

# Is a Wesleyan Interpretation of 1 Thess. 5:23 Exegetically Tenable?: Responding to Reformed Critiques

Chamberlain Holiness Lectures  
October 14, 2010  
A. Philip Brown II, PhD

Αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης ἀγιασάσαι ὑμᾶς ὀλοτελεῖς, καὶ ὀλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ  
ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀμέμπτως ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τηρηθεῖη.  
πιστὸς ὁ καλῶν ὑμᾶς, ὃς καὶ ποιήσει. ~ 1 Thess. 5:23-24

This lecture represents an effort to listen to, learn from, and engage with reformed critiques<sup>1</sup> of the Wesleyan doctrine of “entire sanctification.”<sup>2</sup> Methodologically, reformed critiques of entire sanctification normally focus on theological objections rather than exegetical objections to specific texts. Therefore, the first section of this lecture briefly addresses key theological objections raised by reformed theologians. The second and main section engages B. B. Warfield’s exegesis of 1 Thess. 5:23-24 and offers an exegetical defense for the plausibility of understanding the passage as a prayer for God to sanctify believers entirely *in this life*.<sup>3</sup>

## **Legitimate Reformed Objections and Potential Wesleyan Remedies**

Though reformed theologians often raise multiple objections to the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification,<sup>4</sup> the most significant appear to be the following three objections:

Objection 1: Wesleyans lower the standard of God’s law, or lower the standard of perfection, or alter the law to which we are held accountable.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The following theologically conservative reformed theologians were surveyed: Charles Hodge: *Systematic Theology*; A. A. Hodge: *Outlines of Theology*; Robert L. Dabney: *Systematic and Polemic Theology*; Henry B. Smith: *System of Christian Theology*; A. H. Strong: *Systematic Theology*; Louis Berkhof: *Systematic Theology*; Robert Reymond: *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*; Wayne Grudem: *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>2</sup> Most reformed systematics treat “entire sanctification” under the heading of “perfectionism,” and include it with their analyses of the various forms of perfectionism that have been advanced throughout church history.

<sup>3</sup> Logically, inferences are legitimate or illegitimate. Legitimate inferences are necessary or possible. Possible inferences are more likely, equally likely, or less likely. To say that a Wesleyan understanding is tenable or plausible is to say it is a possible inference given the nature of the evidence. Determination of the likelihood of a position should be based primarily upon contextual warrant and secondarily upon theological coherence.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Henry B. Smith and William S. Karr, *System of Christian Theology* (A.C. Armstrong, 1890), 583-85, offer eleven objections to perfectionism. Charles Hodge offers objections from “the general representations of Scripture,” “passages which describe the conflict of the flesh and spirit,” “the Lord’s Prayer,” and “from the experience of Christians.” *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1872), 3:246-49.

<sup>5</sup> Smith and Karr, *System of Christian Theology*, 584, objects: “In order to make the doctrine [of Christian perfection] consistent, it is necessary to bring down that law to our present actual capacities, and in doing this it is lowered and made to be different in its demands upon each one.” Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Reformed Perspective” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Melvin Dieter and John Walvoord (Zondervan, 1996), 83: “perfectionism lowers the standard of perfection. If this ‘perfection’ is neither like that of Adam before the Fall nor like that of resurrected believers, why call it *perfection*?” Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids:

This complaint, where true,<sup>6</sup> should be corrected. Scripture gives no indication that God's standard for human morality has changed. The change of covenants involves no change either in God's expectation that His people be holy and blameless or in God's standard by which he judges sin. God's will for mankind remains the standard for righteous conduct. All deviation from it is sin.

Objection 2: Wesleyans weaken the definition and significance of sin by making it refer only to willful transgressions.<sup>7</sup>

I believe this objection is valid. Some Wesleyans, seeking to avoid the antinomian tendencies of Calvinism, have sought to safe-guard the biblical call to holiness from dilution by classifying intentional sin as sin and unintentional sin as infirmity.<sup>8</sup> While I share their concern, I believe their solution is wrong. If God Himself, whose holiness demands our holiness, calls unintentional violations of His will sin, we should not flinch from doing the same. We are on safe ground when we call sin all that God calls sin.

The solution is not to lower the standard (objection 1) or to change the definition of sin (objection 2). The solution is to insist upon an accurate understanding of divine justice: God judges as sin any violation of His will, but He imputes guilt to men on the basis of knowledge. Paul's affirmation that "sin is not imputed where there is no law" indicates that knowledge of God's law is not necessary for an action to be regarded as sin by God (Rom. 5:13). However, this Pauline affirmation also teaches us that God does not impute sins to those who sin ignorantly.

---

Eerdmans, 1996), 538: "It is very significant that all the leading perfectionist theories ... deem it necessary to lower the standard of perfection and do not hold man responsible for a great deal that is undoubtedly demanded by the original moral law." Similarly, A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1878), 537-538.

<sup>6</sup> For example, John Fletcher argues, "we shall ... be judged ... by a law adapted to our present state and circumstances, a milder law [than the Creator's paradisiacal law of innocence], called "the law of Christ," i.e., the Mediator's law, which is, like himself, "full of *evangelical* grace and truth" ("The Second Part of an Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism" in *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 4 vols. (New York: Lane & Scott, 1851), 2:493. Similarly, George Peck, *The Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection Stated and Defended* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1849), 151, states: "The standard of character set up in the gospel must be such as is practicable by man, fallen as he is. Coming up to this standard is what we call Christian perfection."

<sup>7</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 538: "And it is equally significant that [Wesleyans] feel the necessity of externalizing the idea of sin, when they claim that only conscious wrongdoing can be so considered, and refuse to recognize as sin a great deal that is represented as such in Scripture." Cf. R. L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Co., 1878), 668-69; Henry Smith, *System of Christian Theology*, 584; Hoekema, 83.

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley regarded unintentional sins ("infirmities") as needing the atonement, and acknowledged that they may legitimately be called "sins" but chose not to: "Perhaps it were advisable rather to call them *infirmities*, that we may not seem to give any countenance to sin, or to extenuate it in any degree, by thus coupling it with infirmity" (Sermon 8, II.8). See further his explanation in his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, under the question, "But still, if they live without sin, does not this exclude the necessity of a Mediator?" (*Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11). Richard S. Taylor's *A Right Conception of Sin: Its Importance to Right Thinking and Right Living* (Kansas City, Mo: Nazarene Pub. House, 1939), represents a more contemporary Wesleyan version of Wesley's basic distinction between "sins" and "infirmities."

Objection 3: Wesleyans separate justification and sanctification, applying justification only to salvation and sanctification only to a second work of grace.<sup>9</sup>

It is true that some non-Wesleyan perfectionists have separated them.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, sometimes Wesleyans make it appear that they have separated them, when in fact they have not.<sup>11</sup> A. A. Hodge is correct when he charges Wesleyans with using technical theological terminology loosely and thereby creating a “theoretical indefiniteness which appears to render their definitions obscure, especially on the subject of justification and of perfection.”<sup>12</sup> When Wesleyan theologians use the term “sanctification” to refer to “entire sanctification,” either in print or in speech, they (unintentionally, I believe) misuse biblical terminology and contribute materially to the fog that obscures our doctrine from those who seek to understand it properly. The only time “sanctification” refers specifically to “entire sanctification” in the NT is 1 Thess. 5:23.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Inadequacies in Reformed Critiques***

First, in rightly holding that God regards any failure to measure up to His will as sin, reformed theologians apparently fail to integrate (a) the fact that God distinguishes between kinds of sin based on knowledge and intention,<sup>14</sup> and (b) the fact that God does not treat all sin as culpable. That is, even though all sins require atonement, He does not impute all sins (Rom. 5:13). In addition to Rom. 5:13, Rom. 2:12-13 indicates that those who do not know the revealed will of God are not judged by it. In other words, God regards any violation of His will as sin, but He does not impute sin, i.e., hold men accountable for sin—culpable for sin—when they do not know His will.

Second, in emphasizing that Scripture never teaches that Christians may live without sin and asserting the reality of sin in even the most perfect of men’s lives,<sup>15</sup> reformed theologians fail to account for two types of passages: (1) those that explicitly teach that Christians must live

---

<sup>9</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 530: “Wesley did not merely distinguish justification and sanctification, but virtually separated them, and spoke of an entire sanctification as a second gift of grace, following the first, of justification by faith, after a shorter or longer period.” Similarly, Hoekema, 83.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see William W. Combs, “The Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *DBSJ* 6 (Fall 2001): 17-44.

<sup>11</sup> For clear statements of the Wesleyan view of the concomitance of justification and (initial) sanctification, Thomas N. Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*, ed. Thomas O. Summers (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1924), 371, who also cites Wesley’s sermon on justification; Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (New York: Mason & Lane, 1836), 2:266-69; H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1946), 281.

<sup>12</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 537.

<sup>13</sup> By “specifically” I mean that what Wesleyan theology calls “entire sanctification,” i.e., a definite work of God’s grace subsequent to regeneration by which the believer is cleansed from inherited depravity, is not the intended referent any time the NT uses the term ‘sanctification’ without further qualification. Entire sanctification may, however, be included in the range of referents intended in passages such as 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 2:11; and 10:14.

<sup>14</sup> Distinction between types of sins on the basis of knowledge is evident from, *inter alia*, the distinction in sacrifices in the OT (Lev. 4-5) and the provision of national forgiveness for sins of ignorance (Lev. 16; Heb. 9:7). Determination of culpability on the basis of intention is evident from Num. 35:16-34 and Deut. 19:4-6 where a man who unintentionally slays his neighbor “does not deserve to die” (Deut. 19:6). Note that no sacrifice is prescribed for the man who commits unintentional man slaughter, implying that God does not regard it as sin.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 246; A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 535; Dabney, *Systematic and Polemic Theology*, 670-71.

without sin (e.g., 1 John 2:3-6; 3:4-10) and (2) those that affirm the blamelessness of persons who, nonetheless, fail to measure up to the perfect standard of God's will (e.g., Noah, Job, Zacharias). Appeals to Romans 7, Gal. 5:17, and 1 John 1:8 do not provide adequate warrant for the reformed assertion, since reformed exegetes and theologians do not agree among themselves that these passages describe the spiritual condition of the believer, and since explanations are available that do not set them in conflict with Scripture's expectation of blamelessness from believers.<sup>16</sup>

### **B. B. Warfield's Exegesis of 1 Thess. 5:23-24**

Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield (1851-1921), considered by many a giant among reformed theologians and the last of the Princeton theologians, lived during the rise of the Keswick movement, Charles Finney's version of sanctification propagated through Oberlin College, and the rise of the Holiness movement in America. Primarily in response to German perfectionism, Keswick and Oberlin theology, and the "Higher Life" / "Victorious Life" movements, Warfield wrote a two volume analysis and critique of "perfectionism."<sup>17</sup> In his April 2010 *Themelios* editorial, "Perfectionisms," D. A. Carson lauds this critique as "essentially unanswerable."<sup>18</sup>

Although reformed theologians have regularly critiqued "perfectionism," Warfield appears to be one of only a handful to give sustained attention to the significance of 1 Thessalonians 5:23 exegetically.<sup>19</sup> In order to give Warfield a fair hearing, I have excerpted the salient elements of his exegesis of 1 Thess. 5:23.<sup>20</sup> Warfield's argument consists of three points. His first point is that this passage does indeed deal with "entire sanctification":

Let us settle it clearly in mind that it is of "entire sanctification" that the passage treats. There can certainly be no doubt of it, if we will only give the language of the passage a fair hearing. ... The entirety, the completeness, the perfection of the sanctification, of which it speaks is, in fact, the

---

<sup>16</sup> For example, the follow reformed theologians are cited by Robert Reymond as regarding Romans 7 as describing Paul's pre-conversion state: J. A. Bengel, H. A. W. Meyer, F. Godet, M. Stuart, Sanday and Headlam, J. Denney, J. Oliver Buswell Jr, A. Hoekema, M. Lloyd-Jones. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1127. For alternate reformed understandings of 1 John 1:8, see Christopher Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John*, NACBST (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 69-70. Bass and others argue convincingly that to "have sin" in 1 John 1:8 refers not to committing acts of sin but to being culpable for sin. See John 9:41; 15:22, 24; and 19:11 for other Johannine uses of this phraseology.

<sup>17</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Perfectionism* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University, 1931). The first volume primarily addresses German perfectionists who denied the traditional views of original sin (e.g., Ritschl, Wernle, Clemen, Pflleiderer, Windisch). The second volume addresses the perfectionism found in England and the United States. Warfield gives special attention to the teachings of A. Mahan, C. Finney, Oberlin College, R. Pearsall and H. W. Smith, and C. G. Trumbull, among others. Since in Warfield's understanding, although Methodists have consistently taught the possibility of "Christian Perfection," they have seldom claimed it, he gives Methodist versions of perfectionism little attention. A condensed edition of this second volume was published as *Perfectionism* (ed. S. G. Craig; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958).

<sup>18</sup> *Themelios* 35.1 (2010): 1.

<sup>19</sup> David Peterson dismisses a Wesleyan understanding of entire sanctification in 1 Thess. 5:23 in his NSBT volume *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity-Apollos, 1995), 65-67. Unfortunately, he shows little evidence of having carefully considered what he dismisses.

<sup>20</sup> Originally published in his 1916 *Faith and Life* lectures, Warfield's understanding of 1 Thess. 5:23-24 appears as an appendix in *Perfectionism*, pages 457-64.

great burden of the passage. ... It is a sanctification that is absolutely complete ... that the Apostle here deals with.<sup>21</sup>

Not only are we to be sanctified wholly, but every part of us—our spirit, our soul, our body itself—is to be kept blamelessly perfect. ... for each of these elements in turn [Paul] seeks a “blameless perfection,” that the sum of them all ... may be complete and entire, wanting nothing. ... His meaning is that there is no department of our being into which he would not have this perfection penetrate, where he would not have it reign, and through which he would not have it operate to the perfecting of the whole. ... Here we may say is “perfectionism” raised to its highest power, a blameless perfection ....<sup>22</sup> A perfect perfection for a perfect man—an entire sanctification for the entire man—surely here is a perfection worth longing for.<sup>23</sup>

Warfield’s second point is that “entire sanctification” is attainable:

Let us observe that Paul does not speak of this perfecting of the entire man as if it were a mere ideal, unattainable, and to be looked up to only as the forever beckoning standard hanging hopelessly above us. He treats it as distinctively attainable. He seriously prays God to grant it to his readers ... Paul’s prayer, and the way in which he introduces his prayer, all combine to make it certain that he is not mocking us here with an illusory hope, but is placing soberly before us an attainable goal. God can and will give it to His children. ... Even more must be said. ... he definitely promises it to them, and bases this ... definite promise on no less firm a foundation than the faithfulness of God.<sup>24</sup>

Not only may a Christian man be perfect—absolutely perfect in all departments of his being—but he certainly and unfailingly shall be perfect. ... Such is the teaching of the text. And assuredly it goes in this, far, far beyond all modern teaching as to entire sanctification that ever has been heard of among men.

Warfield’s third point is that “entire sanctification” is obtained only at the second advent of Christ.

Let us observe, thirdly, the period to which the apostle assigned the accomplishment of this great hope. ... It is a thing not yet in possession, but in petition. ... Paul presents it as a matter of hope, not yet seen; not as a matter of experience, already enjoyed. ... Can we learn from Paul *when* we can hope for it? ... He openly declares ... the term of our imperfection—the point of entrance into our perfection. “... *at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” You see, it is on the second Advent of Christ—and that is the end of the world, and the judgment day—that the Apostle has his eyes set. There is the point of time, to which he refers the completeness of our perfecting. ... And if you will stop and consider a moment, you will perceive that it must be so. For you will bear in mind that the perfecting includes the perfecting of the body also. ... The perfected body is given to men only at the resurrection, at the last day, which is the day of the second coming of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

Whether spiritual perfection may be attained before then, he does not in this passage say. But the analogy of the body ... raises a suspicion that the perfecting of the soul and spirit also will be

---

<sup>21</sup> *Perfectionism*, 458.

<sup>22</sup> *Perfectionism*, 459.

<sup>23</sup> *Perfectionism*, 460.

<sup>24</sup> *Perfectionism*, 460-61.

<sup>25</sup> *Perfectionism*, 462-63. Italics original.

gradual, the result of a process, and will be completed only in a crisis, a cataclysmic moment, when the Spirit of God produces in them the fitness to live with God. This suspicion is entirely borne out by Paul's dealing with the whole matter of entire sanctification in this context, and in this whole epistle: as a matter of effort, long-continued and strenuous, building up slowly the structure to the end. There is no promise of its completion in this life; there is no hint that it may be completed in this life.<sup>26</sup>

Certainly the gradualness of this process ought not to disturb us. ... It is God's way. And He does all things well. After a while! Or as Paul puts it: Faithful is He that calls us -- who also will do it. He will do it! And so, after a while, our spirit, and soul and body shall be made blamelessly perfect, all to be so presented before our Lord, at that day. Let us praise the Lord for the glorious prospect!<sup>27</sup>

The essence of Warfield's understanding, then, is that the "entire sanctification" for which Paul prays is total spiritual and bodily perfection, which will be attained only when Christ returns. Warfield does not regard Paul to be praying for spiritual "entire sanctification" at death but understands this to be resurrection perfection.

### ***A Wesleyan Response to Warfield***

Of the three points Warfield makes, Wesleyans have no contest with his second point that "entire sanctification" is attainable. It is in the nature of "entire sanctification" and in the timing of its attainment that the difference lies. If "entire sanctification" is attained only at the coming of Christ, then its nature is a theoretical question with little practical import. If, on the other hand, it can be attained prior to Christ's coming, then its nature is imminently practical. Therefore, Warfield's third point—the timing of a believer's "entire sanctification" and preservation in blamelessness—will be addressed first.

#### **"At the Coming" or "Unto the coming?"**

The first question here is what does the Greek preposition *ἐν* mean in this context? Despite a wide variety of meanings and uses, lexicographers agree that the preposition *ἐν* never means "until" or "unto."<sup>28</sup> Paul clearly knows how to communicate the idea of "until the coming of Christ," for he does so in 1 Timothy 6:14 where he enjoins his son in the faith, "keep the commandment without stain or reproach until [*μέχρι*] the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul expresses the idea of "unto" Christ's coming with the preposition *εἰς* in Phil. 1:10.<sup>29</sup> Further, the phrase *ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ* "at the coming" occurs five other times in Pauline literature,<sup>30</sup> and none suggest the sense of "until/unto the coming." The preposition *ἐν*, in this context, means "at."

---

<sup>26</sup> *Perfectionism*, 463.

<sup>27</sup> *Perfectionism*, 464.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Louw-Nida, BDAG, Friberg, LSMJ, s.v. "ἐν."

<sup>29</sup> Phil. 1:10 "...in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ" ἵνα ᾗτε εἰλικρινεῖς καὶ ἀπρόσκοποι εἰς ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor. 15:23; 2 Cor. 7:6, 7; Phil. 2:12; 1 Thess. 3:13

## Both “Sanctify Entirely” and “Be Kept Blameless” at the Coming?

The second question is does the phrase “at the coming” modify both *sanctify* and *be kept*, or does it modify only *be kept*? Greek syntax is fairly consistent when an author intends two verbs to be modified by an adverbial phrase.<sup>31</sup> Normally the two verbs will be closely connected by *καί* with the adverbial phrase either following them<sup>32</sup> or preceding them.<sup>33</sup> For example, in 1 Thess. 3:12, Paul prays: “May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love.” ὑμᾶς δὲ ὁ κύριος πλεονάσαι καὶ περισσεύσαι τῇ ἀγάπῃ .... The two verbs πλεονάσαι and περισσεύσαι are linked by *καί* and are both modified by the dative phrase “in love.”

However, the syntax in 1 Thess. 5:23 is different. The verb *τηρηθείη* is at the very end of the sentence. The prepositional phrase “at the coming of our Lord” is between *ἀγιάσαι* and *τηρηθείη* rather than following or preceding them as normal. Given this syntactical arrangement and the distance between *sanctify* and *be kept*, it is unlikely that the prepositional phrase modifies both *sanctify* and *be kept*. Since it is a part of the second clause of Paul’s prayer, it likely modifies only that clause’s verb *be kept* (*τηρηθείη*). In other words, Paul is not praying that they would be “entirely sanctified” at the coming of Christ. He is praying that they would be kept blameless “at the coming.”

## Being Kept Blameless: Possible in this Life or Only in the Next?

The third issue involves the possibility of blamelessness in this life. If blamelessness is possible only in the next life, then we must necessarily conclude that the preservation Paul is praying for begins at the second coming. In order to address this question, careful attention to Paul’s use of the semantic domain of blamelessness is in order.

Paul uses a variety of terms to communicate the idea of blamelessness throughout his epistles. Among the most prominent terms are *ἄμεμπτος/ἄμεπτως*, *ἀνέγκλητος*, *ἀμώμος*, *ἀνεπίλημpton*, *εἰλικρινής/εἰλικρινεῖα*, and *ἀπρόσκοπος*.<sup>34</sup> In Paul, as in the rest of the NT, blamelessness is something that is possible in the present. For example, in 1 Thess. 2:10 Paul uses the same word (*ἀμέμπτως*) that he uses in 1 Thess. 5:23 to describe how he, Silvanus, and Timothy had behaved among the Thessalonians: “devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly (*ἀμέμπτως*).”<sup>35</sup> Not only is blamelessness possible, but it is the expected norm for believers, as evidenced by Paul’s regular admonitions and prayers for believers to be blameless. For example:

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and **blameless** [*ἀπρόσκοποι*] until the day of Christ; (Phil. 1:9-10).

---

<sup>31</sup> An adverbial phrase may be either a prepositional phrase or a phrase in a case that functions adverbially, e.g., the dative case is frequently used to indicate how or why or where a verbal action takes place.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Col. 2:10; 1 Thess. 4:6; 2 Thess. 3:12; 4:14, 16. Yet even in such a construction, the preposition phrase modifying the second verb may not modify the first verb (e.g., Eph. 2:6; 2 Tim. 1:9).

<sup>33</sup> For example, Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:9; 2:19; 3:16; 1 Tim. 4:10; 2 Tim. 3:4.

<sup>34</sup> *ἄμεμπτος/ἄμεπτως* (Phil. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Thess. 2:10; 3:13; 5:23), *ἀνέγκλητος* (1 Cor. 1:8; Col. 1:22; 1 Tim. 3:10; Tit. 1:6-7), *ἀμώμος* (Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Phil. 2:15; Col. 1:22), *εἰλικρινής/εἰλικρινεῖα* (1 Cor. 5:8; 2 Cor. 1:12; 2:17; Phil. 1:10), *ἀνεπίλημpton* (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:7; 6:14), *ἀπρόσκοπος* (1 Cor. 10:32; Phil. 1:10).

<sup>35</sup> Paul gives similar testimony in 2 Cor. 1:12 where he says, “For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you” (ESV).

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be **blameless** [ἄμεμπτοι] and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world (Phil. 2:14-15).

Persistence in blamelessness is a requirement for elders (1 Tim. 3:2, 10; 5:7; 6:14; Tit. 1:6-7). Theologically, we understand that the only way for fallen persons to be blameless is by the grace of God enabling such behavior (2 Cor. 10:15; Phil. 2:13). The requirement for elders to be blameless, therefore, necessarily implies that God's grace will have been active in enabling and keeping elders in such a condition.

Since both being blameless and being kept blameless are possible in this life, the key question that remains is, "Is it possible for one's whole body, soul, and spirit to be kept blameless by God in this life?" What precisely does it mean for one's body to be kept blameless? Most commentators appear to agree that Paul does not intend to trichotomize the human person into distinct, non-overlapping parts. Rather, Paul is seeking to indicate the totality of the person.<sup>36</sup>

Scripture views the body as the vehicle through which the heart/mind enacts its desires and intentions. For this reason, it speaks of "clean hands" (Psa. 24:4) or "holy hands" (1 Tim. 2:8) as a metonymy for clean lives or holy lives. In other words a "blameless body" is a body whose actions are in harmony with the revealed will of God (cf. "bodies washed" Heb. 10:22). Luke 1:6 describes Zacharias and Elizabeth as examples of such whole-person blamelessness: "They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly [ἄμεμπτοι] in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord."<sup>37</sup> This text in combination with the texts previously cited, supports the conclusion that body-soul-and-spirit blamelessness is a possibility in this life.<sup>38</sup>

### **δλόκληρον: perfect or complete?**

Warfield claims that the coming of Christ is the "point of entrance into our perfection ... the point of time to which [Paul] refers the completeness of our perfecting."<sup>39</sup> From his translation of the passage as well as from his discussion, it is clear that he regards δλόκληρον as a term denoting "perfection" and that he regards "blamelessly" as modifying δλόκληρον: "and may there be preserved blamelessly perfect your spirit and soul and body at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>40</sup> This understanding of the semantics of δλόκληρον and its grammatical

---

<sup>36</sup> See Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2009), 227-29; Charles Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NIGCNT (Eerdmans, 1990), 205-207.

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, the only other clear collocation of *keep* and *blameless* occurs in the LXX in the apocryphal book Wisdom 10:5, where Wisdom is said to have kept Abraham blameless before God. Wisdom 10:5 αὕτη καὶ ἐν ὁμοιοῖα πονηρίας ἐθνῶν συγχυθέντων ἔγνω τὸν δίκαιον καὶ ἐτήρησεν αὐτὸν ἄμεμπτον θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τέκνου σπλάγγχοις ἰσχυρὸν ἐφύλαξεν. "Wisdom also, when the nations in wicked agreement had been put to confusion, recognized the righteous man and preserved him blameless before God, and kept him strong in the face of his compassion for his child" (NRSV). Another collocation of τηρέω + ἄμεμπτος may occur in Philo, *Quaest.* 3:23, where Sarah is the subject and it appears Abraham is the object kept "blameless" by his wife.

<sup>38</sup> Precisely what "blameless" means will be addressed later. But whatever it means, it is clear that it is a condition of life that is feasible in this life.

<sup>39</sup> *Perfectionism*, 462-63.

<sup>40</sup> *Perfectionism*, 463.

relationship to ἀμέμπτως colors Warfield’s understanding of the entire passage. It appears to be the grounds upon which he bases his conclusion that Paul is speaking of a “perfect perfection.” Is Warfield correct?

Besides 1 Thess. 5:23, ὀλόκληρον occurs only elsewhere in the NT in James 1:4. There it is collocated with “perfect” (τέλειοι) and “lacking nothing” (ἐν μηδενὶ λειπόμενοι) in describing the result of fortitude having its perfect work in this present life. In the LXX, it is used primarily to describe uncut stones required by God in the construction of an altar (Lev. 23:15; Deut. 27:6; Josh. 9:2). In Josephus it occurs regularly as a descriptive quality of the kind of animal that was acceptable for sacrifice: unblemished, whole, no parts missing (*Antiquities*. 3.228, 3.279). I can find no lexical evidence that ὀλόκληρον denotes an absolute perfection, as Warfield takes it. Semantically, the word ὀλόκληρον normally signifies the ideas of “completeness, wholeness.” Given the nature of the lexical evidence, it seems best to understand it as “complete in all its parts, no deficiency in any part.”

Grammatically, there are three ways ὀλόκληρον could be understood:

- (1) as a predicate adjective modifying body, soul, and spirit, which would yield, “and may your body, soul, and spirit be kept *complete*” (so NASB, HCSB, RSV);<sup>41</sup>
- (2) as an attributive adjective modifying body, soul, and spirit, which would yield, “and may your *whole* body, soul, and spirit be kept” (so KJV, ESV, NIV, NLT);<sup>42</sup> or
- (3) as an adverbial accusative modifying “be kept,” which would yield “may your body, soul, and spirit be kept *completely*” (so NET, Fee<sup>43</sup>).

Since the form of ὀλόκληρον is adjectival and Paul uses the adverbial form “blamelessly,” it seems more likely that ὀλόκληρον is intended to function adjectivally as in either (1) or (2), neither of which yield the sense Warfield derives from the verse.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of whether one prefers to understand ὀλόκληρον as a predicate adjective or an attributive adjective, the resulting sense is basically the same: the entirety of the person is preserved in blamelessness.

### **Be Kept Blameless at the Coming: Inauguration or Culmination?**

Given that having one’s whole being kept blameless is possible, expected, and in the case of elders, required in this life, the next question is, “Is there anything in this verse or context that requires us to understand that the preservation for which Paul prays must *begin* rather than

---

<sup>41</sup> Randy Leedy’s diagram of 1 Thess. 5:23 in BibleWorks 8 takes ὀλόκληρον as a predicate adjective. Although noting the attributive and adverbial alternatives, Leedy reads v. 23b as essentially parallel to v. 23a where ὀλοτελεῖς is a predicate adjective.

<sup>42</sup> Normally the predicate position of this adjective would eliminate this reading entirely. However, evidence that ὀλόκληρον functioned attributively, despite being in predicate position, appears to be present in 4 Macc. 15:17; Hermas, *Mandate* 5, 2:3; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 10.223; Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, 1.126.

<sup>43</sup> NICNT, 229: “the two adjectives [ὀλοτελεῖς and ὀλόκληρον], although grammatically predicate, function in a kind of adverbial sense, and respectively also emphasize the thoroughgoing nature of their sanctification. Seen in this way, the distinctions between them would mean something like ‘totally’ (with emphasis on wholeness) and ‘in every possible expression of your humanity.’ The final adverb, ‘blamelessly,’ then adds the ethical/moral dimension to this thoroughgoing work of the Spirit.”

<sup>44</sup> The syntax of Hermas, *Vision* 3, 13:4 parallels that of Paul—ἀπέχεις ὀλοτελεῖ τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν. The direct object ἀποκάλυψιν is modified by ὀλοτελεῖ as a predicate accusative adjective. The sense is “you now have the complete revelation.” Michael Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Baker, 2007), 495.

*culminate* when Christ returns?”<sup>45</sup> The answer to this question hinges upon the following factors:<sup>46</sup> (1) the lexical meaning of *keep*, (2) the significance of the aorist optative, and (3) the semantic and pragmatic values of the context.

**Lexical meaning of *keep*:** The verb *τηρέω* “to keep” does not inherently denote either ingressive or culminative action, nor does it necessarily specify the duration of the action. One may keep a thing for a short time or a long time, though generally speaking keeping is usually of some duration. Although it is fairly common for a verb + preposition combination to have a different shade of meaning than a simple verb has without a preposition,<sup>47</sup> in this case, 1 Thess. 5:23 is the only Pauline text to use *τηρέω* + *ἐν* where *ἐν* has the sense of “at.”<sup>48</sup> In the non-Pauline NT corpus, *τηρέω* + *ἐν* occurs a total of five times, none of which parallel the use in 1 Thess. 5:23.<sup>49</sup> The same is true for the LXX, Josephus, the Apostolic Fathers, the OT Pseudepigrapha, and Philo. Given this paucity of parallel constructions, we must, as we ought, depend primarily upon the context of this passage to determine the intended meaning.

**Significance of the Aorist Optative:** The verb *be kept* (*τηρηθείη*) is an aorist passive optative form. The aorist tense is the default tense in the optative, i.e., it is the expected tense and does not by itself signal any special aspectual focus.<sup>50</sup> The aorist tense says nothing about the kind of action involved (e.g., linear, instantaneous, durative) in God keeping us (or sanctifying us).<sup>51</sup> It is commonly recognized that in a given context, semantic and pragmatic factors may indicate that an author is focusing on the initiation of an event depicted with the aorist tense, or they may indicate that an author is focusing on the culmination of the event. In this regard, the optative mood necessarily indicates that the action for which Paul is praying has not yet happened from Paul’s perspective. It seems to me that this is exegetically significant.

---

<sup>45</sup> Since *ἐν* specifies a specific point in time, it would seem that the initiation or the culmination of the act of keeping are the only two feasible options.

<sup>46</sup> This question is essentially a question about *aktionsart*, that is, the specific kind of action an author intends to portray by his choice of tense + mood combinations in a given context. The factors involved in making this determination have been adapted from Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996), 502-511; and Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, *Studies in Biblical Greek*, vol. 10 (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 28.

<sup>47</sup> For example, the meaning of *turn* is quite different from *turn off*.

<sup>48</sup> This construction occurs only two other times in Paul: 2 Cor. 11:9; Eph. 4:3.

<sup>49</sup> Jn. 17:11, 12; Acts 12:5; 1 Pet. 1:4; Jude 1:21.

<sup>50</sup> When used in conjunction with the present tense, the aorist tense *may* portray an action as non-linear. It is true that Paul’s pattern of present tense imperatives in 1 Thess. 5:14-22 is interrupted by the aorist optatives in 1 Thess. 5:23. However, present tense vs. aorist tense contrasts occur *in the same mood*, not between different moods. The topic shift indicated by *δέ* as well as the mood shift from imperative (5:14-22) to optative (5:23) argues against understanding the shift in tense as intended to portray a shift from linear to non-linear action.

<sup>51</sup> For those whose NT Greek education was obtained prior to the 1980s, the understanding of the aspectual significance of the aorist tense has undergone significant scholarly scrutiny since then. The consensus of NT Greek scholarship, regardless of theological or non-theological affiliation, is that the aorist tense in itself does not depict an action as completed in a moment of time, but rather presents an action “in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the [action]” (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 97. Cf. also McKay, “Time and Aspect,” 225; Constantine Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative*, 103-106). Stanley Porter offers a similar definition: “The aorist tense-form occurs in contexts where the use of Greek wishes to depict an action as a complete and undifferentiated process” (Porter, *Idioms*, 35). For an accessible introduction to the discussion and literature, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 495-512, and esp. 554-557.

We know from our study of Paul’s use of the semantic domain of blamelessness that he expects believers to be blameless. Given this expectation and the normally durative sense of *τηρέω*, it is unlikely that he would pray for believers to *begin* to be kept body-soul-and-spirit blameless at the coming of Christ. Rather, it is likely that he would pray for the keeping process, which is currently on-going, to culminate successfully at the coming of Christ. We find a similar thought in 1 Cor. 1:8, where Paul asserts that Christ will “strengthen you unto the end blameless [*ἀνεγκλήτους*] in the day of our Lord Jesus.” The thrust of this promise supports a reading of 1 Thess. 5:23 as praying for the culmination of God’s preservation of the Thessalonians blameless when Christ returns.<sup>52</sup>

To this point, our investigation has concluded that Warfield’s claim—that Paul is praying about a perfection achieved only at Christ’s second coming—is neither necessitated by the passage nor well-supported by the lexical and grammatical elements involved. Rather, the prepositional phrase *ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ* (“at the coming”) is best taken as indicating the point at which God’s action of keeping us blameless culminates. The kind of action portrayed by *be kept* (*τηρηθείη*) in its context is, therefore, a culminative action. The adjective *ὀλόκληρον* which means “complete, lacking no part” modifies our body, soul, and spirit, indicating that every part of us is to be kept blameless until Christ returns. What yet remains to be examined is the meaning of the first phrase “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely.”

### **Sanctify you *ὀλοτελεῖς*: Intensive, Extensive, or Both?**

Warfield asserts that Paul is dealing with “a sanctification that is absolutely complete and that embraces the perfection of every member of the human constitution. ... A perfect perfection for a perfect man—an entire sanctification for the entire man.” He appears to base his interpretation upon two grounds: (1) the word “entirely” *ὀλοτελεῖς*, which he seems to understand adverbially, and (2) the word *ὀλόκληρον* which was discussed previously.

The issue here is how does *ὀλοτελεῖς* function grammatically. From a grammatical perspective the answer is straightforward: *ὀλοτελεῖς* agrees with the pronoun *ὑμᾶς* in number and case and, thus, functions as an adjectival predicate accusative. In other words, it modifies “you” not “sanctify.” BDAG defines it as “pertaining to being totally complete, with implication of meeting a high standard,” and offers the glosses “*in every way complete, quite perfect.*”<sup>53</sup> The first phrase of 1 Thess. 5:23 could thus be translated, “May the God of peace himself sanctify every part of you,” or “...sanctify you in your entirety.” Given this understanding, the second half of the verse expands on this idea by indicating the total extent involved in “God sanctifying

---

<sup>52</sup> On this basis, though it is true that the preposition *ἐν* doesn’t mean “until/unto” by itself, *ἐν* in combination with the aorist passive optative *τηρηθείη* may legitimately be understood to indicate that the action of keeping isn’t completed until the coming of Christ. Therefore, I don’t have a problem with the KJV translating “preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. NAB, NJB, NLT).

<sup>53</sup> BDAG, s.v., *ὀλοτελής*. Louw-Nida gloss it as “completely” and translate 1 Thess. 5:23 as “may the God of peace sanctify you completely.” Friberg defines it as “of something complete in all respects.” The translation Danker offers in BDAG—“may God make you completely holy in every way”—, however, appears to treat *ὀλοτελεῖς* as both an adverb and an adjective simultaneously, which is illegitimate. Milligan and others have argued for an adverbial use of the adjective, but the grammar does not support this sense easily. See Fee, 227, fn. 75 for his argumentation in favor of the adverbial use.

every part of us”: our whole person—body, soul, and spirit—is in view.<sup>54</sup> Warfield, therefore, is correct when he says that this “entire sanctification” embraces “every member of the human constitution.” In other words, the sanctification envisioned here appears to be primarily extensive.

### **Sanctify You Entirely: Absolute Perfection or Something Less?**

The next issue is the nature of the “entire sanctification” for which Paul prays. Warfield defines the nature of this “entire sanctification” as perfection, and specifically, resurrection perfection. The problem with this definition is that nowhere else does Paul use the idea of sanctification in the sense of perfection. Paul discusses the second coming of Christ and God’s perfection of us in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. The idea of perfection is implicit in Romans 8:30’s “glorified” as well as in Paul’s testimony that he had not yet attain resurrection perfection (Phil. 3:11-14). Yet, in none of these texts is the concept of sanctification mentioned.<sup>55</sup>

Holiness is the required character of believers when Jesus comes (Eph. 5:27, Col. 1:22; 1 Thess. 3:13), but none of these texts use the semantic domain of holiness in the sense of “perfect.” It always involves the concept of set apartness to God with its concomitant purity of heart and righteousness of behavior. In Paul, as well as in the rest of the NT, sanctification is consistently discussed in terms of what God has done or is doing in this present life. On this basis, there does not seem to be any warrant for understanding “sanctify” in this context to refer to absolute perfection.

What then is the nature of this sanctification? Since Paul is praying for God to sanctify the Thessalonians in their entirety, we can assume that this sanctification has not yet happened. This is important because it is abundantly clear that sanctification is an essential element of God’s work in saving us from sin (1 Cor. 1:1; 6:11; 1 Peter 1:2). We are set apart from sin, to God as His special possession (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). This is positional sanctification. We are not just positionally holy at the new birth; we are actually holy. We are made new creatures, and have put on a new man which is being renewed in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:24). This is personal sanctification, also known as imparted righteousness or initial sanctification. So we may clearly say that the sanctification envisioned by Paul is something more than happens in salvation and something less than absolute perfection. In between those two options, the Wesleyan understanding of “entire sanctification” falls.

The pragmatic factors that necessarily impinge upon determining precisely the nature of the “entire sanctification” for which Paul prays include: (1) the exemplary Christian behavior and steadfast faith of the Thessalonians (1:3, 6-10; 2:14; 3:6-9); (2) the urgency with which Paul

---

<sup>54</sup> This understanding of the relationship between the two halves of the verse appears in the 4<sup>th</sup> c. *Testimonia e Scriptura*: ἐν δὲ τούτῳ τὸ πνεῦμα, καὶ ψυχὴν, καὶ σῶμα, τὸν ὀλοτελεῖ ἄνθρωπον ἐρμηνεύσας, καὶ ὑπευξάμενος αὐτὸν ἁγιασθῆναι, καὶ ἀμέμπτως τηρηθῆναι. “But by this—spirit and soul and body—being interpreted the complete man, and having prayed for it to be sanctified and to be kept blamelessly.” Pseudo-Athanasius, *Testimonia e Scriptura* (PG 28:80, lines 15-18).

<sup>55</sup> The forms of the words ἀγιάζω, ἁγιασμός, and ἁγιασύνη occur in Paul in the following references: Rom. 1:4; 6:19,22; 15:16; 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; 7:14; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:26; 1 Thess. 3:13; 4:3-4,7; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Tim. 2:15; 4:5; 2 Tim. 2:21. None of these texts, contextually, involve discussion of our spiritual state after death or after the resurrection. In Eph. 5:26, the future presentation of the church as holy is accomplished by sanctification in the present.

prays (“night and day exceedingly”) to be able to complete what is lacking in their faith (3:10); (3) Paul’s prayer that the Thessalonians’ love would abound so that their hearts would be found firmly established unblamable in holiness at Christ’s coming (3:12-13); (4) Paul’s instructions regarding sanctification and the body (4:3-8), and (5) the sequence of ethical admonitions that lead up to Paul’s prayer for God to sanctify them entirely (5:6-22).

To argue that a Wesleyan understanding of the nature of “entire sanctification” is the necessary understanding or the correct understanding (though I believe it is) is beyond the scope of this lecture. In sum, I believe Paul visualizes two actions in sequence: entire sanctification taking place and God preserving a believer’s spirit, soul and body blameless, “until” and indeed “at” the coming of our Lord Jesus. In other words, God’s preservation of believers in blamelessness begins in salvation, continues both before and after entire sanctification, and culminates at the coming of Christ. Nonetheless, I do believe that I have demonstrated that a Wesleyan understanding of “entire sanctification” in 1 Thess. 5:23 as a work of God possible in this life is exegetically tenable and more likely than not. On the other hand the interpretation advanced by Warfield, while tenable, is unlikely given the lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic elements of the context.