

WHERE DOES THE FREE METHODIST CHURCH STAND RE: ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION?

(An essay originally prepared for the course “Heart of Canadian Free Methodism”)

Doctrinal statements evolve over time (as the church wrestles to find adequate language -- usually to respond to issues where the church senses the need for clarification).

In 1947, the “Article of Religion” on Entire Sanctification reads as follows [how much earlier I do not know]:

Justified persons, while they do not outwardly commit sin, are nevertheless conscious of sin still remaining in the heart. They feel a natural tendency to evil, a proneness to depart from God and cleave to the things of earth. Those who are sanctified wholly are saved from all inward sin – from evil thoughts and evil tempers. No wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul. All their thoughts, word, and actions are governed by pure love.

Entire sanctification takes place subsequently to justification, and is the work of God wrought instantaneously upon the consecrated, believing soul. After a soul is cleansed from all sin, it is then fully prepared to grow in grace.

By 1960 it had evolved to:

Entire sanctification is that work of the Holy Spirit, subsequent to regeneration, by which fully consecrated believers, upon exercise of faith in the atoning blood of Christ, are cleansed in that moment from all inward sin and empowered for service. The resulting relationship is attested by the witness of the Holy Spirit and is maintained by obedience and faith. Entire sanctification enables the believer to love God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind, and his neighbor as himself, and prepares him for greater growth in grace.

Subsequently, wording changes were made to put “faith” before “obedience” and to remove masculine pronouns for believers, so that the Article now reads:

Entire sanctification is that work of the Holy Spirit, subsequent to regeneration, by which fully consecrated believers, upon exercise of faith in the atoning blood of Christ, are cleansed in that moment from all inward sin and empowered for service. The resulting relationship is attested by the witness of the Holy Spirit and is maintained by faith and obedience. Entire sanctification enables believers to love God with all their hearts, souls, strength, and minds, and their neighbors as themselves, and it prepares them for greater growth in grace.

In the years before the 1985 General Conference, various Free Methodist leaders were arguing that the Article was unduly shaped by the emphases on one particular, identifiable “crisis” rather than on a more historic balancing of process and crisis. The Study Commission on Doctrine tried to discern whether the best answer for the church would be to recommend changing the Article (which change, because it is in the Constitution, would then have had to be presented to all the Annual Conferences and General Conferences around the world).

The Study Commission on Doctrine’s sense was that it would be wiser to leave the Article as is and to ask the North American General Conference to adopt an interpretive statement which would help to clarify the trajectories along which the Article ought to be understood. The following recommendation was adopted by the 1985 North American General Conference (thus making it the approved way of understanding the Article). [Note: At that time, the Canadian Conferences were part of the North American General Conference.]

Where Do We Stand 2

Thus the 'approved' or 'official' way of understanding the Article of Religion on Entire Sanctification became (in 1985):

Some persons err in their interpretation of this doctrine. We counsel the avoidance of the following emphases:

- 1. Presenting holiness as a sectarian distinctive rather than God's grand design for every Christian.**
- 2. Describing entire sanctification as static (a state of religious achievement) rather than as dynamic (a living relationship with God), through Christ, by the aid of the Holy Spirit.)**
- 3. Viewing the experience of entire sanctification as an end in itself rather than as a means to a greater end, namely, a living holy walk with God.**
- 4. Conceiving entire sanctification as a single dramatic emotional event rather than a continuing experience.**
- 5. Defining holiness in terms of rules ("holiness standards") rather than heart attitudes (love, faith, joy, and obedience).**
- 6. Claiming holiness as a private experience or blessing without reference to either the body of believers or the non-Christian world.**
- 7. Placing emphasis on human achievement (which leads to the sin of legalism) rather than on the grace of God.**

Article XIII [currently in The Manual, ¶119] specifically describes entire sanctification. This needs to be understood against the broader doctrine of sanctification. The following points therefore should always be kept in view:

- 1. All of the life-changing aspects of growth into Christlikeness are part of the divine process of sanctification in the believer's life.**
- 2. Entire sanctification is a significant event in this process.**
- 3. Subsequent to entire sanctification, the process of sanctification continues, enhanced by new dimensions of holy love in our relationship with God and our fellow men. The ultimate evidence of the sanctified life is the quality of the believer's present relationships with God and men.**

After this report was adopted, the Free Methodist Church in Canada became its own General Conference in 1990. A restatement of this Article of Religion is currently being considered by the World Conference of the Free Methodist Church.

Where Do We Stand 3

However, the Free Methodist Church in the United States has continued to wrestle with how to present this great truth in ways that are faithful to scripture and our Wesleyan heritage. In 1999, their Study Commission on Doctrine presented the following report, which is helpful in understanding a more contemporary explanation of the doctrine.

HOLINESS

Every faith community, sustained by a living tradition, must periodically reformulate that tradition for the sake of its members. New generations and changed circumstances call for a fresh articulation of the community's core values. The Free Methodist Church (FMC) now finds itself in need of reformulating its understanding of, and passion for, holiness.

How to understand and promote holy living has been a recurring concern of the church at all levels. Between the General Conferences of 1979 and 1989 the Study Commission on Doctrine initiated a fresh inquiry into holiness. More than forty papers were received and discussed from scholars within the FMC as well as the larger Wesleyan movement. These papers covered a range of concerns including: the biblical and theological meaning of key holiness terms (e.g., to sanctify or make holy and related terms, sin, perfection); the exegesis of traditional holiness texts; the implications of developmental theory for holiness theology and experience; the preaching of holiness in non-Western cultures; and John Wesley's view of holiness and its development in the American holiness movement.

The Study Commission on Doctrine (SCOD) considered these papers and, in the course of time, commissioned Bishop Emeritus Elmer Parsons to prepare the paper "Living the Holy Life Today." This paper became a part of SCOD's report to the 1989 General Conference, was warmly received, and subsequently published in pamphlet form for distribution throughout the church. Living the Holy Life Today provides an excellent account of our holiness heritage and continues to serve the church well. Yet the passage of time suggests the appropriateness of another treatment of this theme.

Since the publication of Living the Holy Life Today, SCOD has proposed, and the General Conference of 1995 has adopted, a different approach to membership in the FMC. This new approach to membership also signals the advisability of a fresh articulation of our holiness message, for several reasons.

First, we have identified holiness as "the great commandment of our community" and we urge our members to "call on God for a renewed and clear vision of holiness that brings the presence of God near to the people of our time" (Discipline, ¶352.1). While this "call" assumes the form of a petition anticipating God's response, SCOD rightly views its service to the church as one of the ways God may answer this petition.

Second, we have formulated our membership procedures with a view to a Wesleyan *Ordo Salutis* or process of God's saving work in human life. We seek to encourage people to join us on "the way of holiness." Now, some guidance for the journey, describing the way and resourcing the journey, would seem a natural and helpful next step.

Third, our membership procedures envision a corporate ethos that welcomes sinners and embraces them in redemptive and transforming fellowship, leading to a holy life. The change of ethos we envision will be clarified and encouraged by revisiting and reformulating our holiness teaching.

Thus, our newly revised membership procedures suggest a fresh articulation. The current state of holiness theology and experience among our people suggest it as well. Our traditional approaches, as popularly understood, have focused too much on human experience, especially on issues of life style and conduct that have been historically and culturally important to us, and not enough on Scriptural portrayals of holiness. Consequently, in some quarters holiness teaching has contributed to a legalistic view of Christian life, precisely the view we hope to correct by a different approach to membership. In addition, we have also focused too much on the mechanics of holiness (i.e., our two step formula, placing most of the emphasis on moving toward and experiencing "the second definite work") and not enough on the meaning of holiness. Consequently, holiness teaching has contributed to a mechanical and static view of Christian life, which is another view we hope to correct through revised membership procedures.

Regrettably, perceptions of our holiness message have made holiness out of favor among us. Many -- pastors and lay people -- will say they don't understand it, our explanations don't make sense, or it doesn't work. David KcKenna notes, "In an unpublished study reported at the 1984 annual convention of the Christian Holiness Association, the survey results showed that a high percentage of people in holiness churches did not understand or experience the flagship doctrine of entire sanctification. Another high percentage of colleges in the holiness tradition did not teach the doctrine and a still higher percentage of the young did not understand, experience or accept the doctrine" (*A Future With A History*, Light and Life Communications, 1997, pp. 64-65).

All of these factors -- the passing of time, new membership procedures, the current state of holiness understanding and practice among us, and the tragic presence of unholiness all around us -- call us to help our people understand the heart of Scripture's call to the holy life and give guidance along the way on which we expect them to walk.

Therefore, we offer the church the following essay, "The Holiness We Pursue," written for SCOD by David Kendall. In offering this essay to the church we draw particular attention to four features of our holiness message.

[Note: Subsequently Kendall's work was published as his book, *God's Call to Be Like Jesus: Living a Holy Life in an Unholy World* (Light and Life Communications, 1999).

The Holiness We Pursue

First, we seek to give a simple and straightforward account of the essence of holiness which Free Methodists pursue. In providing an account of our "vision," we encourage our people to affirm the biblical character of holiness and to make this vision the basis for their everyday lives. In doing so our confidence is this: As we seek the God who shares this vision with us, He will do His gracious work in our lives.

Second, we present the pursuit of holiness within a Wesleyan understanding of the process of salvation. In that understanding, holiness is not an "add-on" to our faith, an option we may choose to supplement "the basic package." Rather, from the very beginning, our spiritual awakening, God works to make us holy. We are drawn to participate in a relationship that is dynamic, not to reach a "state" or even to climb a spiritual ladder from one stage to another.

Third, we affirm that the nature of Wesleyan theology and the biblical vision of holy living make process the primary or foundational reality of Christian living. Crisis, though indispensable, is subordinate to process. The *Ordo* makes this clear -- it begins not simply with crisis, but with the initiation of a process -- awakening and movement toward God. Within the *Ordo*, in fact, even the crisis of conversion (justification, regeneration, initial sanctification), though absolutely essential, is subordinate to the process. Grace is not irresistible, and human responsibility continues throughout the believer's life. Conversion therefore leads to dynamic relationship, or it is not true conversion. If conversion as a crisis is subordinate to an overall process, then certainly the crisis of entire sanctification is as well.

To assert the primacy of process over crisis does not minimize the significance of crisis. Rather, it clarifies its context and guards us against a static, and non-Wesleyan view of Christian life. Crisis experiences can be found everywhere throughout the Bible and are therefore to be expected. Furthermore, human nature is such that moral and spiritual development almost always requires crisis. The biblical record and human experience therefore alert us to anticipate the key role of crisis within the life-long process of developing and deepening a holy character and lifestyle.

Fourth, we underscore the comprehensive nature of holy living. Our pursuit and experience of holiness relates to all facets of biblical Christianity. Two of these facets merit particular concern. The first is the connection between holy living and the church as the community of God's people. Only when the community of faith serves individual Christians as a lively and powerful resource may we expect holy living to thrive. The Wesleyan affirmation that there is no holiness other than social holiness leads us to conclude that people do not and cannot become biblically holy as mere individuals. The community helps inform our understanding of holiness and supports us on the way of holiness. Likewise, the community must hold us accountable to our aspirations for holiness. We have succumbed to the individualism of our culture at this point, to the peril of our souls.

A second crucial connection is that between holiness and mission or ministry. The Spirit of God indwells the holy people of God and empowers them both to be like Jesus and to do the work of Jesus. Our aspirations for holiness must lead us to join together in loving God and neighbor and in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Here is David Kendall's summary "vision" of what the holy life would look like today (from God's Call to Be Like Jesus: Living a Holy Life in an Unholy World (Light and Life Communications, 1999), pp. 188-189.

"God is at work to create the community we need . . . a new generation of Christians:

- people overwhelmed by who God shows Himself to be in Jesus, barely able to believe how deeply God loves them and unable to help but love him in return;**
- people whose sense of God's undeserved forgiveness prompts a reflex response back to God and to others who deserve God's love no more than they do and to whom it is no less offered;**
- people who, therefore, hunger and thirst for more of God and whose appetite God satisfies;**
- people who find themselves by losing themselves in Jesus, who now find themselves oriented to God, others, and self the way Jesus was;**
- people whose dependence on God leads them to value and depend on the family God gives them in Jesus, who discover how deeply they need this family to continue following Jesus--even when it means costly sacrifice, service, and suffering in order to do what Jesus would do;**
- people who know they could never be or do as God calls them, and yet they are and they do, because God empowers them by his Spirit;**
- people whose former brokenness is clearly on the mend, whose relationships reveal a beauty and attractiveness that many of the love-starved and sin-stained folk around them will find irresistible.**

It seems right to think that among such people as these, consumer-oriented Christians stand a good chance of seeing how trivial their pursuits are when compared to following Jesus. Some of them may grow passionate about being all God calls them to be, and begin having the time of their lives.

It also seems right to think that among such holy people, the broken, addicted, and deceived of our world will see the true way of life with its promise of healing, freedom, and peace. And, no doubt, some of them will become brand new persons!