

TRAFFIC ON THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

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From piety to personal experience

Dinner was over and the newly elected Methodist president was telling the gathered company about his forthcoming overseas trip. He was to visit a number of churches in Latin America and had been invited to preach on 'entire sanctification' at a theological college. There followed a lively discussion on what he should say about Wesley's doctrine when our host – a distinguished Anglican bishop - expressed surprise. 'This is a holiness I don't really know about.' It was not that he is ignorant, it is just that he had not been exposed to the rich seam of Wesleyan thought and teaching on which others of us had been nurtured since childhood. In fairness, had the conversation turned to the undoubted richness of the liturgy a number of us would have been equally at a loss.

Love's Redeeming Work is an account, compiled by three distinguished scholars and bishops, of the Anglican quest for holiness from Latimer in the early 16th century to twentieth century writers and scholars. Even in its account of the work of John Wesley there is no clear reference to the doctrine of entire sanctification as those of us in the Wesleyan tradition understand it.

Notwithstanding the earlier reference to 'the vast majority of Christians expressing 'a conscious desire to make a clear-cut, definite start toward the holy life subsequent to being saved,' it is equally clear that much of the Church would not think of holiness or sanctification in terms of a 'definite experience', but rather as the moral and spiritual foundations of a close relationship with God.

The purpose of this lecture is to trace the concept of holiness from the development of spirituality for the secular world to holiness as personal and supernatural experience.

The Reformation

The Reformation was another of those swings from 'formalism' to a more personal and therefore rigorous practice of Christianity. The catalyst was two-fold; firstly there was widespread dissatisfaction with the moral and spiritual decay that had set into the Church in the West, and secondly there was the flowering of a new interest in Scripture and theology.

This new emphasis on the Bible was at the heart of Reformation theology and teaching. The great theological issue that emerged from this period was the doctrine of justification by faith. Justification was God's grace at work on behalf of the sinner, and the resulting change in practice was largely in the area of public and private morality, although we might wonder at the personal morality of many of the reformers themselves. There was a distinct shift towards personal experience and piety, but no 'doctrine of sanctification' emerged from this period. Sanctification or holiness was, to Calvin for example, merely the outward confirmation of one's election for salvation.

Catholic Piety

One of the results of the Catholic 'counter-Reformation' was a new interest in personal religion for ordinary people. St. Ignatius of Loyola's 'Brotherhood of the Common Life', later known as 'The Jesuits', set new standards of personal devotion and service for the 'religious', and these were achieved through 'spiritual exercises' which Ignatius laid down. The outward manifestation of this new direction in Catholic spirituality and communal life was a new emphasis on theological and secular education.

But it was the work of Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva that opened up the question of personal piety and the pursuit of personal holiness through devotional exercise for lay people. In 1609 a series of letters written by Francis De Sales was published as *The Introduction to the Devout Life*. This was

explicitly, directly and enthusiastically addressed to 'persons living in the world'. He wrote specifically with the layman in mind, fearing that personal devotion had for too long been perceived as the province of those 'who have withdrawn from the society of the world; or at all events they have taught a kind of devotion which leads to this complete withdrawal'.

In the late 15th century Dutch pre-reformation teacher Erasmus had sought to make the Bible accessible 'even to Scotsmen'. Now in the 17th century Francis de Sales' intention was 'to instruct those who live in towns, in households obliged to lead an ordinary life.'

This was spirituality for the secular world! De Sales primary achievement was to say that the way to spiritual life and personal religion is through a ministry and spirituality that can be lived in the real world. His other achievement was to produce the forerunner of the many helpful devotional guides which are now available to us.

Catholic and Protestant Spirituality

Post-Reformation Christianity followed a number of courses, but the Protestant emphasis on the Bible and the new Catholic patterns of devotion and personal religion were both in their own ways focused on the pursuit of encounter with God and personal holiness. The two hundred years that followed the Reformation produced many good teachers of personal religion, a number of whom came to a more rigorous devotion by way of disenchantment with formal religion.

One such was William Law, an 18th century mystic who is remembered today for such classics as his *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, and for his remarkable mysticism. At the heart of Law's teaching were three things; Christ's presence in the soul, free will, and prayer as the means by which we turn from self towards God.

The distress that stands near the gate of life.

Nature must become a torment and burden to itself before it can willingly give itself up to that death through which alone it can pass into life. There is no true and real conversion, whether it be from infidelity or any other life of sin, until a man comes to know and feel that nothing less than his whole nature is to be parted with, and yet finds in himself no possibility of doing it. This is the inability that can bring us at last to say with the apostle, 'When I am weak, then am I strong'. This is the distress that stands near to the Gate of Life; this is the despair by which we lose all our own life, to find a new one in God.

John Wesley and Christian Perfection

Let Wesley speak for himself.

In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying. In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly affected: that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God; all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced there was no medium, but that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or myself; that is, in effect, to the devil.

In the year 1726 I met with Kempis's Christian's Pattern. The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before.

A year or two after, Mr. Law's 'Christian Perfection' and 'Serious Call' were put into my hands. These convinced me more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian. And I determined, through his grace (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of), to be all devoted to God - to give him all my soul, my body, and my substance.

In the year 1729 I began not only to read but to study the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw, in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having the mind which was in Christ, and of walking as Christ also walked; even of having not some part only, but all the mind which was in him; and of walking as he walked, not only in many or in most respects, but in all things.

To what extent are his spiritual aspirations, which can be summed up as a longing to live the consistent, selfless, and loving life of Christ like perfection, reflected in Wesley's teaching on 'Christian Perfection' or 'Entire Sanctification' which is really a record of his life's journey from 1725 to 1777.

Chick Yuill points out:

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) (Even in the early part of the 20th century Brengle would often ask the individual or the congregation if 'sin has been dealt with, root and branch?')

In John Wesley's case, it was not an experience to which he ever laid public claim. He could recognise the fully resigned, completely devoted and entirely sanctified life in others. There was another interesting paradox in his teaching. The 30 texts on which he leaned heavily supported his teaching that perfect sanctification is deliverance from all sin, but he declined to call it 'sinlessness'. Perfection was of motive, not of degree. It was a matter of love, will and intention.

Nevertheless, it was not until Wesley that it could be truly said that the Church possessed a comprehensive and coherent doctrine of sanctification.

William Booth

William Booth regarded himself as a disciple of John Wesley. He has been quoted as saying that 'there is but one God, and John Wesley is his prophet.' The Founder set out his own thinking in *Salvation Soldiery* (1881)

What are we to understand by holiness? two or three simple statements of truth.

- *All unsaved men are totally unholy.*
- *Holiness, in its broad signification, means separation from all unrighteousness and consecration to God.*
- *In the early stage of Christian experience this deliverance is only partial.*
- *This deliverance from sin in the soul may be entire.*

There are three broad and well-defined relations in which a man can stand towards sin.

1. He can be **UNDER SIN**: Exposed to sin's penalty and power.

2. He can be **OVER SIN**: The Master has taken the throne, ... but the old habits, temper and inclinations can still make their presence felt.

3. He can be **WITHOUT SIN**: Fully delivered, fully consecrated, constant in his obedience, having a clean heart.

In the mid-twentieth century Will Brown, then a corps officer in London, described things this way:

The whole complex area of our human nature - our impulses and desires, our moods and ambitions - will be brought into line with God's holy will as time goes on. This consecration keeps pace with revelation. That is why the words of General Carpenter were, and are, so apt:

The secret of the victorious life is to say "yes" to Christ, and to keep on saying it. Rightmire A.R.: 65 - 68

So how does this translate into spirituality for the ordinary person living in the secular world?

Rightmire's biography *Sanctified Sanity* identifies Brengle's ability to identify with his congregation. Through the use of stories and experiential anecdotes he was 'able to express vast things simply'. In a sense he was teaching a very particular theology while drawing his hearers to a point of realisation that what he spoke about related to everyday life. It was spirituality for the world in which they worked and served.

Writing of Brengle in 1936, General Evangeline Booth noted:

In the pathology of the guilt, Commissioner Brengle stood out as a distinguished specialist. He brought to bear on the patient a healing influence greater than all the resources of man.

Frederick Coutts was similarly impressed with Brengle's ability to relate his doctrine to 'real people and real life.'

First, Brengle has the human touch. Perhaps his secret is that he wrote from his heart to the needs of the human heart.... A second secret is that Brengle saw that the doctrine of holiness is not the enemy of the heart's affections but their sanctifier.

A third secret is that Brengle found the key to the experience of holiness in the word 'Christlikeness.... That same "Christ in you" who is the hope of glory, is also our hope of holiness.

In his book *The Salvationists* John Coutts takes issue with Brengle's teaching on the grounds that it predates the 'psychological revolution' and therefore presents a relatively uninformed view of the human condition and the complex nature of the human psyche.

It knows nothing of anxiety states, phobias and neuroses. The young housewife, confined with two small children on the fifth floor of a block of flats -how shall she achieve that inward peace which is one of the inward hallmarks of sanctification? Brengle does not tell us. Coutts J.:58

Defending Brengle, William Clark notes that although he did not have the skills and language of modern psychology available to him,

Brengle was quite able to counsel people with similar psychological problems (to those of the fifth-floor incarcerated mother of two) stemming from other causes, and he did. He did not use the language of modern psychology, but like the Psalmist and Jesus before him, he was nevertheless a true psychologist in the sense that he understood the human heart and offered solutions to human problems. Clark:114

But something more subtle was taking place in the background. Partly because of the work of Frederick Coutts and others, and their emphasis on Christlikeness and 'Christ in you,' there was a distinct shift away from the idea of sanctification as a matter of 'freedom from sin' to holiness as a new work of the Spirit. In effect the focus shifted from the sin and atonement to life and power in the Spirit. In common with much of the Church, Salvationist teaching and preaching the second half of the twentieth century saw a shift towards a more pneumocentric Pneumocentric – relating to the Holy Spirit understanding of radical Christian experience.

This shift of emphasis can perhaps be seen by comparing testimonies from the 19th and the late 20th centuries. If we look carefully at the two we may also begin to see a pattern of experience with which Salvationists from any point in our history might readily identify.

Bramwell Booth's moment of breakthrough

Described by his mother Catherine Booth:

Bramwell is seeking for himself. His entrance by faith into the peace of that experience came almost abruptly. One Sunday morning when he was on tour visiting Mission stations, after leading the morning meeting in one town he was walking to another. His thoughts were dwelling on the question of a holy life and his own lack of faith, when he suddenly apprehended with great clarity that this was a matter of his will. He stopped, turned aside to a gate in the lane, and immediately challenged his own heart's will to believe. Vaulting into the field he then prayed, submitting himself wholly to Christ. 'What God requires is not merely the doing of righteousness but the love and choice of it,' he wrote in after years. In that garb the experience of holiness had been presented to his heart and by faith it became his own.

Kay F Rader's testimony

In 1973 the Korea Director of Campus Crusade for Christ, Dr. Joon Gun Kim, made an amazing announcement on nation-wide television in America. Before a large youth rally in Texas, he said that they were expecting over 300,000 delegates at a Convocation of Christians.

I found myself immersed in a sea of dedicated, enthusiastic, zealous Christians, new in their faith in Christ, yet seemingly stronger and more settled than I was.

It was a time of personal soul searching for me. Looking back I feel it was a time especially designed by God to meet heart needs I had carried far too long. The exposure to the zeal and enthusiasm of these young Christians was highlighting my own growing lack of excitement about the things of God. I was experiencing a spiritual malaise which had been growing like unhealthy cells around the edges of my heart and seemed to be creeping ever closer to the centre.

Through the various contacts, among which was a stirring seminar led by one of America's foremost Bible teachers and preachers, I began searching for answers to the many troubling

questions in my life. Although I knew the answer lay in total surrender, I was not willing to hand over commitments to certain viewpoints that had come to identify me as a person. Indeed, during this period of preparation for Explo '74, the Korea Territory hosted Lieut-Colonel Mina Russell for a Brengle Institute in which I took part. There, despite the nudgings of the Holy Spirit, I held back.

The crisis came on 17 August, the last Saturday of Explo '74. At the close of the meeting I found myself unable to speak. It was as if I had been struck dumb. At home in our sitting room at 1/23 Chong dong, I wanted nothing more than to be alone with God.

The family obliged, thinking I would be there for a long time. Instead, it was only seconds. As soon as I sat down I knew what God required. He wanted my all. He showed me his Son, Jesus Christ dying on the cross. I was led to Galatians 2:20, which has become my life verse.

For the first time in my life I wanted to identify with his suffering. The prayer was one of the shortest I had ever prayed, 'Lord, this is it!' In other words, 'Here goes everything. It's all yours.'

A short while before Explo '74, a Presbyterian medical missionary had cornered me at a missions meeting and asked, 'What difference does the Holy Spirit make in your life?' At that time it seemed an impossible question, one which required quick thinking and a hasty retreat to evade. Now, suddenly, I longed to meet this missionary and tell him what a difference the Holy Spirit really does make. For the first time I felt I really knew about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I knew what it meant to be empowered by him.

The experience changed every aspect of my life. Almost 25 years later I can say with all confidence that nothing's been the same since that day. August 17, 1974 is a day I often refer to as D-day (deliverance day), the day I was delivered from self, and all related implications. My relationships with family, friends and associates were all changed. It was a turning point. I can say with the Apostle Paul, 'Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me... Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.' (Philippians 3:12-24)

Seven steps to spiritual breakthrough

1. Scriptural teaching awakening spiritual aspiration.
2. Dissatisfaction with one's moral and spiritual state, and a longing for a deeper experience of God.
3. Developing a desire and appetite for holiness because of the lives and testimony of holy people.
4. Realising that God wants to sanctify his people through the Holy Spirit.
5. Receiving the Holy Spirit by faith.
6. A new awareness of God, an outpouring of great joy, peace, and release from the things that inhibit the individual.
7. The fruit of the Spirit which is love.

Here is a timely reminder from a Salvationist writer:

No Christian should seek to emulate the experience of another. But every Christian should so place himself in the will of God, every Christian should so desire the fullness of the Spirit in his life, every Christian should so claim all that is his 'in Christ', that God the Holy Spirit is allowed to be a living reality in his life.

Every teacher of holiness must provide the opportunity for men and women to take that step of faith; every Christian must be sure that the step has been taken.