

## DIFFERENT ROADS TO HOLINESS: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

*Robin Boisvert*

It's worth noting how different traditions in the Church's history have understood sanctification. In *Spiritual Companions: An Introduction to the Christian Classics*, Peter Toon identifies three different approaches to the pathway of holiness: Greek (Eastern), Medieval Western (Roman Catholic), and Protestant.

### GREEK

The Greek approach is known as deification—the imparting of the divine life into the soul from Christ through the Holy Spirit... Thus communion and union with God is the goal of salvation and is possible for human beings as they seek to lose their dependence upon the world and the flesh and are transfigured by the light of God's grace.<sup>1</sup>

This method can be seen in the early monastic movement. During the third century, the hermits of Egypt reacted against a moral laxity which had begun to creep into the Church. Two centuries before, the Church had been made up of Jewish and Gentile Christians whose ethical standards were quite high. But those standards began to fall as more and more people entered the Church. Add to this the deterioration of morals which accompanied the decline of the Roman Empire and one can see the problem. The world was fast becoming, in Hobbes' phrase, "nasty, brutish, and short." Not that the Church had necessarily lowered its standards. In fact, it was morally rigorous compared to today's Church. But the hermit saints left the crumbling Roman world to seek salvation in the desert.

In a sympathetic essay, Charles Kingsley describes the lives of these ascetics as consisting of

...celibacy, poverty, good deeds towards their fellow-men, self-restraint and sometimes self-torture of every kind, to atone (as far as might be) for the sins committed after baptism: and the mental food of [these] was continued meditation upon the vanity of the world, the sinfulness of the flesh, the glories of heaven, and the horrors of hell: but with these the old hermits combined—to do them justice—a personal faith in God, and a personal love for Christ, which those who sneer at them would do well to copy.<sup>2</sup>

To their credit, these hermits—including the great Antony—served to check the spread of worldliness among Christians, and they inspired many to a pursuit of holiness.

The extreme methods of self-denial used by some in this tradition are well documented. In the fifth century, Simon the Stylite (pillar-saint) spent the final thirty-six years of his life atop a pillar that was gradually lengthened until it reached a height of sixty feet. He was widely imitated, and actually carried on an influential ministry as a steady stream of pilgrims came to visit and enquire of him. He spawned a movement that spread from his own Antioch to "Georgia, Thrace, Macedonia, Greece and even Egypt... there were so many stylites by the seventh century, that they were treated as a special order of religion."<sup>3</sup> The singular point they made in confining themselves to these lofty perches was

the renunciation of the world. Had solitude been their main goal, they would certainly have discovered a way to attain that without making such spectacles of themselves.

In the centuries that followed, the monastic approach to the Christian life (whether solitary or communal) spread and was considered by many to be the ideal. What slowly emerged was a two-tiered view of Christianity. The multitudes were regarded as ordinary Christians, secular in nature, who lived in and interacted with the world. Then there were those who forsook all to become monks. If you really wanted to overcome sin, know God, and be holy, it was simply assumed you would adopt the monastic lifestyle.

Interestingly, early in my ministry, a young man from Egypt came to me for counsel. Tempted as most men are by impure thoughts and desires, he insisted that the only way for him to overcome sin would be to become a monk. Apparently the tradition runs deep. But in spite of the obvious excesses, monasticism's self-denial had two unquestionable benefits: it reminded people of their mortality and heightened an awareness of the world to come.

### **MEDIEVAL WESTERN**

The medieval Western approach [which has] continued in Roman Catholic thought, is that of the three ways—the purifying/cleansing of sin; the enlightening/illuminating of the mind; and the becoming one with God by grace.<sup>4</sup>

This is a rich tradition that spans the Church's history and has an enduring voice even among Protestant Evangelicals. Those familiar with the writings of A.W. Tozer will note the many references and allusions to such persons as Nicholas of Cusa, Bernard of Clairveaux, and John of the Cross. What stands out most in this mystical tradition is the ardent language of devotion to God and the desire for purity of heart. There is a passion for God expressed in these works that reveals a depth of longing and a richness of subjective experience. You can't read them without halting the frenetic activity that characterizes our busy lives so that you might listen to God in meditative silence. When I read works from this tradition I'm invariably led to examine my own heart toward God and repent of the shallowness I find there.

Yet despite these strengths, certain distinctives of this contemplative road to holiness ought to give us pause. Emphasis seems to be placed on seeking a direct knowledge of God. Christ's crucial role as mediator between us and the Father is generally not portrayed as clearly as it is in Scripture. In a critique of the medieval western tradition, John Calvin wrote that "Direct knowledge of God's essence is sought only by fools."<sup>5</sup>

Such strong language is warranted, argues Sinclair Ferguson, to safeguard the significance of Christ's atoning work. Ferguson writes,

While the contemplative tradition places much emphasis on Christ's humanity and passion as such, Reformed Christianity places central emphasis on the transaction which took place in the Incarnate Son of God bearing the judgment of his Holy Father against man's sin. Bypass this, it insists, and there is no access to, and therefore no real knowledge of, God.<sup>6</sup>

With these caveats in mind, there is much to be gained from study and meditation on the writings of this tradition.

## PROTESTANT

“The Protestant approach,” says Toon, “has centered on the relationship of justification and sanctification.”<sup>7</sup> It really wasn’t until the Protestant Reformation emphasized justification by grace that sanctification began to be viewed as something distinguishable from justification. But while the two doctrines are closely related, there is a great advantage in considering them separately.

How do justification and sanctification fit together? Within the Protestant framework, of course, there are a variety of views. A Lutheran perspective, for instance, sees sanctification merely as a sub-point under justification. Lutherans stress the need for a thorough understanding of justification by grace alone (seeing ourselves as God sees us) as the way to overcome sin and live in victory. Some Lutherans have been criticized for making the doctrine of justification appear more central to the Christian life than Jesus Christ.

Reformed theology points to our union with Christ as the basis for victory; it underscores the fact that he is the author and finisher of faith as well as the captain of our salvation. Because of Christ’s finished work and present intercession, we are able to mortify indwelling sin and stand against the temptations of the devil. This tradition would include not only Calvin, but also the English Puritans and their heirs.

John Wesley championed yet another position, teaching a doctrine of entire sanctification (not to be confused with total perfectionism) which stressed the experiential side of truth—not just the objective, propositional side. Anyone familiar with his conversion will understand the basis for his doctrine. None of the logical arguments for faith had seemed to help him. But when Wesley encountered the living God, all that changed. Arnold Dallimore quotes from Wesley’s *Journal*: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”<sup>8</sup>

Wesley’s teaching and the 18th-century Methodists in the United States generated the Holiness movement in the 19th century. Adherents of this view trusted that a direct, sanctifying experience with the Holy Spirit would impart victory subsequent to salvation. And when some in the Holiness movement received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, pentecostal holiness teaching had arrived, with its emphasis on speaking in tongues.

There are many other variations on the themes just presented, but these approaches form the main outline of the Church’s attempts to understand sanctification. Taken together, they illustrate the fact that not only do our minds long to be filled with truth about God so that we might obey him, but our hearts desire to experience his reality. While these traditions contain both truths to embrace and eccentricities to avoid, all of them have contributed something to the soul’s quest for holiness.

For a thorough and balanced perspective on approaches to sanctification throughout Church history, I recommend *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, edited by Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

## APPENDIX B

### THE OLD MAN AND THE FLESH

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Some of the terms which the apostle Paul uses in discussing the believer's relationship to sin can cause confusion. I'm speaking of terms such as "old man," "new man," "body of sin," "flesh," and others. These can be difficult to understand. Add to this the variations which modern translators have given these words and the subject can appear daunting.

We know a profound change has occurred in the life of the believer through conversion, but just how has the believer changed?

For we know that our *old self was crucified* with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (Ro 6:6-7, emphasis added)

Let's begin by trying to define our terms. "Old man" (as it is translated in the King James Version and American Standard Version) is equivalent to "old self" (New International Version, New American Standard). This term refers to the unregenerate life we lived before we were converted. As John R.W. Stott has written, the old self "denotes not our old unregenerate *nature* [flesh], but our old unregenerate life. Not my lower self, but my former self. So what was crucified with Christ was not a part of me called my 'old nature', but the whole of me as I was before I was converted."<sup>1</sup> John Murray's definition concurs: "'Old man' is a designation of the person in his unity as dominated by the flesh and sin."<sup>2</sup>

It's important for us to see that the believer is not at the same time an "old self" and a "new self," alternately dominated and directed by one or the other. We are indebted again to Murray's insight:

The old man is the unregenerate man; the new man is the regenerate man created in Christ Jesus unto good works. It is no more feasible to call the believer a new man and an old man, than it is to call him a regenerate man and an unregenerate. And neither is it warranted to speak of the believer as having in him the old man and the new man.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, terms like "old man," "old self," "unregenerate life," and "former self" are synonymous, all referring to the entity that was crucified with Christ.

Notice two significant grammatical features of the passage from Romans 6 cited above. First, the verb is used in the *past tense*: "our old self *was* crucified..." The crucifixion of the old self is a finished fact. Second, the verb is also *passive in voice*, meaning that the subject (our old self) is being acted upon. In other words, the crucifixion of the old self is not something we must do, but something that is done to us.

Another important concept in the biblical doctrine of sanctification has traditionally been designated by the word "flesh" (King James Version). The New International Version uses "sinful nature." According to Stott, "flesh" refers to a "lower" nature, that part of our being inclined toward rebellion against God. This is that part of you that wants to pass on a juicy bit of gossip; that urges you to take a second look at the

immodest images on the television screen. “Whatever we may call this tendency [“indwelling sin,”<sup>4</sup> “remnants of corruption,”<sup>5</sup> “vestiges of sin,”<sup>6</sup> or “my sinful nature”<sup>7</sup>] we must remember that even after we have been regenerated we still have such sinful impulses, and must still fight against them as long as we live.”<sup>8</sup>

In Romans 6:6 Paul calls our sinful nature (i.e. flesh) the “body of sin.” He says our old self was crucified with Christ so that this “body of sin might be done away with...” To be “done away with” here means to be put out of action, rendered powerless. It does *not* mean to be annihilated, gone without a trace. But our sinful nature’s mastery over us has been broken.

Some, not understanding the distinction between the “old self” and the “sinful nature” have gotten Romans 6:6 confused with Galatians 5:24, which also speaks of crucifixion and the believer. Consider two translations of this verse:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. (Gal 5:24 NIV)

And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. (Gal 5:24 KJV)

Though helpless to take anything but a passive stance in regard to the old self (Ro 6:6), we *do* have an active part to play, as the Galatians learned, in the subjugation of the flesh. Stott sums this up with characteristic clarity:

First, we have been crucified with Christ; but then we not only have decisively crucified (i.e. repudiated) the flesh with its passions and desires, but we take up our cross *daily* and follow Christ to crucifixion (Lk 9:23). The first is a legal death, a death to the penalty of sin; the second is a moral death, a death to the power of sin. The first belongs to the past, and is unique and unrepeatable: I died (in Christ) to sin once. The second belongs to the present, and is continuous and repeatable: I die (like Christ) to self daily. It is with the first of these two that Romans 6 is concerned.<sup>9</sup>

And Galatians 5 is concerned with the second.

So the old self has been dealt with. In its place we have been given a new self: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2Co 5:17). And while our sinful nature (the flesh, indwelling sin, etc.) is still very much with us, its dominion over us has ended.

## NOTES

### APPENDIX A – Different Roads to Holiness: An Historical Overview

1. Peter Toon, *Spiritual Companions: An Introduction to the Christian Classics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 5.
2. Charles Kingsley, “The Hermits” in *Cyclopedia of Religious Literature, Volume One* (New York, NY: John B. Alden, publisher, 1883), p. 19.
3. Peter Levi, *The Frontiers of Paradise: A Study of Monks and Monasteries* (New York, NY: Paragon House, 1987), p. 45.
4. Peter Toon, *Spiritual Companions*, pp. 5-6.
5. *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Donald L. Alexander, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 195.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
7. Peter Toon, *Spiritual Companions*, p. 6.
8. Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield, Volume One* (Westchester, England: Cornerstone Books, 1981), p. 186.

### APPENDIX B – The Old Man and the Flesh

1. John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1966, 1984), p. 45.
2. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 218, n. 7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
5. Westminster Confession, XIII,2
6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, MCMLX), III.iii.11.
7. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 56.
8. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 213.
9. John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New*, p. 46.