

The Ten Commandments, Part 3: Christian Perfection

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Introduction

The present paper concludes a three-part series on the Ten Commandments.¹ In part 1 of the series I pointed out that each of commandments 1-5 contain one or more explanatory clauses, whose purpose is to show that the law is reasonable. In part 2 of the series I argued that the explanations begun on Sinai within the text of the law itself are continued in the Sermon on the Mount. My claim is not that we can read this meaning into the discourse, but that Christ consciously intended to extend and complete the series of earlier comment clauses found in the law. He quotes commandments 6 and 7 and comments on them directly, clearly alludes to commandment 9, and shows us the principles that motivate commandments 8 and 10 as well. The second group of proposed explanations--those dealing with commandments 6-10--has the purpose of showing that the law is spiritual.²

In all of this God has been attempting to reveal Himself to mankind. What He asks of His creatures is not exacting or unfair. Those are not His characteristics. God knows the frailty of our natures better than we do, having created us originally, and it is important to bear in mind that what He says on Sinai is said with a full realization that we are fallen and sinful. God was under no illusions about our moral condition when He gave us the law. If we had not been fallen and sinful He would not have had to spell out for us the principles of His character and government as He did. They would have appeared obvious. It is precisely because of sin and because the principles of the law are foreign to us by nature and not intuitively obvious at all that they had to be brought to our attention in this way.

If the law had to do only with our actions it may be that no debate would arise over whether its requirements are reasonable. But the law addresses us in spiritual as well as practical terms. It has to do with our thoughts as well as our actions. Thus, the commandment not to murder involves more than not taking human life willfully. It involves not having a desire to take life, and not just in the form of a considered and resolute intent but any thought that tends in that direction. Thus, it is a commandment not to hate as well as a commandment not to kill. Actions can be monitored by the power of choice and are more or less under our control. But thoughts are more elusive. And so the question is whether God can be served with one's mind as well as with his actions. Does a requirement that demands this level of service go too far? If God cannot be served with the mind and heart, then it is impossible in principle for Him to receive acceptable worship from the human family.

Somehow it seems that the dilemma we create by such speculations is overly philosophical in nature and that practical reality lies elsewhere. If worship is impossible, then idolatry is impossible and we need to reconsider what the Old Testament is saying when it complains that idolatry is widespread if not universal among the nations. Why should it be impossible to serve God with our minds and hearts if we can serve our various idols in this way? Right worship must be informed and guided by the revealed will of God, but worship itself is something humans are surely capable of doing, and in fact I would suggest it is something we

are incapable of not doing. Something, whatever it is, will receive our hearts' best affections. Something will come first in our lives. Whatever that might be, it is our object of worship.

The first question, therefore, is not so much whether it is possible to worship God with the mind, but whether it is possible to worship anything with the mind. Is worship a human capability? I have argued that more than a capability it is an inescapable fact of human life. We cannot avoid worshipping something. Granting now that without the guidance of the Holy Spirit the object of our worship will not be God, who must reveal Himself in order to be perceived and appreciated, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit is it possible for the object of our worship to be God? Is mankind capable of worshipping the true God at all, to any extent whatever? To some degree, as faulty as our attempts might be, it does seem that our instinct to worship could be directed to God instead of some other object. Yes, man can worship God if led to do so by the Holy Spirit. God can become the object of our hearts' best affections. This is not nearly so large a step as admitting initially that worship is possible in principle.

Now we come to a much smaller question, but one that has received a disproportionate amount of attention. Led by the Holy Spirit, can man worship God with all his affections? Can he worship God with the whole mind and heart or is it a fundamental necessity imposed by our fallen human condition for the heart's affections to be divided? There are different answers to this question, but after asserting that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit God can be worshiped at all it is a minor adjustment to an answer already in place to suggest that He can be worshiped completely.

The simple fact is that God wants to be served by our thoughts as well as by our actions (John 6:23) and that nothing less than this is acceptable to Him. I submit that one reason why anything less than this is unacceptable is precisely that it fails to be all we can do. God wants our best and our best includes the heart's affections. He demands complete worship because we are going to give complete worship to something and He wants to be the object of it when that happens.

The Present Model

Independence: the nature
of the problem

Christian perfection is not something contained within ourselves. It simply is not. Personal moral strength is important, but making the discussion revolve around such matters is a side issue and a distraction. God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). It would be possible to misinterpret this statement (see Rom 3:5-8); we should be resolute in our service of Christ. No one understood this fact better than Paul. But the issue is whether we are willing to depend on a strength that transcends our own. Both Herbert E. Douglass and Edward Heppenstall have expressed a similar thought.

The open secret that explains the triumphant, obedient life of Jesus is that He lived by faith in His heavenly Father.³

Properly understood, we contend for the Biblical doctrine of perfection: the perfecting of a right relationship to God, full commitment, a mature and unshakable allegiance to Jesus Christ.⁴

Christ did not come to remove our guilt alone so that in sinning we might avoid the natural results of our actions. To do this--to take away the penalty only--would be to legalize sin, and that is a contradiction in terms. This much should be clear at the outset. But there is another side to the issue. Christ did not come so that, with His example in view, we might become independently sinless. That also is a contradiction in terms. Our willingness to be independent of God is the essential crux of the sin problem in the first place. Any theory of perfection that speaks of eliminating sin without also addressing our natural willingness to be independent does not eliminate sin at all, but merely reintroduces it in another more subtle form. I say it is more subtle not because the condition itself is any different but because, passing now for piety, it is harder to identify. Satan's rebellion against God in the great controversy is a struggle to be independent from God. In this larger context it is ultimately irrelevant what form our independence takes. Thus, even in resisting sin--one might say especially in resisting sin--there is a constant need to guard against human pride and to exercise faith by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Faith: not a measurable quantity

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you" (Luke 17:5-6).

The apostles speak to Christ of degrees of faith in the above passage, as though they have some but would like more. Christ goes behind their question to raise a more fundamental issue--not how much faith they have but whether what they think they have is really faith at all. If one has the genuine article in any degree the results are all the same. It is a quality of faith and not a set quantity that God is looking for.

In the same way, when discussing Christian perfection it is tempting to speak of degrees of attainment, as though we are already Christians but would like to be better Christians. Here also we must ask whether our starting assumption is correct. Do we honestly trust Christ for the blessings He promises to give? Do we really believe what He has promised because He has promised it? If so, then we are Christians. Our faith is genuine and we will surely give evidence of the fact in our lives.

What Christ was commanding in Matt 5:48

The additional question of whether we are perfect Christians does not have to do with degrees of genuineness but with whether we are Christians at all times and not haphazardly. Assuming we really are Christians at all, the question is whether our faith is consistent or fitful.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (44) But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45) that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (46) If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? (47) And if you greet only your brothers, what are you

doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? (48) Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5:43-48)

The command to be perfect is a command to be like our Father in heaven. The same thought is expressed twice--first in vs. 45 and then in vs. 48: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (vss. 44-45). "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (vs. 48).

If we are ever to obey Christ's command successfully, we must understand what we are obeying. The command is to be sons (and daughters) of our Father. The word "son" or "daughter" has a broader range of meanings in the Semitic language Jesus was speaking than it does in Greek or English. James and John were called "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17), for example, because they had some of the characteristics of thunder (Luke 9:54). In the same way, to be "sons of your Father in heaven" means more than to be claimed by the Father as His own. It means to be like Him. By way of caution, however, recall that even Lucifer wanted to be like God: "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; . . . I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa 14:13-14). So there is a question what being like "your Father in heaven" is intended to mean in Matt 5:45. In the context Christ provides the command means to be consistent under every circumstance.

It is easy enough to act like Christians when surrounded by good neighbors (vs. 43), by those who love us (vs. 46), or by those we feel close to because of family ties (vs. 47). It is harder when dealing with enemies who want to persecute us (vs. 44). But if we act like Christians only under favorable circumstances such as these, what we are really acting like is tax collectors (vs. 46) and pagans (vs. 47). The difference between pagans and Christians is not evident until the two are placed in trying circumstances.

The contrast between favorable surroundings and adversity is central to Christ's argument in Matt 5:43-48. Granting that we are Christians at all, are we Christians all the time? If so, we are perfect in the sense that Christ Himself gives the term (vs. 48). There are other meanings available, but it should not be the aim of the exegete to see what he is able to make a word mean. It should be his aim to show what the original speaker or writer made the word mean. What Christ is talking about here is a genuine faith exercised consistently. What I propose is not a diluted substitute for what Christ says in Matt 5:48, but the central essence of a point He was trying to make throughout this section of His discourse (vss. 13-48).⁵

The qualities Christ demonstrated
on the cross

The principles Christ enjoins on us in the Sermon on the Mount are illustrated nowhere more clearly or more practically than when He Himself hung dying on the cross.

Here we see God in human flesh dying in order to give life to others (commandment 6), offering a spotless Sacrifice because of His infinite purity (commandment 7), speaking the simple, straightforward truth as He revealed the Father to lost mankind (commandment 9), not taking revenge on His enemies even though He could have claimed the right to do so (commandment 8), and not even wanting to take such revenge (commandment 10).⁶

We miss an essential point if we assume that Christ's quiet endurance on the cross was a superhuman act of self-control--that He really wanted to destroy His tormentors but restrained Himself from doing so. There was no hatred to restrain. His only wish for the Roman commander who gave the order to crucify Him was that he might be saved and be in the kingdom, and it is quite possible that His wish was fulfilled (Matt 27:54). Christ, in dying as well as living, was completely genuine. He was also consistent. His manner was not a product of circumstances.

Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; (12) if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; (13) if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. (2 Tim 2:11-13)

When we reflect these characteristics we are like Him--in the only way that it makes sense to speak of being like Him.

The final test for the last generation

The test is broadly applicable. The great test of loyalty and obedience for the final generation is the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. And it is instructive to notice that this last test of loyalty is one of two divinely appointed institutions that comes to us from a time before Adam's first sin (Gen 2:1-3).⁷ Seventh-day Adventists have taught that keeping the seventh day holy, instead of keeping any other day holy, demonstrates a willingness to do whatever God says and in this way shows our loyalty to the Creator.⁸ As a test the Sabbath is ideal--a product of infinite wisdom--because it can be applied equitably to the entire human family in any age of history and under any circumstance. The range of debilities we have inflicted on ourselves over the centuries and millenia is virtually endless by now. In view of this fact it seems unavoidable that any test God could devise would be unfair to someone. But God does not ask us to do anything. The test He has chosen involves the absence of doing. He asks us to rest.

Thoughts such as these have been expressed publicly by Seventh-day Adventist leaders for years. It only remains to point out here that the Sabbath is a sword that cuts both ways. It has a message for Seventh-day Adventists as well as for those they are trying to reach with the Sabbath message. The ultimate test, for those in or outside of the church, is whether we will allow ourselves to rest fully in Jesus. There is no super test to supplement this one, nor is one necessary. Here all the issues--of loyalty, obedience, trust, and whatever else--are fully addressed.

The test is spiritual. There are two closely related points to clarify. First, the test is not confined to resting physically on the seventh day, but includes the spiritual implications of doing so. Resting in this larger sense involves realizing that what Christ has done and is doing on our behalf is fully adequate already and does not need to be supplemented in any way by what we think we are doing now or have the best intentions of doing later, "for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his" (Heb 4:10).

When considering this passage we should bear in mind that physical rest is not an appropriate symbol for spiritual work, as the common accusation against Sabbath keepers would have it, nor is physical work on the seventh day an appropriate symbol for spiritual rest, as Evangelicals would like to believe. On the contrary, rest is a symbol for rest--physical rest for

spiritual rest. It is not necessary to rebel against God in order to show we are accepted by Christ. We should maintain the symbolism of seventh-day Sabbath rest and also remember what it symbolizes. One can have both.

The test is practical. The second point to clarify is that resting in Jesus does not imply inactivity. If inactivity is a precondition for salvation, then the apostle Paul is a lost man. In one place he says, "from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ" (Rom 15:19). Illyricum is the ancient name for what is now Yugoslavia and the northern part of Albania.⁹ No one understood more clearly than Paul what Christ was commanding when He said:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (29) Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (30) For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt 11:28-30)

It is hard spiritual labor to resist the Holy Spirit. When we quit performing this needless work and accept the yoke of Christ gladly, we find the rest referred to in the passage quoted above. The yoke of Christ is the law of God interpreted in a spiritual manner. It is the means by which we acknowledge that our will has come into subjection to His and that we ourselves have come into relationship with Him.

When Christ says, "Take my yoke upon you" (vs. 29), what He offers is not something that He owns, but something that He wears. He is not represented here as a farmer but as the other ox. Christ's yoke is not light because it fails to involve strenuous service but because He wears it with us. We cannot walk along beside, giving an appearance of having accepted Christ's yoke, and find the rest He speaks of. Resting in Jesus means sharing His attitudes toward the Father and ceasing to pit our will against His. Paul entered into rest when he accepted the apostolic commission to take Christ's yoke and work, like no one has ever worked, for the Gentile world of his day.

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest [*sabbatismos*] for the people of God; (10) for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. (11) Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. (Heb 4:9-11).

Here is what makes my model for Christian perfection relational. Relational does not mean relative. I am not saying we should be as perfect as we can. I am saying we must learn to rest fully in Christ.

Discussion

There are a number of facts to emphasize about Christian perfection in the present model. It is relational, possible, potentially unifying--both within the Seventh-day Adventist church and in dialogue with members of other denominations, and it is not the end of all development. No limits are placed upon growth either now or in eternity.

Christian perfection is
relational in nature

I have not discussed perfection in our capacity as humans, but in our capacity as Christians. If the goal is human perfection, then we are doomed to failure. If the goal is Christian perfection, then there is ample provision for success. Even if we could attain human perfection, which we cannot, it would not be worth having. By contrast, without in any way weakening the implications of what is involved, we can be sure that Christian perfection is not only possible but freely available for every child of humanity who will accept it as God offers it.

Bear in mind that talking about human perfection in religious terms does not change human perfection into Christian perfection. There is a fundamental difference between them. Human perfection has to do with one person's qualities or attributes, whereas Christian perfection resides in a relationship maintained between two persons--oneself and Christ. It would be possible to have a humanistic concept of Christian perfection whereby we use divine help to achieve human perfection instead of doing it ourselves. But the goal is flawed in this case even if the means of attaining it is not. Any theory of perfection that has the individual as its primary object leads to pride and is therefore self-defeating.

There is no room whatever for human pride in the concept of perfection defended here. It is humbling to rely on someone else to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It is humbling to acknowledge that such reliance is necessary. It is not that such a relationship makes Christian perfection possible. Christian perfection resides in the relationship itself and not in the party benefiting from it. A perfection that resides within the individual is human perfection whether or not we use religious terms to describe it.

What I am arguing for is not a weakened form of "real" perfection, i.e., human perfection, but something fundamentally different. The one is not an emasculated form of the other. Christian perfection is not a lack of perfection glossed over by an accepting attitude conditioned by Christianity. It is truly and genuinely perfection, but in another sphere.

Christian perfection is
possible

Christian perfection perplexes us not because we have taken its implications too far, but because we have not taken them far enough. More is involved than an absence of law breaking--even the total absence of law breaking. There is an immense area to consider that lies beyond not breaking the law. There must be an absence of bad but also the positive presence of good. One problem with limiting our concept of perfection to the absence of law breaking is that the goal, when defined in this way, seems somehow attainable. But when we go beyond merely avoiding evil to think of actually supplying something good, the issues become clearer and we are driven to Christ with the realization of our need. As the realization grows, the relationship grows. As the relationship becomes mature and unshakable, sin becomes less attractive and we begin to turn from it. This is sanctification. The point to notice, however, is that the basis for its operation is the growing knowledge that we cannot supply what the law demands. Just here is a great paradox, because the degree to which we acknowledge our need is the degree to which it becomes possible for Christ to supply it. The irreducible minimum for the above process to operate is an accurate and mature sense of need.

There is something fundamentally misleading in the assumption that Christian perfection is an accomplishment. In any such theory we assume that God's power is made perfect in strength. But this cannot be. When the inherent weakness of descent from sinful Adam is coupled with an accurate knowledge of the fact through the leading of the Holy Spirit, that is a sufficient basis for anyone to enjoy the experience of total dependence and reliance on Christ that is part and parcel of Christian perfection--an experience which has been elusive in part because we have looked for it in the wrong place.

Christian perfection is
potentially unifying

Within the Seventh-day Adventist church there are those who say that perfection is not possible and those who say that it is. A relational concept of Christian perfection should have the potential for speaking to both camps. On the one hand it is Christ centered and reasonable, and on the other it does not deny what Scripture clearly teaches is possible and necessary.

In its dialogue with Evangelicals also a relational concept of Christian perfection could have the useful effect of showing that what Seventh-day Adventists believe is not only responsible to the entire body of inspired Scripture, contained in both the Old and New Testaments, but focuses the attention of those who believe it entirely on Christ. This is an emphasis the world has been waiting for. When they see a group lifting up Christ without ulterior monetary or political motives, because He is genuinely their all-consuming interest--the beginning and end of their faith--we will see a response take place that we do not now anticipate. The world is hungry for Christ and is weary of substitutes. We have not yet taken seriously Christ's words, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32).

Christian perfection, understood in the relational manner described here, is the opposite of being preoccupied with ourselves. Do Evangelicals teach that we should have a Christ-centered theology? Let Seventh-day Adventists show that they have a completely Christ-centered theology and yet one in which no part of inspired Scripture is ignored.

Christian perfection is
not the end

Hans K. LaRondelle, in an essay entitled, "The Biblical Idea of Perfection,"¹⁰ makes the very valuable point that the tension between what we have now and what we will have later in regard to perfection of character is similar to the tension between the way in which Christ fulfills messianic prophecies at His first and second comings.

I have argued for a relational concept of Christian perfection, but do not claim that what I have said exhausts the topic. The saints before Christ comes will have rejected and overcome all known sin from their lives. And yet their experience of Christian perfection is based precisely on their knowledge of personal need. When Christ comes, however, the inherent sinfulness that has caused them so much distress is removed and they are changed into the fullness of His character.

Two different types of experience are in evidence here and neither can replace the other. Both are desirable and valid, but they are different. If any are inclined to quibble that the saints cannot enjoy all the benefits of their final inheritance here and now, they are in danger of

repeating the mistake of the Pharisees who quibbled that Christ did not come in the manner described by those prophecies which speak of His second coming. Christ was just as divine in Pilate's courtroom as He is in His own, and yet it is true that the ultimate level of messianic fulfillment remained future throughout His earthly life. Not seeing the entire fulfillment immediately the Pharisees rejected it out of hand, including the part that was available to them at the time.

There is something instructive about the Pharisees' attitudes that we should allow ourselves to learn from. Christ came to reveal the Father, but if He had started by revealing the Father's glory--which He could easily have done--it would not have been helpful. Israel had seen God's glory on Sinai and were afraid for their lives (Exod 20:19). There was a point about the Father's character that could not possibly be made in this way. God is not only powerful and glorious but "gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11:29). To make this point His glory had to be laid aside. To do otherwise would have obscured the issues.

In the same way God has a point to make in the perfecting of the saints, but it is different from what we might have thought. The issues at stake in the great controversy between Christ and Satan have to do with choices, with loyalties, with deciding whom we will serve. They do not have to do with God's ability to lift us above present weakness and difficulty. He could easily do this now, as He soon will at glorification. But to remove the saints' inherent weaknesses immediately would make it impossible to illustrate adequately the nature of the present controversy.

Potential Problems

Christian perfection is a challenging topic. There are a number of difficult issues that must be raised in any responsible discussion of it, and the more closely we examine these issues the better. They should not be dismissed or ignored. The list includes: (1) the relationship between accurate self-knowledge and a well-founded rather than patronizing sense of need, which I maintain is the only truly indispensable precondition for the development of Christian perfection, (2) the tension between having at one and the same time an accurate sense of both need and assurance, and (3) the problem of how Christ's work as a Mediator in heaven can ever end--which it must if He is to return as He promised--without calling the saints' basis for security into question.

The problem of accurate
self-knowledge

There is a very real question how we can know what the quality of our experience is. In my view we must trust Jesus for faith in the same way that we must trust Him for repentance and forgiveness. It takes faith to believe that the faith God has given us is real and adequate to lay hold on Him in a saving way. Faith is not a commodity that we supply for ourselves on the basis of which God then gives us all other things. If our faith is not itself something God freely gives us, then offering faith and receiving grace in return is nothing more than a purchase. But this cannot be: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8-9). Faith is not work in a theological sense, although exercising it does require effort.

So how can we know that we have truly loved God (fulfilling the first table of the law) and our fellow man (fulfilling the second table)? From one point of view we cannot, and so it is literally true that a person who illustrates the principles of Christian perfection in his or her life will not know it. The best example of this aspect of practical Christianity, as in so many other areas, is Paul. He could say shortly before his death,

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. (13) Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, (14) I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:12-14)

This statement illustrates two principles of fundamental importance about Christian perfection. First, as stated above, it is not something the recipient can ever be aware of, because that experience is motivated precisely by a sense of one's insufficiency. Perfect reliance can develop only when one has and knows that he has a need to rely in this way. Thus, the self-awareness of a person who illustrates Christian perfection is exactly the opposite of that which pertains to a person who has some other concept of perfection.

More than this, the type of self-awareness I refer to must be accurate. Otherwise it is inaccurate and potentially deceptive. One cannot realize his need if he does not have a need. Thus, the impossibility of human perfection on any level—even in having a perfect love for Christ in the sense demanded by human perfection—is the basis and precondition for developing Christian perfection. By contrast, thinking we are perfect is the surest evidence that we are not.¹¹ Thus, Paul's disclaimer illustrates one aspect of the quality he denied having.¹²

Knowing the full extent to which we need and must depend on Christ is great knowledge. This kind of self-awareness does not result from having a powerful intellect but from being open to the Holy Spirit. He reveals Christ to any receptive mind and knowing Him we come to know ourselves in a correct light. When and to the extent that we permit ourselves to acknowledge the deficiencies the Holy Spirit reveals to our hearts, we have a basis for developing Christian perfection. The more we realize our need, the more we are driven to Christ to supply it, the firmer the bond between us becomes, and the nearer we come to relying on Him completely.

Christian perfection is similar to human perfection only in the words used to describe it. The one concept is defined by traits we have, the other by the knowledge of traits we do not have. Behind the similarity of words the two are fundamentally different. Despairing of the one we are driven to Christ for the other. This is why Paul could say, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim 1:15), and mean it with some justification because he had violently persecuted the church (Acts 8:1-3; Phil 3:6). And yet at the same time he could stand perfect before God, because he put behind him what was past and pressed onward to Christ.

The problem of assurance

I have argued above that people who illustrate the principles of Christian perfection in their lives will not suspect that this is the case. There are some things, however, of which we can be very sure. We can have complete assurance that the faith God gives us is genuine. The basis for this confidence is not that we are the ones who have it, but that God is the One who supplies it. The facts that God created the world in the past and that Christ will come again in

the future must be accepted by faith in precisely the same way.¹³ Faith is even necessary to believe that Christ came into the world, that He died, and that He rose again on the third day. It is not just that a man was born, that His name was Jesus, that He grew up in Nazareth, and that He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, but that in Jesus' birth God was sending His Son into the world and that once here He lived as our Example and died as our Substitute. It takes faith to appreciate the true significance of any given fact about the historical life of Christ. It should not seem unusual then that we must exercise faith to believe that God has given us faith with which to respond to Him. And if we cut away all other support and trust God for faith as well as for the benefits that come from exercising it, we may be very sure that our faith is genuine.

The soteriological problem posed
by the second coming

When John the Baptist saw Jesus by the Jordan he described Him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). On the cross Christ completed His work in that capacity. "He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (Heb 7:27). He then returned to heaven as

a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, (2) and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. (Heb 8:1-2).

When He comes again in glory Christ will occupy yet another role--that of King over all the earth. "On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev 19:16).

Christ's transition from Lamb to Priest should be clear. But to the extent that we take the doctrine of His high priesthood seriously, the doctrine of the Second Coming raises a major soteriological problem in that there must also be a transition from Priest to King. It is true that Christ has always been a King, but He has not always been a Priest in the past nor will He always continue to be one in the future. It is a temporary role. The problem then is that in order to return to the earth as King Christ must stop ministering in heaven as a Priest. Even this might not pose a problem, however, if He left there and arrived here at the same time. But this is not the way distances are traveled. There must be a brief span of time between Christ's departure and His arrival during which there is no ministry of mediation in the place He has left. During this time the saints stand before a holy God without an Intercessor.

I do not have a facile solution for the above problem. Let me point out, however, that it is not a uniquely Seventh-day Adventist problem, except in the sense that they have allowed themselves come to grips with it. Any Christian who believes (1) that Christ ministers on our behalf before the Father in heaven--as taught throughout the entire New Testament book of Hebrews--and (2) that He will return to earth as He promised, has either ignored or come to grips with the above problem.

The difficulty would be minimized if Christ did not minister or alternatively if He did not return. In the one case He could return without ceasing to minister and in the other He could minister without ever interrupting His work. Correspondingly, in the one case mankind could sin on until the Second Coming and in the other they could sin on indefinitely without reference to any such event. But when Christ's high priestly ministry in heaven and His return to earth are both given equal emphasis, there is a short time before the Second Coming during which it is imperative that His followers no longer sin. It is an irony that the ultimate soteriological solution

(the Second Coming) should bring about the ultimate soteriological problem (the period without an Intercessor). But it does and the problem will not go away.

Just as the disciples thought that Christ was being taken away from them when He left to begin His priestly work in heaven, it seems now that He is being taken away from us when He stops doing that work in order to return and bring us home. He is not removing Himself from us by laying aside His priestly responsibilities so as to come to us where we are. Our Savior has rarely enjoyed the luxury of being understood.

Conclusion

On Sinai God was attempting to reveal Himself to His people and made the point that the law, based on the attributes of His own character, was reasonable and right. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ was again attempting to reveal the Father and made the point that the law was not only reasonable but spiritual in its implications. That He would make such attempts to be understood by His human children says something about God. In all of this He is taking the initiative so as to establish a relationship of mutual love and trust with us.

When we have the same attitude toward God that He has toward us our attention will not be directed to ourselves just as His attention has not been directed to Himself. Our thoughts will center on Him as His do on us. Any group of people who deep in their hearts have this attitude toward God cannot help revealing what He is like to other people, and this is the essential element of the divine character that He has tried to convey to us in so many ways. He cares about us and bears us in mind. Here is the divine counterpart to what I have been calling Christian perfection--i.e., an unwillingness to go our own way, an insistence on caring what God has said in deciding on a course of behavior, a reliance on our Father and an acceptance of His will for our lives that has grown and matured until it is unshakable.

We make simple things hard. The "eternal gospel" of the first angel's message has not changed (Rev 14:6). The end of the gospel is the same as its beginning. We must learn to trust, simply and completely, in Jesus.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹See Hardy, "The Ten Commandments, Part 1: Non-Imperative Clauses," *Historicism* No. 6/Apr 86, pp. 59-70; "The Ten Commandments, Part 2: A New Testament Sequel," *Historicism* No. 9/Jan 87, pp. 45-66.

²Perhaps because our dealings with God are by definition spiritual in nature and those with our fellow man more practical and subject to reason, God explains about the law what we might not have noticed intuitively. The commandments that deal with our relationship to God are used to show that the entire law is reasonable and the commandments that deal with our relationship to other people are used to show that the entire law is spiritual. Thus, the whole is well balanced and complete.

³"Men of Faith - The Showcase of God's Grace," in Herbert E. Douglass, et al., *Perfection: the Impossible Possibility* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1975), p. 36.

⁴"Let Us Go On Unto Perfection," *ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵Hardy, "Ten Commandments, part 2," pp. 47-48, 60-62.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷The Sabbath is one, marriage is the other. No other human social institutions can claim so high a degree of antiquity as these (Gen 2:24).

⁸It is profoundly ironic that the strongest popular support for creationism today comes from the same quarter as the strongest support for a rival Sabbath--a day in direct competition with the divinely appointed memorial of creation (Exod 20:11). If creation is consistent with the other teachings of Christianity, one might ask why its weekly memorial should not be considered consistent with those same teachings. And if creationism is a matter that deserves special emphasis in light of the prevailing secularism, why should the Sabbath not receive equal emphasis from the same people?

⁹Ancient Macedonia extended from the Aegean to the Adriatic and therefore included much of modern Albania. The next province to the north along the Adriatic coast was Illyricum. When or how far into this province he took the gospel is not known. "It was the first Latin-speaking province which [Paul] visited in the course of his apostolic ministry, and could have prepared him for his projected mission in Latin-speaking Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28)" (*New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982], s.v. "Illyricum").

¹⁰"The relationship of God and the believer as Father and son, therefore, is both a *present reality*, in one real sense, and a *future reality*, in another sense. The difference is determined by the meaning of the two advents of Christ" (Douglass, et al., *Perfection*, pp. 89-136). LaRondelle's paper is based on his published doctoral thesis, *Perfection and Perfectionism*, Andrews University Monograph Series, no. 3 (Kampen, 1971).

¹¹"The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature. This is evidence that Satan's delusions have lost their power; that the vivifying influence of the Spirit of God is arousing you. No deep-seated love for Jesus can dwell in the heart that does not realize its own sinfulness. The soul that is transformed by the grace of Christ will admire His divine character; but if we do not see our own moral deformity, it is unmistakable evidence that we have not had a view of the beauty and excellence of Christ" (Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* [Washington, D.C., Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977; originally published, 1892], p. 44 [in other editions, p. 65]).

¹²C. Mervyn Maxwell comments on Paul's statement as follows: "Wasn't Paul 'perfect' even when he admitted, in virtually the same breath, that he was not yet perfect? Doesn't *Christ's Object Lessons*, page 65, say that 'at every stage of development our life may be perfect'? Is not this concept of perfection at every stage true 'Biblical perfection'" ("Ready for His Appearing," in Douglass, et al., p. 192)? The implied answer is no, that Paul's experience represents a level of Christian growth and maturity that the last generation must surpass. I do not believe this conclusion follows from the passage in question.

¹³The name "Seventh-day Adventist" illustrates the above concept of history. On the one hand "Seventh-day" refers to creation, i.e., to the fact that God made us, that human history has a distinct starting point. On the other hand "Adventist" refers to the second coming of Christ, i.e., to the fact that human history will have a distinct ending point--one that we can look forward to with confidence and joy (Luke 21:28).