

CHRISTIAN PERFECTIONISM

by Zacharias Ursinus

Zacharias Ursinus' Reformed exposition on whether Christians can perfectly keep God's law, concluding that while perfect obedience is unattainable in this life, sincere obedience is required.

1 Chapters

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1. Christian Perfectionism?

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Christian Perfectionism? by Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583)

Zacharias Ursinus was the primary author of the Heidelberg Catechism. The following text can be found in Ursinus' exposition of question and answer 114 in his "Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism," pp. 608-612 (english translation by G.W. Williard, 1852; reprinted by P & R). The electronic edition of this text was scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal for Reformation Ink. It is in the public domain and may be freely copied and distributed. Pagination has been retained for purposes of reference. It should be noted that the above title is artificial, and is not in the original english edition. The actual heading to this exposition appears below.

URSINUS, COMMENTARY ON THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, page 608 Whether The Regenerate Can Keep The Law Perfectly.

Question 114. But can those who are converted to God, perfectly keep these commands?

Answer. No; but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only small beginnings of this obedience, yet so, that with a sincere resolution, they begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commands of God.

EXPOSITION. The question which here claims our attention is, How is obedience to the law possible , and can those who are regenerated keep the law perfectly? which is the seventh division proposed under the general subject of the law of God. That this question may be the better understood, we shall distinguish the nature of man as it was when it first came from the hands of God, pure and holy -- as fallen, and as regenerated.

Perfect obedience to the whole law, was possible to the nature of man before it was corrupted by sin, and that as it respects every part and degree of obedience, as it is to the angels; for man was created good, and after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness. The nature of man in its corrupt state since the fall, is entirely unable to fulfill what the law demands; yea, it cannot so much as commence acceptable obedience to God, according to the following declarations of Scripture 'File imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.' "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil." "A corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit." "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." "Ye were dead in trespasses and sins; and were by nature the children of wrath even as others." "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to think anything, as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" (Genesis 8:21, Jeremiah 13:23, Matthew 7:18, Romans 4:23, Ephesians 2:13, 2 Corinthians 3:5). The obedience of the law is possible in the regenerate, 1. As touching external propriety and discipline. 2. As it respects the imputation of Christ's righteousness, or by the benefit of justification and regeneration, which we obtain by faith. 3. As it respects the commencement of internal and external obedience in this life. "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:8). He that boasts that he knows and worships God, without the commencement of obedience, or regeneration, is a liar.

Put the law is impossible to the regenerate in respect to God, or the perfect internal and external obedience which it requires. "Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight shall no man living be justified" (Psalms 143:2). 1. Because the regenerate do not fulfill the law perfectly, but do many things in opposition to it. 2. Because even those things which they do according to the law, are imperfect; for there are still many sins remainig, in the regenerate, as original sin, and many actual sins, neglects, omissions and infirmities, which sins the godly acknowledge and bewail in themselves. "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6).

There is, however, a great difference between the regenerate and the unregenerate when they sin. 1. God has a purpose to save the regenerate. 2. There is a certain final repentance on the part of the regenerate. 3. Even with the sins of the regenerate there is always remaining some

URSINUS, COMMENTARY ON THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, page 609 beginning, or seed of true faith and conversion. It is different, however, as it respects the unregenerate; for in regard to them God has no purpose as in the case of the godly, neither is there any certain final repentance in their case, nor any beginning of new obedience; but they sin willingly and persist in their opposition to God, and at length perish, unless they are converted.

Objections against the imperfection of works in the regenerate.

Obj. 1. The works of the Holy Spirit cannot be imperfect. The good works of the regenerate are the works of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it must needs be that they are perfect, considered even in themselves. Ans. There is here an error in regarding that to be absolutely true which is true only in a certain respect. Those works which are wrought simply by the Holy Spirit must needs be pure and perfect. But the good works of the regenerate are of the Holy Spirit, not absolutely, but in such a way that they are at the same time the works of the regenerate themselves. Hence this is all that follows, that the works of the saints are pure in as far as they are suggested and wrought by the Holy Spirit, but in as far as they are also of men, who are as yet imperfect and fallible, they are works accompanied with many defects and with much that is evil.

Obj. 2. The works of those who are conformed to the image of Christ cannot be imperfect. The saints are in this life conformed to Christ by their regeneration and adoption into the family of God. Therefore their works cannot be imperfect. Ans. There is here the same error which we noticed in replying to the former objection. The major proposition is spoken in reference to those who are perfectly conformed to the image of Christ, whilst the saints, of whom the minor proposition speaks, are conformed to Christ only in part as long as they continue on earth. For as our knowledge is, so is our love and conformity with Christ. But here we know only in part, and prophesy only in part, as the Apostle says. Hence our conformity with Christ is not perfect.

Obj. 3. There is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1.) The saints are in Christ. Therefore their works are perfectly good, considered even in themselves. Ans. There is here a fallacy in regarding that as a cause which is none; for it is not the perfection of the works of the regenerate, but the satisfaction of Christ imputed to them by faith, which is the cause on account of which there is no condemnation to them. Hence this is all that follows, that the works of the regenerate are perfect, either in themselves or in respect to the satisfaction of Christ imputed to them, and not condemned as impure in the judgment of God.

Obj. 4. The severity of divine justice does not render good according to works which are not perfectly good. But Christ in the final judgment will render to every one, and so to the saints also, according to their works. Therefore the works of the saints are so perfect that they will in themselves stand in the judgment of God. Ans. There are here four terms; because the major must be understood of a legal reward of works, whilst the minor must be understood of a reward that is evangelical; or to express it differently, we may say that the justice of God does not render good according to works which are imperfect, if he judges according to the covenant of perfect obedience to the law. But Christ, in rewarding the works of the

URSINUS, COMMENTARY ON THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, page 610 saints, will not judge according to the covenant of perfect works, but according-, to the covenant of faith, or of his own righteousness imputed and applied to them by faith; and yet he will judge them according to their works, as according to. the evidences of their faith, from which their works have proceeded, and which they, as the fruits of this faith, declare to be in them.

Obj. 5. The Scriptures attribute perfection to the works of the saints. "Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart." "With my whole heart have I sought thee." "Noah was a just man, and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God." "The heart of Asa was perfect all his days." (Psalms 119:1, Psalms 119:10, Genesis 6:9, 2 Chronicles 15:17). Testimonies of a similar character are found in every part of the Scriptures. Therefore the works of the saints are perfect. Ans. These and similar declarations of Scripture speak of that perfection which consists in parts, of true sincerity as opposed to hypocrisy, and a feigning of piety, and not of that perfection which consists in the degrees of obedience which the saints ought to render to God. For the saints do not in this life attain to that degree of perfect obedience which the law requires; yet they, nevertheless, have the commencement of perfect obedience to the divine law, and of subjection to God, according to all his commandments. And although there is much hypocrisy and sin still remaining even in the most holy, as it is said, let every man be a liar (Romans 3:4), yet there is notwithstanding a great difference between those who are altogether hypocrites, whose hypocrisy is pleasing to themselves, having no commencement or sense of true piety in their hearts, and those who, acknowledging and lamenting the remains of hypocrisy in themselves, have at the same time the commencement of true faith and conversion to God. The former are condemned of God, whilst the latter are received into favor, not on account of this commencement of obedience which is in them, but on account of the perfect obedience of Christ imputed unto them. We must therefore add, that those who are converted are perfect in the sight of God, not only as it respects the parts of true piety which are all begun in them, but also in the degrees of the true and perfect righteousness of Christ imputed unto them, as it is said, "Ye are complete in him." "Christ is made unto us of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption" (Colossians 2:10. 1 Corinthians 1:30).

But, say our opponents, the Scriptures also attribute the perfection of degrees to the saints, as when it is said, "We speak wisdom among them that are perfect." "Be not children in understanding." "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 fullness of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:6 1 Corinthians 14:20. Ephesians 4:13). But these and similar declarations of Scripture, do not mean by the term perfect, such as are absolutely or wholly conformable to the law, but such as have more knowledge, assurance and readiness (confirmed by exercise) to obey God, resist carnal

desires, and to bear the cross, than others who are not so fully confirmed and established in the principles of piety. For so this perfection is elsewhere explained, where it is said, "That we be no more children tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine." "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after, that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." "To will is present with me, but how to perform that URSINUS, COMMENTARY ON THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, page 611 which is good, I find not" (Ephesians 4:13, Php 3:12, Romans 7:18). Hence this perfection is relative, having respect, not to the divine law, but to such as are weaker and less confirmed in the faith of the gospel.

It is also proper that we should here refer to the passage found in 1 John 4:17-18, which our adversaries are wont to bring forward against what we have just said: "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." But John does not mean that our love to God, but his love to us, is perfect, that is, fully expressed and made known unto us by the effects or benefits which God has bestowed upon us in Christ; as Paul declares in the fifth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, that the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto us, is the cause why we look for the day of judgment without fear and with, assurance; and that we are assured of this love and mercy of God by this sign or testimony, because we are in this life conformed to his image by the Holy Spirit. For we are assured of our justification by our regeneration, not as by the cause of the effect, but as by the effect of the cause. And although regeneration is not perfect in this life, yet, if it be indeed begun, it is sufficient to confirm the truth of our faith to our consciences. And indeed that which John adds, when he says, Love casteth out fear, is a proof that love is not as yet perfect in us, because we are not in this life perfectly delivered from fear of the wrath and judgment of God, and of eternal punishment. For the fear and love of God, which are contrary to each other, are here in small degrees in the saints at the same time, their fear decreasing, and their love and comfort or joy in God increasing, until joy gains a complete triumph, and perfectly casts out all agitation and fear in the life to come, when God shall wipe away every tear.

Obj. 6. David says, "I have not declined from thy law." "I have kept thy law." "I have done judgment and justice." "Judge me according to my righteousness." (Psalms 119:50-51, ps 121; Psalms 7:8). Therefore the regenerate may declare their good works in the judgment, as being perfectly conformable to the divine law. Ans. These and similar declarations do not claim for the saints absolute conformity to the law in this life, or else they would contradict those passages which speak of the imperfection of the righteous already referred to, but of the righteousness of a good conscience without which faith cannot stand, just as a good conscience cannot be without faith, as it is said: "That thou by them mightest war a good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience; which some having put away, concerning faith have made shipwreck" (1 Timothy 1:18-19). The saints now do not dread to come before the tribunal of God, and comfort themselves with a consciousness of having acted correctly, not, indeed, because they would oppose this to the judgment of God, or because they are conscious of no sin, (for they exclaim in view of their sins, "O Lord enter not into judgment with thy servant: if thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities who shall stand") but because they have a sincere, and not a hypocritical, desire to obey God, and have the full assurance that their sins are covered and washed away by the blood of Christ, and that the

obedience which is begun in them is pleasing, to God for Christ's sake, and that they shall be graciously rewarded by Christ according to the promises of the gospel.

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Obj. 7. "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). Therefore new obedience in the saints is perfect and without sin. Ans. But this is to misunderstand the figure of speech which is here used. Not to commit sin, is not, according to John, to be without sin, (for this he had taught in the first and second chapters of this same Epistle, does not take place, evert in the most holy) but it is not to have reigning sin, nor to persevere in it, which is not inconsistent with true faith and piety in the saints.

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