

# PERFECTIONISM and BUBBLE THEOLOGY

*by Ian Hodge, Ph.D.*

**Be ye therefore perfect  
even as your Father  
which is in heaven  
is perfect.**

Matt 5:48

**A** MUSIC SCHOOL, where students from age three upwards learn various instruments, is a great place to learn about perfection. A significant number of the students in this particular school learn either violin or piano, and for very young students, the violin has some added attraction. For a start, it's possible to buy an instrument in fractional sizes so that the very young can fit their arms and hands around the instrument. No such ease exists with piano, and young students must simply learn to spread their fingers and extend their hand in order to cope with the physical dimensions of the instrument.

How difficult it is on the hearing of adults as these young students, especially the violinists,

struggle to master their instruments. An out-of-tune violin can be a nightmare to listen to, but one that is in tune yet played off pitch is difficult to endure for any length of time.<sup>1</sup> The problem, however, is not isolated to the violin. The young pianist, too, must learn to place his hand and fingers in exactly the right spot. While the pianist cannot make the fractional mistakes in intonation that the violinists can make, the piano student is certainly capable of creating a cacophony of sound that is difficult to tolerate as notes are “split” (i.e. two notes next to one another are played at the same time since the finger hits the crack between the notes and not directly on the correct key).

How we long for the students to reach perfection in their chosen instrument. We wait patiently for the day when the child (or adult learner, for that matter) moves beyond the student stage to the period when their playing becomes something to enjoy.

But what do we mean by perfection? *First*, perfection means that the *correct* notes are played. The student must play the right note, the one that is in tune. For the pianist, this means getting his hand and fingers on the right notes. For the violinist it means getting her fingers in the right

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<sup>1</sup> I have been told that the only thing more difficult to endure than someone learning the violin is a beginner on the bagpipes. I wonder if this has anything to do with the fact that a) there are no famous Scottish violinists, and b) there are no famous Jewish pipers?

post on the fingerboard to ensure the note is played at its correct tonality.

*Second*, it means establishing the *quality* of the sound made on the instrument. It is one of the distinguishing traits of a good musician that not only are the notes played in tune but that the sound produced by the instrument is of a particular quality. It is the inability to vary the quality of the sound produced that sets apart many musicians, even professionals.<sup>2</sup>

*Third*, it means that even though the correct notes might be mastered, there is more than just a casual playing of notes. Correct notes played at the same volume become monotonous. Correct notes played without any dynamic shading (loud and soft, and shades in between) are only a part of the idea of playing to perfection because the idea of perfection in music includes *how* the music is played. And *how* the music is played becomes a matter of artistic taste, and having the ability to create the desired effects at the time of performance. Creating shape and form in music is not just a matter of composition, but is also a matter to do with performance. A musician may see that the melodic line in the music can be shaped to rise and fall. His

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<sup>2</sup> Sound quality, among other things, is most often what sets apart “classical” musicians from their pop or rock counterparts. No pop or rock pianist creates the beautiful lines and full rich sounds produced by the better classical pianists. It is not that their music does not demand it, which is usually true, but that they are incapable of playing with that level of expertise. They are artists with a limited palette.

ability to make this line rise and fall in volume depends on his inner judgement and his physical capacity to handle the instrument in such a way that the line rises and falls as a curve rather than a line with sudden jerks up and down.

When the elements of music are put together in such a way that the magnificence of shape and form, combined with the ability to “color” the sound by slightly varying the touch on the instrument (or the way the instrument is blown if it is a wind instrument) we begin to praise not only the composer but also the performer. When the variety in richness and color is presented by the performer, we begin to appreciate the idea of perfection in music.

In this sense, perfection has to do with *maturity*. Rarely are young performers considered at the peak of their career. The peak of their playing is not only the culmination of years of study but also the accumulation of years of working with music, honing their judgement, refining their control of fingers, hands, arms and whole body to produce exciting and extraordinary performances. In other words, perfection means more than merely playing without error. While this notion exists in the musical world, where we look for performances without error, we also recognize that perfection is more than just the notion of note perfection. It has to do with maturity.

## **Christian Perfectionism**

**O**UR TEXT FROM Matt 5:48, **Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect** causes us to pause and think about what God requires of us in the way of perfection. A superficial reading of the Bible can easily lead to the notion that when we are commanded to be perfect it means we must be totally sinless. While it is certainly true that we should strive to lead lives in perfect obedience to God, the idea of perfection in the Bible is also intimately connected to the idea of maturity. And this is what our text means when it asks us to be perfect.<sup>3</sup>

Maturity means, among other things, making right judgements. For the Christian this means making right judgements about how God wants us to live, that is, by applying God-given principles into a myriad of situations.

Take education, for example. When we educate students to play a musical instrument, we try our hardest to get the student to play “with maturity”. We do not want our children to play Mozart with childish technique or with childish maturity, even though we accept that this will happen in the early years of their tuition. We do our best to encourage children to play with maturity, to play with the

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<sup>3</sup>The Greek word τελειος (pronounced: telee-oss), translated “perfect” in the King James version, has the sense of bringing to an end, to consummate, or to bring to an ultimate goal.

same judgement that is like one who has been playing for a lifetime, rather than one who has been playing for just a few short years.

To put this another way, we do our best to encourage music students to be *adults* in the way they play, to have the judgement of adults. We do our best to eliminate childish judgement from their thinking as early as we can, because we know that while childish judgement remains, immature performances will be the end result on the concert platform. When they hear immature performances, we tell the student “don't play the music like that”. And we refer them to mature performances to imitate, not the performances of young and inexperienced musicians.

This, in essence, is a key purpose of all education: To teach the child not to be a child but to be an adult, one who behaves in a mature way, who makes correct conclusions in given situations, and who then exhibits the willingness and tenacity to live up to those judgements. Education not aimed at this purpose, to produce maturity, should be questioned, whether it is education in the home, the school, or the church.

It should come as no surprise, then, to find that often the error in so much music teaching is because there is insufficient understanding of this point. Education becomes childish. Simplistic pieces that are not great compositions in themselves are

the tools often used to “educate” the child in music. But because no amount of trying can make great music out of mediocre compositions, it should not surprise us that most students of musical instruments do not reach more than an elementary level in their field if they are given “immature” pieces to play all the time. While there is a place for a very short period using childish or immature compositions because of their elementary nature, the idea is to get the student away from these compositions into “mature” music as soon as possible. In short, we do our best to ensure that musical childhood is eliminated as soon as possible in the life of the student.

### ***"Bubble" Theology***

**N**EITHER SHOULD IT surprise us that we have immature Christians in this world when we see what takes place in many churches. Children are sent out of the church so they do not participate in “adult” portions of the service. Children even have their own songs, often senseless ditties. Some may contain great and true theological themes, but they are wrapped in immature language or music. The kingship and lordship of Christ are surely worth more than the senseless repetition of “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble” supposedly imitating the fish of the sea who teach us of the lordship of God as creator. While this is true, we must ask what does the child remember about the song, especially

when this humorous phrase is the focal point at the end of the song, with the children encouraged to shout at the top of their voices, “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble”.

Put yourself in the situation of the child in a place where this song is to be sung. The children are brought out to the front of the church, and the minister sets the example of how this song is to be sung. The opening words of how God is creator and king over all creation are sung, but the children are waiting to the part where they can excel, shouting at the top of their voices, “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble”. Why couldn't the song have been written so that the children shout at the end “Christ is creator and lord over all, the king over all the earth, and the king who should be the ruler in our lives”?

The difference between these two phrases is the difference between childishness and maturity, the difference between perfectionism on the one hand and an elementary immaturity on the other. We do not do our children a favor in their musical education by having them play childish and elementary music. Neither do we promote maturity in our children by having them remember that the climax of the song is to shout “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble”. When the adults of the church are encouraged to sing along to such a mindless ditty, we can understand why there is a lack of Christian perfectionism, a shortfall in Christian maturity, a

deficit of right judgement, and an inability to apply the Word of God to personal and corporate lives.

We also see evidence of this unwillingness to hurry the child to maturity when children are discouraged from participating in the so-called “adult” section of the worship service, the long intercessory prayer and the sermon. Instead, children are often treated to childish songs and stories then sent from the worship service. It may be that children might become “perfect”, more quickly if we let them remain in the service and help them understand the language of the Bible and its demands which are, after all, not made in childish terms but in very forthright and clear “adult” language. We need only reread our text for evidence of this.

### **Methodological Immaturity**

**U**NDERLYING THE ACTIVITIES using such teaching practices for children is a lack of understanding of educational methodology and philosophy, or an understanding of how Christianity has influenced Western civilization and its educational methods aimed at producing maturity in young students. Educator John Holt draws attention to this kind of educational madness in his book, *How Children Fail*.<sup>4</sup> He tells how young children in music class were encouraged to touch

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<sup>4</sup> Revised edition Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, [1964] 1982.

their toes every time they heard C played. The way the teacher “told” the children that C was being played was to pause and hold the note. So, when the children heard the paused note, they would stop running and touch their toes. “What does such a practice teach” asks Holt? It does not teach the children to recognise a C in music, since in most compositions C is probably not a long note. It may teach them how to touch their toes, but this could be taught without the musical note C being brought into the study. It certainly teaches them nothing about music, unless it is to recognise the difference between long and short notes. But then the skill of listening to long notes should not be confined to the note C.

Holt comments:

This is typical of schools. thinking in another respect. Teachers, not understanding that children like to learn things, believing that learning is painful (because it is for them), every so often try to make it “fun” by taking some tiny task, in this case recognizing the sound of the C, and making it the center of some elaborate game. Teachers' magazines are full of such suggestions. These games take an enormous amount of time to organize and carry out – and so fill up the school day, bring the class just that much closer to that distant and long-for closing bell. But they also complicate and confuse the learning situation. In electronics terms, they bury the *signal* (whatever the teacher is trying to get

across) in a lot of noise. For the children in this particular class, what was the point of this activity? To march around the room? To touch your toes? To listen to music? How could they apply their minds to a task when they hardly knew what it was?<sup>5</sup>

Reconsider the situation in the local church where the children are to shout out “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble” at the end of the song, after singing that Jesus is Lord of all. What are they to learn from this activity? That the significance of the concept of the lordship of Christ is not to be dwelt upon so that the mindless “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble” can be shouted with enthusiasm? That in the end, “bubble” theology is the concluding thought of the lordship of Christ? That life is full of opportunities to shout mindless repetitions at the top of the voice? How will the children know what to learn? And what about the adults who are exhorted from the pulpit to indulge in such childish antics? In Holt's words, the message has been lost in the *noise*.

Our text from Matthew 5:48 comes at the middle of the section known as the Sermon on the Mount. It also comes after the section where Jesus talks about loving our neighbors, about how we relate to people, about how we should treat them and deal with them. Jesus goes on to talk about judgement,

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

and the necessity to make *right* judgements, that is, *mature* judgements, *correct* judgements. Later in the same Sermon, Jesus says the wise people are those who obey God, who do not practice “lawlessness”, that is, disobedience to the law of God. It is in the context of standards, of rules and – dare we say it, of law – that maturity is possible. Without rules or guidelines, there is no standard of judgement. We may not like to use the word “law” because of our late twentieth century disposition against the notion of being told what to do, but the notion of rules that are mandatory is inseparable from the idea of perfectionism. And *both* ideas are inseparable from Christianity, as the Sermon on the Mount indicates.

Imagine the difficulty English teachers would have teaching children the difference between good and bad prose and poetry without the existence of grammar rules. Without the rules of composition, it is difficult to teach a child how to write better music.<sup>6</sup>

And without the law of God, it is impossible to obey the command, **Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.** No amount of philosophic juggling can eliminate the need for rules – and these rules cannot merely be

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<sup>6</sup> Our churches are full of people who don't know the rules of composition, who cannot perform more than elementary music, and yet pass judgements about what is “good” music or “Christian” music, when they have neither the knowledge nor the understanding (maturity) to know the difference.

good ideas but standards that *ought* to be adhered to because they are the *right* standards. If the rules of music composition are nothing more than good ideas at a point in time, there is no ability to differentiate between good and bad music. If the Ten Commandments are simply God's "Ten Good Ideas" at a point in time that have no ongoing moral compunction, then we cannot ever hope to reach perfection because we have no standard with which to assess either the goal or our progress towards it.

Our hostility to rules and laws may go so far as to deny the validity of the Ten Commandments while at the same time trying to establish a new standard of "love". But this is like trying to abandon the rules of composition while insisting that music students write and play "with feeling". It is an attempt to replace one set of standards with another. Such a process, however, replaces substance with vagueness and, what Francis Schaeffer called, "contentless" phrases. To play music with feeling or expression is only possible when students are told how to do it. This requires the establishment of one or more rules which make up the standard.

Similarly, the notion of "love" remains vague and useless unless it is given concrete and specific meaning. The meaning is either the Ten Commandments and all that God said they mean, or

else they are some other set of rules. Perhaps now you can understand why the Bible defines love as keeping the commandments of God (I John 5:3). Rules we shall have. We may not call them rules or laws, but we will have them nonetheless. We may refer to our rules as “law” or as the standard of “love”. In the end, it is the detail of our words “law” and “love” that give substance to the concepts, and this detail will either be the law of God or someone else's law.

### ***Aspirin Christianity***

**W**E WILL DO GREAT THINGS for the kingdom of God by encouraging Christian perfectionism in adults *and* children so that they make right judgements and applications of the Word of God. We will do more for the kingdom of God by teaching our children to *imitate* right judgements than we will by having them sing “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble”, then sending them out of the service so they don't get to hear the “boring”<sup>7</sup> part of the worship service. Sending children out of the service, where the Word of God is taught, is a step in aiding the children to remain in childhood or adolescence, thereby escaping the demands to be “perfect”. Jesus did not qualify his comments and

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<sup>7</sup>This is not my own attitude towards the sermon portion of the worship service, even if many sermons fit the description. The word was actually used recently from the pulpit by a preacher, not referring to his own preaching or that of others but rather to the sermon section of the service. No wonder children get wrong ideas.

say, “All those over the age of 12 are to be perfect, and those 12 and under can wait until then before they need to follow this teaching”.

The requirement to be perfect, that is to be mature, is an expectation upon all. It is not even something that is only required by God of Christians. If perfectionism is not the requirement of all men, then our good news of salvation becomes nothing more than psychological seduction.<sup>8</sup>

Too often the contemporary Christian message reduces to concepts such as this: If you have a problem, take Jesus as the universal Pain Reliever; if you cannot get enjoyment in life, then Jesus can become the Great Aphrodisiac, bound to bring pleasure to life if taken in sufficient quantities. If Jesus is offered as the great Heavenly Aspirin rather than the one who deals with sin, then we have an explanation why there is so much trouble in the church today. Psychology takes precedence over sin and salvation. In this scheme man's feelings take priority over certain fundamental facts relating to the Fall, sin, and what God has done to satisfy the legal requirements of the law. Rather than a restoration of God's absolute moral values, there is a tendency to substitute “feeling good”, as if “feeling bad” is somehow man's real problem. Treating symptoms rather than causes is not the way to get

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<sup>8</sup> William Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction* (Thomas Nelson, 1982).

sick people better.

It is the lack of maturity in the Christian church that is the cause of the deep-seated malaise not just in the lives of individuals but also in the lives of the people in all the nations of this world. Where Christian *principles* or *laws* once governed men in many areas, now anything goes *except* the laws that God has given us. Where the ability of men and women once existed to take the Word of God and apply it in areas such as education, politics, business, law and philosophy, now such an application does not exist *because the Christians are incapable of doing it*. In other words, we have immature Christianity and immature Christians.

### **Promoting Maturity**

**T**HE WRITER OF the book of Hebrews makes this comment about Christian perfection. “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment” (Heb. 6:1,2 NKJV). Go on, says the writer, “to perfection.” Leave the discussion of “elementary principles”. What are these elementary things? The writer tells us.

1. Laying again the foundation of repentance

from dead works.

2. Faith toward God.
3. Doctrine of baptisms.
4. Laying on of hands.
5. Resurrection of the dead.
6. Eternal judgment.

These are the “elementary things”. There are “better things”, though, says the writer (verse nine). What are these? These are the “things that accompany salvation”. Not intent on giving vague statements, these “better things” that “accompany salvation” are explained. These are:

- 1) diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end.
- 2) imitating those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Which promises? Those that were given to Abraham. Now we must turn to the Old Testament and Genesis to find out what these were. But we can summarize them briefly by saying that God promised that Abraham would one day inherit the earth. This is not just the theme of Genesis and the account of God's dealings with Abraham. The rest of the biblical record lays testimony to the faithfulness of God in his covenant with Abraham, how the whole of the redemption story is an

expansion of God's dealings with Abraham and how Abraham's heirs would one day inherit the earth under the leadership of a new King. And God's dealings with Abraham, summed up in Christ, as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, is the establishment of God's covenant through Jesus Christ, the establishment of the Abrahamic descendants (that's all those who trust in God for salvation) as the inheritors of the earth.

But this inheritance does not come without sweat and labor on our part. Just as Adam was required to work before the Fall, so we too are required to work after our redemption. To maintain ourselves in discussions about the elementary doctrines of the faith is to keep ourselves in a state of immaturity.

And herein lies the problem with so many of our Christian communities. They know and understand the message of salvation so well. They can tell us with great clarity how we can never work for our salvation, that Christ has done it all for us, that it is ours by grace, through faith, and that we should be baptized as a sign of our new allegiance. They know this because the common message of the contemporary Christian church boils down to six points.

- Laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works. How many times have we heard justification explained. This is not say it should not be done, but certainly if we want

people to mature we must move on to other topics.

- Faith toward God. Again, a great theme that has its place, but it is not the total message of the Bible.
- Doctrine of baptisms. Some churches like to make a big point on baptisms (plural, and while they have their place, they are considered elementary things by the writer of Hebrews.
- Laying on of hands. Only considered to be important in some churches.
- Resurrection of the dead. Should only be preached in a live church, since it is too late once *rigor mortis* has set in.
- Eternal judgment. Only if you believe in hell, and this is not a politically correct word at the present time. So it is rarely mentioned in many contemporary churches.

### **The Missing Link**

**W**HAT IS MISSING in our churches and amongst Christians is *maturity*, the ability to take the word of God and create a new humanity amongst the morass and decay of civilizations whose end will be brought about by this same God who has saved us to be his people, to be his *perfect*

people. Our pastors and leaders who so clearly explain the nature of Christ and how he has done all for us somehow cannot bring themselves to tell the politicians in the land what are the limits of their jurisdiction. They cannot be sure if the bible condemns or condones debt. They are uncertain if the Bible requires a Christian education for children. They do not know if the judges of the land should put murderers to death, leave them in prison forever, or allow them early parole for good behavior. The pastors and leaders do not know if the courts of the land should incarcerate thieves or make them repay what they stole plus pay compensation to the victims of theft. In short, our Christian leaders are immature. They lack the ability to make judgements, right judgements. They have no goal, no standards, no rules, no laws, so they have no chance of creating a new and exciting civilization where Christ is king. For them, Christ is a king who cannot rule because he is not allowed to have rules, only “love”, as if love somehow negates the idea of rules and laws. This is why so much contemporary Christianity borders on the preposterous.

We will do ourselves a favor as well as those who come after us, by laying up a foundation of perfection, by doing our best to lay down principles from God’s word, laws from God’s word, rules from God’s word, setting up a standard of righteousness based on the character of God and working towards

the fulfilment of the blessing promised to Abraham. In so doing, we will become a blessing to all the nations on the earth as they, too, learn about Christian perfectionism and train themselves and their offspring in godly and holy living.

The “bubble” theologians will rant against such a notion, but they have no alternative. They have no standard. They have slogans which, in the end, mean little, can provide little guidance, and which leave the people they lead in a state of immaturity. So, while they chant their mindless mantras and teach others to imitate their “bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble”, let us run the race, work out our salvation with fear and trembling, putting aside the elementary things. Let us be perfect, just as our father in heaven is perfect. Let us take the commandments of God and create a New World Order where justice and righteousness prevail, for this is our destiny. And God has promised to do everything necessary to ensure the success of the mission, for in the end, it is his mission, not ours.