

**“CONTINUAL CLEANSING”
VERSES
“PERFECTIONISM”**

by Robert Waters

“My thanks to you for sending me a copy of your excellent booklet, *Continual Cleansing VS Perfectionism*. It is a very forthright, effective and convincing presentation. I believe you to be right in each argument therein. I have preached this comforting doctrine for nearly sixty years. I never heard it questioned until recently. All scholarly men among us of every persuasion have taught it either directly or indirectly. -- **Guy N. Woods**

The Security Of The Believer

Brother Waters has done excellent work in this booklet and it deserves to be read and studied by any sincere brethren. He denies all Calvinism but at the same time he advocates full assurance and confidence for the faith child of God.”
– **Leslie Diestelkamp**

Third Printing Revised 2006

“CONTINUAL CLEANSING” VERSES “PERFECTIONISM”

There are brethren who hold the opinion that a person is capable of knowing each and every time he sins. This idea is a cornerstone in the foundation of a doctrine that minimizes the need for the blood of Christ, destroys hope, prevents happiness, elevates man to the level of Christ, and which is at least partly responsible for numerous and needless divisions that have taken place among churches of Christ. I do not like to affix names but a study such as this would be impossible without names to describe the doctrines discussed. The name *neo-perfectionist* was the appropriate term 15 years ago when referring to many of the same brethren who are now teaching old fashioned *perfectionism*.

On the other hand, there are brethren who take a firm and scriptural position that denies the main points of Calvinism while allowing the faithful to have hope, contentment, peace of mind, and spiritual security. The doctrine just described has been called *continual cleansing* which is based upon many passages, some of which are listed as follows: 1 John 1:7; Rom. 8:1-4; Luke 18:13; and Ps. 19:12,13.

Perfectionism has made inroads in the church in the last two decades. Proponents, in their efforts to defend their doctrine have taken a position on the deity of Christ that is rejected by all except modernists. My hopes are that this study will help the reader to have a better understanding of what it takes to have spiritual security; and to become aware, or be reminded, of the dangers and consequences of *perfectionism*. Brethren who learn the truth on this issue and are forewarned of those who would pervert it, will be able to avoid administrative (hiring) blunders which often result in churches being split.

Some have concluded that it would be better to not discuss this issue, while others are willing to discuss it but are

unable to do so without getting angry. Some public debates have been held and several written discussions have taken place in journals, but it seems that brethren cannot agree on a clear and fair proposition. This is an indication that we are either not understanding one another or that there is dishonesty in one or both camps. Honesty demands that we address the issue. I shall state the real issue, as I see it, in the form of both a negative and positive proposition:

A child of God falls from grace every time he commits a sin, regardless of the nature of the sin (presumptuous, or in ignorance, "great" or "minor") or the penitent disposition of the Christian. Deny - R.W. Affirm - _____?

A person can become a Christian and "*walk in the light*" all the days of his life without falling from the grace of God, even though he never reaches the point that he does not sin. Affirm - R.W. Affirm - _____?

For those who would consider denying the latter, I would remind you of the words of the apostle Peter: "*Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 1:10, 11). Since doing the things spoken of by the apostle do not include sinless perfection, and he said, "*ye shall never fall,*" to deny the proposition would be tantamount to denying the word of God.

Not until the last two decades have we heard such things as, "**Yes, it is possible for one to always know every sin of which he is guilty.**"¹ It is also being taught by the same

1 Keith Sharp; **The Preceptor**, June 1986, p. 15.

brethren that, **“Since every sin springs from the heart (mind will), there are no such thing as an accidental sin.”**² What these brethren seem to be saying is that each and every time we sin, it is premeditated and we do it deliberately!

But is the above true? Webster defines the word *“choose”* as: *“To select especially freely and after consideration.”* Before a person can be said to have made a choice, he must have been aware of more than one of the options involved. For example, Joshua exhorted the Israelites to choose between God and the gods of the Ammorites (Josh. 24:15) and the people chose God. In like manner, those who know about God have the choice to either serve Him or Satan. But how can it be said that one who has not heard of the Bible has chosen to sin? People ignorant of God do sin, but it is not necessarily deliberate and premeditated, which is inferred if we say they *“choose”* to sin. It is also true that CHRISTIANS sometimes commit sin without having chosen or made a choice to do so. All of us have become aware of sins we committed inadvertently or which were due to ignorance. Had we been aware of the matter at the time, we would have had a choice and could have avoided it. This principle is taught in Numbers 15:29-31. Those who sinned due to ignorance were allowed to make a sacrifice and live. Contrariwise, those who knew that the thing was sin but presumptuously or rebelliously did it anyway were *“cut-off”* from the people.

Thinking that sin cannot be categorized, some brethren conclude that we are *“cut-off”* from God’s grace every time we sin. Nevertheless, as we have seen, there are two classes of sin. One did not bring death or separation -- the other did. In the New Testament, John spoke of sin *“not unto death”* and sin *“unto death”* (1 John 5:15-17). Yet, the *neo-perfectionism and perfectionism* brethren still say, *“All sin is unto death.”*

If a faithful Christian inadvertently crosses the centerline of the highway while driving a car (which is sin) and dies in a crash, there are brethren that would say he would be destined to hell because he did not confess the sin. Granted that there are brethren that would answer in this manner, what other conclusion can you come to than that they believe that the only time one is *"in the light"* is when he has reached the point of perfection and is therefore without sin.

Remember, we learn from 1 John 1:7 that, *"if we walk in the light"* the blood cleanses. When does the blood do the cleansing? Cleansing takes place when we are in the light. What about those who God determines are no longer in the light? They must repent, or change their life, and get back in the light where the cleansing takes place. Some of my brethren seem to think that repentance and confession of sin in prayer are things a Christian does only while in darkness and out of the light. Nevertheless, both repentance and confession are practices of Christians, and we do these things while *in the light*. Those who will not repent and confess are the ones who are not in the light! Who can deny it?

The *perfectionists* ask: "What sins can a Christian commit and not be lost," and, "If you can commit one sin and not be lost, what about adultery, etc." Admittedly, no one knows where God draws the line. We are taught to "draw the line" on those who refuse to repent. However, it should be obvious to all that those who *"walk in the light"* endeavor to avoid all sin and that we do not need to know the answer to such foolish questions. We also know that even though God no longer *"winks"* at sin but commands repentance, He said, *"I show mercy on whom I will"* (Ex. 33:19). Those whom the Lord forgives are said to be "blessed". Paul wrote: *"Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin"*

(Romans 4:6-8). A pertinent question to this issue is, DOES GOD ALWAYS IMPUTE EVERY SIN TO EVERYONE? Paul answered the question when he taught that there is a man to whom, "*He will not impute sin*". Who is that man? The man whose sins are covered is the man who walks in the light (1 John 1:7).

Although faithful Christians do not commit sin "all the time," as some brethren have affirmed, we do sin. Sin is associated with darkness, but a faithful Christian's *walk* or manner of life is "in the light" and God approves of his life.

When a preacher of the gospel preaches, "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*", we understand the comprehensiveness of "*believeth*". We do not accuse the preacher of failing to preach repentance and faithful service. Yet when a preacher teaches that if you "*walk in the light*" you are cleansed of all sin, some brethren do not apply the principle and cry, "That's Calvinism!". But those who espouse the idea of "continual cleansing," based on 1 John 1:7, understand that repentance and confession of sin, honesty, diligence, brotherly love, etc., are all included in the phrase, "*walk in the light*".

Some make a play on the words, "*As He is in the light.*" Of course when they do, it is tantamount to admitting that perfection is essential to being in a saved condition. The question is not how we walk, but where we are walking. Isaiah appealed to the house of Jacob saying, "*Come let us walk in the light of the Lord*" (Isa. 2:5). Certainly God is light, but we are merely imperfect humans. We must walk in the light of the Lord, which indicates the place. No person can live in the sun but all can walk in the sunlight. While on earth we cannot attain the same degree of purity, perfection, holiness, honesty and knowledge as God possesses, but we can walk in His light. God's condition for grace is not that we be like Him for His Word tells us we all sin, as in Ecclesiastes 7:20: "*For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not*".

The teachers of *perfectionism* say, "*Continual Cleansing*" opens the doors of fellowship to those worshipping in error." This is a false assumption. No door of fellowship is being opened because those who "*walk in the light*" know better than to fellowship those who do not love nor practice the truth.

It is argued that if we teach that God forgives sins that we might commit due to ignorance, without our ever becoming aware, repenting and confessing, then we put a premium on ignorance. We must admit that we do place a premium on ignorance if we make a blanket statement that God forgives all sins committed in ignorance. I am very sure He does not, but I'm equally sure that he forgives (or does not impute) sins of ignorance committed by those who "*walk in the light*", because John said the blood then cleanses us of ALL sin. The blessing promised is forgiveness of all sin, but the condition is that we, "*walk in the light*".

One brother wrote, "I believe that any time a Christian commits a sin, he stands condemned (Gal. 2:14) or he dies spiritually (Gen. 3). In order to be forgiven of that sin, he must repent of his sin, confess it, and pray for forgiveness from the Lord".¹

Those who believe the above have yet to tell the rest of us how a Christian can feel confident of his salvation. If *perfectionism* is true, it would seem evident that for one to be confident of salvation he must have complete knowledge of what is and what is not sin, and indeed be "without sin". However, in view of what John tells us about the matter, the idea of thinking oneself to be without sin is sin in itself (1 John 1:8,10). Thus, one who believes in *perfectionism* cannot have true spiritual security.

An alarming number of preachers of the gospel are teaching that it is possible for a person to live his whole life

1 **Guardian Of Truth**; June 6, 1985, p. 368.

without sinning. Keith Sharp said, "Yes, it is possible to live without sin, but none of us do so".¹ We must admit that they say, "none do" live without sin, but how do they know that "none do" since, as they have argued, "it is possible" to so live. Sharp preached that it is possible for a person to live his whole life without sinning and thus be saved (or "safe", as he puts it) without the blood of Christ.² Such false doctrine minimizes the importance of the fact that ANYONE who is saved, or "safe", (who is accountable) is so because he has contacted the blood of Christ and is walking in the light.

The preachers of *perfectionism* have a lot to say about man's ability to live above sin. Thankfully though, we are only taught to strive diligently for sinless perfection (Heb. 11:6; Phi. 3:13; 2 Pet. 1:5; 3:14; Prov. 4:23). The Bible doesn't teach that we must attain sinless perfection to continue in fellowship with God. If it did it would contradict itself, and since we cannot or "do not" become perfect, we would all be lost (Ecc. 7:20). The brethren who oppose *continual cleansing* not only will not accept this consequence they will seldom address it.

Those who embrace *perfectionism* argue if a person can live without sinning for an hour, why not a day, and if a day why not a year, and so on. At first that might sound logical, but is it? You could tread water for an hour, but you could not do it for years. According to both reason and prophecy, we cannot avoid becoming a sinner (Romans 3:23; Ecc. 7:20). If it is possible for someone to live a sinless life, it is possible for prophecy to fail.

The defenders of *perfectionism* admit that "none do" reach sinless perfection, but think about that for a moment. If a person has any sin in his life, regardless of the circumstances or general faithfulness of the person, or regardless of the pure heart of the Christian, they say he is lost. Yet they say

1 **The Preceptor**, June 1986, p. 8

2 Keith Sharp - in a sermon on "Neo-Calvinism"

none of us reach sinless perfection! THERE IS BUT ONE LOGICAL CONCLUSION TO THEIR REASONING, AND THAT IS THAT THERE IS NOT ONE PERSON THAT IS NOT LOST!

Even though proponents of *perfectionism* say “none do” live a sinless life, they continue to argue that they are capable of knowing all things that are sin, and capable of keeping free of every kind of error. Well, if they are capable, why don't they do it? They should start by telling the truth!

In 1985, Eugene Britnell wrote a short article entitled, **“Does Man Have To Sin?”**. Eugene's article was a confutation of an article bearing the same title published in another journal. Nowhere did Eugene say or imply that a person cannot resist a particular temptation. Eugene quoted Eccles. 7:20, and then wrote, “That one statement refutes the conclusion in the article and should settle the matter. If man can live without sinning, nobody has yet discovered how to do it!” That pretty much summarizes what Eugene taught in the article. To most brethren, if not all, the message was clear. However, some saw it as an opportunity to defame a prominent teacher of *continual cleansing*. Their response was, which was taught in the original article, “No, a man does not have to sin.” That objection would have been reasonable if they were talking about occasions when a choice is presented. Rather, it was a confirmation of the belief that a person can live his entire life without sin. How could the scriptures justify this idea? The answers that Keith Sharp, John Welch, and others gave to prove their doctrine sent shock waves throughout the brotherhood. **“Jesus was just a man like you and me. He lived a life without sin, therefore we can do the same.”** Rather than give up on *neo-perfectionism*, they began to openly teach a doctrine that is pure *perfectionism* and nothing short of modernism. It began to be openly taught that, **“Jesus was just an ordinary guy.”** It was emphatically asserted that

while on earth Jesus was, “**just a man.**” This turn of events served to cloud the issue and sidetrack opposing brethren. The issue (*continual cleansing* verses *neo-perfectionism*) was overshadowed by the new issues, “Does Man Have To Sin?”, and, “Was Jesus just a man?”.

If advocates of *perfectionism* were to accept that all sins are forgiven only when the Christian asks for forgiveness of all sins (general confession), then there would be a semblance of hope. Even then the only hope would be to get lucky and die shortly after the confession and before another sin could be committed. Many reject the idea of this “general confession” because it implies forgiveness without learning of and specifically repenting of sins of which one is ignorant. Our real hope is based upon the fact that if “*we walk in the light*” (repentance and confession of sin being a part of the walk), “*the blood...cleanses us of all sin*” (1 John 1:7). If you are not willing to accept that the phrase, “*walk in the light*” means ABSOLUTE SINLESS LIVING, then you are left to conclude that the phrase does not have reference to a single act, but to the “*walk*” of life, or general character of an individual. The latter is what Bible scholars teach.

Do you suppose any of the *perfectionist* preachers have ever considered the number of things that are questionable; that is things that some faithful Christians believe to be sin, but which others do not? I believe it can be said with certainty that if any five preachers made a list of things that are sinful, as complete as they could, no two would have the same things on the list.

The following are a few things upon which faithful brethren differ as to the question of whether they are sinful or not: 1) preaching a meeting for a church that engages in unscriptural practices or worships in error; 2) missing a regular service to preach to the lost when there is no other occasion; 3) wearing shorts in playing sports; 4) worshipping with a liberal church when there is no other for many miles; 5) the

church owning and operating a van or bus; 6) the church having an interest bearing checking account; 7) having funerals and weddings in the meeting house; ad infinitum.

To bring up another question of significance to our study, who knows the exact point when certain things become sinful? For example, movies can certainly be sinful to watch, but which ones -- those rated "G", "PG", "R", or "X"? What about contact among dating couples -- at what point does physical contact become sinful? When does a church sin by not appointing elders? To what extent must a church practice discipline before it sins? Boasting is certainly sinful, but at what point does the broadcasting of the good things one has done (gospel meetings, baptisms, etc.) become sinful? How many of us know the answers to all these questions and the many others like them?

This next list is of things that we all generally agree to be sinful but which we can never be sure that we are not guilty, of at least one, to some degree: 1) anxiety or worry (Matt. 6:25-34, NKJB); 2) negligent regarding one of our many responsibilities; 3) pride; 4) having offended someone; 5) prejudice; 6) jealousy; 7) greed; 8) waste of anything over which God has placed us as stewards; ad infinitum.

When those who teach that man can and must keep himself absolutely free of all sin, to be in fellowship with God, demonstrate that they know the answer to all the above, their contention will not look quite as hopeless and absurd.

Under the Old Testament, the children of God were responsible for keeping the Ten Commandments. Nine of the same commandments are found in the New Testament, as well as many other principles. Are we saying that it is harder to be saved under the New Testament than it was by the Old Law? No. It is easier, but not through self-accomplishment or the possibility of one being able to live without sin. Such was necessary to be saved by the Old Law, but not in Christ. The

difference in the two laws is that one “*killeth*”, whereas the other “*giveth life*” (1 Cor. 3:6).

Jesus said, “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall ANY MAN PLUCK THEM OUT OF MY HAND*” (John 10:27-28; emphasis mine). If what Jesus said is true, the doctrine that we are warning you about cannot be true. If *perfectionism* is true, God’s sheep CAN be “plucked” out of His hand. One could place a bomb in a church and change the elements of the Lord’s Supper to something that wouldn’t be noticed, then immediately after the church partook set off the explosive. Those killed, according to *perfectionism*, would be “plucked” right out of God’s hand. Reason, logic, and the scripture supports the idea that if they were faithful immediately before the incident the blood keeps on cleansing.

The effect *perfectionism* has had is very serious and very great. The following are a few things that are noteworthy: 1) divisions have occurred over doctrinal matters that were not a threat to the church nor to the salvation of any individual, simply because some entertain the idea that we must be “right” on everything we believe, (and “right” is, of course, the way THEY see it); 2) brethren have classified things that the Bible teaches against as being merely “unwise” and not sinful; the reason possibly being because it would otherwise be too difficult to live above sin; 3) those who have accepted the other extreme (once saved always saved) look upon “The Church of Christ” as legalists and perfectionists, which often leads to prejudice against all members of Christ’s church; 4) faithful brethren’s reputations have been damaged because of misrepresentations; 5) brethren who accept and hold to the perfection doctrine are going to be less apt to admit a sin because to do so would be to admit that they were disinherited by the Lord (One preacher excused his sin by saying, “That was just unfortunate”); 6) there have been needless

contentions among brethren on this matter; 7) preaching to the alien and other important topics for Christians are neglected by those who preach their hopeless hobby at every occasion (one man preached it at a funeral); 8) the doctrine tends to beget self-righteous and arrogant attitudes and impenitent dispositions; and 9) it has led to the denial of the deity of Jesus while on earth.

CONCLUSION

The issues involved in this discussion are of great concern because if we accept the strange things that are being taught as truth: 1) we minimize the necessity to contact the blood of Christ; 2) we minimize the necessity to confess our sins (1 John 1:9), because we would then think that if one hasn't sinned (or can't recall any) that he doesn't have to confess and ask for forgiveness; and 3) hope, which is necessary to happiness, security, and even salvation, would be nonexistent, unless we think we are sinlessly perfect, but such would then be a false hope. Any way you slice it, **IF THE PERFECTION DOCTRINE IS TRUE WE ARE ALL DOOMED FOR HELL! AND IF YOU ACCEPT IT, YOU CAN NEVER HAVE THE PEACE OF MIND REALIZED BY THOSE WHO RECOGNIZE THAT GOD ONLY EXPECTS US TO *WALK IN THE LIGHT*.**

Let me close with a word of warning. There are brethren who are making their hopeless hobby an issue to the point of disfellowshipping those who oppose them. Isn't the heretic the one that is supposed to be rejected? The proponents of *perfectionism* are teaching that man can be saved without Christ, and that Christ was just a man like you and me. Such teaching must not be allowed in the pulpits of faithful brethren. These brethren are not wolves in sheep's clothing. We know what they are and who they are. Beware! If they are allowed to preach where you worship, they will tell you *continual*

cleansing advocates are teaching that a Christian does not have to repent or confess his sins. They will also falsely assert that such faithful brethren, in teaching the idea of *continual cleansing*, are teaching a new doctrine and that this doctrine is "pure Calvinism", thus employing guilt by association. The *perfectionists* have incessantly taught their doctrine from the pulpit, books, tracts, journals Internet and any other means available. They have often implored others to "join in the fight" and to "give the signal" about the danger of those who oppose them.

The idea of *continual cleansing* is supported by insurmountable proof while *perfectionism* is without a shred of evidence and stands self-condemned. Which do you choose?

CONTINUAL CLEANSING

BLESSINGS:

Hope

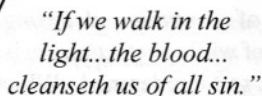
Contentment

Peace of Mind

Joy and Happiness

Spiritual Security

Foundation: 1 John 1:7



*"If we walk in the
light...the blood...
cleanseth us of all sin."*

DILIGENCE AND GRACE

PERFECTIONISM

RESULTS IN:

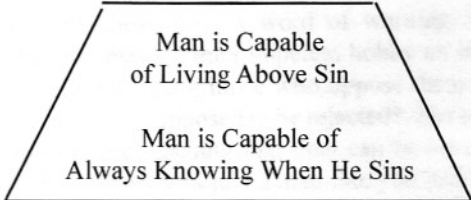
Worry

Doubt

Unhappiness

Hopelessness

Foundation: Man



Man is Capable
of Living Above Sin

Man is Capable of
Always Knowing When He Sins

DILIGENCE AND PERFECTION

by Robert Waters