

January 2018

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Recommended Citation

Healy, Israel-David J.J. (2018) "The Superfluity of Purgatory," *Quaerens Deum: The Liberty Undergraduate Journal for Philosophy of Religion*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lujpr/vol4/iss1/3>

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The Superfluity of Purgatory:

A Refutation of Jerry Walls's Theory of Temporal Purgatory

By Israel-David J.J. Healy

Though addressed many times by Reformed theologians, the doctrine of Purgatory continues to find new life. Originally, this was one of the central doctrines (including the use of indulgences) that tore the western church apart. Martin Luther, one the main proponents of Protestantism at the time—joined also by John Calvin—was disgusted by the concept of Purgatory, as it, in their opinion, attempted to add to Christ's sacrifice and the justification found in it. However, in recent years, writer and philosopher Jerry Walls has sought to reconcile this doctrine to Protestantism, in no tentative manner. He states, "I... have argued at length for an ecumenical version of the doctrine [of Purgatory] that is compatible with Protestant theology."¹ This paper will outline the version of Purgatory that Walls claims naturally follows from Protestant doctrine and detail his attempt to distinguish this model from the 16th century understanding of Purgatory. The second section of the paper will combat the notion of necessary temporal purification, which Walls so staunchly claims follows from Protestant doctrine. Although I do not attempt to prove the impossibility of Purgatory, I will attempt to

¹ Jerry Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 93.

show the superfluity of Purgatory through several minor and a few major logical and scriptural implications within Walls's writings.

Section 1: Walls's Claim and Distinction

Walls's central claim in Chapter 4 of *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* is drawn from two basic principles that he points out are critical to the Protestant and Evangelical doctrines, as found in scripture:

“Heaven is a place of total perfection, full of light, beauty, and goodness... To enter Heaven, we must be completely holy.”²

“The great majority of persons—all, according to many theological traditions—are far from perfect when they die.”³

The issue for Walls is understanding how men die imperfect, but still enter heaven at some point. The rest of Walls's argument is an attempt to reconcile this apparent discrepancy using the doctrine of Purgatory as a temporally dictated process of purification of sinful man into a suitable form to enter Heaven.

It is not difficult to concede the first point. In fact, this is supported on numerous occasions throughout Scripture—as the dwelling place of God (the infinitely perfect being), anything that enters Heaven must be pure from sin and blemish. One verse Walls uses is Revelation 21:27, which states, “...there shall by no means enter [Heaven] anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those

² Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, 93.

³ Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, 94.

who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life."⁴ Walls also quotes Hebrews 12:14, regarding the conditions for entering Heaven: "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord..." To see God, Walls claims, requires perfect holiness, which is something to be pursued but not entirely attained while on Earth. Furthermore, he claims this holiness is an attribute of character, which can be developed and worked towards, leading to a point at which "[man] can no longer sin."⁵

Walls's second claim is generally acceptable, as he adds the caveat concerning the belief that "all fall short of the glory of God" and that "none is righteous; no, not one."⁶ We can assume these are the verses Walls is alluding to when he mentions the widely held belief that none are perfect or made perfect during this lifetime. However, many may find the following notion Walls holds to be somewhat controversial:

[Their need for further sanctification] is true despite the fact that they are justified, forgiven by God, and restored to a right relationship with Him. And it is true despite the fact that they have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and made a new creation in Christ. Indeed, this is true even on the assumption that everyone has made at least some progress in the pursuit of holiness, some more than others. The obvious fact remains that most are not completely holy... when they die.⁷

⁴ Thomas Nelson, Inc. *NKJV Study Bible*, 2nd (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007).

⁵ Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, 94.

⁶ Nelson, Inc, *NKJV Study Bible*, Romans 3:23 and Romans 3:10-12.

⁷ Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, 94.

Clearly, a shift from traditional Reformed belief can be inferred in Walls's statement. The claim is simply this: the qualifications to enter Heaven go beyond that of justification, right relationship with God, and a repentant heart in the pursuit of God's glory and holiness. Instead, Walls opts for the view that we *become* perfect through a gradual sanctification process that takes place even after death—indeed, it is gradual in that it takes place in time and for a specified period that is dictated by our eventually perfected character.

Walls then compares the only two models of Purgatory he believes are compatible with the Protestant view (one more than the other). These models are: 1) Once we die, we are instantaneously made impeccable in character, given our glorified body, and can be in the presence of God freely. This is possible due to Christ's sacrifice and imparted righteousness. 2) Post-death sanctification and purification take place through our cooperation with God, over a period of time, which is completely of our free will. Although this may be an oversimplification, the two views are basically (1) the traditional, Protestant view and (2) the view that accepts Purgatory as a means for continued sanctification. Walls claims that some understanding of Purgatory as simple sanctification of the soul needs to be held in both models, although he supports the second model in his writings. This paper, again, is not meant to combat the need for purification. Instead, it is to combat the second view: that after death imperfect man is still in need of attaining perfection

through a temporal process of change in character accomplished by cooperation with God.

Distinction between Sanctification and Satisfaction

To follow the rest of Walls's argument, it is important to understand three different models of Purgatory: The Satisfaction Model, The Satisfaction-Sanctification Model, and The Sanctification Model.

The Satisfaction Model is most closely aligned with the view of Purgatory held by the Catholic Church in the 16th Century. Much of the controversy surrounding Purgatory, Walls claims, stems from this interpretation of it, particularly because Calvin rejected the position so strongly.⁸ The position starts well, but what follows after the first premise was entirely rejected by men like Luther and Calvin: 1) sin merits punishment, 2) penal atonement for sin that remains after death is the process by which men are made perfect, and 3) guilt can be cleansed away through contrition and paid for by indulgences. However, Walls rejects this view on its face based on its weight resting on the punishment for sins, rather than the perfection of the soul. He observes, "Even if they do not hold the view that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to those who have faith in him, they will hold that the gift of salvation through Christ pardons them of sin in such a way that they are no longer

⁸ Jerry Walls, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 70.

required to pay any sort of debt of punishment.”⁹ The issue for Walls is not the atonement factor of Purgatory, but rather that the man is not perfect in character.

Second, the Satisfaction-Sanctification Model stands only slightly separated from the first model. In this view, like in The Satisfaction Model, payment of debt from past sins is still necessary. However, instead of penal repentance, it is a means of cleansing the soul to make it “spiritually healthy.”¹⁰ Again, Walls rejects this view due to an unspecified moment of perfection and the payment for sins. The two are mutually exclusive, and do not necessarily rely on each other for completion.

Walls states the following:

A person might undergo an appropriate punishment that would satisfy justice, but still have a significant way to go by way of rectifying his character flaws. On the other hand, his character flaws might be healed well before he has served a sentence sufficient to satisfy the requirements of justice.¹¹

Finally, he arrives at the model he supports—The Sanctification Model. This model’s only goal, according to Walls, is to achieve spiritual perfection and holiness through a temporal, character-building process. Walls argues that the work towards the soul’s perfection is accomplished only in Purgatory, while cooperating with God. “Protestants can affirm sanctification models ... and may find that it

⁹ Walls, *Purgatory*, 69-70.

¹⁰ Walls, *Purgatory*, 69.

¹¹ Walls, *Purgatory*, 87.

makes better sense ... than the typical Protestant account that it happens instantly and immediately at or after death.”¹² It is this theory of Purgatory that this paper seeks to refute based on its simple superfluity.

Section 2: Objections and Refutation

Before beginning the brief criticism of this understanding of sanctification and God’s priorities concerning free will, it is important to review a few discrepancies Walls may have overlooked in his books. Highlighting them briefly will weaken the foundation enough to attack its frame.

In the last chapter of *Purgatory*, Walls clearly addresses (albeit briefly) the *Sola Scriptura* argument against Purgatory. To refute it, he simply states, “While I agree that scripture does not clearly support the doctrine by way of explicit affirmation, I believe that it does not rule it out either.”¹³ This seems a weak defense against those who would claim Scripture as their sole source and foundation. However, concerning the doctrine of things like the Trinity, Scripture is not explicit either; we might ask, “Why should we not accept another doctrine like Purgatory?” The reason is this: the doctrine of the Trinity, and many others, is a simple necessity in completing God’s whole, loving, relational nature and was drawn not only from language used in the Old Testament, but divined through deductive logic

¹² Walls, *Purgatory*, 90.

¹³ Walls, *Purgatory*, 114.

concerning God's nature. Instead of this simple, elegant transition between a deistic Creator to a Triune, loving God, the doctrine of Purgatory is not necessitated by the tone of Scripture and its references to what purity will look like in Heaven.

Additionally, Walls uses C. S. Lewis's understanding of Purgatory as it relates to Christ's substitutionary sacrifice on the cross as a weak argument from authority. In Chapter 4 of *Heaven, Hell and Purgatory*, Walls reviews the difference between "penal substitution" and the position that he holds, which aligns more closely to the view that Christ made a way to allow for complete sanctification through hard work and dedication to surrender to Christ, coming to a complete knowledge. However, he quotes Lewis as saying: "You and I can go through this process [of sanctification] only if God does it in us; but God can do it only if he becomes man."¹⁴ This phrase seems to go against much of what Walls has claimed so far. If, indeed, this is a work that is only capable through God's work in us, why is a temporal purification necessary? Would God not be able to complete this work in an instant, as suggested in Philippians 1:6, allowing for complete understanding of His goodness through the removal of the darkened mind found in the flesh and a sinful nature? Did not our sin nature, the remaining sin that Walls speaks about, enter through Adam (Romans 5:12-21) and affect the generations to follow through the imparting of a fallen body and mind, rendering man incapable of reaching full

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics: Mere Christianity*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 55.

understanding of God without His illuminating wisdom? And is not this understanding granted freely with faithful request?¹⁵ If understanding is what drives us to a perfection found in the safety of Christ's sacrifice, then the case for a temporally dependent Purgatory is small, indeed.

In Walls's book *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* he makes several claims concerning the nature of our sanctification working towards perfection in Purgatory. Two of these claims are contradictory when compared to the qualifications for Heaven (satisfying the justice of God and His standards for perfection) that he gives elsewhere in the book. The two phrases Walls uses to describe the process are "cooperation" and "perfect repentance."¹⁶ However, this cooperation, if effective in securing our perfection through a process, must be a perfect cooperation at the very least. Perfect cooperation is not possible unless man's will is perfectly in line with the will of God. However, being in a fallen state, hindered by the limitations of the flesh, even while holding the image of God, man is kept from this perfect cooperation.

Continued sanctification in a temporally dictated manner, as proposed by Walls, could not be feasible considering his notion of achieving perfection. This is due to the necessary dependence of each individual notion of repentance and cooperation as they relate to each other. Using his terms, the action of "perfect repentance" is

¹⁵ Nelson, Inc, *NKJV Study Bible*, James 1.

¹⁶ Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, 114.

not possible without first perfectly cooperating with God (which Christ was able to do based on Him being fully God) according to God's will. However, perfect cooperation entails complete surrender and repentance. These two events must necessarily come to fulfillment at the same time, as they are co-dependent. One cannot exist without an understanding and fulfillment of the other. Therefore, it is illogical to understand the purification of a soul to be something that reaches its completion in a time-stringent sense, out of man's own actions and change in character. Instead, it is much more coherent to claim that final, complete sanctification is only possible through the work of Christ and is instantaneous upon our completion of time here on Earth, being released from a sinful body and the curse of Sin, which was buried with Christ on the cross.

Significance of Free Will

In support of Walls's Sanctification Theory, many other philosophers have made claims concerning God's respect for our free will. My claim is that traditional Protestant thought on God's radical purification is not impeded if full sanctification takes place immediately upon death, and such a sanctification is in full respect and fulfillment of our free will. In the following section, I will discuss the effect that a sin nature has on mankind, how that effects man's free will, and what those effects mean for man's spiritual sanctification.

Sin and its effect on man is what separates man from direct contact with God and a perfect character. However, I must touch on the other nature that is at work

within believers to sanctify them: the Holy Spirit. If one holds to traditional Protestant and Catholic belief, the Holy Spirit endows the believer with discernment of God's will and understanding of the truth of Christ's gospel, as found in 1 Corinthians 2:10-16. In simpler terms, it is the *good* will inside of man, pressing him on toward obedience. As addressed above, in Walls's quoting of C.S. Lewis, the Holy Spirit is the same God that we will face when perfected. These two natures, sin and good, are at odds inside man.

This section of the argument requires two developments: (1) an explanation of the choice involved in accepting God's will over one's own, and (2) how an instantaneous cleansing of a sinful nature is in full recognition and support of man's free will. Briefly, scripture is clear that a conscious decision by each believing individual is necessary to partake in the birthright of Christ. The Apostle Paul qualifies this in Romans 10:9 with two necessities: the act of confessing with your mouth and believing in your heart that the Christ is Lord. This belief is confirmed by one's faith in Christ's sacrifice and the professing of it. Additionally, it is confirmed by a repentant heart, proven by the works that arise naturally as a "fruit" of an actual change in will. Notice that the change in character is done in us by the Spirit of God, when we continue in the conscious decision of faith in God and righteous decision-making. This conscious decision of faith is an act of cooperation with God's will.

While discussing the use of the term cooperation, Walls points out the respect God has for our free will. God does not intervene, except in rare circumstance, to impede our ability to make morally significant and free choices.¹⁷ He posits that for God to allow an instantaneous removal of our sin nature would breach our free will and strip an opportunity for cooperation. Additionally, this cooperation, as stated previously, leads to a perfection of character, which is a prerequisite to enter Heaven. However, Walls's version of temporal sanctification implies that once inside Heaven, no further character building is necessary or possible, because the man is perfect in his decision making upon completion. However, Walls says little about the effect this perfection has on his free will once inside Heaven except for one claim: that to be perfect, and to see God, you must not be able to sin.¹⁸ This concept of perfection leaves no further room for a concept of free will, as the impossibility of doing *other than perfect*.¹⁹ This reality would then strip mankind of his free will, discontinuing any form of cooperation upon entering Heaven and removing any culpability in receiving reward or punishment for actions that were not of his own choosing. In short, the choices would not be morally significant.

¹⁷ Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, 114.

¹⁸ Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, 94.

¹⁹ Jerry Walls and Evangel University, "Jerry Walls: What's Wrong with Calvinism, Part 1," Published on YouTube, February 19, 2013, video, youtu.be/Daomzm3nyIg.

In Walls's lecture *What's Wrong with Calvinism?* he clearly lays out this version of free will as the one libertarian thinkers, and as he says "common sense" thinkers, would hold to.

Although Walls argues for a temporal sanctification process that is enough to enter Heaven, he discontinues the character-building process at the point of impeccability. Luke Henderson defines this view concisely:

Given that impeccability entails the inability to sin or act morally blameworthy, the blessed reconstruct themselves through the process of character-development, to the point in which the performance of any sinful act becomes impossible. In this way, the blessed act to deepen those traits of character prior to heaven, which contribute to a certain constraint on what types of actions are possible for the blessed in heaven.²⁰

However, in line with Henderson's argument regarding the character-building theory, this gradual perfection of character seems to place psychological constraints on the individual, removing the possibility of sin. These psychological restrictions are incoherent with Walls's use of free will and God's respect for it, as they do not allow an alternative action or any personal responsibility of moral decisions once perfection has been achieved by the individual. Instead, Henderson puts forth a different solution that I concur with. Henderson's solution emphasizes the unnecessary nature of a character-development theory leading to self-perfection prior to Heaven:

What seems unnecessary here is the claim that the blessed needed to develop their characters at all prior to heaven in order to hold some responsibility for the state of their perfected characters in heaven. I see no reason why a denizen of heaven could not have made one decision that would have allowed God to perfect her character for her, whether prior to heaven or subsequent. For instance, it seems plausible to say that such a denizen exercised her access to alternative possibilities in one scenario in order to choose to allow God to take responsibility for the impeccability of

²⁰ Luke Henderson, "Character-Development and Heaven," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76, No. 3 (2014): 319-330. 322.

her future character. Applied to all the blessed, this would help explain how the blessed have impeccable characters in heaven, even though so many were unable to sufficiently cultivate impeccable characters prior to heaven.²¹

Henderson's argument can adeptly be used as a tool against Walls's claim that an instantaneous removal of a sinful nature strips any notion of free will and cooperation from man. However, instead of stripping free will from man, an instantaneous character change allows for the further exercise of free will in Heaven that Walls's claim excludes. Moral responsibilities in Heaven can and should be present in light of God's nature towards humans in allowing their free will, at least to the extent of making morally significant decisions.

This theory purported by Henderson opens the possibility that man can be unable to complete his own sanctification, although he is willing. As represented in the quote above, the "one decision" that would allow God to perfect one's character would most likely be the decision at the time of salvation. Although it is not an immediate cleansing, I would posit that one's life on Earth is the continued expression of that one decision and is proof of one's decision to allow God to perfect one's character. Additionally, the perfection of character that is accomplished by God allows for the full cooperation in Heaven with the moral responsibilities that will still be placed on man in Heaven, in agreement with the necessity of our free will.

²¹ Henderson, "Character-Development and Heaven," 325-6.

The Proximate Conception of Freedom

In agreement with Walls, Heaven must be a sinless place, free of any moral impurity to be in the presence of God. Furthermore, in order to avoid complications with the Consequence Argument (chiefly, that if we are determined to choose good or bad, we can hold no responsibility for our actions as they are a consequence of previously determined events), a different model of freedom than that which Walls holds must be used. The new conception of freedom must be able to provide for two facts: (1) we are free in Heaven to make morally significant choices, and (2) that Heaven is a sinless environment.

A model that satisfies these criteria is put forth by James F. Sennet which he titles “The Proximate Conception of Freedom.” In his article “Is There Freedom in Heaven?” he outlines this view as asserting the necessity for free will and cooperation on the part of man as well as the necessity for free will in Heaven, in order to provide for morally significant decisions. Additionally, his model avoids the dilemma of attributing man’s sinless character to the contingent choices of free agents in Heaven. Instead, it shifts the credit for the lack of evil in Heaven to God’s work in us in building and completing our character. Finally, Sennet’s model for Heavenly freedom allows for the actualization of a “freedom good” without the presence of moral evil.²²

²² James Sennet, “Is There Freedom in Heaven?” *Faith and Philosophy*, (1999), 70.

To satisfy the criteria, two things must be true of man, outside and inside of Heaven, respectively: (1) at some stage, the individual must freely choose the formation of his or her own character, and (2) once in Heaven, his or her actions must be a direct choice that is determined by his or her character.²³ Sennet meets these criteria by detailing the different stages of free will. To allow a meaningful choice in choosing one's character, free will is necessarily libertarian on Earth, allowing for evil to exist so that "freedom good" can be possible.²⁴ This "freedom good" allows for man to choose between good and evil, building or degrading his character. Upon entering Heaven, however, the character that is a result of their time on Earth is the determining factor of their actions. In Heaven, a sinless character is what determines their actions, leaning more closely to a compatibilist view than libertarian free will—since the character is *good* within those in Heaven, every action that man takes, now without any outside factors from a fallen state, are *good* choices. This escapes the problems concerning the Consequence Argument by allowing libertarian free will on Earth for a time, creating an environment where

²³ Sennet, "Is There Freedom In Heaven?" 73.

²⁴ John Hick, "Soul-making Theodicy," in *God and the Problem of Evil*, ed. William Rowe (Oxford: Blackwell), 271.

Here, the "freedom good" is referring to the good that is gained in choosing good over evil. Without the freedom to choose good, the good of choosing it would be lost. This theory allows for this good to be realized in the act of morally significant decisions in Heaven as well, regardless of God's supplying of character lacking in us.

the free agents take part in choosing what will determine them in the future (i.e., their character).

However, what about the actual transformation process? Does Sennet's view fit more closely with Walls's or with Henderson's interpretation? Sennet addresses this question directly, stating the following:

There is room for some kind of doctrine of sanctification, whereby God supplies upon our deaths whatever is lacking in our character formations to bring us to the state of compatibilist free perfection. I believe this can be worked out consistently by insisting that it is the pattern we establish throughout a life of persistent intentional character building that is critical—not our actually attaining the desired character itself in our lifetimes. By establishing such a pattern, we are, in effect, giving God permission to fill in the gap.²⁵

It is this model that most prominently answers Walls's objection to an instantaneous transformation. Additionally, it satisfies Walls's adherence to a cooperative process and God's respect for our free choice. An instantaneous perfection is the result of a life of submission, leading to a character inclined to choose Christ, and a culmination of God's love and grace in completing that character upon one's death.

Conclusion

After examining his arguments and highlighting the main points of contention, a review of themes is necessary. Again, my claim is that there is no need for a temporal Purgatory considering God's work in man and respect for our free will.

²⁵ Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy," 271.

Given this respect, Earth serves as a proving ground for those that would enter Heaven. The perfection that God requires is only attainable through the perfection of character (in effect, the removal of our sin nature, which is fundamentally connected to our fallen state). Furthermore, without any outside influence affecting a believer whose character has been made *good* by God's transforming work based on one's free will in choosing Him, there is nothing hindering the freedom in making morally significant choices determined by that character that they have chosen.²⁶ Although I do not hesitate to affirm that a true believer would obey willingly if God were to ask us to perfect ourselves through a temporal process like Purgatory, it is a submissive spirit, honest pursuit of God, and belief in His son's redemptive work that God sees as a "permission" to perfect our character. Perfection is unattainable by our own efforts. Finally, by giving an alternative that works logically, and with this understanding of Scripture, Walls's argument for Purgatory does not follow necessarily for Protestant Christianity. After clarifying the need for a purification before entering Heaven, it is still logically consistent to receive an instantaneous transformation of character, allowing for us to enter Heaven without a temporal concept of Purgatory.

²⁶ Romans 7:15-20 (NKJV) is a good example of the Apostle Paul's thoughts on his decision making while on Earth, especially considering his flawed character. He, too, claims to genuinely desire this perfection of character.

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