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Sanctification is Existential: Religious Existentialism I

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Religism Existentialism

I. Sanctification Is Existential

By Mildred Bangs Wynkoop*

THE DOCTRINE of holiness has structured the thinking of the Church of the Nazarene from its beginning fifty years ago. The doctrine has been received variously, from glad to reluctant acceptance and from question to decisive rejection on the part of the hearers. The life of holiness, when demonstrated, has contributed to the overcoming of some theological prejudice and its absence has certainly hindered the solving of intellectual problems. But the worst enemy to the doctrine of holiness is not the outside "enemy" but the unwise and unthinking inside friend.

Not all persons who leave the "holiness ranks" are rejecting God. Some have found a doctrine unsupported by a consistently growing Christian life insufficient to convince the mind, and the rejection has been of an inadequate expression of doctrine. It has been the contention of the church that sanctification is not simply an intellectual idea and a formal statement of faith but also a way of life. As life is dynamic and enlarging and changing and coming into ever new relationships and extending to greater heights and depths and needing to meet new problems and adjust to new perspectives, so the Christian aspect of life must conform

to the pattern of personality and answer to its needs. It must be realistic and Biblical.

If sanctification is a life, as well as a doctrine, it needs an adequate theological context to support it intellectually as a doctrine and moral imperatives to press it upon ourselves as individuals in a most vital and compelling way. There is a term recently appropriated by a large segment of Christianity which connotes the moral urgency which has always characterized divine revelation and Biblical truth and preaching. The word is "existentialism." In spite of the varied associations brought to this term which would be unacceptable to conservative thinking, there is a core meaning that ought not to be lost by way of intellectual default.

Religious existentialism is a reaction against hollow orthodoxy, icily correct doctrine, and an empty religious profession. It is an affirmation for theological truth presented in such a way that, when properly believed, it demands a thorough transformation of a man's everyday life. Its meaning is simple, yet profound. It asserts that the knowledge that we gain from God's Word requires of us more than an intellectual acceptance. Men are *units* of personality and when a person accepts or rejects truth the whole man is involved. The will does not

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act apart from the mind or the intellect apart from the emotions. Choice is *moral* because it is the whole man acting freely. This thoroughgoing moral involvement is not something one is free to accept or reject. We live in an environment of decision. As moral creatures we must and do decide, and these decisions are formative for life. We very early "commit" ourselves to a way of life at a very deep level of personality. Every act of life is colored by that commitment. Gospel truth challenges that prior commitment and not simply the things we do. It demands that a commitment to Christ supplant a former commitment. Acceptance of Christ, then, or faith, must include not only an intellectual conviction and acceptance of truth, but a moral renovation both painful and real.

But the danger we face is in affirming a belief in the doctrine of holiness that does not issue in a full and satisfactory expression of that faith in daily living situations. The doctrine of holiness, because it relates to the whole man—to every part of his personality—can never be simply a beautifully and meticulously stated article of faith by which one's orthodoxy is tested. To believe it and affirm it implicates more than the intellect. It is an existential doctrine displaying its beauty and power, not in verbal eloquence and fine definition, but in its morally transforming power in the lives of men. If it could be beautifully expressed apart from that life demonstration, its very beauty would condemn it because the degree of clarity with which it is understood becomes a measure of the moral responsibility a man has to it. As a segment of Biblical truth it was given to live by, not simply to look at and admire. The uniqueness of Biblical truth is its transforming power in human life.

Holiness preaching must be more than the delivery of properly turned theological phrases. "Shibboleths" can be dangerous if the whole weight of truth be laid upon them. Biblical preaching, alone, is great preaching, because it stays close to both God and men. The relationship of great preaching and the formal theology out of which it springs may not always be obvious. Preaching that moves men to God and holy living must stay close to the idiom of life and is in that sense more universal and gripping than the carefully worked out theological formula which structures it. One is vital, the other is formal. The two need not be antithetical. Wesleyan preaching and theology partake of this apparent ambiguity. In a measure not so true of any other theological tradition, Wesleyan preaching must stay very close to life and be deeply realistic, for it relates to life and human experience. In this it is distinctive. As a religion of life its theology is less logically structured than Biblically grounded. It must lie close to the existential Biblical teaching to remain close to the common experience of men everywhere in all times. In this sense theology is subservient to scripture and experience.

Calvinistic theology is, basically, non-experiential and is fortified by an impregnable logic. It not only structures thinking but dominates Biblical interpretation. Our approach is *not* by way of logic, but a consistent Biblical presentation. It is not the logic that prevails but the Word of God. The experiential emphasis stands in danger of emotionalism and irrationalism and must be guarded. But non-experiential religion has its risks too. It tends to undue abstraction and legalism and irrelevance.

Wesleyan doctrine, with its experiential emphasis, believes it finds its stability in a reference to scripture.

The Bible is a Book of experience. Its events occurred in history, among people, in profoundly human involvements. The Bible was not given on golden plates but to people. Revelation was not given in a vacuum but concretely, in experience. Jesus was a Man who was seen, heard, touched, loved, hated. He spoke to real persons enmeshed in the web of life and sickness and family concerns and labor and social involvements and death. The language of the Bible is the language of experience. If the experience of men today can become a participation in the knowledge and experience of Christ which the New Testament people knew, by the same obedience and faith and commitment, then the danger of unguarded subjectivism is minimized. As a book of Christian experience, it is believed that Christian faith must always seek to relate itself to the Christian Book. In a unique sense Wesleyan theology is totally dependent upon the Bible for every facet of its structure. The apostolic experience of Christ is normative for all Christian experience because there is but one Christ to know. Nor is it sufficient that the historical Christ alone should be known: it is enough only when the Christ himself becomes a part of the human experience.

Jesus was the first real religious existentialist. He perhaps never framed a doctrine or issued a command which could be intellectually accepted apart from a radical change in the mode of a man's existence. Everything He was as a Person or said as a Teacher was disturbing to religious complacency, irritating to self-righteousness, and terrifically demanding through and through the whole moral structure of man. His hearers had the Old Testament Scriptures, many of them kept the law, but Jesus had a way of stripping the ab-

stractions away from the commandments with one stroke and with another laying bare the poverty-stricken souls of men clothed with mere superficial obedience. He applied the law to conscience in a way that demanded a moral response.

No one heard Jesus speak without becoming better—or worse. No one could listen to Him without making some kind of moral decision. In this Jesus gave truth an existential interpretation. Something had to happen and always did. Matthew heard Jesus' "Follow me," and he left his money stall and followed. The rich young ruler's strict and noble orthodoxy collapsed before the existential interpretation of the law by Jesus. He went sorrowfully away to a deformed life, not a transformed one. Saul (Paul) was confronted by an existential presentation of Christ's person to him. He cried out, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" He was told what to do—and he did it.

Jesus did not underestimate the law or abrogate it or discredit it; He simply crowded it in on the human conscience until it left no room for mere intellectual approval or mere emotional response or mere verbal assent. Men were forced to put themselves, from the profoundest depth of human personality, in a different relationship to God, to themselves, to others—a change which revolutionized the total man, for better or for worse.

The doctrine of sanctification is an existential doctrine more profoundly than it can be said to be formal doctrine, and it must be existentially interpreted. He who professes this doctrine must, moreover, judge himself by this interpretation. He dare not measure himself and his progress in grace against too low a level of an understanding of Jesus' demands nor too complacent a satisfaction with

himself as a Christian. He must never underestimate the mystery of the grace of cleansing which the coming of the Holy Spirit provides, and he must testify to that grace with the deepest humility and thankfulness. But he must also be forever aware of the fact that sanctification is a radical life transformation, demanding moral alterations running inward to the deepest root of the human personality. Life commitments were contracted at the altar of consecration that cannot remain there at the altar, forgotten or neglected. God's grace is forfeited by persistently broken promises and failure to daily comply with existential interpretations of the doctrine of holiness that demanded our decision in the first place.

We are indebted to John Wesley for rediscovering and revitalizing the doctrine of perfection. The perfection which God demands, said he, is the perfection of love. Sanctification is perfect love. But what, we may ask, is perfect love? And we go back to Jesus to find the answer, as Wesley did.

The first of all the commandments is. Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength . . . the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:29-31).

Here in a few words is an existential interpretation of holiness that respects, yet cuts through all intellectual and creedal formulations and lays bare the human heart before its truth. When we say, "I love the Lord with all my heart," we have this standard by which to judge our sincerity, and it can be a very humbling experience.

These words of Jesus compel a correction to every low view of sanctification. First, it is a definition, with intellectual content in contrast to emotionalism and irrational systems. Love is a hard word to define. No New Testament writer attempts a formal, abstract definition of it. The reason is that love is never an abstraction. It cannot be defined apart from description or illustration, and that is precisely what Jesus does. And it cuts to the quick, just as Paul's description of love in I Corinthians 13 cuts to the quick. If it isn't lived, it is too hot to handle.

But secondly, the definition by way of intellectual content is so stated as to expose lack of sincerity and to force a genuine personal decision. An examination of the setting of the text shows that Jesus had been under attack from the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes. They had asked a number of trick questions in an attempt to trap Jesus. The question asked about the most important commandment was probably another trick question. Jesus answered as the text indicates—and "no man after that durst ask him any more questions." Why? Because He had trapped them by an existential interpretation of the law. It was no longer simply an intellectual game, but a deadly serious condemnation of moral failure, and they knew it. What mattered whether the commandments were correctly evaluated? Suddenly, corrections ceased to be an intellectual matter only, and became a matter of existential concern. Do I keep the commandments? Do I keep them in the way that I know they ought to be kept? These are always uncomfortable questions.

And thirdly, Jesus put this very personal relationship to the law at the very heart of religion. Here is obedience to God taken out of the

realm of mere duty or superficial moralism and put into the realm of love. It is life crowded to its outside limits with service. Here is not a compartmentalized life—church duties, home duties, personal rights—and sacred duties and secular duties,

with always a question as to where one ends and the other begins—but life lived in a prodigality of love for God and others that leaves no room for questions of religious legalism.

(To be continued)