

The Standard of Perfection

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Even though the gospel *is* simple, the malady of which the people of Christ suffers perhaps the most is a self-induced confusion, a confusion that complicates the simple and oversimplifies the complex. That is, the things hard to understand of which the New Testament speaks (see 2 Pet. 3:16) are reduced to being things that “really don’t matter” because they aren’t simple. And the things that are simple to understand are either obscured behind poorly translated words or intermingled with complex “theology” so that obedience to Christ’s simple commands need no longer be practiced. Jesus’ question still stands worthy of contemplation – and action! – “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Lk. 6:46)

As but one example, some theologians imagine that there are two standards for conduct. One scholar writes, “Some students of Christian ethics make a distinction between the general standards of Christian conduct and what are called ‘counsels of perfection,’ as though the former were prescribed for the rank and file of Christians while the latter could [only] be attained by real saints.” (F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 74) One can see the vestiges of the clergy-laity distinctions as well as the failure to note that *all* believers are called to be saints. (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1, Phlp. 1:1, etc.) It has been humorously but accurately noted that there are only two categories when it comes to be a follower of Christ – saints and ain’ts! To be a saint is simply to be one who is set apart for God’s purposes – to not be set apart from this world to participate in the things of God is to be separate from the new life which Christ gives. It is most important, therefore, to know on which side of that line one stands!

Jesus said, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Mt. 5:48) This “counsel of perfection” for some supposed elite or superior kind of believer falls flat on its face in that regard when we simply compare it with what John wrote: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 Jn. 1:8) If *sinless* perfection is not what Jesus is speaking of here – and it is not – then just what kind of perfection is He talking about?

The first answer is found in recognizing that “perfect” in this instance is an imperfect, even unfortunate, word choice. However, in defense of the many translators who have chosen “perfect” over all other available choices, there really isn’t any one English word that would convey all that is implied in the Greek. The Greek word here is *teleios* [5046] and is many times elsewhere, especially in more recent translations, rendered “complete” or “mature.” “Whole” would come close in some respects. But hidden in the Greek is also the idea of “the end result, the goal, the limit.” It is not so much the sinlessness of God that is to be our standard and goal here but rather the wholeness or completeness or even oneness of God that is what we are to pursue.

This is also confirmed by recognizing what the scholars call the context of Jesus’ words. Directly before this command, He has given six instances where He demands from His followers even greater things than the law required. His requirements looked at the physical action merely as a symptom or indicator of the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Christ required – and still requires – an appropriate thought or heart attitude, not mere outward compliance. (see Mt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-34, 38-39) In the sixth instance, the topic He takes up is love – love even your enemies. Have a love that is greater than the human love that even the tax collectors have for their own. (Mt. 5:43-47) Love, the divine characteristic which both Peter and Paul also place as the pinnacle of spiritual maturity (2 Pet. 1:5-7, Col. 3:14), is the crowning indicator of just how

whole, complete, mature, perfect, like the Father, one actually is. In effect, Jesus is saying, “You must, by the power I give you by My Spirit, go beyond the letter and outward compliance with God’s laws and fulfill the spirit of the law so that you will be whole, mature and complete as the creation God created you to be.”

To What End

This standard of perfection – that of completeness, wholeness and maturity – is the standard by which we should be measuring our own life. But it is not the standard by which we are to judge and decide whom we will fellowship with. That is to say, we cannot fellowship only with those who display spiritual maturity – in our day, one might not find any fellowship at all on that basis! Yet the question of who should be received as a brother in Christ is a question as old as Christianity. The related question is – just what is the ekklesia supposed to be? It is not really possible to decide who should be included if one is not even certain what one is being included in! This question has historically been difficult to answer because the “theologians” were unwilling or unable to envision what the people of Christ were supposed to be because the Nicolaitan bishops had already corrupted the gospel and changed it to an outwardly visible structure by drawing followers after themselves and away from Christ. (Rev. 2:6, 15, Acts 20:30)

Cyprian, in 251 A.D., closed the gate as best he could, by saying, “Outside the church there is no salvation.” Though it is true that no one can be in Christ’s ekklesia (the Greek word inappropriately rendered “church” in English) who has not received Christ’s new life (Jn. 3:3, 2 Cor. 5:17), this is not nearly the same as saying that anyone who refuses to participate in a sect’s rituals and peculiar doctrines (and, yes, the Catholic sect, though the majority sect and the dominant power at that time, was, and is, nothing but a sect) is not being saved by Christ. In this way, Cyprian and the other “church” fathers thus spawned the “Mother Church” or “Mother Kirk” errors. Peter boldly and rightly declared, “[Jesus Christ of Nazareth] is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:11-12) Any salvation obtained in the name of “the church” that has no genuine roots in Jesus Christ of Nazareth is a false “salvation.” And any one’s salvation that is genuinely in Christ that is not recognized by those who claim to be “leaders” in “the church” only demonstrates the false nature of their “church.”

A Mixed Multitude

After the second century, the “church” has always been a mixed multitude, in part because *orthodoxy* (majority opinion about truth) was the primary standard for inclusion in the Catholic sect, and in part because many of the bishops and even popes were themselves corrupt and even wicked men. In many instances, we cannot historically ascertain if the bishop or pope in question had ever personally and genuinely received Christ’s new life! Yet these sometimes unregenerate, even carnal, worldly and wicked men were called upon to decide what truth was and to produce rulings and creeds which the rest of the people of Christ were then to abide by. To be certain, there were also bishops and “divines” who radiated the Spirit and wisdom of Christ but the trend of corruption was never checked and was the primary cause behind the Reformation which broke away from the Catholic sect in the sixteenth century.

The idea that “the church” must always be a mixed multitude was cemented in place with the conflict of Augustine and the Donatists (411 A.D.) Bruce Shelley writes:

North African Christianity was still torn by a passionate conflict between Catholics and a movement called Donatism. The controversy was long-standing and deep-seated. A bishop of Hippo [in North Africa] could scarcely avoid speaking to the issue.

When Augustine stepped into church leadership, Donatism was almost a hundred years old. The movement stood for a holy church, for church discipline, and for the unflinching resistance of unworthy bishops. The Catholics, said the Donatists, had surrendered all of these by ordaining immoral priests and bishops.

The *Donatist* name arose from Donatus, an early bishop of Carthage [also in North Africa] (315-355) who led the protest against Catholic practices. Donatist charges centered on the fact that certain Catholic bishops had handed over the Scriptures to be burned during the persecution under Diocletian. Such an act, the Donatists insisted, was a serious sin of apostasy. Since the Catholic pastors were ordained by bishops who had sinned so grievously, the Donatists believed they, rather than the Catholics, constituted the true church of Christ. During Augustine's time the Donatists were still widespread in North Africa and in some areas they constituted a majority.

Augustine rejected the Donatist's view of a pure church. Until the day of judgment, he said, the church must be a mixed multitude. Both good and bad people are in it. To support this idea he appealed to Jesus' parable of the wheat and tares (Mt. 13:24-30), overlooking the fact that Jesus was not speaking of the church but of the whole world.

Augustine also set forth a different understanding of the sacraments. The Donatists argued that the validity of the sacrament depends upon the moral standing of the minister. Augustine said, "No." The sacrament does not belong to the minister but to Christ. The priest's acts are really God's because He has placed the sacraments in the hands of the properly ordained minister. All that is required of the priest is his awareness that he administers God's grace for the whole church.

Such a view makes the priest the channel for grace to the members of the church. Thus, Augustine added his considerable influence to his priestly (sacerdotal) view of the church that reached such unfortunate extremes in medieval Catholicism. (*Church History in Plain Language*, p. 143-144)

The Wheat and the Tares

Let us try to avoid the superficialities of this episode and look at the points that touch upon perfection and maturity. Augustine supported his idea of "the church" as a mixed multitude by appealing to the parable of the wheat and tares but overlooked the fact that Jesus spoke of the world and not "the church." That is, Jesus, in the parable, specifically said that "the field" in which both kinds of seeds were planted "is the world." (Mt. 13:38) Why did Augustine and the Catholics miss this obvious fact? Augustine knew the Old and New Testaments inside out yet missed this. There are two more elements of that same parable that should be noted:

1) "While men *slept*..." Jesus said. (Mt. 13:25) Augustine and the Catholics certainly seemed to be sleeping at this point. And

2) the owner, representing Christ or God, said, “Let both grow together until the harvest...” (Mt. 13:30)

If God had awoken Augustine on this point, there would not have been a place for the tares to grow together with the wheat. Our vantage point, 1,500 years later and much nearer to the time when the angels will come to remove the tares, places us in a time when God is graciously showing (to those who will receive it) again just what a tare really is so that we can purify ourselves from all the contaminants and be ready for His return.

So what is this place that God allowed so that the two seeds could mature simultaneously? This place must be in the world – the Donatists had that part right. Yet the tares, “all things that offend [stumble] and those who practice lawlessness [what is right in one’s own eyes],” will be gathered “*out of Christ’s kingdom.*” (Mt. 13:41) What kind of place can be both in the world yet in the kingdom? Christ’s careful choice of words allows us, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, to understand *exactly* what He had in mind. It’s a matter of perspective. On another occasion Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is in your midst.” (Lk. 17:21) The tares stand now in the midst of the wheat – when they are removed, they will no longer be in the midst of the wheat and they will no longer be “in the kingdom.” They will have missed and refused all of God’s offers for them to become wheat and they will be gone. Sad indeed.

Let us consider the Nicolaitan bishops who stood over the people they had drawn after themselves (Acts 20:30) and stood as priest and mediator between the people and God. (see 1 Tim. 2:5) Is this the kingdom of God? No! This is the pattern of the world. Even the “church” buildings of the third and fourth centuries, the first to be specifically built for “Christian worship,” were manufactured at the order of the Roman emperor and were in contradiction to the teachings of the original apostles (Acts 7:48, 17:24) and patterned after Rome’s basilica or judgment hall. The “church,” that hierarchy of Nicolaitan overlords presiding over their own sect, is *from the world*. It was and still is a worldly authority structure, pattern and method.

Augustine, blinded to the truth contained in the parable, rightly judged that the “church” must be a mixed multitude until the tares were to be removed. But he failed to see that the only reason this must be so is because the “church” is really part of the field! He did not see that “Mother Church” was in reality the Mother of Abominations. (Rev. 17:5) Augustine was asleep.

Where Does It Come From

Augustine also delivered another truth that carries much weight even today – yet he did not realize what a condemnation it was on the whole system of which he was a part. Petilian, a Donatist spokesman, said, “He who receives faith from a faithless priest, receives not faith, but guilt.” Augustine answered, “But Christ is not unfaithful, from whom I receive faith, not guilt. Christ, therefore, is properly the functionary, and the priest is simply His organ... My origin is Christ, my root is Christ, my head is Christ. This seed, of which I was born, is the Word of God, which I must obey even though the preacher himself practice not what he preaches. I believe not in the minister by whom I am baptized, but in Christ, who alone justifies the sinner and can forgive guilt.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. III, Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, p. 367)

But wait a minute, Augustine. You’re a Catholic – you’re in that sect that teaches there is no salvation apart from “the church,” that hierarchy of priests and bishops and popes whom God gave direct permission to forgive sins. (Cyprian – again) If we must go through “the church” as

the only channel of God's grace in order to be saved, and we obtain our salvation from a part of "the church" that is not in Christ, how is it possible that we are truly saved? The Donatists quite logically and rationally and rightly reached this conclusion. They too, however, were asleep, not seeing that their conclusion was sound but built on a false premise, not seeing that "the church" was something from the world.

But let us look also at the illogic that is contained in Augustine's argument. A corrupt, deceived, disobedient, unregenerate priest (or "pastor" or "apostle" or "elder" or whatever) is Christ's organ? It must be admitted that God indeed uses imperfect men to accomplish His perfect purpose – indeed, what other kind of men are there on planet earth that He could work with? But the priests and bishops of the Catholic sect are known to include some who practice the basest and worst kinds of sins, those things which Paul said were "shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret." (Eph. 5:12)

What is lacking here is the understanding that God gives His Spirit to *all* to drink of (1 Cor. 12:13), that *all* have the anointing of His Spirit (1 Jn. 2:20), that *all*, from the least to the greatest, shall know God and *none* shall need to be taught to know God. (Heb. 8:11, also see 1 Jn. 2:27) Because the Catholics had come to believe their priests and bishops were needed to mediate between God and men, they had to give these guys something to do. The men who stood in the place of God now also took on the work that originally belonged to the Spirit. Unity, truth and obedience were replaced with orthodoxy, doctrines, creeds and rituals and these latter became the special venue of the priest – the priesthood of *every* believer virtually died out though it has experienced various episodes of revitalization since the Reformation restored this truth at least to our awareness if not our practice. But under the Nicolaitan priesthood, men now had to go through other men just to get to God – just as it was under the Pharisees (Mt. 23:13, Lk. 11:52) None of this Nicolaitan system was God's New Covenant. This was what came into existence because men slept and God allowed a place, "the church," to come into being so that the wheat, the sons of the kingdom (Mt. 13:38), and the tares, the sons of the evil one (largely but not exclusively the priests and bishops), could have a place to grow to maturity together, the tares in the midst of the wheat. Rightly it has been said, "Jesus proclaimed the kingdom but it was the church that came into being."

Sons of the Kingdom

To be a wheat, then, is to return to the kingdom of Christ and God. What is the kingdom? The kingdom of Christ, simply put, is that realm where Christ is truly King, that is, obeyed. This simple definition, believe it or not, is the whole counsel of God on this question and is the basis for deciding what is and what is not the kingdom of God. Christ was perfected (brought to completeness, maturity) through suffering and, having been perfected (brought to completeness, maturity), He became the author of eternal salvation to all who *obey* Him. (Heb. 2:10, 5:9) This *is* the gospel of the kingdom that was preached by the apostles and preserved for us in the New Testament so that we might again find and follow Him who is Light and Truth and Life.

Augustine and the Donatists were not the first to debate and divide over whether the people of Christ were to be a society of saints or a school for sinners. Novatian and Cornelius in 251 A.D. earned that distinction. The confusion that surrounds this ongoing debate only gives great confirmation to Jesus' words: "While men slept..." (Mt. 13:25, also see Mt. 25:5)

If we conclude that saints are sinlessly perfect people, we must deny the notion of the ekklesia being a society of saints. But this is not what saints are – there are no sinlessly perfect people anywhere on this planet! Saints are simply those who have been set apart, by God's

invitation and grace and their own subsequent willful choice, for use in God's kingdom. To be a saint, then, is to be a citizen or son of the kingdom, a functioning member of His body which is His ekklesia. (Eph. 1:22-23) A saint is a sinner who has repented and by faith received the new life which is from above. Thus the ekklesia *is and can only be* a society of saints. No sinners who have not yet received Christ's grace and life can be in the ekklesia because they are not saints – but that transformation can happen to them in an instant. And, oh to God, that it would!

The idea that the genuine ekklesia could ever be a mixed multitude is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what a saint is and of what the ekklesia is. Similarly, the notion that the ekklesia could ever be a school for sinners fails to acknowledge what sinners are and what saints are. If a sinner could be educated to become a saint, then Christ died in vain. True preaching is not so much an intellectual dissertation as it is a proclamation of kingdom realities. The sinner must repent and believe in Christ in order to become a saint – or he will remain an “ain't.” That the Catholic sect of the early centuries thought “the church” could be an intellectual and philosophical entity that progressively brought men into the salvation of Christ shows only how they had already fallen from their first love of simply walking with Christ and had exchanged kingdom truth for doctrines, philosophies and creeds. (see Rev. 2:4, Col. 2:8)

“God is not the author of confusion...” (1 Cor. 14:33) These historical episodes of confusion, of men failing to see obvious spiritual truths and blundering forward with their carnal misunderstandings, have been preserved for our benefit. We can learn from history, purify ourselves from the contaminants of the “church” and the tares and truly become the wheat, the sons of the kingdom that God intends us to be. Or we can scoff at the ridiculous notions presented in this article, continue to attend the “church” of our own preference, sit at the feet of the man or woman who scratches and tickles our ears in just the way we like (2 Tim. 4:3-4), and be surprised on judgment day when Jesus says to us, “Get away from Me! I never knew you, you who practiced only what was right in your own eyes!” (Mt. 7:23) The choice is ours to make. The time to make that choice is now.

Let he who has ears hear.

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