

Forms of the pursuit of the holy life—before and after Wesley.



PRACTICING HOLINESS IN THE GREAT TRADITION

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The life of holiness is a life lived out of the experience of entire sanctification, not a life lived in hope of gaining it.

Several strands of practiced holiness are woven into Christian history. And most of them can be followed through the whole course of it. All are not equally authentic expressions of the faith. In fact, some even prove to be spiritually unhealthy, though authentic Christians have perpetuated them. But all of them assert the desire to love God with all of the heart, soul, mind, and strength, and neighbor as self.

In this short article I can only wave a bit of the cloth before your eyes, of course. But perhaps we can see three of the strands with sufficient clarity to understand ourselves and to act accordingly. We will look at the idea that one practices holiness in order to be justified, at the notion that one practices holiness in order to be sanctified, and at the thought that one practices holiness because one is sanctified.

I. Practicing Holiness in Order to Be Justified

The idea that we must be holy before God can justify us plagues Christianity, even Protestantism. In the New Testament folks given to that idea infested the congregations

in Galatia, and apparently the problem was known in Ephesus and Corinth, too. To all of these, Paul wrote of salvation by grace alone through faith.

Since Paul's day, this idea of attaining sanctification in order to be justified has taken two forms. Positive sorts have believed that by heaping up holy thoughts, holy words, and holy deeds, one may merit justification. Gloomier sorts have thought that they will earn justifying approval by getting rid of unholy thoughts, unholy words, and unholy deeds.

The *Akoimetai* represent the positive side. They were Syrian monks active in the fifth to seventh centuries. Their founder, Alexander, yearned to fulfill the commandments of the New Testament and of Christian tradition perfectly. Hearing in the Liturgy that the angels, pure creatures, sing the *Gloria* seven times a day, he organized his monks, surely not angelically pure, to sing it seventy times seven around the clock, kneeling each time. That's how they got their name; *Akoimetai* means "the sleepless."

Among the less optimistic were attempts to gain salvation by negative holiness, as it were. Martin Luther was one of these people before his evangelical discovery. He joined a strict monastic order and aligned with the most rigorous group within it. He tried to rid himself of guilt by starving, scourging, and sleeplessness, by pilgrimage, penance, and prayer.

The Holiness Movement, too, has known this sort of misguided piety, this spiritually mercenary sanctity. The keeping of behavior rules, official and traditional, has sometimes been offered as a way to guarantee entry into eternal life. Nowadays the more often proffered means is "good attitudes." "Get your attitudes in order and God will save you."

II. Practicing Holiness in Order to Be Sanctified

This second form of practiced holiness may need a bit of explaining. One thinks here of those who exercise piety hoping to develop an attitude of piety, or of those who engage in deeds of love in order to gain the *habitus*, the disposition, of loving. The practitioners of this sort of

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holiness know themselves to be justified, to be forgiven Christians.

Among these persons once stood that attractive medieval mystic, Henry Suso. "Stood," we say, because he finally moved beyond practicing holiness to obtain sanctification, to practicing holiness to express sanctification.

In his autobiography, *The Life of the Servant*, he tells us that he experienced a radical conversion at age 18. But, in an effort to rid himself of a tendency still to be selfish and prideful, and in yearning to taste to the full the joy of the salvation he possessed, he devoted himself to rigorous asceticism for a decade. Among his disciplines were the wearing of a cross on his back, a cross studded with nails pointing inward; and since sleeping brought personal pleasures, he sought to avoid it and to spend the time in prayer—standing. Finding that he had to sleep some, lying down, he kept wearing his cross, and his hair shirt, and made his bed uncomfortable.

Remember, now, he had peace of soul concerning his conversion. This was settled. But he wished to perfect that peace, to heat his love for God to the degree of consuming all else. He saw the physical body as the chief obstacle to perfect love. So he sought its total discipline.

Suso's experience is not uncommon. Many have thus practiced holiness to gain sanctification. Knowing beyond doubt that they are justified, they find difficulty in loving God and neighbor without reserve—selfish, egocentric reserve. They yearn for the fullness of joy at which their conversion hints. Often, they know that the key is love, so they doggedly set about to perfect love and find an enemy, *the* enemy, in their own character. So, holiness becomes a matter of self-discipline in an attempt to free the spirit to love God and neighbor perfectly.

The Holiness Movement has seen this sort of practice of holiness, too. In fact, in its sincerity and desire to keep the whole counsel of God, it has often inadvertently encouraged those seeking sanctification first to become holy. The whole matter of

"surrender" is sometimes put in these terms. One gives up this, then that (usually something cherished); one accepts this, then that (usually something unpleasant). Then, when the appropriate degree of giving up and accepting has been done, one is thought to be ready for entire sanctification.

One would in no way reflect ill upon the process of consecration

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that is surely involved in entire sanctification. One would point out, however, that if entire sanctification comes as a *result* of consecration or surrender, it is not then a gift of grace but a reward for works. This, of course, would be clearly contrary to the Scripture.

III. Practicing Holiness as an Expression of Entire Sanctification

John Wesley's great discovery was that entire sanctification, no less than justification, is a gift of grace. This means, then, that the life of holiness is a life lived out of the experience of entire sanctification, not a life lived in hope of gaining it. So Wesley says, clearly, in his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation."

"Do you believe we are sanctified by faith? We know you believe that we are justified by faith; but do not you believe, and accordingly teach, that we are sanctified by our works?" So it has been roundly and vehemently affirmed for these five-and-twenty years: but I have constantly declared just the contrary; and that in all manner of ways. I have continually testified in private and in public, that we are sanctified as well as justified by faith. And indeed the one of those great truths does exceedingly illustrate the other. Exactly as we are justified by faith, so are we sanctified by faith. Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of sanctification exactly as it is of justification. It is the *condition*: none is sanctified but he that believes; without

faith no man is sanctified. And it is the *only condition*: this alone is sufficient for sanctification. Everyone that believes is sanctified, whatever else he has or has not. In other words, no man is sanctified till he believes: every man when he believes is sanctified.

Early in his career as leader of the Methodists, Wesley responded to some dissenting clergy of Reformed persuasion who saw sanctification as a matter of doing no harm and doing good. Wesley, in contrast, insisted on the inward character of the work: "I believe it to be an inward thing, namely, the life of God in the soul of man; a participation of the divine nature; the mind that was in Christ; or, the renewal of our heart after the image of Him that created us" (*Journal*, Thursday, September 13, 1739).

Finally, it is out of this inward change that holiness comes: "And I am consistent with myself, as well as with the Bible, when I affirm, that none shall be finally saved by any 'faith' but that 'which worketh by love,' both inward and outward holiness" ("Thoughts on Salvation by Faith," 11 [1779]).

Also of a piece with this is Wesley's oft-quoted sentiment that there is no holiness but social holiness, no true religion but social. Not only is holiness of life a product of holiness of heart, and *not* the reverse, but it must also be said that there is no holiness of heart that does not produce holiness of life. Entire sanctification cannot be attained by living a holy life; entire sanctification produces a holy life. And a holy life is necessarily a life in society, interacting with society.

Luther, who never came as far along as Wesley in his "optimism of grace," still came to understand that sanctification, like justification, is a gift of grace and not a product of works. But he still tended to see it in medieval terms. That is to say, for Luther, sanctification was the process through which we are actually *made* righteous, having been *declared* righteous in justification. This process is begun by grace and maintained in grace. Works, good works, then became both the vehicle of sanctification and the expression of sanctification and are not our

own. Our good works are God working in and through us.


So, like Wesley, Luther says that the practice of holiness is an expression of sanctification, but he would mean something other than what Wesley meant by saying it. For Wesley, true holiness of life begins in entire sanctification. That is to say, by grace we are granted perfect love to God and neighbor, and holiness of life is the expression of that gift. For Luther, true holiness of life begins when we are, at justification, declared holy in Christ (when holiness is imputed or accredited to us). It becomes increasingly a matter of our being made actually holy as sanctification proceeds to change us in a lifelong process.

So, for Wesley, holiness is a product or result of entire sanctification. For Luther, holiness is both a source and a result of sanctification, but sanctification cannot be entire until "the article of death." For both, the practice of holiness depends upon sanctification. One does not practice holiness to gain either justification or sanctification. For both, sanctification is a gracious divine gift which works its way, by the grace and presence of the Holy Spirit, in a life of holiness. From first to last, it is God who works in us, both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

Conclusion

I have not dilated upon the assets and liabilities of the three modes of practiced holiness presented here, though I hope they are clearly implied. Obviously, I am convinced of the truth of the third way, that true holiness of life will—must—be a product of entire sanctification.

What must also be obvious is a fear that "the holiness life-style," as it is now being called, will be made over into an engine of works righteousness, a collection of schemes for saving and sanctifying ourselves. Entire sanctification, like justification, is a gift of grace. And it issues in the life of holiness, which is begun by grace, nourished by grace, maintained by grace, matured by grace, and brought to its glorious *finale* by grace. "Without me, you can do nothing."

How perceptive are we of our own place in the history of the faith? 

SOMETHING TO SCREAM ABOUT

by Fred Wenger

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I rushed from the meeting of the Board of Christian Life just in time for the evening service to start. I wasn't ready. I had mixed-up feelings stirring within. Along with anger I was feeling frustration, sadness, and futility. Rather than sing a hymn I wanted to stand up and scream.

This was not the first time I had felt like this. I had felt this way in numerous church meetings in other cities, led by many fine people.

We met to do what hundreds of Christian Life boards were doing; that is, to plan the spring emphasis. The denominational dates were mentioned. The district theme was announced. The leader then asked, "What shall we do these six weeks to increase our attendance?" Attendance had dipped low during the winter months.

Ideas began to flow. One thing led to another. We ended up selecting four teams with four coleaders each. They would compete with each other. We then planned sure-fire attendance stimulators for each week. Time almost ran out before we got it all in place. We concluded with a brief prayer. That's when I began to get in touch with my feelings.

Whence my feelings? We came to the meeting. We knew the need. We offered good ideas. We had sincere motives. We were enthusiastic. We were optimistic. We were realistic. Then why this uneasiness of spirit?

It may be purely personal, but I think we made a wrong turn when we asked and began responding to a *what* question before we looked

at a *why* question. What basis did we have for selecting one *what* over another *what* when we hadn't pinpointed *why* we wanted to do anything?

Just asking *why* isn't enough for me anymore. I need to struggle with *why* until I get to my spiritual assumptions. Let me illustrate.

WHY do we need a contest? To raise the yearly Sunday School average above last year's is an answer that leaves much to be desired. As I wrestled with it I came to rock bottom and said, Relatives, friends, and acquaintances of mine are spiritually needy yet uninterested (or unaware of their need). I am burdened for them and would like to interest them (entice them?) in understanding how Jesus can satisfy their needs. Now, WHAT can we do that will attract their attention? Or, better yet, what can we plan and prepare so that the regularly attending people will be so excited they will feel compelled to go out and bring relatives, friends, and associates to the spiritual banquet? (I will probably want to think also about WHAT I want to be doing that will attract those who begin coming to keep it up after the emphasis.)

I guess what I am saying is that I've come to the conclusion the only way to have SOULS IN THOSE GOALS is to start with souls and move to goals. I have an idea Christian Life boards that planned contests from this base would send their members hurrying into evening services more anxious to pray than to scream. 