

Do You Prefer to Be Perfect or to Exist?

Song of Solomon 5:2; Matthew 5:48; 19:21; Romans 12:2; and 2 Corinthians 13:9b
(Excerpts from the Bible that refer to being “perfect”)

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Before you are two objects: A recipe for a rich three layer chocolate cake, which, by the way, is a *perfect* recipe, and, a rich three-layer chocolate cake that is not perfect. It slumps a bit to one side; all the layers aren't exactly the same height; and I may have been off just a fraction in measuring some of the ingredients.

We're going to take a vote. Which would you prefer to have? The recipe, which, I tell you, is perfect; or the cake, which I admit is not perfect? ----- Response -----

This is the best illustration I have found for me to understand something like what in Christianity has often been called “the fall.” It's much easier to understand than whatever might have happened to an Adam and an Eve in a Garden. You can think of it this way. In the mind of God, you and I and all others are “perfect.” That is, God has certain general visions for us, in God's creativity, and God visualizes us dancing around those visions rather harmoniously. When we actually exist in this world, we are not perfect, we're not quite “all we are meant to be”—but, we do exist.¹ Anything that exists inevitably isn't quite as perfect as the idea of it is. Think about any human relationship that you are in. Is it as “perfect” as your idea of that relationship? (Perhaps you are in a relationship that is even better than your idea of it had been--then you are truly blessed.)

The point is **not** that we have to choose between the idea and the thing that exists--*we can have our recipe and the cake to eat, too*. Obviously, we have both right here! It's just that the recipe can be perfect; the cake that exists cannot be perfect.

You know what? I'm glad that all of you exist, in your imperfect states.

If you want to think of a “fall,” you could say that we “fall” into existence. Isn't that a great way to think of it? There is no blame. We need not feel guilty for being imperfect. That's just the fact of the matter. Yet, there's another step. Now that we exist, we can always improve, grow, *aim* toward “perfection.”

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, made a big deal about perfection. In fact when you're ordained, you have to vow that you're “going onto perfection.” In case you didn't know that about me, I made that vow—it's true about me. I am going on to perfection. I have to trust it's happening, for I don't see lots of evidence yet. By the way, it's true about all the other pastors around here, too--Nan, Rex, Virginia, Karen . . .

Actually, John Wesley made such a big deal about “perfection” that some of his followers started professing that they had achieved the gift of perfection—they had “arrived” at this state. “Oops,” thought Wesley when this happened—he didn't mean that perfection was a state that people could really attain. If people started saying they were perfect that could lead to a great deal of self-righteousness and misplaced pride. So Wesley wrote 3 new sermons to reject any notion of perfection as a *state actually to be achieved*. Wesley made clear that what he meant by perfection was more like “perfect love”—that we could achieve a state in which we were able to love others, all others.²

Okay—but what about the biblical passages that haunt some of us when we make a mistake: “Be perfect, as God is perfect” (Matthew 5:48)?

What about Paul's words to the people at Corinth: "This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect?" How would you like someone to be praying that you become perfect? There have been several people in my life who have prayed for me as Paul prayed for those Corinthians—that I become perfect. I think that they were intending for me exactly what Paul intended for the folks at Corinth. Paul wanted the people to "return to the way that they used to be"³ Those people who prayed for my perfection—were praying that I be as *they thought I should be*.

Actually "perfectionists" today have been caught up in a sad dilemma due to a misunderstanding of the original word used for "perfect." The word Paul used when he prayed so vigorously for his Corinthian friends meant more what we might describe today as "to be complete." It did not mean to be "without flaws.," rather more like what we mean when we say "to be whole."⁴

Once, when as a professor in Ohio, I was asked to give a lecture at what was called "Pastors' School," for some soon-to-be-pastors, and two bishops were present, I suggested that the ministers, when they vowed that they were "going onto perfection" at their ordination, inwardly translate that to mean, "I'm going onto completion." There were some gulps by the bishops and laughter by the clergy. But it's not funny at all, really. The last thing people in a congregation want are pastors who think that they are perfect!

Maybe not pastors, but of course "the church" is perfect, isn't it? Ha!

I won't take time to list all the imperfections that any local church, let alone denomination, let alone the "church universal" might demonstrate. To deal with this dilemma some theologians talk about the "visible church" and the "invisible church." Actually, that way of looking at the church is very much like our recipe and cake. The invisible church, in the mind of God, is indeed perfect, like the recipe. But the visible church, which is the only one that can wrap its arms around us when we hurt, or provide meaningful worship, or help to bring more justice on earth—that visible church—EXISTS ...it is not perfect.

Most of us prefer the church that is not perfect, but exists...to an imaginary invisible church.

Some of us are haunted by the internalized demand to be "perfect," or we think that our friends should be "perfect."⁵ If you look at yourself in a mirror and get frustrated, or if you get down on yourself, please, try not to be upset at yourself for not being perfect. Stand up straight, look squarely at your eyes in the mirror and say to yourself, "At least I EXIST! I prefer to exist than to be perfect." It's okay, after that, to say, "Okay, God, now, I'll keep going *onto* pureness of heart, so what shall I do next?"

If you have a friend (or child or parent) who frustrates you, who is not perfect (maybe you can think of someone who isn't perfect, if you try hard), then try asking yourself the next time you get angry with them: "Am I expecting perfection?" If you discover you that you have wise anger, that you're not expecting perfection at all, just reasonable behavior, go ahead and be angry. However, if you find that you are expecting perfection, then look at your friend and humbly remind *yourself*, "She, or he, exists." You might just say to the other, silently or aloud, "Well, Honey, you exist."

Existence is not all. We can always improve. We can grow. We can aim toward loving more fully. I imagine arguments proceeding like this too, "Hey, be patient, I *am going* onto perfection, I'm just going very slowly."

We haven't mentioned the *Song of Solomon* excerpt from the Bible. The male suitor is knocking on the door while the beloved is sleeping. He says, "Open (the door) to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one." He's naming her with a whole string of pet names.

Love is blind...and she's certainly wise if she realizes that this string of epithets is a big exaggeration...She'd better let him know quickly that he should think again if he thinks she's flawless. If he wants a flawless lover, then, he should just *imagine* one. If he wants a lover that exists—well, he'll have to be content with her imperfection, just like his own.

One of the great consequences of not feeling we have to achieve perfection, just *aim toward* it, is that we don't feel badly for not *being* perfect. That is important. However, another consequence of not feeling that we have to *achieve* perfection is that *we can* humbly aim toward it, that is, we can aim toward the absurd goals that Jesus wanted us to aim toward, such as loving our enemies, and loving ourselves, too.

¹ This is existential theology, based on Paul Tillich's analysis of Essence to Existence to New Being affected by Christ.

² *John Wesley*, Edited by Albert C. Outler. NY: Oxford University Press, 1964, 30-31

³ Interpreter's Bible for 2 Corinthians 13:9

⁴ With this in mind, Jesus' advice to the wealthy one who asked how to enter the Kingdom of God makes sense. Jesus was telling that one man, in particular, that for him to be all that he could be for the world, he needed to sell his possessions, to give them to the poor, and to follow him. (Matthew 19:21). That behavior would make him whole.

⁵ Carl Jung, psychologist, argued rightly from a biblical perspective that when Jesus said perfect, he really meant what we now call "completion." Jung argued that Jesus was complete—but we humans have insisted upon making him, in our minds, "perfect." Jung argues that by doing that we've made ourselves try to be "like Jesus" and have been unable to, when we could, in our own way, be complete.