

Apology — Robert Barclay — 214-215, 217, 223

Doctrine of Perfection

extract of Proposition VIII § viii, xi

§ viii. First, I prove [our doctrine of perfection] from the decisive command of Christ and his apostles. Nature writes in the heart of everyone the maxim that no one is obliged to do what is impossible. And so, since Christ and his apostles have commanded us to keep all the commandments, and to be perfect in this respect, it is possible for us to do it. This command is given without any commentary or interpretation in many clear testimonies: Matthew 5:48 and 7:21; John 13:17; I Corinthians 7:19; II Corinthians 13:11; I John 2:3-6 and 3:2-10. These scriptures proclaim a direct command for perfection; they declare that it is absolutely necessary. As if they had been written on purpose to answer the objections of our opponents, these scriptures show the foolishness of those who want to think that they are children or friends of God, while they do the contrary.

Second, perfection is possible because we receive what is said in the Gospel and the Gospel law about it; it is clearly promised to us since we are under grace, as these scriptures say: Romans 6:14: "Sin shall not have dominion over you, because you are not under the law but under grace;" and also Romans 8:3-4: "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son," etc., "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us," etc. For if this were not a condition which is required, necessary, and attainable under the Gospel, there would be no difference between the coming of a better hope

and the law¹ which made nothing perfect. There would be no difference between mere legalists and those who are under the Gospel, including those who, being under the law, enjoyed and walked in the life of the Gospel.² Nevertheless throughout the whole sixth chapter of Romans the apostle proves not only the possibility but also the necessity of freedom from sin because they are under the Gospel and under grace and not under the law. Therefore, in verses 2-7 he says that he himself and those to whom he wrote are in that condition. In verses 11-13 and 16-18 he insists* on both the possibility and the necessity of this freedom from sin, in almost the same way as we did a little previously. In verse 22 he declares that they have attained this condition in some measure³ with these words: "But now having been set free from sin, and having become servants of God, you have your fruit which leads to holiness and to eternal life in the end."

Just as this perfection or freedom from sin is attained and made possible when the Gospel and inward law of the Spirit is received and known, so also the ignorance of it has been and still is a cause of opposition to this truth.⁴ For when man does not pay attention to the *Light and Law within his heart* which not only uncovers sin but leads out of sin, when a man is a stranger to the new Life and Birth which is born of God, which naturally does God's will and by nature is incapable of transgressing the commandments of God — when such a man in his natural state sees the

¹ Latin: *tunc nihil esset discriminis inter Evangelium & legem*, "then there would be no difference between the Gospel and the law"

² This sentence is omitted in the Latin.

³ Latin: *aliquantulum*, "in a small amount"

⁴ paraphrase of the last clause: The cause of opposition to this truth is ignorance of the Gospel and inward law of the Spirit. The Latin says it somewhat differently: *ita hujus ignorantia contrarium errorem & peperit & fovit*, "in the same way, ignorance of this gives birth to and nurtures the contrary error."

commandments of God as something outside of him, in the letter, and finds himself reprov'd and convicted, that man is killed by the letter rather than being made alive.⁵ So man feels wounded but doesn't apply himself inwardly to what can heal him; instead he labors in his own will to conform to the Law which is outward, a conformity which he can never achieve; the more he struggles, the more he falls short. This is still the Jew, in effect, with his carnal commandment, with the external law, in the condition of the first covenant "which doesn't make the one who does it perfect, in regard to the conscience" (Hebrews 9:9), though they may have a notion of Christianity and an external faith in Christ. This has made them stretch and twist the Scriptures to find an *imputed righteousness* completely outside of them to cover up their iniquities. This has made them imagine that it is possible to be accepted by God although they suppose it is impossible to ever obey Christ's commands. But alas! Oh deceived souls!⁶ That will not do any good on the day when "God will judge every man according to his works, whether good or bad."⁷ It will not save you to say it was necessary for you to sin daily in thought, word, and deed; people who act that way have certainly obeyed unrighteousness. . . .

Finally, this perfection, this freedom from sin, is possible because many have attained it, according to the clear testimony of the Scripture. Some people before the Law, some under the Law (by experiencing and partaking of the benefit and effect of the Gospel), and many, many more under the Gospel. First, for example, it is written of Enoch (Genesis 5:22-24) that he "walked with God," which no one can do while sinning; also the Scripture does not record any shortcoming of his. It is said of Noah (Genesis 6:9) and of

⁵ II Corinthians 3:6

⁶ Latin: *Sed eheu! o animæ ineptientes, hallucinatæ & delirantes!* But alas! O souls who make fools of yourselves, hallucinating and raving!

⁷ See Revelation 20:13, II Corinthians 5:10

Job (1:8) and of Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6), that they were perfect. Under the Gospel, in addition to the passage from Romans mentioned earlier, look at what the apostle says about many saints in general: “God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love which he has for us, even when we were dead in sins, has made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) and has raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,” etc. (Ephesians 2:4-6). I don’t think they could be sinning daily in thought, word, and deed while they were sitting in the heavenly places, nor were all the works they did there like filthy rags or a menstruous garment.⁸

* * *

§ xi. Therefore, blessed are those who believe in the one who is both able and willing to deliver from all sin everyone who comes to him in true repentance, everyone who does not resolve, as those men do, to be the devil’s servants all their lives. The people who believe leave behind unrighteousness every day, forgetting those things that are in the past and “pressing forward toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”⁹ They will not discover that their faith and confidence are in vain, but rather in due time they shall be made conquerors through the one they have believed in,¹⁰ and so, “overcoming, they shall be established as pillars in the house of God, and shall never leave it again” (Revelation 3:12).

Source: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition VIII § viii, xi (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 214-215, 217, 223; and Roberti

⁸ See Proposition VII, § xi

⁹ Philippians 3:14 RB

¹⁰ See Romans 8:37

Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile
(Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 159, 161, 166.