

Sinless Living: Possible or Not?

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To ask the wrong questions at the wrong time produces confusion. Whenever “sinless living” is mentioned, someone is bound to ask with a great show of finality: “Are you living without sin? Are you perfect? Can you show me somebody (except Christ) who is perfect?” Laughter usually punctuates the strained silence that follows these taunting questions.

But they are irrelevant to our theme. It is obvious even to a child that no true Christian will ever *feel* or *claim* to be perfect. Not the proud Pharisee, but the contrite publican is justified (obviously by faith, for there is no other way possible). And he prays, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (see Luke 18:10-14). Until Jesus glorifies His saints at His second coming, they “know that in . . . [them], (that is in . . . [their] flesh,) dwelleth no good thing” (Romans 7:18). No true Christian will ever claim more than Paul claimed: “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect. . . . Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended” (Philippians 3:12, 13).

“Never can we safely put confidence in self or feel, this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation. . . . Our only safety is in constant distrust of self, and dependence on Christ. . .

“It is not only at the beginning of the Christian life that this renunciation of . . . [pride and self dependence] is to be made. At every advance step heavenward it is to be renewed. . . .

“The nearer we come to Jesus and the more clearly we discern the purity of His character, the more clearly we shall discern the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the less we shall feel like exalting ourselves.”¹

“From the cross to the crown there is earnest work to be done. There wrestling with inbred sin; there is warfare against outward wrong.”²

We should begin by asking the right questions at the right time.

And the right time is this time of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, while our great High Priest is completing His work of final atonement.

Christ is to accomplish a work unique in human history since sin began—preparing a body of people for translation. While no child God of will ever *claim* to have overcome all sin, and while it is equally that we cannot judge of any present or past individual that he has overcome as He overcame, that does not mean that the ministry of Christ in the most holy apartment will fail to achieve such results. However much in the past or in the present we have failed to overcome, for us to say that it is impossible to overcome sin through faith in the Redeemer is actually to justify and to encourage sin, and thus to stand on the great enemy’s side.

The right questions to ask are:

- Is the sacrifice of Christ as Lamb of God, and is His ministry as great High Priest, powerful enough to save His people from (not in) their sins?
- Is He truly able to save “to the uttermost

¹ *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 155, 159, 160.

² *Review and Herald*, November 29, 1887.

[completely] those who come unto God by Him”?

- Will He be truly successful “as a refiner and purifier of silver . . . [to] purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness” (Malachi 3:3)?

- When Christ comes the second time, will He find a body of people of whom it can honestly be said, “Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus”?

If the Lord wants to, He can accomplish the preparation of a people for the second coming of Christ. For the first time in human history, a divine announcement is made concerning a corporate body of people from “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people,” “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12, emphasis supplied). Before the grueling inspection of the unfallen universe, they pass the test. The Lord is honored in them. And the next event is His coming (verse 14).

To say that these saints don’t really keep the commandments, but God pretends that they do, is to violate the context of the three angels’ messages. Heaven declares these people to be “virgins. . . . They . . . follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. . . . In their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God” (verses 4, 5). Jones offers a comment that they—“stand where it can be said of us by the Lord, to the universe, ‘Here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.’ And it will be a fact, not merely

because He says it, but He will say it because it is a fact.”³

We know they are sinful by nature, “for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). But in order for this pronouncement to make any sense, the faith of Jesus must have “worked,” and they must have ceased to continue giving in to Satan through the clamors of their sinful flesh or nature. *They have overcome even as Christ overcame* (Revelation 3:21). They don’t have “holy flesh,” but they have a holy character, and righteousness is imparted to them. To try to insert this prophetic glimpse of an overcoming people into the post-Second Advent future is to violate the context. Revelation 15:2 reveals this same group as having gotten the victory *before* the close of human probation.

Previous generations have never clearly understood the truth of Christian perfection without falling into the trap of perfectionism.

The reason is that the hour for the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary had not yet struck. When we come to the “days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets” (Revelation 10:7). Here is the special contribution that Seventh-day Adventists are to make to the completion of the great Reformation and the fulfillment of the gospel commission. There must be a joining together of the truth of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary and the truth of

³ *General Conference Bulletin*, 1897, p.279.

justification by faith. And it is here that we begin to sense the real significance of the 1888 message.

It was one of glorious hope, free both from fanaticism and the error of perfectionism. Both messengers, from the beginning of the 1888 era were clear and emphatic that sinless living is possible, that God's people can overcome even as Christ overcame, and that the key to this glorious possibility lies in His people's faith in the ministry of the High Priest the most holy apartment.

[The first three sentences of Waggoner's *Christ and His Righteousness*, page 5, neatly summarize their concept of sinless living. They are a summary in a nutshell of his Minneapolis message preached only a few weeks before they were published in *Signs* articles:]

"In the first verse of the third chapter of Hebrews we have an exhortation which comprehends all the injunctions given to the Christian. It is this: 'Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus.' To do this as the Bible enjoins, to consider Christ continually and intelligently, just as He is, will transform one into a perfect Christian, for 'by beholding we become changed.'"

[Jones and Waggoner together set forth three essential elements of the uniqueness of the three angels' messages. Here is where the 1888 message goes further than the sixteenth-century Reformers were able to go in their day:]

1. The message is rooted in the cleansing of the sanctuary truth. The believer is called to "consider

the . . . High Priest of our profession Christ Jesus" in His work of cleansing the sanctuary in the anti-typical Day of Atonement which began in 1844. This was essential Waggoner's radical idea.

2. The reality of Christ's nearness is emphatic. To consider Christ continually and intelligently, just as He is, is to consider the true New Testament teaching that His role as Substitute and Example require Him to take the nature of fallen man in the likeness of sinful flesh, a thus be *able* to succor them that are tempted.

3. Faith in such a Savior and High Priest will transform one into a perfect Christian. Note the word *transform*. Not only will the true believer be "counted" or "legally reckoned" such; he will actually become a perfect Christian *by faith*. (But he will never claim such or even be conscious of it himself).

[Let us see how Jones's teaching was in full harmony with Waggoner's. In *The Consecrated Way to Christian Perfection*, first published as *Review and Herald* articles in 1898 and 1899, he states it simply and powerfully:]

"In His coming in the flesh—having been made in all things like unto us, and having been tempted in all points like as we are—He has identified Himself with every human soul just where that soul is. And from the place where every human soul is, He has consecrated for that soul a new and living way through all the vicissitudes and experiences of a whole lifetime, and even through death and the tomb, into the holiest of all, at the right hand of God for evermore. . . .

"And this 'way' He has consecrated for us. He,

having become one of us, has made this way our way; it belongs to us. He has endowed every soul with divine right to walk in this consecrated way; and by His having done it Himself in the flesh—in our flesh—He has made it possible yea, He has given actual assurance, that every human soul can walk in that way, in all that that way is; and by it enter fully and freely into the holiest of all. . . .

“He has made and consecrated a way by which, *in Him* every believer can in this world, and for a whole lifetime, live a life holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and as a consequence be made with Him higher than the heavens.”⁴

Immediately the question will arise, Is this the heresy of perfectionism? On the same page Jones demonstrates how it is not:

“Perfection, perfection of character, is the Christian goal—perfection attained in human flesh in this world. Christ attained it in human flesh in this world, and thus made and consecrated a way by which, *in Him*, every believer can attain it. He, having attained it, has become our great High Priest, by His priestly ministry in the true sanctuary to enable us to attain it.

“We must clearly distinguish between “perfection of *character* . . . attained in human flesh” and fanatical perfectionism that is assumed be *of* human flesh. Perfectionism is a heresy characterized by one or more of the following false ideas:

1. The eradication of man’s sinful nature at any time before glorification at the second coming of Christ.

2. Perfect restoration of mental or physical powers while man is still mortal.

3. Perfection of the flesh.

4. Living without God’s enabling grace.

5. An infusion of intrinsic merit, trusting to an inherent or holiness righteousness.

6. Claiming to be saved through some superior holiness.

7. Claiming to have, or trusting in, feeling or impressions that supersede the Word.

8. Believing that it is impossible to sin or to fall after some special “infilling” experience.

9. The assumption that one is secure spiritually because of a purely legal justification while continuing to live for self in transgression of the law of God.

10. The assumption that continued sin ceases to be sinful if one is “saved” or “sanctified.”

None of these false ideas is found in the 1888 message.

But we do find a clear call to a preparation for the second coming of Christ. Ellen White recognized the call. [Speaking of the message of Waggoner and Jones, she said:]

“This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It presented justification through faith in the Surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, *which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God*. . . . It is the third angel’s message, which is to be proclaimed with a loud voice, and attended with

⁴ Pp. 83, 84.

the outpouring of His Spirit in a large measure.”⁵

Often Ellen White declared that a secret love of sin is the real reason for the rejection of that message. Waggoner tells us that he was indebted to both Luther and Wesley for the beginning of his understanding. Wesley clearly taught the possibility of sinless living in mortal flesh, but he lacked the cleansing of the sanctuary truth. [The terrible opposition that Wesley had to meet in his day prefigured that which Jones and Waggoner had to meet.] Wesley said of the conflict in his day:

“There is scarce any expression in Holy Writ, which has given more offense than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them; and whosoever preaches perfection (as the phrase is) that asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man, or a publican.”⁶

“No,” says a great man [Zinzendorf], “this is the error of errors: I hate it from my heart. I pursue it through all the world with fire and sword” Nay, why so vehement? . . . Why are those that oppose salvation from sin (few excepted) so eager, I had almost said, furious? . . . In God’s name, why are you so fond of sin? What has it ever done you? What good is it ever likely to do you, either in this world, or in the world to come? And why are you so violent against those that hope for a deliverance from it?”⁷

⁵ *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 91, 92, emphasis supplied.

⁶ *Works of Wesley*, Vol. 6, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

Wesley in his day was probably unable to understand the problem in its ultimate perspective. But those who live in the last days will know that the dragon is “wroth with the woman, and . . . [goes] to make war with the remnant of her seed.” What makes Satan so uncontrollably angry is that there *will* be a people who truly keep the commandments of God! He says it can’t be.

In fact, the law of God has always been the focus of his warfare, for he has always said of fallen man, “It is impossible for us to obey its precepts.”⁸ Wesley had to contend with what Ellen White declares we have “to contend with—a strange power opposed to the idea of attaining the perfection that Christ holds out.”⁹ That “strange power” is mysteriously active within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As in Wesley’s day, she says many ministers today echo the falsehoods of Satan:

“Satan declared that it was impossible for the sons and daughters of to Adam keep the law of God, and thus charged upon God a lack of wisdom and love. If they could not keep the law, then there was fault with the Lawgiver. Men who are under the control of Satan repeat these accusations against God, in asserting that men can not keep the law of God. . . .

“[But] Christ took human nature upon him, and became a debtor to do the whole law in behalf of those whom he represented. Had he failed in one jot or tittle, he would have been a transgressor of the law, and we would have had in him a sinful, unavailing offering. But he fulfilled every

⁸ Cf. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 24.

⁹ *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6, p. 1098.

specification of the law, and condemned sin in the flesh; yet many ministers repeat the falsehoods of the scribes, priests, and Pharisees, and follow their example in turning the people away from the truth.

“God was manifested in the flesh to condemn sin in the flesh, by manifesting perfect obedience to all the law of God. Christ did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth. He corrupted not human nature, and, though in the flesh, he transgressed not the law of God in any particular. More than this, he removed every excuse from fallen man that he could urge for a reason for not keeping the law of God. . . .

“This testimony concerning Christ plainly shows that he condemned sin in the flesh. No man can say that he is hopelessly subject to the bondage of sin and Satan. Christ has assumed the responsibilities of the human race. . . . He testifies that through his imputed righteousness the believing soul shall obey the commandments of God.”¹⁰

[The date of this straightforward statement indicates that Ellen White was firmly supporting the message of Jones and Waggoner.] But had the message been in the slightest degree tainted by the heresy of perfectionism, she would certainly not have supported them in this way. Note that Christ’s imputed righteousness accomplishes more than a mere judicial declaration. It actually *makes the believer obedient*.

The *how* of this glorious development is made clear by something she said over ten years later (1907):

“[Christ] made an offering so complete that through

his grace every one may reach the standard of perfection. Of those who receive his grace and follow his example it will be written in the book of life, “Complete in him—without spot or stain.”

“In word and deed Christ’s followers are to be pure and true. In this world—a world of iniquity and corruption—Christians are to reveal the attributes of Christ. All they do and say is to be free from selfishness. Christ desires to present them to the Father “without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing,” purified through his grace, bearing his likeness.

“In his great love, Christ surrendered himself for us. . . . We are to surrender ourselves to him. When this surrender is entire, Christ can finish the work he began for us by the surrender of himself. Then he can bring us to complete restoration.”¹¹

A child can see it: perfection of character is not something that is only a legal declaration; it is something Christ desires, and which therefore has not yet been realized in His people. There is a time element involved, a condition: “When [our] surrender is entire, Christ can finish the work he began for us by the surrender of himself.” And this “entire surrender” must precede “complete restoration,” which again must include translation without seeing death. You can’t break the progression.

Here is where genuine righteousness by faith at last comes into its own. We cannot know how to make that entire surrender that is so vitally needed unless we truly understand “the everlasting gospel” of Revelation 14. The 1888 message was the

¹⁰ *Signs of the Times*, January 16, 1896.

¹¹ *Review and Herald*, May 30, 1907.

beginning of that divine provision for the latter rain.

No wonder Satan has hated the message!

He has opposed it assiduously, misrepresented it, maligned it, ridiculed it, suppressed it. His cleverest opposition is obviously his subtle counterfeits of righteousness by faith. These can be readily identified because they invariably betray one common denominator—antipathy for the law of God. This takes one of two forms: (1) declaring that the law of God has been abolished or changed; or (2) declaring the law of God impossible to obey. Either position denies the gospel of Jesus, and the latter is the one that most appeals to many Seventh-day Adventists.

Therefore any righteousness by faith that becomes a cloak for continued disobedience to God's law has to be a counterfeit. And, according to Jesus, any messenger preaching a brand of righteousness by faith while himself knowingly breaks "one of these least commandments" and teaches men so must be an agent of deception (cf. Matthew 5:19).

Does the Bible teach the possibility of sinless living in our sinful nature?

If Christ was sent "in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be filled in us," then the obvious answer is "Yes." Christ is both our Substitute *and* enabling Example. He demonstrated it once for all. He "did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth" (1 Peter 2:22). And of His people it has to be said eventually, "In their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God" (Revelation 14:5). They will overcome "even as

I also overcame" (Revelation 3:21 says Jesus. No saint will ever overcome except through faith in the Great Overcomer, "the author and finisher of our faith." The overcomers acquire no merit to themselves, yet they gain everything by their faith. Christ "is able also to save them to the uttermost . . . for such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners and made higher than the heavens" (Hebrews 7:25, 26).

If we take away the high priestly ministry of Christ in the second apartment as distinct from the first, this idea of preparation for the second coming disappears, and the impact of the Advent movement reduced to a "me-too" echo of the popular evangelical churches. Our unique message centers in the sanctuary ministry of Christ:

"Those who are living upon the earth when the intercession 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, their characters must be purified from sin by the blood of sprinkling. Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort they must be conquerors in the battle with evil. While the investigative judgment is going forward in heaven, while the sins of penitent believers are being removed from the sanctuary, there is to be a special work of purification, of putting away of sin, among God's people upon earth. This work is more clearly presented in the message of Revelation 14."¹²

There is no need to be afraid of "standing in the

¹² The Great Controversy, p. 425.

sight of a holy God without a mediator.”

Remember that this holy God is also our loving heavenly Father, and our Savior. He is not seeking a way to keep us out of heaven; He is seeking a way to get us in! Our part is simply to believe (appreciate Him!) and thus to cooperate with Him and *let Him prepare us for that time* (more about this in our next chapter).

The Lord will have a people who “not even by a thought [can] . . . be brought to yield to the power of temptation”:

“Now, while our great High Priest is making the atonement for us, we should seek to become perfect in Christ. Not even by a thought could our Saviour be brought to yield to the power of temptation. Satan finds in human hearts some point where he can gain a foothold; some sinful desire is cherished, by means of which his temptations assert their power. But Christ declared of Himself: “The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me.” John 14:30. Satan could find nothing in the Son of God that would enable him to gain the victory. He had kept His Father’s commandments, and there was no sin in Him that Satan could use to his advantage. This is the condition in which those must be found who shall stand in the time of trouble.”¹³

“Ah,” someone says, “that is just what I was afraid of. I would rather die and go into the grave than stand through the time of trouble. I’m afraid I can’t make it! Dying is not so bad these days with all the medical help we have.” But if we feel that way, we

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 623.

are really being selfish, in two ways:

- We are depriving the Lord of our demonstration of total loyalty He deserves from us in these last days.
- We are evading an experience, a trial, that someone else will have to endure in our place while we selfishly escape it, but get the same ultimate reward.

If our entire concern is just getting to heaven, getting that “reward,” then we certainly are selfish to the core. And those who reason that because the “underground route” is just as effective in the end as going through the time of trouble and experiencing translation, are thinking only of themselves, not of the need that Jesus has for their cooperation in the very end of time.

They may not realize it, but in reality they are seeking to *avoid* Christ. They don’t want to get too close to Him. The paragraph that follows the one above makes this clear:

“It is in this life that we are to separate sin from us, through faith in the atoning blood of Christ. Our precious Saviour invites us to join ourselves to Him, to unite our weakness to His strength, our ignorance to His wisdom, our unworthiness to His merits. . . . It rests with us to co-operate with the agencies which Heaven employs in the work of conforming our characters to the divine model.

Note: there is nothing to be afraid of if only we are willing to “join ourselves to Him” and follow Him “whithersoever He goeth.”

When I was in a university class in advanced Greek translations, I soon began to fear that I could never keep up. Day after day the class discussions

seemed to roll like giant waves over my head. I went to the teacher and suggested “I think I’d better drop this class—I can’t keep up.”

She told me, “I think you should hang on. Stay in the class, and I’ll see that you get through.”

And she saw me through! Persistent, patient, determined, she helped me so much that in the end I passed! She was an illustration of our Heavenly Teacher. If we’ll stay in His class, it’s *His* work to see that we pass—yes, that we get an A. His business is being a Savior! Let Him be what He is!

It is not by our own works and trying hard that our robes “must be spotless,” our “characters . . . purified from sin.” No; it is by “the blood of sprinkling,” getting close to that cross so we “feel the blood so freely sired” for us:

O for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free;
A heart that always feels Thy blood
So freely shed for me!”

Charles Wesley