

Do the Authorities Conflict on Perfectionism?

Review by Timothy Crosby

Perfection: The Impossible Possibility
by Herbert E. Douglass, Edward Heppenstall,
Hans K. LaRondelle, C. Mervyn Maxwell
Southern Publishing Association, 200 pp., \$9.00

This work, the third in Southern Publishing's Anvil series, brings together essays by four Adventist scholars. On the issue of perfection, Douglass and Maxwell tend to take the "possible" position against Heppenstall's and LaRondelle's "impossible" (the subtitle was well chosen!). One must be willing to overlook the nine-dollar price tag for a 200-page indexless paperback, but the attractive gold cover, innovative layout and quality of the contents make the book worthwhile.

As a collection of rather controversial essays, this book is certainly a step in a new direction for the Adventist press. In the last decade or so, we seem to have lost a good deal of our reticence about putting conflicting opinions into print. This is not an unmixed blessing, but it does stimulate worthwhile discussion, and it helps to point up the unfinished areas in the house of Adventist theology. It also provides fascinating reading.

Douglass takes an eschatological approach to

the topic. His main point is that Jesus is waiting for a quality people who perfectly reproduce His character; and this, rather than the state of the world or any other consideration, is what will determine the time of His advent. Taking off on the parable of the harvest found in Mark 4 and Revelation 14, Douglass shows that Christ cannot return until the "grain" is fully ripe and "the fruit is brought forth" which, according to Ellen G. White, means "the reproduction of Christ's character in the believer."¹ Douglass points out that saying that calamitous world conditions will determine Christ's return is like a farmer's saying, "It looks as if there will be a bad thunderstorm; it must be time to pick my corn."

In the second half of his paper, Douglass delves into the subject of the nature of Christ in His incarnation, another unsettled issue in the church. Douglass emphasizes a Christ who took on man's nature "with all its liabilities," including our "fallen, sinful nature," for which he offers a battery of supporting quotations from the Spirit of Prophecy, ignoring those which do not support his view. To Douglass, this is a crucially important point since, if Christ's nature were superior to ours in any way, we could not be expected to overcome as He did.

Douglass goes on to show that "what Jesus achieved will be reproduced in the last generation," quoting such passages as *The Great Controversy*, p. 623: "He [Jesus] had kept His

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Father's commandments, and there was no sin in Him. . . . This is the condition in which those must be found who shall stand in the time of trouble." Thus, God will be fully vindicated: "The honor of God, the honor of Christ, is involved in the perfection of the character of His people."²

Heppenstall begins his article by noting that many who have "laid upon themselves the galling yoke" of achieving sinless perfection "have turned themselves into a moral machine without peace and without security before God." Then his thesis: "If Christian perfection means restoration here and now to Adam's sinless state and complete harmony with God, so that a man need no longer be classed as a sinner, then the Bible knows nothing of it."

According to Heppenstall, it is our present-day definition of perfection as an absolute acme beyond which there is no further progression which causes the confusion. In the Bible, perfection does not imply sinlessness, but "full commitment, a mature and unshakable allegiance to Jesus Christ." Noah was termed "perfect" (Gen. 6:9) even though three chapters later we find him in a drunken stupor (Gen. 9:21). Even "perfect" Job (Job 2:3) had to confess his sins (Job 42:6). And in the New Testament, those who are "perfect" still have to press on toward the goal, not having reached it yet (Phil. 3:13-15).

Heppenstall leans toward Calvin in his view of man's fallen nature, speaking of "the depravity under which he is held in bondage." Accordingly, "nowhere does man reflect the perfection of God in whose image he was made." This is in contrast to Christ, who possessed a "spiritual harmony and elevation of character unknown in our experience. The facts that Christ Himself was God as His incarnation and was born of the Holy Spirit deny His being was in any part out of harmony with His Father. Christ was unique in this, these conditions we do not have." Thus, we cannot achieve Christ's sinlessness.

Heppenstall does believe that it is possible to reach a state of "conscious deliverance from known sin," where "there is nothing we know of between us and Christ." Yet, "imperfection persists, not in . . . committing willful sin, but in . . . coming short of the ideal in Jesus Christ." He maintains that "there is a limit to the temptation that man can withstand in his sinful state." Rather than striving for sinlessness and

living "like a display piece in a shop window," we must "walk with God in love. This is Bible perfection."

LaRondelle, with less polemic and more exegesis, asks "How can man attain to sinless perfection? . . . Our specific purpose now is to investigate the inspired answer . . . recorded in the [scriptures]." LaRondelle then takes us on a guided tour through the entire Bible, elucidating the texts having a bearing on this topic. LaRondelle's biblically derived definition of perfection is similar to Heppenstall's. Perfection in the gospels is "the revival of the principle of perfect love as proclaimed by Moses and the prophets." In Paul's writings, perfection is "a present gift and reality; yet, in another sense, it is a promise to be realized only at the ultimate establishment of the kingdom of glory." LaRondelle's conclusion: perfection is "living daily out of God's forgiving and keeping grace. . . . The only absolutely perfect, that is, inherently sinless, character has been revealed in the life of Jesus Christ. . . . Through faith and baptism, the believer participates legally and dynamically in the perfection of Christ. Man has no perfection in himself."

Like Douglass, Maxwell approaches perfection from the standpoint of preparation for the second coming. Maxwell sees a difference between "resurrection holiness" and "translation holiness," the latter requiring sinlessness. This is because "God can blot out the sins of the victorious dead by simply attending to their records. They are dead and cannot sin again. It will be a vitally different thing for those who are alive when their cases are called up in the judgment. Can their sins be blotted out in heaven unless they are also blotted out on earth? Hardly! . . . Suppose just after their sins were blotted out, the saints committed new ones—what would the blotting out of sins have meant?"

As exhibit number one, Maxwell portrays the pre-Great-Disappointment Millerites who, according to Ellen G. White, were "unreservedly consecrated to God" and whose "faces shone with a heavenly light." Judging by these and other Ellen G. White statements about them, these people were perfect, according to Heppenstall's and LaRondelle's definitions of perfection. Maxwell then quotes *The Great Controversy*, pp. 424, 425: "But the people were

not yet ready to meet their Lord. . . . Those who are living upon the earth when the intercessions of Christ shall cease in the sanctuary above are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless. . . . When this work shall have been accomplished, the followers of Christ will be ready for His appearing.”

Like Douglass, Maxwell goes to great lengths to carefully define his terms, since the term “sinless perfection” has been abused to mean a state beyond the reach of sin, something Maxwell repudiates. He also disavows the possibility of absolute perfection beyond which there can be no progress.

Since the words do not appear in the Bible, Maxwell takes issue with the cry “by grace alone,” overlooking the fact that the phrase appears in one of the passages he quotes from *Steps to Christ* several pages later. True, he says, there is a sense in which we are saved solely by grace, as works have no merit, but men can only become conquerors over evil “through the grace of God and their own diligent efforts.”³ Maxwell rejects the use of the opinions of the church fathers and Christian theologians in this debate (“Luther knew nothing of the third angel’s message.”). He devotes an entire section to defining sin, and another to answering objections to his position, which the other three writers tend to ignore, making his paper the longest of the four.

This is where the issue stands. Four competent Adventist theologians have started with the same givens and reach opposite conclusions. Can we find a reason for this?

First of all, it should be noted that each author’s opinion of the possibility of sinlessness is determined by his definition of sin. To Maxwell, sin is yielding to temptation. Heppenstall takes a much broader view of sin. It is a natural consequence of separation from God, a state into which all men are born. It is disharmony with God. Since this state will always exist until Christ comes, there will always be sin. As is so often true of theological debate, much of the problem here is one of definition. Much, but not all.

As I was reading the book, it occurred to me that there seemed to be a definite pattern to the way Adventist pastors and teachers take sides in

this issue. There are exceptions, of course, but generally the “impossibles” are the Bible scholars and the “possibles” are the Ellen G. White scholars. Notice the differing use of quotations from the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy in the following table:

Author	Bible	Spirit of Prophecy
Douglass	47	101
Heppenstall	53	8
LaRondelle	232	4
Maxwell	60	148

All four authors are guilty of biased selection of sources, but this is to be expected in essays of this type. Only Maxwell looks at passages that seem to contradict his interpretation of the problem. All four scholars employ, for the most part, some well-reasoned arguments, although Heppenstall has a penchant for making unsupported theological pronouncements which are far from self-evident. Neither side has a monopoly on the truth. It cannot be doubted that sinlessness is not implied in the biblical concept of perfection; the “impossibles” have proven their point. Yet, they have largely ignored the Spirit of Prophecy in doing so, as the above table shows. And it is difficult to deny that Ellen G. White taught that God’s people in the last days would reach such a state of holiness that they could stand faultless before God without a mediator; many of her statements are simply too plain to be explained away.

Is there a real contradiction here, or is there a deeper underlying harmony as yet unexposed? Is this a case of complete misinterpretation on the part of one side or the other, or might the apparent discrepancies be explained as a case of progressive revelation (Compare Heppenstall: “If Christian perfection means restoration here and now to Adam’s sinless state. . . . then *the Bible knows nothing of it,*” with Ellen G. White quoted by Douglass: “Everyone who by faith obeys God’s commandments will reach the condition of sinlessness in which Adam lived before his transgression.”)

Such questions as these the authors have not dealt with.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E. G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 67.
2. E. G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 671.
3. E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 425.