

Perfectionism in Psychology and in Theology

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IN psychology, perfectionism is a sign of personality disorder, while in theology it refers to a doctrine with a long and reputable history. This confusion of meaning creates problems for the Christian which are both theoretic and practical. It seems worth while, therefore, to sort out some of the reasons for the confusion, and to try to get a clearer understanding of what the search for perfection involves.

I. PERFECTIONISM IN PSYCHOLOGY

Perfectionism is considered to be a sign of personality disorder in much contemporary psychological thought. "The need for perfection," says Karen Horney, "is the most radical" of the misleading forms of self-idealization from which the neurotic suffers. "Self-idealization always entails a general self-glorification," and this "is what I suggest calling a *comprehensive neurotic solution*."¹

The emphasis on self-idealization in modern psychology reflects its concern with what C. R. Rogers calls "the compelling necessity which the individual feels to search for and become himself."² In the process of doing this, the individual forms an ideal picture of himself (using the word ideal in its psychological rather than in its ethical sense), and strives to live it out in the concrete circumstances of his life. "The history of ten years' research on this . . . problem," wrote G. W. Allport, with reference to the development of modern ego-psychology, "is too intricate to trace here, but unless I am mistaken every investigation has directly or indirectly confirmed Hoppe's initial claim that the subject behaves in such a manner as to maintain his self-esteem at the highest possible level."³ Initially one's self-ideal develops by a process of identification with members of one's immediate family circle. Contemporary psychology lays a good deal of emphasis on this process of identification, which is, as O. H. Mowrer points out,⁴ one of the significant ways in which it is transcending the earlier Freudian picture. Having begun to develop its self-image through identification, the child continues to develop largely under the influence of the drive to actualize

1. K. Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1950), pp. 22-24 (Italics in original).

2. C. R. Rogers, "What it means to become a Person," in Moustakas and Jayaswal (eds.), *The Self* (Harper & Bros., 1956), p. 199.

3. G. W. Allport, "The Ego in Contemporary Psychology," in *The Psychological Review*, Vol. 50, 1943, p. 470.

4. O. H. Mowrer, *Learning Theory and Personality Dynamics* (Arnold Press, 1950), Chapter 21.

this image: ". . . we have to *assume only one drive*," says K. Goldstein, "*the drive for self-actualization*."⁵

The first phrase of Goldstein's statement is significant. While it has been customary to emphasize a number of specific drives, with the growth of the self as a product of these drives, there is a considerable movement today to treat the realization of the self-image as the dominant factor, with the urge to satisfy specific drives as an abnormal deviation. "The traditional view," writes Goldstein, "assumes various drives . . . We assume only one drive, the drive for self-actualization of the organism;"⁶ and again "this tendency to actualize its nature, to *actualize 'itself' is the basic drive, the only drive by which the life of the organism is determined*."⁷ Action governed by specific drives is evidence of a defective organism; it is "an abnormal deviation from normal behaviour."⁸ This "wholesome turn in theorizing,"⁹ as G. W. Allport characterized the new emphasis on the importance of the self, reflects at times an almost Biblical concern to treat each human response as a response of the whole person, which cannot be broken down into any aggregate of specific drives or functions. "The effect pattern," says Goldstein again, "depends primarily on the functional *significance of the stimulus for the whole organism*."¹⁰ Behaviour is to be interpreted by reference to "the activities of the organism as a whole."¹¹

In the light of this emphasis one can see why methods of actualizing the self-image are assuming such importance in current psychological interpretations of personality, and why the deviations indicated by the term "perfectionism" are considered so dangerous. These dangers appear in three forms which are of particular importance for us.

The first characteristic of the perfectionist is that he has lost his grip on reality. He is unable to see as clearly as he should the relation between his ideal self-image and the actual conditions in which he must live, between what he feels he should be and what he actually is. He "is bound to look at his actual self . . . from a wrong perspective. The glorified self becomes not only a phantom to be pursued, it also becomes a measuring rod with which to measure his actual being."¹² He "identifies himself with his standards."¹³ Feeling under a compulsion to live out this ideal character under the actual conditions of daily life, he expects others to treat him correspondingly. Escape from the resulting conflicts and tensions is possible only by giving up his idealized self-image, or by denying the realities of his immediate situation. But the perfectionist can do neither. It would be

5. K. Goldstein, *The Organism* (American Book Co., 1939), p. 197 (Italics in original).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 196 (Italics in original).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

9. G. W. Allport, "The Trend in Motivational Theory," in C. E. Moustakas and S. R. Jayaswal (eds.), *The Self* (Harper & Bros., 1956), p. 41.

10. K. Goldstein, *op. cit.*, p. 218 (Italics in original).

11. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

12. K. Horney, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

tantamount to acknowledging failure, which the perfectionist cannot do without surrendering his whole system of self-respect. He is consequently driven increasingly to deny the relevance, and then the reality, of the concrete details of daily life, building up a system of conceptual defences against them. He may appeal to his idealized self-image to buttress this system of defences. His self-image and his defences against reality interact on each other in a circular process by which they are mutually strengthened. "The central issue in the patient's endeavours to ward off an experience . . . of self-contempt is to avoid any realization of unfulfilled shoulds . . . he must therefore fight off any real insight into these shortcomings . . . any suggestion of these shortcomings . . . puts him on the defensive . . . it prevents him from a sober examination of the truth."¹⁴

Similar conclusions are reached from studies of people recovering from personality disorder, and of people considered normal. In the process of counseling therapy, says C. R. Rogers, the "individual becomes more open to his experience . . . It is the opposite of defensiveness."¹⁵ Speaking of one patient he says she "has come to accept a more realistic view of her abilities and of her ultimate attainments";¹⁶ and again, she "has changed from a person who feels she must be perfect . . . to a person who can have comfortable goals of achievement."¹⁷ The therapy makes one "far more realistic in dealing with new people, new situations, new problems . . . This openness of awareness to what exists *at this moment in this situation* is, I believe, an important element in the description of the person who emerges from therapy."¹⁸ "He has a relatively accurate perception of the existential situation in all its complexity."¹⁹

A. H. Maslow, studying a carefully selected group of people considered to be unusually healthy, came to similar conclusions. He reported that his subjects were selected on two grounds. Negatively they must show "an absence of neurosis, psychopathic personality, psychosis or strong tendencies in those directions"²⁰ as evidenced by tests stringent enough to cause the rejection of all but 1 out of 3000 university students examined. Positively they must show evidence of considerable achievement in interpersonal relations, and ability to actualize their ideals without observable neurotic by-products. He called them self-actualizing people, and placed them at the opposite pole from perfectionists. ". . . the self-actualized person," he notes, "sees reality more clearly." He is "able to see concealed or confused realities more swiftly and more correctly than others"; ". . . self-actualizing people distinguish far more easily than most the fresh, concrete and idio-

14. *Ibid.*, p. 335.

15. C. R. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

16. C. R. Rogers, *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Houghton Mifflin, 1942), p. 192.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

18. C. R. Rogers "What it means to become a Person," in Moustakas and Jayaswal, (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 204 (Italics in original).

19. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

20. A. H. Maslow, "Self-Actualizing People," in Moustakas and Jayaswal (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 161.

syncretic from the generic, abstract and 'rubricized'. The consequence is that they live more in the real world of nature than in the man-made set of concepts, expectations, beliefs and stereotypes which most people confuse with the world."²¹ He sums up the evidence from several contributing sources by saying that the neurotic "does not perceive the real world as accurately or as effectively as does a healthy person."²²

The second characteristic of the perfectionist can be stated more briefly since it is implied in what has already been said. He lacks an adequate grasp of the relationship between means and ends. In his effort to live out his idealized pictures, he shows a striking "*disregard for feasibility* which pervades his entire drive for actualization," a "*complete disregard for the conditions* under which they could be fulfilled."²³ He tends to telescope the whole process involved in realizing his objective, treating the end-result as though it were the next step, and dropping out the intermediate links. Perfectionists emphasize "Immediate and absolute perfection. They aim . . . at making it appear *as if* the particular perfection were attained." If they think they *should* be like their ideal, then "in their minds they *have* all these qualities."²⁴

By contrast, people who are able to actualize their ideals in a normal and healthy way "behave as though, for them, means and ends are clearly distinguishable. In general, they are fixed on ends rather than on means, and means are quite definitely subordinated to these ends."²⁵

The third characteristic of perfectionism is its "coercive character,"²⁶ its compulsiveness, rooted in the intense feelings accompanying the perfectionist's effort to practise his idealized pattern of behaviour. Any suggestion that this pattern of behaviour may not be immediately practicable sets off "violent emotional reactions to non-fulfilment—reactions which traverse the whole range of anxiety, despair, self-condemnation and self-destructive impulses. To the outsider they appear entirely out of proportion to the provocation. But they are entirely in proportion to what it means to the individual."²⁷ The perfectionist cannot bear to admit the disparity between his ideal and his present pattern of behaviour. To remove a mask which one had thought was a part of one's real self can be, as Rogers says,²⁸ a deeply disturbing experience for even a fairly stable personality, much more so for the perfectionist. "Just as a misfortune pulls the ground away from under him, so does a realization of his own fallibility."²⁹ Conversely he is under such intense pressure to insist on the immediate practicability of his ideal that his behaviour, in relation to this ideal, becomes compulsive.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 165, 166.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

23. K. Horney, *op. cit.*, p. 66 (*Italics in original*).

24. *Ibid.*, p. 66 (*Italics in original*).

25. A. H. Maslow, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

26. K. Horney, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

28. C. R. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

29. K. Horney, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

The distinction between unhealthy perfectionism and healthy idealism is recognized by the psychologist as being important. It hinges largely on the method by which the attempt is made to realize the ideal. There is "a profoundly different psychology of motivation,"³⁰ says Maslow, for people capable of actualizing the ideal in healthy ways. He calls it a growth motivation as opposed to a deficiency motivation, that is, a motivation capable of recognizing the significance of time differences between present and future, and of exercising rational foresight and responsible judgment regarding means and ends. Where the perfectionist tends to be compulsive, for the normal person "the wish, the judgment, the decision is ours . . . efforts of this kind give us freedom and strength."³¹

II. PERFECTIONISM IN THEOLOGY

In theology perfectionism refers not to a disorder but to a doctrine which R. N. Flew goes so far as to describe as "veritably the King's highway."³² It goes back for its foundation to the words attributed to Christ: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Mat. 5:48). It appeals for support to numerous statements in the New Testament epistles,³³ some of which require future perfection (2 Cor. 13:11), some of which assume perfection already attained (Phil. 3:15), and some of which refer perfection to its source (Heb. 10:14).

Five features of the Christian doctrine of perfection provide significant points of comparison with modern psychological thought.

In the first place, Christian teaching on perfection has recognized the importance of a time factor. In one sense, perfection belongs to the future life, when we shall see God "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). That which is "incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away" is "reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). Yet, in another sense, Christian perfection can be realized in this life. Christ "hath perfected" already those who "therefore" have "boldness to enter into the holiest . . . by a new and living way" (Heb. 10:14, 19, 20). While there is continuity between the two kinds of perfection, they are by no means identical. The distinction between what may be called ultimate perfection and immediate perfection runs through the story of Christian thought, and, though more emphasis is sometimes laid on one aspect and sometimes on the other, though the nature of the relation between them is variously interpreted, the double emphasis is never wholly lost. The Christian, even when he claims immediate perfection, acknowledges the lack of ultimate perfection. In one sense, a part of his immediate perfection consists in acknowledging that there is another perfection which is beyond his capacity to realize in the circumstances of his immediate life.

A second, associated, characteristic of perfection as it is understood in Christian theology, is a deep sense of humility. In the parable of the Phari-

30. A. H. Maslow, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

31. K. Horney, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

32. R. N. Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology* (Oxford, 1934), p. xii.

33. E.g. Phil. 2:5; 2 Cor. 13:9; Col. 1:28.

see and the Publican, Christ pointed out the significance of this feature. "When we speak of the perfection of the saints," wrote John Calvin, quoting Augustine with approval, "part of this perfection consists in the recognition of our imperfection, both in truth and in humility."³⁴ John Wesley, even when urging that "all our preachers should make a point of preaching perfection to believers constantly, strongly and explicitly,"³⁵ recognized the immense danger of spiritual self-satisfaction: ". . . the most perfect," he wrote, "have continual need of the merits of Christ."³⁶ In an enquiry about perfection, when he was asked, "What is the first advice that you would give?" he answered, "watch and pray continually against pride."³⁷ "In our perfection," wrote P. T. Forsyth, "there is a permanent element of repentance."³⁸

A much more fundamental reason for the emphasis on humility is the Christian conviction that perfection is never a personal achievement. It is basically a gift. When St. Paul speaks of the need for constant effort in pressing on towards the mark, and urges that "as many as be perfect" should be "thus minded," he lays the foundation for his argument by saying that what he strives to apprehend is only that for which he has already been apprehended by Christ (Phil. 3:12-15). There is, he says, no ground for boasting (Eph. 2:7, 8). This does not preclude an emphasis on good works, which are the fruits of the Spirit. But even where Christian teaching has seemed to emphasize works to the detriment of faith, to insist that faith without works is bad, and that "by works a man is justified, and not by faith only," (James 2:17, 24) it has first insisted that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above," (James 1:17) so that the ground of pride in personal achievement is undercut. Even in the mediaeval period, which laid more emphasis on works of merit than either New Testament or Reformation theology would ordinarily countenance, "grace was as much the very ground and environment of mediaeval religion as was merit."³⁹ Protestant teaching on perfection has been explicit on this point: ". . . perfection such as enables a person to fulfil the whole law, and so needs not the merits of Christ—I acknowledge no such perfection; I do now and always did protest against it,"⁴⁰ said John Wesley. "Christian perfection," he says, "is received merely by faith."⁴¹ And when asked about the place of works in perfection: "But what does the perfect one do more than others?" he replied, "Perhaps nothing."⁴²

What has already been said bears directly on the third characteristic of Christian thinking about perfection—its inseparable connection with the life,

34. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, Chapter 17, translated by W. J. Allen, Presbyterian Board of Publications and Sabbath School Work, 1902, Vol. II, p. 50.

35. J. Wesley, *Works*, ed. J. Emory (Lane & Scott, 1850), Vol. VI, p. 529.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 501.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 520.

38. P. T. Forsyth, quoted in R. N. Flew, *op. cit.*, p. 410.

39. J. S. Whale, *The Protestant Tradition* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 48.

40. J. Wesley, quoted in R. N. Flew, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

41. J. Wesley, *Works*, *op. cit.*, p. 500.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 504.

death and resurrection of Christ. Enough has been said to indicate how specifically the New Testament writers emphasize this connection. Theologians through the ages have remained true to this emphasis, however variously they have developed its implications. It will be useful, however, to notice three subordinate forms in which this conviction has expressed itself.

In the first place, Christ provides the norm of Christian perfection. The Christian aiming at perfection looks to a historic person rather than to a conceptually defined standard, or to a subjective image. This emphasis is fundamental to the New Testament outlook, and has never been wholly forsaken in later Christian thought.

In the second place Christ gives the assurance that, by God's grace, a measure of perfection is possible. Though setting standards of perfection more difficult of achievement than any which a man is likely to set for himself, and which are likely in the normal way to produce frustration, despair, and other forms of personality disorder in anyone seriously concerned to practice them, he also provides increased resources to achieve these standards. Theologians may differ endlessly over the method by which these resources are provided, but not over the fact.

Thirdly, in providing these new resources, Christ establishes a new order in which the Christian is a "new man."⁴³ The new order is both objective and subjective. It involves a new relationship between man and God and between man and man. It also involves a new organization of motives and of values in the thinking of the individual. The establishment of this new order gives the Christian concept of perfection its meaning and makes it possible.

In view of these three emphases it is important to note more precisely the meaning which Christian perfection has in the context of this new order; and this leads us to the fourth feature of the Christian idea of perfection.

Christian perfection is more a religious than an ethical perfection. Though this distinction raises problems, one cannot avoid drawing it in the light of Christian thinking on this question. For theologians it comes up in connection with the concept of sinlessness. "Perfection is not sinlessness," says P. T. Forsyth. "The perfect in the New Testament are certainly not the sinless."⁴⁴ Ritschl agrees: "The conception of moral perfection in the Christian life ought on no account to be associated with the idea of a fruitless search for actual sinlessness of conduct."⁴⁵ "I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes those involuntary transgressions," wrote John Wesley. "Therefore *sinless perfection* is a phrase I never use."⁴⁶ "For nothing proceeds from the most perfect man," says Calvin, "which is wholly immaculate."⁴⁷ St. Paul recognizes that even those who are perfect are capable of backsliding and sin.⁴⁸

43. E.g. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Ephes. 4:24.

44. P. T. Forsyth, *Christian Perfection*, quoted in R. N. Flew, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

45. A. Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, Eng. translation by H. R. Mackintosh & A. B. Macaulay (T. & T. Clark, 1902), p. 665.

46. J. Wesley, *Works, op. cit.*, p. 501 (Italics in original).

47. J. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book III, Chapter 15, *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 23.

48. R. N. Flew, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-60.

On this matter, however, Christian writers sometimes seem to contradict themselves and one another. In spite of the New Testament recognition that the perfect are capable of backsliding, the First Epistle of John explicitly says that "whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not," and "whoever is born of God doth not commit sin" (1 John 3:6, 9). John Wesley himself, in spite of sayings like that quoted above, also said, "A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin."⁴⁹ The apparent contradiction in Wesley's statements may be understood in terms of his distinction between voluntary and involuntary sins, and the difficulty of conceiving a perfection that does not involve sinlessness may be lessened if we keep in mind various senses in which the term sin can be used. St. Paul sometimes speaks of sin in the context of the old order of law and works, when it involves failure to observe requirements for specific forms of behaviour. But when he speaks of sin in the context of the new order of grace and faith, it seems to have a different meaning. It is failure to live by faith, "for whatsoever is not of faith," he says specifically, "is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

It is the great virtue of Luther, says Ritschl, that he recovers the distinction "between the irreligious and the immoral aspects of sin, and subordinates the latter to the former."⁵⁰ The former, the irreligious aspect, is the concern of Christian perfection. Though related, the two belong to different dimensions. It is this difference which gives the concept, he says, "not a quantitative but a qualitative significance." "Now there is no contradiction between the qualitative sense of Christian perfection and the fact that we still continue to be conscious of quantitative imperfectness and defectiveness even of those functions in which our Christian faith is expressed."⁵¹ Christian perfection finds its meaning in a religious dimension: ". . . the principal thing in Christian perfection is reverence and trust in God."⁵² "Whom then do you mean by one that is perfect?" asks John Wesley, and answers himself, "We mean one in whom is 'the mind that was in Christ'." "Pure love reigning alone in the heart and life—this is the whole of Scriptural perfection."⁵³

Whatever one may think of these distinctions in the meaning of the term sinlessness, it seems quite clear that Christian perfection is conceived in terms of religious attitude rather than in terms of ethical observance. It is a life dominated by faith in and love to God, rather than by a struggle to act in strict conformity to ideal maxims. It is basically a personal response rather than a personal achievement. The perfect man is one who has moved into a new dimension of living, whose system of motives has been transformed by his inclusion within the new order of grace and faith. The effect is to remove the obsessional compulsiveness which so often characterizes the striving for what Ritschl would call quantitative conformity, without lessen-

49. Quoted in R. N. Flew, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

50. A. Ritschl, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 651.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

53. J. Wesley, *Works, op. cit.*, pp. 494, 505.

ing the strength of the inner desire for the ideal, thus giving something corresponding to St. Paul's thought of "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21).

Finally one must note how the Christian concept of perfection requires one to recognize the difficult and unpleasant features of the concrete situation in which one must live. References to perfection in the New Testament epistles are constantly accompanied by a recognition of the weakness of human nature and the evils current in contemporary society. Far more fundamental, however, is the intimate connection in Christian thought between the idea of perfection and the Cross of Christ, with all its shame and ignominy, and with its sharp illumination of human vice. It was because Christ "humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross" that "God hath highly exalted him" (Phil. 2:8, 9). It was "this mind" (Phil. 2:5) that the Christian was to have in him—the mind capable of accomplishing its purpose in the full face of human evil, without any evasion or pretense. "I am determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), said Paul. And it was because the Christian was "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20), because he participated to some degree in Christ's victorious involvement with the worst the world could produce, that he was capable of what the Christian called perfection.

In later Protestant theology, this emphasis on victorious involvement in the concrete situations of life was expressed in a belief about the sanctity of Christian vocations in ordinary life: ". . . the Reformers hold", wrote Ritschl, "in opposition to the pretended perfection of monasticism, that faith in providence, humility, and patience and faithful activity in any calling, represent Christian perfection . . . as an injunction incumbent on all Christians."⁵⁴ "Better and more perfect is the obedience of son, wife, servant, captive than the obedience of a monk," wrote Luther, "if we are to go on from imperfection to perfection."⁵⁵ And R. N. Flew, speaking of the teaching of the Methodists on perfection, says that "the sanctification expected has been an ideal possible of attainment in the struggle and suffering of ordinary life."⁵⁶

III. THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

It is obvious that the terms of perfection and perfectionism have had quite different meanings for the psychologist and for the theologian.

It must also be obvious, however, that the psychologist and the theologian agree, at a deeper level of interpretation, on some of the most significant characteristics of the healthy person in his effort to realize his ideals. The healthy person must recognize the significance of the time span involved in

54. A. Ritschl, *op. cit.*, p. 648.

55. M. Luther, *Werke* (Weimar Ed.), viii, 584, *De votis monastics*. Quoted in R. N. Flew, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

56. R. N. Flew, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

any effort to realize his ideal. He must have a realistic understanding of the relation between means and ends. He must have a clear and humble recognition of his own limitations. He must have a clear grasp of the difficult, and often unpleasant, features of his immediate situation as they affect the practice of his ideal. His effort to realize his ideal must be free from compulsive and obsessional features, and must be carried on by a process of responsible judgments exercised in a climate of liberty. The psychologist and the theologian agree that there is a significant difference in the structure and organization of motives between the healthy and the unhealthy person in his striving for perfection.

So far there is a measure of agreement behind differences in terminology and expression. At this point they tend to diverge, the psychologist still being concerned largely to preserve the structure and organization of motives from abnormal strain, the theologian being more concerned with the creation of a structure of motives able to withstand abnormal strain.

It is beyond the purpose of this paper to discuss how such insights as these can be applied to the practical problems faced by the Christian who is burdened with a sense of obligation to work for the realization of Christian ideals in a sub-Christian society. That they are relevant will not be seriously questioned. Christians are compelled to try to actualize their ideals in concrete situations where they are constantly "so cornered that every alternative open to them threatens their moral security."⁵⁷ They are convinced of the relevance of their ideal to daily life, even while they recognize the impossibility of realizing it fully in the immediate situation. They are concerned "to live the life of angels" even while fully acknowledging "the corruptions of the world" in which it must be lived—than which, as Calvin said, "nothing is more difficult."⁵⁸ In circumstances like these, the insights of the psychologist and the theologian have distinct relevance to the problem of the individual Christian.

For our present purpose it is enough to point out how clearly these insights serve to indicate the points of danger in Christian practice. The Christian who is concerned about perfection, as the theologian understands it, can slip over with disturbing ease into the practice of perfectionism as the psychologist has described it. It is helpful to know some of the signs of deterioration, for the Christian is constantly under double pressure, both from the culture of which he is a part, and from the ideal of perfection to which he cannot be disloyal. Under such pressures, a search for perfection which is spiritually edifying can readily turn into a practice of perfectionism which is spiritually stultifying. Calvin, as so often happens, has a wise word to say on the matter: "I admit that we are not to labour feebly or coldly in urging perfection, far less desist from urging it; but I hold that it is a device of the devil to fill our minds with a confident belief of it while we are still in our course."⁵⁹

57. J. C. Bennett, *Christianity and Communism* (S.C.M., 1949), p. 94.

58. J. Calvin, *Institutes*, III. 7, *op. cit.* Vol. I, p. 621.

59. J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. 1, tr. by H. Beveridge (T. & T. Clark, 1879), p. 297.