

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I know someone who belongs to a church that teaches that true Christians do not sin (no drinking, smoking, gambling, going to movies or playing card games), that after “receiving the Holy Ghost” they never sin again. I sin in many ways, big and small, every day, so I feel inferior and ashamed when I think about the “sinlessness” the people of that church claim to possess. Can you help me?

What you have run into is called Perfectionism, the belief that it is possible to not sin at all.

There have been Perfectionist groups through the centuries, but what you have encountered sounds like Holiness teaching, which originated in early Methodism and is widespread in classical Pentecostalism and in non-Pentecostal Holiness churches.

John Wesley called his followers to be “altogether Christian,” that God who is good enough to forgive sin (to justify) is great enough to transform the sinner into a saint (to sanctify) so that one will be free from outward sins and from “evil thoughts and tempers.”

But there were two views about how quickly this sanctification happens. One type is “instantaneous perfection”—a miraculous transformation in an instant. The other is “gradualism,” the notion of slowly becoming more Christ-like over many years. Instantaneous moral perfection won out over gradualism in Wesleyanism. But when American Methodism stopped emphasizing Perfectionism in the early 19th century, other groups broke away and did stress it. For instance, in 1843 a number of Holiness ministers withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church to found the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America, and in 1860 the Free Methodist Church of North America was

founded. Between 1880 and World War I, a number of new Holiness churches emerged, including the Church of God of Anderson, Indiana (1881), the Church of the Nazarene (1895), and the Church of God of Cleveland, Tennessee (1907).

As a side note, Pentecostalism developed out of Holiness around 1900. The main difference between the two strains is that Pentecostals added speaking in tongues to instantaneous perfection as what you get when you receive “the Baptism of the Holy Ghost.”

What are we to think about Perfectionism—especially the instantaneous kind? First, it has never been the official teaching of historic Christianity—at least until the Wesleyan Movement. Martin Luther famously rejected Perfectionism and was very much aware of his many faults and sins to his dying day. John Calvin and the whole Reformed Tradition never accepted Perfectionism. Catholic Christianity East and West (Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism) acknowledged moral and spiritual growth over a lifetime but never instantaneous sinlessness.

I see Perfectionism as representing a laudable desire but an unrealistic one. The desire to be totally dedicated to God is good and natural for one who is full of

love for God and thankful for God’s many blessings. But sober reflection on the reality of the lives of believers shows that no one (except our Lord Jesus) has ever managed to avoid sin completely.

After a religious experience, many people are filled with love for God and gratitude to God and immediately “turn over a new leaf.” With a strong desire to please God and not do anything that God forbids, people often will quite effortlessly and painlessly stop any number of transgressions, from having extramarital sex to drinking alcohol, from smoking and gambling to using coarse language. I believe this is the phenomenon that those who believe in Perfectionism have in mind.

The problem is that even if one can “turn over a new leaf” in this way, that does not mean one is truly sinless. Other bad behaviors and bad thinking often remain, even if is not as easily apparent. What comes to mind is prejudice and hostility in regard to immigrants and foreigners, dark-skinned people of all sorts, Jews, Muslims, Catholics, women. Being “baptized in the Holy Spirit” does not necessarily free one from the common prejudices of one’s culture.

A serious problem with Holiness Perfectionism is that many Holiness people, believing Church is for the righteous and not for sinners, stay away from

Church when they are not living a righteous life. They are miserable, thinking that they have chosen beer or something else unholy over Jesus. They think they cannot return to Church until they first reform themselves and again live righteously. Some believe they have lost their salvation and will have to get re-saved and re-baptized in the Holy Ghost and again live a perfect life, or else they’ll go to Hell.

I ask Where is the Good News in this? Where is grace? There is forgiveness in this style of Christianity if you ask for it for your past sins. But if you sin again, God’s love is withdrawn until you return to righteous living. The problem is that the bar is set so high at complete moral perfection and avoidance of every sin and bad habit that most people are doomed to fail and to be cast out of the church. Those who remain must behave flawlessly in public and hide their bad features and behavior from the church. This raises the very real danger of people carrying guilty secrets and feeling they are hypocrites for still going to church.

Is this healthy? Is this style of Christianity Good News? I can’t see how it is.

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