



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 187

Perfectionism – A heresy that the church has had to deal with throughout its history has been the heresy of perfectionism. The 18th century pastor and theologian John Wesley, a defender of Arminian theology and the founder of the Methodist movement in England, taught that Christians could attain to a state where the Spirit would pour out the love of God in their hearts to such a degree that they could achieve instantaneous holiness and victory over sin. Such teachings spread in America in the 19th century through revival meetings, laying the foundation for what became known as the “holiness movement.”

This work of the Holy Spirit has come to be known by various terms such as the second work of grace, second blessing, the baptism or infilling of the Holy Spirit, and entire sanctification. Such doctrines create two groups of Christians, those who have received the second blessing and live holy lives, and those who have not and live ordinary Christian lives. According to such teachings, Romans 7:14-25 is not describing Paul the apostle but Saul the adversary, for Paul was undoubtedly living a holy life.

Nowhere does the Bible teach that we can attain moral perfection in this life. Believers are described as those who will not continue in a lifestyle of constant habitual sinning, and not that they will no longer sin (1 John 3:6, 8-9). If such verses taught sinless perfection, then they would apply to all believers and not just some. The Bible explicitly rejects the idea of sinless perfectionism (Proverbs 20:9; Ecclesiastes 7:20; James 3:2), calling believers to a constant repentance from sin (Matthew 6:12; 1 John 1:8-10).

Carnal Christian – Another heresy which also came out of Wesleyan teachings is the carnal Christian heresy. Those who hold to this say that the person in Romans 7:14-25 is not the apostle but a carnal Christian. This also divides Christians into two groups, the carnal Christian and the spiritual Christian. Carnal Christians are those who accept Jesus as their Savior but not as their Lord; and having not been filled with the Spirit their lives are directed by the self and not Christ. Spiritual Christians are those who have not only accepted Christ as their Savior but also as their Lord; and having been filled with the Spirit their lives are directed by Christ and not the self. Thus, they live a victorious Christian life.

Even though believers are set free from the power and bondage of sin, they are still under the continuing presence and influence of sin; and so in this sense we can say that all Christians are carnal, and will continue to struggle with sin in their Christian life. However, this doesn't mean that we are fully carnal, for such a person is not a Christian. On the other hand, the Bible also teaches that all Christians are spiritual, that is, we all have a new nature, we all have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, and are thus called to walk in the newness of life (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Romans 8:5-8; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Though we have the remnants of the flesh still in us, and can and at times do act carnally, we are no longer in the flesh, that is, we are not controlled by the flesh; rather, we are now in the Spirit and controlled by the Spirit.

The Bible talks not of two classes of Christians, but of two classes of people – Christians and non-Christians. All such concepts of living the sinless victorious life stem from two serious errors. On the one hand, a person must lower the true standard of perfection, and on the other hand, he must elevate his ability in achieving the standard of God's law. But in reality, the more Christians grow in the faith, the more they understand who God is as revealed in His Word, and the more they become intensely aware of their own sinfulness, and thus their need for God's grace (Isaiah 6:5; 1 Timothy 1:15). The Bible refutes all such doctrines, teaching that perfect holiness will only be consummated at our glorification, when God will instantly remove our remaining sin and prepare us to live with Him in glory forever.

There are no shortcuts to our growth in holiness. The Christian life is a life characterized by a lifelong conflict between the old and the new natures; a life of commitment to and use of the means of grace. And as we pursue and strive for holiness, the Spirit gradually works holiness in us (Philippians 3:12-15).