

An aerial photograph of a city at sunset, with buildings and a river visible. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. The city is densely packed with buildings, and a river flows through the lower part of the frame. The overall scene is a panoramic view of an urban landscape during the golden hour.

# The Perfect Church

The Roots of Perfectionist Thinking in Adventism and the Need for  
Balanced Ecclesiology

Ján Barna, Newbold College of Higher Education

# The Roots of Perfectionist Theology in Adventism

## (1) Wesleyan Perfectionism

*‘It is that habitual disposition of the soul which, in sacred writings is termed **holiness**, and which directly implies, the **being cleansed from sin.**’ Or: ‘Here, then, is the sum of the perfect law; this is the **true circumcision of the heart...Let your soul be filled with an entire love of him, that you may love nothing but for his sake**’*

Oxford, January 1, 1733, Sermon 17 (Circumcision of the Heart).

1. Wesley’s definition of perfection is at its core **internal LOVE of God.**
2. Wesley’s ‘perfection’ is **not final or absolute.**
3. Wesley’s ‘perfection’ is based on the idea of **full eradication of sin.**

# The Roots of Perfectionist Theology in Adventism

## (2) A. T. Jones' Charismatic Perfectionism

God will *supress sin* in us to such a degree that it will be powerless, this way we gain perfect obedience and receive Christ's righteousness. To make this possible, one must show total surrender to God.

### **Keswick Movement (1875)**

Holiness by faith is the act of *complete surrender* to God's will; looking away from oneself and trusting God. When believers surrender all to Him, God will literally *possess* such individuals with His fullness.

The Keswick slogan: **'let go and let God'** - surrender everything to God

# The Roots of Perfectionist Theology in Adventism

## (2) A. T. Jones' Charismatic Perfectionism

The theology of **full surrender, spirit possession & infilling** dominates many Adventist hymns in the *Adventist Hymnal*.

269 - Come Holy Spirit

263 - Fire of God Thou Sacred Flame

567 - Have Thine Own Way, Lord

260 - Hover Over Me, Holy Spirit

309 - I Surrender All

330 - Take My Life and Let It Be

590 - Trust and Obey

318 - Whiter Than Snow

308 - Wholly Thine

258 - Baptise Us Anew

265 - Breathe on Me, Breath of God

267 - Spirit Divine



# The Roots of Perfectionist Theology in Adventism

## **(3) Andreasen's Perfect Last Generation**

Andreasen's type of perfection is the end result of gradual sanctification - a work of gradual eradication of sinful actions and habits from one's life. One reaches perfection when outward physical acts and the inner sinful tendencies are completely eradicated or overcome.

The perfect last generation finally vindicates God's government based on the obedience to His law; and as the result God will stand vindicated and Satan will be defeated.

# The Roots of Perfectionist Theology in Adventism

## The Official Adventist Statements

Does the lack of direct reference to perfectionism in official Adventist statements of faith...

...perhaps say to us that Adventist ecclesiology works well with sanctification and maturing of Christian character concepts, concepts which *are* very prominent in our statements, but not really with absolutist connotations of sanctification which push soteriology into sinlessness position?

# Towards a Biblical Definition of Perfection

There are **94** scriptural places where the KJV uses the English word 'perfect'.

Hebrew – *Tom/ Tamijm* = 'integrity/simplicity of mind,' 'innocence,'

Greek – *Teleios* from *Telos* = 'an end,' 'a purpose,' 'an aim,' or 'a goal'

**Matthew 5:48** – *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*

**Mat 19:16-21**

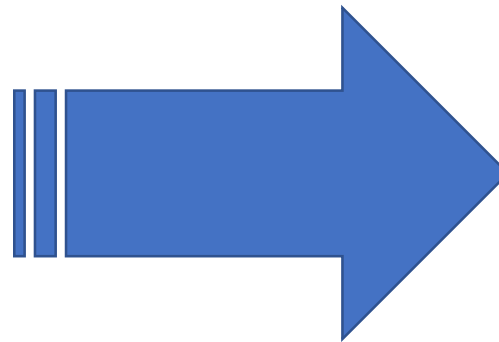
**Perfect** = 'mature' or 'whole'

# Towards a Biblical Definition of Perfection

NT framework of thinking is **ALREADY** of salvation and **NOT-YET** of salvation

## **ALREADY**

Forgiveness  
Conversion  
Confession  
Circumcision of heart  
Faith  
Baptism  
Fellowship  
Breaking of the bread  
Reconciliation  
Sanctification  
Walking in the Spirit  
Being *in Christ*



## **NOT YET**

Revelation of the sons and daughters of God  
Restoration  
Redemption from the curse  
Glorification  
Resurrection  
New bodies  
Vindication/Justification  
Judgement  
Crown of righteousness





# Reflection

*Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. 13 Brethren, I **count not myself to have apprehended**: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, 14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. 15 **Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded**: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. 16 Nevertheless, **whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing. Phil 3:12-16***

# Reflection

Perfection – as **maturity of heart** and **motivation of love** belongs to the present experience of salvation.

But *teleios* in terms of **eradication of sin** belongs to the future of God's people.

It is illegitimate to bring future aspects of salvation to the present experience of the church.

The salvation framework will help us to avoid perfectionist excesses on one hand and on the other define biblically what the church is and what it's main mission in the world ought to be.

# Questions

**Discuss in what ways can the NT framework of *Already and Not-Yet* be helpful in your church context. Can you imagine using it meaningfully?**

**How damaging in your experience is the perfectionist influence over the church and its members? Share ways in which it can be addressed.**

**What could the official church - administration, teachers, pastors, authors - do to address the issue of perfectionist distortion? Do we do enough?**

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