

TRAFFIC ON THE PATH TO PERFECTION

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Holiness and humanity

Introduction

The International Spiritual Life Commission made a call to Salvationists world-wide to 'restate and live out the doctrine of holiness in all its dimensions - personal, relational, social and political - in the context of our cultures and in the idioms of our day while allowing for and indeed prizing such diversity of experience and expression as is in accord with the Scriptures.'

This call reflects the vital part holiness plays in the witness of the movement. But if the call is to be heeded, more holiness teaching is required. What is 'holiness teaching'?

The *Handbook of Doctrine* (1969) defines sanctification in this way:

The word 'sanctification' is used in two senses:

(1) to describe the action by which men are made holy, and

(2) to denote the result of this hallowing. The first refers to the sanctifying action, the second to the sanctified state.

The 1969 Handbook then goes on to describe the connection between the holy nature of God, and the consecrated and Christ like life which is possible in the believer.

The Salvation Army Year Book has a more experiential definition of the term.

The deeper experience of grace, known as holiness or sanctification, is the outcome of wholehearted commitment to God and enables the living of a Christ like life.

For a fuller definition of the outcome of the sanctifying work of the Spirit, in the sense of the Army's traditional teaching on the matter, we turn to Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle:

Holiness is that state of our moral and spiritual nature which makes us like Jesus in his moral and spiritual nature.

Holiness is a state of conformity to the divine nature. God is love, and there is a sense in which a holy man can be said to be love. He is like God, not in God's natural perfection of power and wisdom and knowledge and omnipresence, but in patience, humility, self-control, purity of heart and love. As a drop out of the ocean is like the ocean, not in its bigness but in its essence, so is the holy soul like God.

Heart Talks on Holiness 1897

In traditional holiness teaching there is emphasis on conformity to the divine nature, but it is not the conformity of divinity with divinity, but the conformity of humanity with divinity.

There are echoes in Brengle of St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of Analogy which may help us understand what God means when he says:

You shall be holy, for I am holy;

Lev. 19:2

and what Jesus meant when he said:

You must be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect. The word 'perfect' is a rendition of the Greek adjective *teleios* or the verb *telein*. Used elsewhere in the NT it can mean accomplished, finished, completed, brought to maturity and, depending on the grammar, can include being in the process of becoming It does not have the absolute connotation that is implied in the word 'perfect' as used in English. Hence St Paul speaks of 'perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord' (2 Cor 7:1), and the writer to the Hebrews of 'the captain of our salvation (Christ) being 'made perfect through suffering.'

Matt 5:48

The main point of Aquinas' teaching is that all language is symbolic, and in the case of religious language, analogous.

When a word such as 'good' is applied to a created being and to God, it is not being used unequivocally (that is with exactly the same meaning) in the two cases. God is not good in identically the sense in which human beings may be good.

Nor, on the other hand, do we apply the epithet 'good' to God and man equivocally (that is, with completely different and unrelated meanings).

There is no doubt that Wesley would have been familiar with the scholarship of Aquinas. However, instead of going down the road of analogy, he seeks to redefine the word 'perfect.'

John Wesley's account of Christian perfection speaks for itself:

On Monday, June 25, 1744, our first conference began, six clergymen and all our preachers being present. The next morning we seriously considered the doctrine of sanctification, or perfection. The questions asked concerning it, and the substance of the answers given, were as follows:-

Q. *What is it to be sanctified?*

A. *To be renewed in the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.*

Q. *What is implied in being a perfect Christian?*

A. *Loving God with all our heart, and mind, and soul (Deut vi, 5).*

Q. *Does this imply that all inward sin is taken away?*

A. *Undoubtedly: or how can we be said to be saved from all our uncleanness?: (Ezek xxxvi.29).*

At the 1759 Conference he defined 'Christian Perfection', which he read as synonymous with 'entire sanctification' or 'holiness' thus:

Q. *What is Christian Perfection?*

A. *Loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love.*

I Wesley speaking of 'sinless' perfection?

Q. *What was the judgement of all our brethren who met at Bristol, in August 1758, on this head?*

A. *It was expressed in these words:*

- *Everyone may make a mistake as long as he lives.*
- *A mistake in opinion may occasion a mistake in practice.*
- *Every such mistake is a transgression of the perfect law, therefore.*
- *Every such mistake, were it not for the blood of atonement, would expose us to eternal damnation.*
- *It follows that the most perfect have continual need to pray for themselves, as well as for their brethren, 'Forgive us our trespasses.'*

When it was put to Wesley that it might be wiser to speak of holiness as 'a high state of grace' rather than perfection, he defended his terminology on the grounds that it was biblical:

As to the word, it is scriptural; therefore, neither you nor I can in conscience object against it, unless we would send the Holy Ghost to school and teach him to speak who made the tongue.

Wesley's reply, although cleverly worded, failed to give due weight to the difference in meaning between the biblical term (i.e. perfection = maturity, properly fulfilling the task for which we were created) and the normal English use of the word. He stuck with terminology which meant that he had frequently to remind people that he didn't mean what they thought he meant!

Even so, it has been pointed out that:

It is well always to bear in mind the central tenet of Wesley's teaching, that by faith the believer can claim the reality of the love of God in his life, that it is impossible to love God and man and wilfully sin against either, and that love is a matter of the will seeking to live to God's glory, rather than a passing emotion.

According to Wesley, deliverance from original sin was as much an effect of 'entire sanctification' as deliverance from actual sin. The former he described as 'an evil root', and 'an evil inclination' (Hebrews 12: 15).

Divinity and humanity

The Doctrine of Sanctification is paradoxically complementary to our Doctrine of Man.

Brenge continues:

It does not consist in perfection of intellect, although the experience will bring much greater clearness ...

Nor does it necessarily consist in perfection of conduct, though a holy man seeks with all his heart to make his outward conduct correspond to his inward light and love.

Holiness does consist in complete deliverance from the sinful nature, and in the perfection of the spiritual graces of love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, truth, meekness and self-control.

The 1969 edition of the *Handbook of Doctrine* re-affirms that man cannot be holy unless he is delivered from sin, and that there is one means of deliverance - that provided by the atonement.

The 1969 edition also affirms that total depravity means that no part of our being is untouched by our sinful nature, then entire sanctification is a work of grace in which God's power and purpose

penetrate into the depths of personality and leave no part of life untouched. This is not a doctrine of original righteousness being reinstated after the eradication of original sin.

So, can an individual ever be truly holy? According to Brengle: yes! That there is such an experience is revealed in three ways:

by the Scriptures

by the testimony of holy men and women

by the hunger and thirst of our own regenerate heart ...

The Spirit of God will not beget desires in the hearts of his trusting children only to mock them.