion is immediate. The attainment in every art is future, infinitely distant; the attainment of religion is present. . . . Religion,

we may now say, is the present attainment in a single experience of those objects which in the course of nature are reached only at the end of infinite progression. Religion is anticipated attainment.⁴

On the other hand he shows that,

Whatever may be the nature of that anticipation of all attainment, genuine religion is not inclined — as far as hard work goes — to take advantage of its advantage. If being in the world it is not of the world, it is none the less with the world and for it—in brief *in for it*, and with no loss of power. This is an extraordinary attainment which one must still labor forever to possess: but just this paradox is inherent in the religious consciousness.⁵

In this same connection Hocking also notes that,

In time my moral task will never be finished, for my imperfection is infinite and my progress by small degrees; but religion calls upon me to be perfect at once even as God is perfect, *and in religion somehow I am perfect.*⁶

This same idea also seems to be illustrated by St. Paul in Philippians, chapter 3, verses 12-15.

Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect (*teteleiomai*): but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as *are perfect* (*teleioi*) be thus minded.

In one instance he considers himself to be perfect, complete, mature in Christ, in another as not being perfect. He seems to say, in harmony with the writer to the Hebrews, that his perfection, though in a very true sense a present reality, is something for which he must strive continually with single purpose.

The perfect, striving for perfection! It sounds paradoxical. Perhaps it is. Have not the holiest saints been the

⁴ Hocking, William Ernest, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, p. 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32. (Second italics are my own.)

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31. (Italics are my own.)

first to declare their constant need of holiness, perhaps just as Socrates insisted that he knew nothing, though declared by the Oracle at Delphi to be the wisest man in Athens?

While emphasizing the experience of inner perfection through faith the author of the epistle recognizes that the perfecting process continues as long as life itself. The Christian is able to make progress in the direction of the ideal goal of moral perfection simply because, through faith in Christ, he actually experiences Christ's moral perfection in kind, though not in degree. And though a man may be becoming progressively more perfect, Kant was probably right in a sense, when he conceived of man's moral endeavor as an eternal thing.

The author of our epistle makes this progress in perfection particularly explicit in the eloquent benediction at the close of the letter.

Now the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep with the blood of an eternal covenant, even our Lord Jesus, make you *perfect* in every good thing *to do his will*, working in us that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.⁷

He prays that the inner perfection of his readers may be externalized through everything they do. Interestingly, here the word translated "perfect" is not a form of the verb *teleious*, but is *katartisai*, which is the first aorist optative active of the verb *katartizo*. It is a combination of *kata*, which here denotes "in succession, in course," and *artios*, which means "entirely suited; complete in accomplishment, ready." It would appear that the writer has employed this compound word to emphasize the thought of perfection being achieved in the successive experiences of life, "in every good thing to do his will." Thus the paradox continues. He who is morally perfect in Christ through faith in his

sufficient atonement for sin must go on in his endless quest for perfection in Christian living.

POSSIBILITIES OF FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Dr. W. E. Sangster, an English writer, in his recent book, *The Path to Perfection* (1943), quotes from an address by Dr. R. W. Dale in Carrs Lane Chapel, Birmingham, England, July 27, 1879. The distinguished divine and educational reformer was attempting a dispassionate appraisal of John Wesley's influence. Among other things Dr. Dale declared:

There was one doctrine of John Wesley's—the doctrine of perfect sanctification—which ought to have led to a great and original ethical development; but the doctrine has not grown; it seems to remain just where John Wesley left it. There has been a want of the genius or the courage to attempt the solution of the immense practical questions which the doctrine suggests. The questions have not been raised—much less solved. To have raised them effectively, indeed, would have been to originate an ethical revolution which would have had a far deeper effect on the thought and life—first of England, and then of the rest of Christendom—than was produced by the Reformation of the sixteenth century.⁸

It is my personal belief, after a rather careful study of the Epistle to the Hebrews during the past ten years, that this concept of perfection, as there presented, suggests a metaphysical basis for a teleological Christian ethics of self-realization whose social implications are far-reaching.

Is it possible that Christians might exert a greater moral impact on the life of today if they more nearly realized in their own experience the possibilities of the "perfection paradox"? Perhaps believers have always been conscious of the *Ideal* and of their failure to measure up to it. But have they been conscious enough of a present inner moral completeness in an experience suggested as possible by

⁷ Hebrews 13:20, 21.

⁸ Sangster, Dr. W. E., *The Path to Perfection*, p. 168.

Dr. Hocking's theory of "anticipated attainment"? Might not such an experience afford a moral dynamic and resourcefulness that would enable man to win his individual and social struggle with the problems of evil? Is it failure at this point that is responsible chiefly for the recurring indictment that Christianity is not "practical"? Is Christianity being really (or realistically) practiced by its professed followers?

In this day of breath-taking discovery in the fields of the sciences perhaps there can be found a frame of mind that is prepared not only to entertain but to demand a solution of our moral problems in terms of this "perfection paradox," which appears to characterize the Epistle to the Hebrews. Dr. Sangster seems to have been in such a frame of mind when in concluding the study mentioned above, he declares,

*To believe that the human heart can be cleansed from sin (experience moral perfection) is a bold, big thing to believe, and we have protested against any easy assumption that it has been done because this is fraught with dreadful dangers, not the least of which is a subtle discouragement against being honest with oneself. But the opposite conviction, so it seems to the writer, is not less terrible.*⁹

The unmodified core of this statement is especially provocative. "To believe that the human heart can be cleansed from sin is a bold, big thing to believe . . . But the opposite conviction . . . is not less terrible."

If John Wesley was on the right track in his doctrine of perfection, and the Epistle to the Hebrews seems to suggest that he was, surely it is time this doctrine received more serious consideration with a view toward its future development and toward its enlarged social application.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190. (Parenthesis and italics are my own.)