

The King's Highway

AN ADVOCATE OF SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS

VOL. XXXIX

MONCTON, N. B., OCTOBER 31, 1962

No. 19

The Human Element In Sanctification

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The basis of the Arminian approach to justification and sanctification is the Scripture truth of the co-operation of the human will with the movings of divine grace. Wesley warned against the opposite view in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in these words, "Beware of solifidianism: crying nothing but 'Believe, believe!' and condemning those as ignorant or legal who speak in a more scriptural way . . . for as 'by works faith is made perfect,' so the completing or destroying the work of faith, and enjoying the favor or suffering the displeasure of God, greatly depends on every single act of obedience or disobedience."

Yet there is a strong tendency today in writing and preaching to warn against the great danger of self-endeavor—of resolutions to pray more, to serve more faithfully, to use the means of grace more. Widely-accepted holiness writers and preachers tell us that all we have to do is to believe and we will be sanctified. If the necessity for total surrender is mentioned, this consecration is often so robbed of its true content as to comprise nothing more than an emotional experience at an altar of prayer.

John Wesley, however, in the above-mentioned book, says plainly that, "It is scarce conceivable how strait the way is wherein God leads them that follow him"; and again that we are to wait for this blessing, "not in careless indifference, or indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance upon all the ordinances of God. And if any man dream of attaining it in any other way—yea, or of keeping it when it is attained, when he has received it, even in the largest measure—he deceiveth his own soul. It is true that we receive it by simple faith: but God does not, will not give that faith unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which He hath ordained."

Equally plain and to the point are these words from MacDonald's *Fletcher of Madeley*, "If at any time the Methodists, or evangelical Christians generally, should let slip either of these truths; if holiness be thought of, on the one hand, as a human attainment and not a divine gift, or, on the other hand, as a gift of God having no relation to personal discipline and culture—they will at least be breaking with their best traditions, and have against them both the teaching and example of their fathers."

No doubt there are several reasons for the drift away from the truly Wesleyan emphasis. Early Methodism was founded upon and largely nourished by the great traditions of European piety. It may have been that when the movement leapt the ocean to America there was a break with those traditions, occasioned by the scarcity of devotional books and even Bibles among the early settlers.

Perhaps there has been a misunderstanding of Wesley's own ideas of sanctity before and after his Aldersgate Street experience. He makes it plain, in the book from which we have been quoting, that his ideas on this subject

did not materially change. While he deplored his legalistic search for Christ before his experience of saving faith, yet his labors, and personal discipline and sacrifices for Christ, were far more abundant after that experience. It was after that memorable evening that he said, "Leisure and I have parted company," and soon after he entered into the arduous labors of his itinerant ministry, as a love service, rather than a law service.

Another factor in the drift into "solifidianism" might be found in the natural reticence of the sanctified to refer at all to their own disciplines, sacrifices and spiritual culture. They rightly feel that having done all these things, they are still unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10); and they are so over-whelmed with the soul-cleansing, love-infusing work of grace in their hearts that they can speak only of Christ and His power to transfigure.

Yet the Bible definitely teaches that we have a certain part in our own sanctification. That they are not in earnest in their desire for holiness is evident in the fact that they do not strive with all their human will and energy against sin. The following examples from the New Testament could be multiplied. They are chosen at random to illustrate the point.

"And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (I John 3:3).

"The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin" (I John 1:7).

"Keep yourselves in the love of God" (Jude 21).

"Now unto him that is able to keep you" (Jude 24).

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

"For it is God which worketh in you" (Phil. 2:13).

In these Scriptures there is the element of human effort on the one hand and the power of God on the other.

It is true that we cannot sanctify ourselves. It is true that only Christ can sanctify, and that the blessing comes to us on the basis of our faith. Wesley makes this abundantly clear in his sermon on "The Scripture Way of Salvation."

The fact remains, however, that the gift of perfect love can seldom be separated from the careful, exacting cultivation of the art of holy living on the part of the seeker. Resignation, humility, charity, patience, mortification and separation from the world must be practiced by the believer until he is perfected by Christ. He must put away his sins before Christ can take away his sin.

Let us follow Wesley, Fletcher, Asbury, and the host of humble itinerants and Methodist preachers to that Calvary which leaves the flesh hanging naked and dead, while the spirit rises in the power of an endless life in Christ. This is not legalism. It is the first and finest instinct of the truly born-again—to suffer, to toil, to live, to die, to abandon oneself totally and irrevocably to the divine object of one's love, and to carry out that surrender in all the acts and choices of the daily life. This is the holy life that draws the cleansing fire from heaven.

—The Free Methodist