

SINLESS PERFECTION IN THE LAST GENERATION THEOLOGY: A PERSISTENT ISSUE?

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Abstract

There is an increasing support for the Last Generation Theology teaching about the sinless perfection of believers in the SDAC. The proponents of this movement advocate for this sinless-perfection teaching by using some biblical passages, such as Matt 5:48, 2 Pet 3:14, and 1 John 3:9 to support their position. However, through an in-depth analysis of the above texts, the present study argues that the word translated as “perfection” in Matt 5:48 is *teleios* and, in this context, is used in connection with love and mercy. The words *aspilos* and *amōmos* in 2 Pet 3:14 appear to be related, and for instance, the word *amōmos*, viewed in terms of its OT background, refers to a life entirely submitted to the will of God. 1 John 3:9 also suggests that the believers continue to grapple with sin as the verb used (*poiei*) indicates a continuative idea. Such continuity gives the believers the courage to seek Christ’s help and invite Him to dwell in them and them in Him, which then brings forth spiritual growth.

Keywords: Perfection, sinless, blameless, spotless, in Christ.

Introduction

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDAC) has undergone many theological challenges throughout its history. One major movement that aggressively attacked the SDAC’s understanding of the doctrine of salvation was “the last generation theology (LGT)” in the 1950s, which promoted “sinless perfection” theology. This movement, as George Knight indicates, argued that “Jesus could not return until there was a generation of perfect (sinless) Adventists whose existence would not only falsify Satan’s claims but justify God in the eyes of the universe.”¹ Its initiator and major proponent was M. L. Andreasen with his “reaction to

¹ George R. Knight, *End-Time Events and the Last Generation: The Explosive 1950s* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2018), 14.

Questions on Doctrines.² He influenced people such as Robert Wieland and Donald Short.³ Andreasen contended that in the last generation, believers will be sinless and will vindicate God's character. Without this being done, Christ will not come.⁴

Andreasen's thesis and other proponents of his theology of LGT, namely his understanding of sin and a step-by-step approach to sanctification and perfection, received criticism. On his understanding of sin and his master—Satan,—Andreasen contended that Christ did not fully defeat Satan at the cross. Knight underlines that such a thesis “contradicts not only the victory cry of Christ that ‘it is finished’ (John 19:30) but also the plain statement in *The Desire of Ages* that the ‘destruction of sin and Satan was forever made certain’ by Christ's death on the cross.”⁵ Knight charges Andreasen's approach to make “the plan of salvation in part a human-centered affair.”⁶

The LGT teaching of sinless perfection poses problems that affect the faith of believers. For instance, it claims that “humans must get to the place where they don't need Christ, where they can stand without a mediator on the basis of their *own* achievements.”⁷ This movement's teaching of “sinless perfection” not only posed problems in early Adventism but also continues to do so today. Recent major advocates of this theology include Armin Kritzinger⁸ and Dennis E. Priebe,⁹ among others.

The LGT proponents of “sinless perfection” base their theology on certain biblical passages and some quotations from Ellen White.¹⁰ However, due to the length constraints and

² Knight, *End-Time Events*, 15.

³ At first Wieland and Short had argued that the church's leadership had failed in not considering “the 1888 message of Alonzo T. Jones and Ellet J. Waggoner” (Knight, *End-Time Events*, 14–15).

⁴ Andreasen stated, “Thus it shall be with the last generation of men living on earth... They will be subjected to every temptation, but they will not yield. They will demonstrate that it is possible to live without sin—the very demonstration for which the world has been looking and for which God has been preparing. It will become evident to all that the gospel really can save to the uttermost. God is found true in His sayings.” See M. L. Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1947), 302.

⁵ Knight, *End-Time Events*, 31.

⁶ Knight, *End-Time Events*, 31.

⁷ Knight highlights that the tenants of this understanding misunderstood Ellen G. White's teaching. He posits, “M. L. Andreasen came to that interpretation when he read Ellen White's statements about standing without a mediator in the sense of standing without a savior. That is not the only interpretation of that concept, but it is certainly out of harmony with both the New Testament and Ellen White.” (Knight, *End-Time Events*, 31).

⁸ Armin Kritzinger, “The Doctrine of Last Generation Theology of the Seventh Day Adventists: A Defense” (Doctoral dissertation, Assumption University of Thailand, 2022).

⁹ Dennis E. Priebe, *Face-to-Face with the Real Gospel* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985).

the purpose of this research, I will only analyze the prominent Bible texts this theology uses. In the Bible, especially in the NT, LGT advocates use texts, such as Matt 5:48, 2 Pet 3:14, and 1 John 3:9.

The present study acknowledges that some responses have been advanced against the LGT, but it focuses on these texts to clarify the lexemes “perfection” and “sinless” more in depth.¹¹ In this paper, I conduct an in-depth philological study of biblical passages LGT proponents employ to defend their theology, such as Matt 5:48; 2 Pet 3:14, and 1 John 3:9, propose the benefit of the “in Christ motif,” and show how “sinless perfection” theology affects the believer’s spirituality.

Biblical Texts Alluding to Sinless Perfection analyzed

As mentioned above, the prominent Bible texts that LGT use to argue for their theology of sinless perfection are Matt 5:48; 2 Pet 3:14, and 1 John 3:9. This section analyzes each text and assesses the LGT’s interpretation of it.

Perfection

The key text the LGT proponents utilize to advocate for absolute perfection is Matt 5:48, *Esesthe oun hymeis teleioi hos ho patēr hymōn ho ouranios teleios estin*. “Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”¹² The text contains the inferential particle *oun*, which suggests that the author is concluding by bringing home what he wants his audience to consider most.¹³ The particle also indicates that he is drawing an inference from his preceding discussion, implying that understanding Matt 5:48 requires attention to the preceding texts.

¹⁰ The Ellen White’s quotations that these proponents of the Last generation theology use are namely, “when the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own;” (Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* [Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1941], 49). The passage from her *Great Controversy*: “Those who are living upon the earth when the intercession of Christ shall cease in the sanctuary above are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless, their characters must be purified from sin by the blood of sprinkling. Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort they must be conquerors in the battle with evil. While the investigative judgment is going forward in heaven while the sins of penitent believers are being removed from the sanctuary, there is to be a special work of purification, of putting away of sin, among God’s people upon earth. This work is more clearly present in the messages of Revelation 14. When this work shall have been accomplished, the followers of Christ will be ready for His appearing.” See White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2005), 425.

¹¹ Jiří Moskala, and John Peckham, eds., *God’s Character and the Last Generation*, eds., (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2018).

¹²Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

¹³ On the use the particle *oun*, see Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 43–48.

Matthew 5 is part of a long discourse of Beatitudes that Christ offered to His disciples (Matthew 5–7; cf. Luke 6:20–49). Particularly from Matt 5:21–48, Christ corrects the common understanding of people regarding some practices and regulations, using the formula, “You have heard that ... But I say to you.” From vv. 43–48, Christ discusses issues of love. In v. 43, He corrects the perception that Israelites/Jews should love their neighbors and hate their enemies (Lev 19:18; Deut 23:3–6). He instead introduces the principle that they should love “their enemies and pray for those who persecute them” (v. 44), and by doing that, they will prove themselves to be sons of their Father who is in heaven (v. 45a). Christ gives the rationale of this kind of love. He sets God as an example for His audience to follow, using the causative particle *hoti*.¹⁴ The Father “causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous” (v. 45b, italics original). In other words, God’s love does not segregate people. This love is perfect/whole/complete in a way that it encompasses all, regardless of whether they are good or evil. Christ then gives the reasons why His audience should not only love those who love them. He mentions that the tax collectors, whom they considered pagans and Gentiles, also do the same (vv. 46–47), and therefore, there is no reward for such an attitude. He then infers that they are to be perfect in their love, as their heavenly Father is (v. 48).

The word translated “perfect” is *teleios* in v. 48. BDAG argues that *teleios* may pertain to “being mature, full grown, adult,” or “being fully developed in a moral sense.”¹⁵ The BDAG lexicon attributes *teleios* in Matt 5:48 to the latter meaning.¹⁶ The text may be suggesting that people should view their fellow humans as God sees and values them. Fortin observes that the statement in Matt 5:48 “has often been interpreted within an Aristotelian framework to say that human behavior ought to be exactly as perfect as God’s behavior.”¹⁷ Albright and Mann underline that *teleios* refers to “truth, sincerity.” They argue that this word “does not have the later Greek meaning of being ‘totally free from imperfection,’ which is the meaning found both in KJ AND RSV.”¹⁸ It is impossible for humans to reproduce exactly God’s perfect/complete

¹⁴ France posits that “the disciple’s lifestyle is to be different from other people’s in that it draws its inspiration not from the norms of society but from the character of God” (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT 40 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 228).

¹⁵ BDAG 995–96. s.v. τέλειος.

¹⁶ Davies and Allison also argue that τέλειος denote “maturity or adulthood, that is, completed growth” or it can also point to “moral perfection,” which is envisaged in Matt 5:48. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol 1, ICC 40 (Edinburgh, London: T&T Clark, 1988), 561. Similarly, McIver argues that “τέλειος can be used of an unblemished animal used in a sacrifice, something that is mature (having completed natural development), With respect to our enemies, as the context indicates, the followers of Jesus are expected to be like God by loving them” (Robert K. McIver, *Matthew*, Andrews Bible Commentary: Light, Depth, Truth [Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2024], 1235–36).

¹⁷ Denis Fortin, “Sanctification and Perfection Are the Work of a Lifetime,” in *God’s Character and the Last Generation*, 114.

¹⁸ W. f. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, AB 40 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 71–72.

love by their own effort, as they are imperfect (Rom 3:23). They are to strive to achieve it through the help of Christ and the Holy Spirit instead. Fortin states that the text is “about loving others and having human relationships that exemplify maturity and completeness within our sphere as God does in His sphere.”¹⁹

Since Matthew is a synoptic gospel, one has to consider other versions of the text in other gospels. Luke 6:36 states, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Luke uses the adjective *oiktirmones* (“merciful”) rather than *teleios* (“perfect”). The adjective *oiktirmōn* signifies “being concerned about another’s unfortunate state or misery, merciful, compassionate.”²⁰ Reading Luke 6:36 alongside Matt 5:48 suggests that the command is not about perfection in the absolute sense (“spotless”) as the LGT proponents hold, but rather about having complete love, mercy, and compassion for others.

Kritzinger’s interpretation does not do justice to the text. He equates Matt 5:48, Luke 6:36; and 1 John 4:18 with John 14:15. He points out that since this instruction in Matt 5:48 is about loving others,²¹ and that John 14:15 records Jesus’s statement that “if you love me, keep my commandments,” those who fail to keep His commands are liars (1 John 2:4), and, therefore, “being perfect in love ... means to be perfect in obeying God’s words.”²² Kritzinger further mentions that “when the Bible tells us in Matt 5:48 to be perfect, to be perfect in love, it is thus a call to perfect obedience of God’s law of love. Since the Bible defines sin as the transgression of this law (1 John 3:4), it means that those who are perfectly obedient to this law will be experiencing sinless perfection.”²³

Taking an example of the rich young man, he confesses that he had kept/obeyed all the commandments. However, still Christ finds him lacking (Mark 10:21), for He contended, “If you want to be complete, go *and* sell your possessions and give to *the* poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt 19:20). The NASB translates *teleios* as “complete,” while the NKJV has “perfect.” France notes that this word is wider “than moral flawlessness, and is used for spiritual maturity.”²⁴ Again, *teleios* is used here to indicate the act of caring for others, even our enemies, and those who are less fortunate, and, in that sense, the caring individual is considered complete or perfect.²⁵ Thus, the thesis that obeying the law can

¹⁹ Fortin, “Sanctification,” 114.

²⁰ BDAG 700. s.v. οἰκτιρμων.

²¹ Bruinsma insists that “loving others is the distinguishing mark of God’s children” (Reinder Bruinsma, *In all Humility: Saying No to Last Generation Theology* [Westlake, CA: Oak & Acorn, 2018], 95).

²² Kritzinger, “The Doctrine of Last Generation Theology,” 95.

²³ Kritzinger, “The Doctrine of Last Generation Theology,” 95.

²⁴ France, *Matthew*, 228.

²⁵ Davies and Allison also observe that the “motivation for being perfect’ in love is grounded in the Father’s ‘perfect’ love, in his giving without measure. (The emphasis is upon God’s deeds, not his nature)” (Davies and Allison, *A Critical*, 563). Blomberg also posits that “‘perfect’ here is better translated as ‘mature, whole,’ i.e., loving without limit.... Jesus is not frustrating his hearers with an

render someone to experience “sinless perfection” is ruled out.²⁶ It is not about obeying the law in order to become perfect but about an inward reverence for God and a constant search to imitate His character in showing love to fellow humans²⁷—love with honesty, love without hypocrisy, or boundaries. Each text/word, therefore, should be considered and interpreted based on its own literary context, and careful attention should be given to the specific issue it addresses.

Sinlessness

The other central thesis of the LGT is that an individual can attain an absolute sinless life. The LGT proponents use 2 Pet 3:14 and 1 John 3:9 to argue for such an understanding.²⁸ 2 Peter 3:14 says, “Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found spotless and blameless by Him, at peace.” Peter utilizes two adjectives to point out the state in which His addressees are to be found, *aspiloi* (“spotless”) and *amōmētoi* (“blameless”). The context of this text is an eschatological pericope that discusses the second coming of Christ.²⁹ From vv. 10–11, Peter describes what the day of the Lord will look like and how this event of Christ’s coming will happen. This day comes as a thief, i.e., unexpectedly. The heaven and earth disappear and are destroyed by intense heat (v. 10), and a new heaven and earth are created (v. 12).

Peter posits that righteousness dwells in this new heaven and earth (2 Pet 3:13). This designation gives the reason why he urges the believer to strive for “holy conduct and godliness” (v. 11). Peter had mentioned the judgment of ungodly people in 2 Pet 3:7, and how God awaits patiently for them to repent, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Note the emphasis Peter places on *makrothymei eis hymas* (“is patient towards you”). It is undoubtedly that the prepositional phrase *eis hymas* (“towards you”) refers to the *agapētoi* (“beloved”) mentioned in 2 Pet 3:8, denoting his addressees.³⁰ The verb *makrothymei* is also in

unachievable ideal but challenging them to grow in obedience to God’s will—to become more like him.” See Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 115.

²⁶ Walvoord avers that “while sinless perfection is impossible, godliness, in its biblical concept, is attainable” (J. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* [Chicago: Moody, 1974], 51).

²⁷ France highlights that “the God-given law had been accommodated to a practical ethical code with which Jewish society had come to feel comfortable, but Jesus is demanding a different approach, not via laws read simply rules of conduct but rather by looking behind those laws to the mind and character of God himself.” See France, *Matthew*, 228.

²⁸ Priebe, *Face-to-Face*, 71.

²⁹ Schreiner points out that “the eschatological future becomes the basis for ethical exhortation” in 2 Pet 3:14. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 393.

³⁰ Giese observes the same and contends that “‘beloved’... [signifies] the status before God and their identity in Christ.” See Curtis P. Giese, *2 Peter and Jude*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis, Mo: Concordia, 2012), 197.

the indicative present, indicating a present continuous action, which implies that the Lord is continuously patient toward them so that they come to repent their sins.

With this background, it can be said that Peter urges the believers to strive for godly and holy conduct. The two words referred to above, namely *aspilos*, are defined as “being of untainted character, *pure, without fault of inward condition*, as of character,”³¹ while *amōmos* is referred to as “being without fault.”³² These two words appear to be related, as they both convey the idea of cultivating a pious character.³³ The rationale being that believers are to strive to model Christ as they look forward to the new heaven and earth, where righteousness dwells.³⁴ They do not strive to achieve this character independently, but Christ, through the Holy Spirit, helps them reflect His character. The two words, especially *amōmos* can be understood well if viewed with the OT lens.

For instance, God instructed Abram to walk before Him and be *tā·mîm* (“blameless”). The LXX translates the Hebrew word *tā·mîm* with *amōmos*, a word Peter uses in 2 Pet 3:14. It is to be pointed out that it is challenging to translate *tā·mîm* or find its equivalent in English.³⁵

³¹ BDAG 144. s.v. ἄσπιλος.

³² BDAG 56. s.v. ἄμωμος.

³³ Bauckman also argues the same, arguing that both words are synonymous. See Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC 50 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 2005), 326.

³⁴ Neyrey contends the same as LGT, when he sees that the text posits that “the followers of the holy and perfect God must themselves also be completely free from evil and perfectly obedient to the ways of God” (Jerome Henry Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introd. and Commentary*, AB 37 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 248, 249). However, Schreiner avers that “we should not confuse this [spotless and blameless], then, with moral perfection, at least in this life... Hence, there is little doubt that believers need to be ‘spotless and blameless’ to be saved.” See Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter*, 393. Moo also asserts that the reference to “spotless” and “blameless” “is a goal we are to strive for, not a condition that will finally be able to achieve. For the New Testament makes clear that the believer will always have sin to confess (1 John 1:8) and that our struggle with sin will never finally end until our bodies themselves are ‘redeemed’ (Rom. 8:23). But this realization should not diminish our sincere effort to get as close to that goal as possible.” See Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter and Jude*, NIVAC 61, 65 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 208.

³⁵ The adjective *tā·mîm* is used in different context in OT. For instance, Noah is referred to as *tā·mîm* in comparison with his contemporaries (Gen 9:6), which implies that he was better than them not blameless. In the Exodus period, the lamb to be eaten before their deliverance was to be *tā·mîm* (Exod 12:5). The word is also used in the sacrificial system, where the animal that was to be offered as a burnt offering and of guilt of sin was to be *tā·mîm* (Lev 1:3, 10:3:1, 6; 22:19). Leviticus 4:23 articulates that if a leader sinned, he would give a male *tā·mîm* goat. In case an individual sinned unintentionally against the Lord’s holy things, he should give a *tā·mîm* ram as a guilty offering (Lev 5:15, 18). The animal then ought to be *tā·mîm* in and out, that is, without defect/infirmity (Lev 22:21). In Deut 18:13, the sons of Israel were exhorted not to associate with Canaanites in practicing divination, casting spells, consulting a medium or a spiritist, or one who consults the dead, the one who interprets the omens, making their sons and daughters pass through the fire (Deut 18:9–10). The Lord God detested such things (Deut 18:12), and therefore, they ought to be *tā·mîm* before the Lord in not practicing these evil habits (Deut 18:13). 2 Samuel 22:24, 26, 33 says that to be *tā·mîm* is not to practice wrongdoings. In addition, Deut 32:4, God’s

However, its use in connotation with people, Abraham in this case, “may denote living a righteous life in his presence and ‘a life entirely committed to God rather than a moral perfection.’”³⁶ In addition, *tā·mîm* points to a life that obeys and trusts God—the One who fulfills His promise. Andreasen points out the example of Job, who is identified as *tā·mîm* and claims that Job attained a sinless life. Rather, the idea of Job being *tā·mîm*, denoting his reliance and close relationship with God by believing wholeheartedly, can be seen in his life. Seow argues that the description of Job as “blameless and just” denotes a “person of impeccable character and unimpeachable conduct, someone who has personal integrity (“blameless”) and is right with regards to others (“just”).”³⁷ In fact, God praises Job for fearing and trusting Him and that he does not associate with evil but turns away from it (Job 1:8).³⁸ Ambrose would say that *tā·mîm* denotes that “one must be constantly in training.”³⁹

Since Peter, in his writings, relies heavily on the OT, he might have understood *tā·mîm*, with its equivalent *amōmos*, in its OT use. His emphasis on believers to preserve themselves in being *amōmos* signifies that they should live a life that trusts God, a life entirely submitted to Him.⁴⁰ Thus, 2 Pet 3:14 may not refer to a life purely free from sin but a changed life that does

work, the rock, is *tā·mîm* because His ways are also just (God’s ways are also *tā·mîm* according to 2 Sam 22:31). When Moses was building the sanctuary, *tā·mîm* referred to “complete” in terms of joining elements together (Exod 26:24; 36:29). Ezekiel points out that a *tā·mîm* goat was to cleanse the sanctuary (Ezek 43:22–23; 45:18). Another instance in which *tā·mîm* is used is that it can mean “whole” in terms of the totality of something (Josh 10:13). It can also refer to just lot (1 Sam 14:41). Ezekiel 15:5 uses *tā·mîm* as signifying “untouched,” “harmed,” or “intact,” i.e., where *tā·mîm* is, unrighteousness is absent (Ezek 28:15). Speaking *tā·mîm* may mean truth, honesty, not deceit (Amos 5:10). David prays that his heart be *tā·mîm* in doing God’s ordinances so that he may not be blamed (Ps 119:80). Psalms 15:2 argues that the one who walks *tā·mîm* is the one who does righteousness, speaks the truth. He or she lives well with his neighbor, not slandering with his tongue and devising evil against him. Proverbs also posits that the one who walks *tā·mîm* will be helped, but the wicked will fall at once (Prov 28:18). Thus, it can be inferred that to be *tā·mîm*, in this context, signifies ‘not doing the things that God abhors.’

³⁶ Gerald A. Klingbeil, *Genesis*, Andrews Bible Commentary: Light, Depth, Truth (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2024), 162.

³⁷ C. L. Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 253. Caesar, on Job 1:1–5, states that the words *tam and Yashar* denotes “his reliance on God and for his righteousness.... He feared the Lord in the sense of respecting and reverencing Him, greatly valuing his relationship with Him.” See Lael O. Caesar, *Job*, Andrews Bible Commentary: Light, Depth, Truth (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2024), 627.

³⁸ The LGT proponents also cite Gen 6:9, arguing that Noah was blameless. However, the context of this description suggests that Noah was *tā·mîm* comparatively to his generation. However, Gen 6:9 also points out that he walked with God, which implies that he trusted and feared Him. If, however, *tā·mîm* is to be understood as denoting a sinless life, Noah’s life indicates otherwise (Gen 9:20).

³⁹ Mark Sheridan, *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 51.

⁴⁰ Weedon II underlines that Ellen White held that “perfection is an experience that arises out of full surrender and consecration to God’s will and guidance in the life” (Woodrow Weedon II, *Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995], 122–23).

not seek fleshly desires, a life that is renewed daily to reflect Christ's character, and an undivided life that relies on God rather than the one that obeys and heeds false teachers. A life that seeks godliness over ungodliness, for "in [2 Pet] 3:14 diligence in godliness is requisite for enjoying the new heavens and new earth."⁴¹ This dedication to God guards Peter's audience and prepares them for the second coming of Christ.

The third text is 1 John 3:9. It says, "Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God." The LGT advocates use this text to argue for a sinless life.⁴² Andreasen hints at the latter, claiming, "In the last generation God gives the final demonstration that men can keep the law of God and that they can live without sinning."⁴³ He further asserts that "commandments keeping means entire sanctification, a holy life, unswerving allegiance to right, entire separation from sin, and victory over it."⁴⁴ The syntax of 1 John 3:9 suggests that John may not have been referring to a sinless life per se, but a continuing battle with sin, thus striving to overcome it.

John uses the present indicative *poiei* in the phrase *hamartian ou poiei*, which denotes a continuative idea. Thus, the phrase can be rendered as "he does not sin *continually*."⁴⁵ Translations such as NASB, NIV, and ESV also translate this text in this way. John is referring to habitual sin.⁴⁶ The same author, John, argues in 1 John 1:9–10, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." John then underlines that everyone has sinned and thus, no one can claim to be sinless. In 1 John 2:1, he points out that we have an advocate interceding for us in heaven for our sins. Swanson posits, "Obviously then, anyone who complacently believes at any time that he is exempt from temptation and immune to transgression is too far distant from Christ to see the beauty of His character and is blind to his own unlikeness to Him."⁴⁷ Ellen White argues, "The more closely we discern Jesus, the more will we see our own defects of character."⁴⁸ As such, the closer one comes to Christ, the guilty and sinful he or she finds their character.

⁴¹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter*, 393.

⁴² Knight shares some insights on how this text is misunderstood, reflecting on his own life journey of trying to achieve this state of sinlessness. See Knight, *End-Time Events*, 100–102.

⁴³ Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service*, 318.

⁴⁴ Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service*, 310.

⁴⁵ "Doth not commit sin" [1 John 3:9] *SDABC 7:652*; Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, NAC 38 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 147.

⁴⁶ Mueller "suggest[s] that John was talking about habitual sin, that is, willfully persistent sin.... [Believers] may fall in sin here and there but are opposed to sin and do not practice a life of sin" (Ekkehardt Mueller, *1 John*, Andrews Bible Commentary: Light, Depth, Truth [Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2024], 1911).

⁴⁷ H. Peter Swanson, "Inside the Mind of a Struggling Saint: The Psychology of Perfection" in *God's Character and Last Generation*, 148.

Therefore, 1 John 3:9 may be saying that the one born of God does not dwell in sin but strives to overcome it,⁴⁹ not about a sinless perfection that believers develop in this life.⁵⁰ Such an understanding brings forth growth in Christlike character that can be summed up in the “in Christ motif.”

In Christ Motif

The Bible, particularly the New Testament, emphasizes the mystical relationship of the divine and human beings: Christ in the believers and them in Him. Such a relationship helps the believer to rely on Christ constantly. The Savior emphasizes to the believers in these words, “Remain in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself but must remain in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you remain in Me” (John 15:4). It is when the believers cling on Christ and remain in Him that they can bear fruit which are apparent to their surroundings. This relationship with the redeemer brings unity in such a way that the world comes to know Christ, who is in the believer (John 17:23; Cf. John 14:20). Perfectionists argue that one achieves a state that is no longer vulnerable to sin. But the Bible holds that no one is perfect (1 John 3:10), which is the reason Paul reminds the believer that “in Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our wrongdoings, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph 1:7).⁵¹ His grace is sufficient in forgiving the wrongdoings of those who recognize their shortcomings and unworthiness. Wilkins contends that “our obedience to Jesus’ teaching should overflow from a heart attitude that is rightly oriented toward God.”⁵²

The “in Christ motif” also indicates that we never cease to grow. Peter urges his audience to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).⁵³

⁴⁸ Ellen White, “Corkham, LT10, 1893,” <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/14058.6953001#6953011>

⁴⁹ Stecker argues the same, highlighting that “there can be no doubt that this is determined by a parenetic framework, and that it is an especially powerful form of expression aimed at warning the community not to sin.... sin remains a threatening force that must be repeatedly overcome, until the end of the world” (Georg Stecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996], 103–104); Bruce G. Schuchard, *1–3 John*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis, Mo: Concordia, 2012), 335–36.

⁵⁰ Yarbrough posits that John doesn’t “have in mind sinless perfection.” See Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament Ser (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 195.

⁵¹ White points out that “so long as Satan reigns, we shall have self to subdue, besetting sins to overcome so long as life shall last, there will be no stopping place, no point which we can reach and say, I have fully attained” (White, *The Acts of Apostles* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911], 560, 561.)

⁵² Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew: From Biblical Text—to Contemporary Life*, NIVAC 40 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 258.

⁵³ Wilkins avers that “we must rest in the positional perfection that Christ has brought through the cross, while being relatively dissatisfied with our experience in this life, pressing on toward greater growth in Christ.” See Wilkins, *Matthew*, 268.

Swanson calls the idea of considering “perfection” a “destination which has a discernible end point” as a “misconception.”⁵⁴ Perfection as well as sanctification is progressive. Believers’ lives ought to demonstrate the status that God’s grace has given them in Christ as they grow and become spiritually mature.⁵⁵ As there is no point in life at which a person can claim to have reached complete sufficiency or to no longer need growth, this likewise applies to the spiritual journey.

Conclusion

The theology of sinless perfection is nowhere advocated in the text analyzed. Believers continue to grow in grace and Christ until they are translated to living with God (1 Thess 4:16). As long as Satan and sin live, there is always room to be tempted and fall, but Christ renders those who trust Him victorious. The Scripture, however, encourages believers to cultivate good manners. It also invites these believers to recognize their shortcomings and die daily to their sins. With Christ being in them and them in Him, they grow daily to reflect His character.

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⁵⁴ Swanson, “Inside the Mind of a Struggling Saint,” 144. Ellen White argues, “None of the apostles and prophets ever claimed to be without sin. Men who have lived the nearest to God, men who would sacrifice life itself rather than knowingly commit a wrong act, men whom God has honored with divine light and power, have confessed the sinfulness of their nature. They have put no confidence in the flesh, have claimed no righteousness of their own, but have trusted wholly in the righteousness of Christ” (White, *Acts of Apostles*, 561). Davidson argues that it is not in a vacuum that Paul posits “that all have sinned [aorist punctiliar = sins of the past] and fall short [present continuous, ‘continue to fall short’] of the glory of God.’ No matter how advanced one’s character development may be, one is still a sinner” (Richard M. Davidson, “How Shall a Person Stand Before God? What Is the Meaning of Justification?” in *God’s Character and Last Generation*, 78).

⁵⁵ Giese, *2 Peter*, 202.

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