In 1975, Southern Publishing Association published a book entitled “Perfection — The Impossible Possibility.” There were four authors of this 200 page volume — all of them well known writers of that day. Their names were Dr. Edward Heppenstall, Dr. Hans LaRondelle, Dr. Herbert Douglas and Dr. Mervyn Maxwell. The publication of this book revealed the great divide in our church on this subject and also on the subjects of the nature of Christ in His humanity and righteousness by faith. The four authors were poles apart in their understanding of perfection. This topic has proven to be a theological hot potato, the discussion of which has often created more heat than light.

The word ‘perfection’ is a dangerous word to some. The very mention of it in theological discussion can produce a traumatic reaction on some theologians which could ruin their whole day. One theologian disdainfully refers to it as “fear mongering about the time of the end and legalistic interpretations about how to arrive at a state where one no longer sins.” Another such case that I personally encountered was a lady who avoided even speaking the word. She explained that she doesn’t use the “p” word anymore because of the negative effect it had on her mental state. So what is it about this word that makes it a lightning rod for heated debate and controversy? Do the Inspired writings uphold the necessity or even the possibility of fallen human beings ever attaining to that high moral standard in this life?

It seems that almost everyone will agree that sin and imperfection will not be admitted into heaven. Otherwise, heaven would become just like this sin-cursed earth. So the critical question is when and how will perfection be attained in the experience of those who will be admitted into heaven? There seems to be several commonly held opinions on this point.

One option is the belief that perfection of character is not possible until Christ comes the second time when, according to Philippians 3:21, He changes “our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body” (KJV). This is a very popular option, especially with the theologians. They believe that sin resides in the flesh and therefore will be part of our character until we receive a new body. According to this theory, sin is inherited from our ancestors which has been passed down from Adam. Some believe that because we all were in Adam when he sinned, therefore we all sinned when he sinned. Consequently we are sharers in his guilt even before we personally sin. This teaching necessitates a change in the doctrine of the nature of Christ, making Him exempt from inheriting what we inherit. The idea that we are all born sinners has been so widely taught among us that to many minds it has become like one of our fundamental beliefs.

But this raises a serious problem. If the perfection required to enter heaven is dependent on the saints being given a new body, then why doesn’t Christ come and complete His redemptive work by giving the saints new bodies? That puts the blame on Christ for the continuance of sin. And how will these people fare when Christ makes the pronouncement, “He that is unjust, let him be unjust still, and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still.” This will fix the character beyond any further change. The imperfect will remain imperfect still. This teaching of inherited sin will destroy the very foundation of the Three Angel’s Messages and rob us of the experience that we need in order to be ready for the latter rain and the close of probation.

With this doctrine there can be no 144,00 sealed, perfected saints who will be prepared for Christ’s second coming. Yet we have many statements in Inspiration which show that God’s people are perfected in character before Christ comes and changes the body. Ephesians 5:25-27 tells us that when Christ comes the church will be without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish. Zephaniah 3:13 says “The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth.” Also read
Revelation 14:5. In 2 Testimonies For The Church 355 we read

“We are preparing to meet Him who, escorted by a retinue of holy angels, is to appear in the clouds of heaven to give the faithful and the just the finishing touch of immortality. When He comes He is not to cleanse us of our sins, to remove from us the defects in our characters, or to cure us of the infirmities of our tempers and dispositions. If wrought for us at all, this work will all be accomplished before that time. When the Lord comes, those who are holy will be holy still “ So this option is obviously not according to the law and testimony.

There is a second option which has its adherents at the opposite end of the theological spectrum. It teaches that perfection is attained when one is genuinely born again. They believe when we have experienced the new birth and justification that we become wholly like Jesus through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who brings the righteousness of Christ into the life. Thereafter the believers prayers and good deeds ascend up before God pure from all human defilement. And as long as they abide in Christ, they will have the perfection required to be ready for heaven.

This level of experience would go beyond what the apostle Paul experienced. Even though Paul was one of the most dedicated of Christ’s followers, he confessed that he was not yet perfect. He wrote in Philippians 3:12, “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect . . . But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

The following statement from Inspiration shows that conversion is not a one time thing. We have to be born anew every morning like the apostle Paul who confessed, “I die daily.”

“None are living Christians unless they have a daily experience in the things of God and daily practice self-denial, cheerfully bearing the cross and following Christ. Every living Christian will advance daily in the divine life. As he advances toward perfection, he experiences a conversion to God every day; and this conversion is not completed until he attains to perfection of Christian character, a full preparation for the finishing touch of immortality “ (White, 2 Testimonies 505).

We also are told that “There is no such thing as instantaneous sanctification. True sanctification is a daily work, continuing as long as life shall last. Those who are battling with daily temptations, overcoming their own sinful tendencies, and seeking for holiness of heart and life, make no boastful claims of holiness. They are hungering and thirsting for righteousness.” (White, Sanctified Life 10)

“Let us be growing Christians. We are not to stand still. We are to be in advance today of what we were yesterday; every day learning to be more trustful, more fully relying upon Jesus. Thus we are to grow up. You do not at one bound reach perfection; sanctification is the work of a lifetime” (White, 3 Selected Messages 193). This second option does not meet the test of Isaiah 8:20 any more than the first option.

The third option seems to be the more valid one. Those who walk this path are earnestly striving to conform their lives to the great standard of righteousness. They believe the word of Inspiration which tells us that “Everyone who by faith obeys God’s commandments will reach the condition of sinlessness in which Adam lived before his transgression “ (White, In Heavenly Places 146 ). The question is, How and when will this condition be reached? Have any saints in the past ever attained to it through daily sanctification? Even though Paul was one of the most dedicated follower of Christ, he confessed that he was not yet perfect. Likewise, the apostle John stated in 1 John 1:8, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” And the Wiseman asked the rhetorical question in Proverbs 20:9, “Who can say, I have made
my heart clean, I am pure from my sin? “ The truth is that

“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 The Apostles 561).

So it is obvious that during probationary time “There is none righteous, no not one” (Romans 3:10). Christ covers the repentant, believing souls during probationary time so that they have a standing of perfection which meets the broadest demands of God’s holy law. But if that covering were removed, there would be none righteous, no not one. So when will the sanctified saints attain to perfection within? We get a clue from this passage in 4 Testimonies For The Church 367:

“When I was shown the present condition of man in physical, mental, and moral power, and what he might become through the merits of Christ, I was astonished that he should preserve such a low level. Man may grow up into Christ, his living head. It is not the work of a moment, but that of a lifetime. By growing daily in the divine life, he will not attain to the full stature of a perfect man in Christ until his probation ceases.”

Perfection does not come until our probation ceases. When does probation cease for the righteous? 1 Selected Messages 125 tells us that it happens at the judgment. Zechariah 3:1-5 depicts the 144,000 just before they are sealed and without fault before God. They are represented by Joshua standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. They still are defective in character, but not because they haven’t overcome all their sins and besetment. The filthy garments are their past sins which have been overcome and pardoned, but have not yet been blotted out. 21 Manuscript Release 384 tells us that “Satan pointed to their sins which had not yet been blotted out, and which he had tempted them to commit, and then reviled them as being sinners clad with filthy garments. But Jesus changes their appearance. He says, "Take away his filthy garments from him." And 5 Testimonies For The Church 475 describes the perfection which results when the filthy garments are removed.

“ As the people of God afflict their souls before Him, pleading for purity of heart, the command is given, "Take away the filthy garments" from them, and the encouraging words are spoken, "Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment." The despised remnant are clothed in glorious apparel, nevermore to be defiled by the corruptions of the world. . . Now they are eternally secure from the tempter’s devices. “ (White)

Our past experience in sinning has had a very depraving effect on our spirituality. Jeremiah 17:1 tells us that “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart.” Messages To Young People 195 says, “An evil thought leaves an evil impress on the mind.” (White) That is what makes for a filthy garment which defiles even the prayers and best deeds of the saints. However, when Christ blots out the filthy garment and clothes them with the fullness of His righteousness, God’s people will be “men wondered at.” Then Christ will have a perfected people who have His Father’s name in their forehead. In them the mystery of God will be finished and “Satan, with all his triumphant boasting, with all his confederacy of evil united against God and the laws of His government, stands viewing them as a fortress impregnable to his sophistries and delusions. They are to him an incomprehensible mystery.” “(White, Testimonies to Ministers 18).