

X.

Perfect in Parts, Imperfect in Degrees.

And the very God of peace sanctify, you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. — *1 Thess. v. 23.*



The Scriptural doctrine that sanctification is a gradual process perfected only in death must be maintained clearly and soberly: first, in opposition to the Perfectionist, who says that saints may be "wholly sanctified" in this life; *secondly*, to those who deny the implanting of inherent holy dispositions in God's children.

It should be noticed, therefore, that Sacred Scripture distinguishes sanctification, imperfect in *degrees*, and sanctification perfect in *parts*. A normal infant, tho small, is a perfect human being. Of course it must grow, but it has all the parts of the human body. The mental faculties can not be examined, but the bodily members are obviously *perfect* and complete. The head may not be covered with hair, various members may be still incomplete, but that does not impair its perfection: in a small beginning the constituent parts and members are all present. Hence the child is called perfect in *parts*.

Yet it is not perfect in degrees, *i.e.*, it has not attained its full growth. It must grow and increase in every respect. And this is a slow and imperceptible progress. A garment fitting perfectly at night is never too small in the morning. One night's growth is imperceptible. Yet we grow and increase; and until death's hour the body changes constantly. And this increase and the subsequent decrease of old age affect all the parts *equally*. It never happens that a child's arm grows, but not his leg, that his neck expands, while the head remains small. This gradual increase is the expanding force of an inherent vital principle, pervading all the members and every part.

This applies to the children of God in the second birth even more forcibly, for in the divine kingdom are no deformities; all proceed from the hand of their Creator a perfect creation. This perfection is in the *parts, i.e.*, they have what essentially belongs to them. And every member is internally animated and wrought upon from one vital principle, by the Holy Spirit, in such a way that all the parts are affected by it spontaneously. Hence in sanctification holy desires and inclinations must spring from that internal, vital principle in the parts and pervade every member.



In this sense sanctification is a *perfect* work; not externally, but on God's part, in that He causes the sanctifying principle to affect every member. He does not first sanctify the will, then the understanding, or first the soul and then the body; but His work embraces the entire new man at once.

But sanctification is *imperfect* in the degree of its development. When for ten years God has wrought in us, the holy desire must be much stronger than in the beginning. This is the

result of growth, of gradual increase, despite many ups and downs, almost imperceptible. Hence there are steps, *ascending* from less to more with reference to the new man; and *descending* from more to less in the dying of the old; but in both a gradual change, ever farther from Satan and nearer to God.

"Perfect in parts, imperfect in degrees," as our godly fathers used to say, by which they illustrated the second birth by comparing it with the first; and in this they simply followed Scripture; which places the perfection of God's gift alongside the imperfection of our gradual increase. The Catechism expresses it as follows: "Even the holiest men, while in this life, have only small beginnings of this obedience; yet so that with a sincere resolution they begin to live not only according to *some*, but to *all*, the commandments of God" (q. 114). St. Paul says that "Christ has given some pastors and some teachers, for the perfecting of saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" ([Ephes. iv. 12](#)). In [2 Cor. x. 15](#) he hopes to be enlarged among them when their faith shall be *increased*. To the Colossians he writes: "That ye might walk worthy of the Lord, unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God" ([Col. i. 10](#)). To the Thessalonians: "Your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth" ([2 Thess. i. 3](#)). The psalmist sings that "the righteous shall flourish as a palm-tree"; and St. Paul says to Timothy, his son in Christ: "Give thyself wholly to these things, that thy perfecting may appear to all" ([1 Tim. iv. 15](#)). From his own experience the apostle testifies: "Not as tho I had already attained, but I follow after if that I may apprehend." And writing to the Corinthians, he draws a picture of the fruit of sanctification, saying: "But we all are changed unto the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."



But we should not fall in the common error of applying to sanctification what Scripture teaches concerning the "Children" and the "perfect." This causes confusion. Speaking of different classes of believers, Scripture recognizes the fact that there are different *degrees*. This appears most clearly from St. John's first epistle ([ii. 12-14](#)), where he addresses believers as "young men" and as "fathers," evidently with reference to their age, for he places the latter as more mature in spiritual experience above the former. In [Heb. v. 13, 14](#), St. Paul distinguishes the "perfect" who use strong meat, and the "babes" who depend upon milk. To the Corinthians: "Brethren, I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal," *i.e.*, to those who can not bear meat, but who must still be fed with milk ([1 Cor. iii. 11ff](#)). That these words relate to sanctification is evident from what follows: "For ye are yet carnal, whereas there is among you envying and strife ([ver. 3](#)). Of himself he testifies: "When I was a child I understood as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things" ([1 Cor. xiii. 11](#)). He exhorts the Ephesians ([iv. 14](#)): "Be no more children tossed to and fro with

every wind of doctrine”; and among the Philippians he distinguishes the perfect and the not perfect, saying: “Let us, therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded” (iii. 15).

Hence the apostle evidently distinguished two classes of believers: those whose condition is normal, and those who are still in a preliminary condition. Scripture designates the former as “perfect,” “adults,” “men and fathers” to whom belongs the strong meat; the latter as “babes,” “young men” who still use the milk.

Now the question arises whether the transition from the former unto the latter is the same as the gradual increase of sanctification. Generally the answer is affirmative; but Scripture answers it negatively, for reasons as clear as daylight. Convincing proof we find in Phil. iii. 12-15. In verse 12 St. Paul says, “I am *not yet* perfect”; and directly after that (ver. 15), and in the same connection, he puts himself just as distinctly among the perfect; yea, he offers himself even as their example.

It is evident that when St. Paul, under the direct leading of the Holy Spirit, declares in the same moment that he is not yet perfect, and that he is perfect, yea, the example of the perfect, the word “perfect” may not be taken in the same sense in both cases; in the one it must have a different meaning from that in the other.

They who believe in *gradual* sanctification should not appeal to this and similar passages to support their doctrine. Such misapplication of Scripture is grist for the mill of the Perfectionists, who with good reason reply: “The apostles were evidently acquainted with saints ‘*wholly sanctified*’ like ourselves.”

And what is the difference?

A child and a man are not the same; the latter is physically full grown, the former is not. The latter having attained manhood enters upon the new process of becoming nobler, more refined, *inwardly stronger*. The oak continues to grow until it has attained its full height, which process covers many years. But this is not the end of its development. On the contrary, it does not begin to acquire its iron qualities until it is full grown. The child is sent to school for the exercise of its powers. Having passed through successive institutions, and being graduated from the highest, he receives his diploma which declares that his education is finished and that he is ready to enter upon his life’s career; *i.e.*, his education is finished so far as the *school* is concerned. But this does not imply that he has nothing more to learn. On the contrary, only now are his eyes opened to see the reality and actual condition of things. His education is finished, and yet he only begins to learn.

And the same applies to those whom Scripture calls “perfect.” A new convert should first go to school, and not, after the practise of Methodism,⁹ be directly put to work to convert

9 For the author’s sense in which he takes Methodism, see section 5 of the Preface.—Trans.

others as a perfect believer. He is only a babe, says the apostle, a partaker of milk; and a babe can not be expected to assist as midwife or nurse in the spiritual birth of other babes.

It is the great mistake of many Sunday-schools to make sucking lambs do the work of ewes; of neglecting to feed the new-born babes with spiritual knowledge and discipline. And the insane notion, which is gaining ground more and more, that a young man who has evinced but a slight stir of spiritual life must be promoted at once to the state of the mature Christian, brings destruction upon the Church. This is why so few inquire after the truth, or seek to enrich themselves with spiritual knowledge; why the spiritual life seems to consist only of running and racing until, spiritually exhausted and impoverished, men sit down bitterly disappointed. This makes unhealthy Christians, spiritually consumptive, tall and thin, with glittering eye and hectic cheek, but without manly, strength and vigorous pulse. Of course, such can not resist the whirlwind of strange teachings without being carried about with every wind of doctrine.

Wherefore we repeat that a new-born babe must first be fed with milk; then be sent to school, not to teach, but to learn. And the ministers of the Word in the pulpit, parents at home, and teachers in our Christian schools should examine themselves whether they understand the art of feeding the babes with milk, whether in the teaching the bread is not too heavy, whether they have not forgotten that there are sucking lambs in the flock.

Of course, the time will come when the suckling will be able to digest solid food. Knowledge will accumulate, and by and by his education be finished. And then it would be exceedingly foolish not to go on to perfection, but to withhold solid food, and to continue to feed all the members of the church alike on milk. Such a course would soon empty the church. Men provided with spiritual teeth can not live on such diet. The preaching which is always laying the first foundations kills both preacher and people.

Hence there is a time in the life of the saint when this first process of growth is finished; when believers, having become men, take their place among the mature and perfect. And in this sense we hear the apostle say: "I do not belong to the babes in their mother's lap, nor to the children at school, but to the adults and the perfect whose education is finished. But, O brethren, do not think that I am perfect inwardly, for I have not yet attained; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

We see the same difference in plant and animal, in the natural and spiritual birth. There is first a growth to attain the full stature, then only the real development begins which in the children of God is the unfolding of the holy disposition in their own person.

472

473

XI.

The Pietist and the Perfectionist.

“He chastens us for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness.”—*Heb. xii.*
10.

474

Sanctification is a gracious work of God, whereby in a supernatural way He gradually divests from sin the inclinations and dispositions of the regenerate and clothes them with holiness.

Here we meet a serious objection which deserves our careful attention. To the superficial observer, the spiritual experience of God’s children seems diametrically opposed to this professed gift of sanctification. One says: “Can it be that for more than ten years I have been the subject of a divine operation whereby my desires and inclinations were divested of sin and clothed with holiness? If this is the Gospel, then I belong not to the Lord’s redeemed; for in myself I perceive scarcely any progress; I only know that my first love has become cold and that the inward corruption is appalling. Some dream of progress, but I discover in myself scarcely anything but backsliding. No gain but loss, is the sad footing-up of the account. My only hope is Immanuel my Surety.”

While the experience of a broken heart vents its grief in this way, others exhort us not to encourage spiritual pride. They say: “We should not foster spiritual pride in God’s children, for by nature they are already thus inclined. What is more conducive to spiritual pride than the conceit of an ever-advancing holiness? Is not holiness the highest and most glorious attainment? Is it not our comprehensive prayer to be made partakers of His holiness? And would you have these souls imagine that, since they were converted a number of years ago, they have attained already a considerable degree of this divine perfection? Would you give license to older Christians to feel themselves above their younger brethren? Holiness wants to be noticed; hence you incite them to a display of their good works. What is this but to cultivate a spirit of Pharisaism?”

We may not rest until this objection of the sensitive conscience is entirely removed.

Not as tho we could escape all dangers of Pharisaism. This would silence every exhortation to holy living. Light without shadows is impossible; the shadows disappear only in absolute darkness. In the days of the ancient Pharisee, Jerusalem, compared with Rome and Athens, was a God-fearing city. Pharisaism was never more bold than in the days of Jesus. And history shows that the danger of Pharisaism has always been least in the Romish and greatest in the Reformed churches; and among the latter, it is strongest where the name of God is most exalted. Godliness is impossible without the shadow of Pharisaism. The brighter the light and glory of the former, the darker the shadow of the latter. To escape

475