

Prepared and Preparing

Christian Perfection

This month's study is called "Prepared and Preparing." For the past two months, we have been studying the concept of "Christian Perfection," and in fact our study in December and January were based on the first and second part of a study by that name given by an Adventist Pioneer.

The concept of Christian perfection has captured my attention, and this is, I believe, to be our primary focus as Creation Seventh Day Adventists. Up until now, if someone were to ask me, "In one sentence, what is the CSDA Church all about?" I would probably have replied, "We believe in victory over sin," or perhaps, if I wished to start an interesting conversation right then and there, I would have replied, "We believe in total, or complete, victory over all sin in the life of a believer." But now, I think that I will begin to reply, "We believe in Christian perfection."

Now, why am I going to make this change? It is for the same reason that I am, and that I am called, a Creation Seventh Day Adventist. That name is a testimony; it is a "standing rebuke" to the errors that are present in the generation to which it is being presented. Most of us are familiar with the relevant quotes here, but when the Advent movement had just begun, they were considering what name would be appropriate to represent the faith that had come forth from the Great Awakening. Some wished to simply be called, "The Church of God," or "The Church of Christ," but inspiration revealed that these names, while true, while correct, were not specific enough to act as a living witness.

So now, I believe, it is with the phrasing of "Victory over sin." It is true, it is correct, but it is not specific enough to accomplish what our witness should be to others – at least not for some people, and especially if we only have a short time to encourage deep interest. After all, what have our experiences been? We have said, "We believe in victory over sin," and what have the responses been?

Well, if we get any reaction at all (and often we get very little reaction) it is often along the lines of, "Oh, we believe in that too." And their thought is, "Christ won the victory over sin for us, so if we believe in His sacrifice and accept Him as our personal savior, we have victory over sin."

Now, the statement is true, yes, but the issue is what that "victory over sin" actually looks like in the life. If we have truly accepted Christ, we have not merely befriended Him. We have accepted Christ Yahshua as a mystical "Husband" to us, with all the commitment, intimacy and security that this covenant represents. This is not often taught in modern Churches. Furthermore, it is not "Christ's victory over sin" that we believe in; rather, it is OUR victory over sin through Christ's victory over sin. Those are two different things, and that distinction is very seldom made.

Christ's victory over sin we have called, in previous studies, the "Sealed Deed," referencing the parable of Jeremiah, a portion of which reads, "Thus saith Yahweh of hosts, Elohim of Israel, 'Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open, and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days.'" (Jer 32:14)

The sealed deed is the "proof." It is a testimony that is already closed, and may be opened in judgment if there is a controversy about who owns the land (and there is rich symbolism even in that statement). But

the opened deeds are those who are now open before men, of which the apostle Paul writes, “Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men.” (2Cor 3:2)

Our witness before men is not the “proof” of their salvation. We testify of that proof; we reveal that proof, but Yahshua Himself is the assurance that our faith is true. And yet, if our testimony is not sound, who will believe in the proof we present? As Paul writes, again, “if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (1Cor 14:8)

Now, we’ve talked about this before. In the Bible, in its prophetic symbolism, what does the trumpet represent?

It represents two things: victory, and judgment. And both those are applicable here. If we do not give a clear “sound,” if our witness is not secure, who will receive victory, and who will prepare for judgment? But if they do not understand what we mean by victory, and if they develop no interest in exploring further, we will not have succeeded in our commission, even if we have said only true words.

In my experience with evangelism, saying “I believe in victory over sin” does not produce a strong interest. But now, if I say “I believe in Christian perfection,” I think that I will get a more dramatic response.

First of all, it sounds very powerful, especially in these days, where a very common expression is, “Nobody is perfect.” Even among Christians, “Nobody is perfect” has become practically a “Gospel according to self.” To many, this a source of (false) comfort, because they are only too aware of their shortcomings and sins, and if *nobody* is expected to overcome these things, then maybe they are not so badly off after all. The knowledge of sin that leads to true repentance is thus avoided. Saying, “I believe in perfection” is certainly not something people hear every day, and so they are likely to ask what we mean by this statement.

Second, it makes it a very personal testimony. If I say, “I believe in victory over sin,” that sounds like a theological position, just like, “I believe in the Trinity,” or “I believe in transubstantiation” (neither of which are true, of course). But, “I believe in Christian perfection” leads, quite naturally I think, to the response, “So do you believe you are perfect?” Notice, I did not say, “in Christ’s perfection.” I said, “in Christian perfection,” or, the perfection of those who follow Christ. “Victory over sin” has the potential to seem ambiguous, because victory is shared by both the Savior and those who follow him, but “Christian perfection” specifies the believer, and not only Him in whom we believe. Do you understand what I mean by that?

But now, if I am going to give this testimony, and if I am going to say, if asked about my faith, “I believe in Christian perfection,” I have to be ready for the response I am likely to get, “Do you believe that you are perfect?”

Now, we have answered this question, over the years, in different ways, depending on who asks the question. If we know they will understand the difference between ultimate, fully mature, glorified perfection and the perfection of the growing plant (Mark 4:28) we say, “Yes.” If we believe they will instantly conclude we are self-deceived fanatics (after all, they will say, “if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” – 1John 1:8) then we say, “Not in the sense that you mean.” Both answers, we hope, provide us an opportunity to share further, and both are true, but what

they boil down to, if the meaning of both is understood at the same time, is, “I am perfect, and I am being perfected.”

Isn't this what Paul says? He says, “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after...” (Phil 3:12) In other words, “I don't consider myself to have attained the full measure of perfection,” (the Greek word *teleioo*) and yet, “Let us therefore, as many as be perfect (*teleios* – perfect up to the expected level of growth), be thus minded.” (Phil 3:15)

So then, is the born-again Christian ready to be judged according to the perfect measure of Christ's character? We are perfect, and we are being perfected; thus, we are prepared, and we are preparing.

The Paradox of Faith

The Christian life is one of faith, and yet we have a “work” to do, a work of preparation, of which James says, “by works was faith made perfect.” There is that word “perfect” again. And yes, in full accord with Paul's doctrine, James uses the term *teleioo* here: fully mature perfection. By acts of faith, by living out our faith, by enduring trials of our faith, that faith is refined. (1Pet 1:7)

In general, but when it comes to spiritual ideas especially, there are many things that appear at first consideration to conflict, when in reality they are in harmony. You can find hundreds of supposed “contradictions” in the Bible, certainly in the doctrines of the Adventist Church, yet those who set forth those arguments never seem to take the time to critically examine what they are saying.

There are three ways to approach any matter, and the way that is chosen greatly affects the thought processes of those who evaluate it. One may consider a concept in order to a) disprove it, b) prove it, or c) learn about it. If we are aware of the way we are approaching something, we have the ability to alter our course if we see enough evidence contrary to what we have believed.

Those who look for errors are almost never interested in studying the Bible objectively. Almost invariably we find some personal matter at the root of the endeavor, and the rejection of Biblical doctrine is the most convenient way to justify some individual's flaw or sin.

What we have found, we who are interested in learning the Scriptures, and also interested in proving it (for we expect our faith to be confirmed in every respect, and we are aware of this), is that everything lines up perfectly. Thus, for us to say, “I am prepared (which implies a finished work) and preparing (which indicates an unfinished work)” is actually a perfectly sensible statement. Without contradiction, we view ourselves as both a finished work, and also a work whose final end we cannot even comprehend.

As we saw in that study by A.T. Jones on Christian perfection, we cannot even measure Yahweh's righteousness, yet we are instructed to attain it. How can we do this? It is only by the grandest of miracles... but again, we expect our faith to be confirmed in this respect as well. As John has so eloquently put it, and I am actually surprised this verse didn't turn up in last month's material: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when [Christ] shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” (1John 3:2)

And here again we see the supposed paradox; “now” we are Yah's sons, and yet we have not seen what we shall be, because we have not yet seen Him as He is. The physical attributes of Christ are hardly the

issue here; John is speaking about the revelation of Yah's character to the universe through the Son. And it is possible to take this idea too far, that the "Christ" who shall appear is a concept, an idea, and not a physical Person. Yet we believe that the prophecies of Scripture will be fulfilled "to the letter" (which does not always mean "literally" in the strictest sense of the word); and that Yahshua will appear "in like manner as [the disciples] have seen Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

It is with this mindset that we should approach passages such as the following:

"And one of the multitude answered and said, 'Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit.' And He asked his father, 'How long is it ago since this came unto him?' And he said, 'Of a child. And oft-times it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him; but if thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us.'

"Yahshua said unto him, 'If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, 'Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.'"

"When Yahshua saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, 'Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him.' And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him, and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, 'He is dead.' But Yahshua took him by the hand, and lifted him up, and he arose." (Mark 9:17, 21-27)

The father of the stricken child said, "I believe," but then right afterwards he said, "Help my unbelief." At first glance this appears to be a paradox, and yet, if he did not believe Yahshua could help, why would he ask Him to help his unbelief?

The man realized that he did not have perfect (as in, fully mature) faith. When faced with a life-or-death situation, the important matters of his life rose up before him, and the one that was foremost in his mind was the state of his faith. And he believed that it was important, necessary, for the safety of his son, yet like Isaiah, when faced with "the moment," he was keenly aware of his own inadequacy. Like Peter walking on the water, he reached out for help – in faith – and that faith was acknowledged.

In terms of our preparedness, we grasp all that we have attained, as it is written in Philippians 3, and we never let it go. Our convictions are worth our blood, and our drive is to reach ever upward to the next rung of the ladder. And as we grasp tightly, and as we reach upward, we hold these things to be true with an almost child-like wonder. The world is cynical, especially about spiritual things. It is always ready to doubt, to fall back into materialism, to have confidence only in what it can see and touch.

But we are not like that. We believe, and we know that we believe. We accept, and we seek more truth to accept.

Perhaps you know the old saying:

He who knows, and knows that he knows – he is a wise man. Seek him.
He who knows, and knows not he knows – he is asleep. Wake him.
He know knows not, and knows that he knows not – he is a child. Teach him.
He who knows not, and knows not he knows not – he is a fool. Shun him!

Child-like faith is a teachable faith. We do not revel in ignorance, like the world, nor are we self-deceived, as the fools are, thinking we know something that we do not.

Our belief, far from making us naïve, makes us aware of things that the rest of humanity is not, and one of the things we become aware of very quickly is the distance between ourselves and the Father, even as He says to us with a loving, comforting voice, “We are one.” We cling to that promise, even though we are unable to fully understand it, because those words are salvation to us. Through the sacrifice of Yahshua, we are “one” with the Father and Son. We are prepared to meet them, should life end this very moment, yet we are preparing to meet them, as we expect to see them in the clouds of glory, coming for those who have triumphed over every shadow of transgression.

The man said, “I believe, help thou my unbelief.” We, who are members of the royal family, say, “We believe.” And we strengthen that belief through our witness to the world.

The Work of A Witness

Just as the name “Creation Seventh Day Adventist” was given to us, not only for our own sakes, but as a witness to others, so Christian perfection was given to us, not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of others as well.

We witness so that others may prepare, as we are preparing. And more, we show them how it is done, and the result of such preparation.

How exactly we do this is by revealing to them the gifts of the Spirit. And by this I refer not only to the “spiritual gifts” listed in 1Corinthians, such as prophecy, organization, tongues, and so on. These are individual spiritual gifts. I mean the corporate gifts of the spirit, often ignored – if not outright despised – by many who call themselves Christians.

We read: “And [Yah] gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” (Eph 4:11-13)

So why do I call these things, these people, gifts of the Spirit? It is because of another passage that reveals the means by which these gifts are given: “But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will [...] For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. [...] And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” (1Cor 12:11, 13, 28)

The transition there should be easy to read. And these gifts, both the traditionally reckoned “spiritual gifts” and also the structure of the Church body, are given for the “perfecting of the saints.” Do we say, can we consider, that these gifts will fail? I should think not; therefore how can any deny the reality of Christian perfection? How can any say, “That will never happen,” when this very thing is the purpose of Yah’s gifts? I would submit that to deny the concept of Christian perfection is to deny faith in Yah Himself, for that is the stated purpose of His Spirit’s work among those who claim to be His.

And furthermore, we do not conceive of perfection as something distant, and future. It is ours for the claiming now, if Paul's doctrine as revealed in Philippians 3, and various other places, is to be accepted as the Gospel of Yahshua.

No... we cannot deny the reality of perfection. And furthermore, because these promises will never fail, it is a part of our faith to *expect* this of ourselves at every stage of our growth. But notice, none of us will say, "I have no need of these gifts." We are still preparing; we still need these things, thus, the process is ongoing. We are both prepared by what we have learned, and preparing for what we do not yet know. But at every stage, and for every trial that we face, we are prepared, and that perfectly.

Now, let us not mistake the matter. Who is it that is truly doing the preparing?

We do the acts, but it is Yah who prepares. As with evangelism: "So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase." (1Cor 3:7)

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Our work on the earth, as those being refined ourselves, and in our work of witnessing to others, what we are doing is opening the way for Yah to work. Like the voice crying in the desert, we are making the path straight for the Divine to function as It wishes. While we are not necessary to the process, it is Yah's "Good pleasure" to work in us and through us, but this also requires preparation. We find many examples of this in the Scriptures:

Moses, prepared by shepherding

Noah, prepared by his preaching and building the ark.

Christ, the perfect example, prepared for the cross by His ministry, and then prepared by that sacrifice for His role as High Priest. And He is even now being prepared, by that work as High Priest, for His eternal labor as King. You see how this works through the experiences of our perfect example, and there is probably more in that than we can cover at the end of this month's lesson.

But understand, everything we endure, whether it is a victory or an apparent defeat, it is but preparation for our calling, and we can always look to Yahshua to see exactly how this works.