

SANCTIFICATION

WHAT THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BELIEVES

The Evangelical Congregational Church in its Articles of Faith takes the position that everyone who is in Christ is called to the realization of Christian perfection. Drawn from its historic doctrinal relationship with John Wesley and his theological heirs, Jacob Albright, John Seybert, and others, Article eleven of the E.C. Church states:

Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is a state of righteousness and true holiness, which every regenerate believer may attain. It consists in being cleansed from all sin, loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. This gracious state of perfect love is attainable in this life by faith, both gradually and instantaneously, and should be earnestly sought by every child of God. But it does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance and mistakes which are common to man.

When we read this article by itself we miss an important part of the divine order of salvation which is found in Article nine on regeneration.

Regeneration is that work of the Holy Spirit wrought in us whereby we are made partakers of the divine nature, and experience newness of life in Christ Jesus. By this new birth, the believer becomes a child of God, receives the spirit of adoption, and is made an heir of the kingdom of heaven.

The emphasis on the work of the divine Trinity in salvation must be recognized in the doctrine of sanctification. Sanctification is not a human effort, but is realized in the grace of God through which we commit ourselves in total love to God.

THE ARTICLE IS SUMMARIZED

The article on sanctification focuses upon human response and responsibility *toward* God. It stresses attainment of the state of righteousness. Sanctification is set forth both in terms of (1) deliverance from the pollution of sin ("cleansed from all sin") and (2) the wholeness of love filling our lives ("loving god with all the heart..."). The Articles notes the time in which sanctification is attainable ("in this life"), and the process of perfect love ("gradually and instantaneously"). And finally it recognizes that human limitations will always be evident in the life of those whose love is perfected.

A DIVINE WORK

Perfect love is a gift of grace, to be sought by the believer, and received by faith. God wills that His people be holy. Entire sanctification is possible for those who are born again and who live in a growing relationship of faith and love toward God. The "babes in Christ" (the infant Christians) are called by St. Paul to move away from their "fleshly" (as opposed to "spiritual") interests toward spiritual maturity (1 Corinthians 3). This is what the E.C. Church believes.

The belief that born-again believers are sanctified in an initial (or beginning) sense is taught by St. Paul (and is an important part of the E.C. heritage). The Corinthians are called saints or sanctified (1 Cor. 1:8). yet they are fleshly in their affections (1 Cor. 3:1-3). The spiritual mind of Christ (1 Cor.

2:14-16) was not the controlling or dominant factor in their lives. In the lives of many Christians this immaturity is characteristic, frequently in new Christians but also with those who received Christ months or years ago. Uninformed concerning the biblical call to perfect love, they live in the infancy and immaturity of "babes in Christ."

The E.C. Church believes that the tendency toward sin remains in the life of the believer after the new birth. Therefore it is not surprising that Christians often are immature for so much of their lives. Yet, farther, the Church believes that it is possible to be cleansed from all sin and filled with love. It is not necessary for the people of God to remain at the level of infants. We miss the benefits which God has promised to His servants because we fail to live in the power of perfect love.

THE HUMAN RESPONSE

Once we sustain the position that God - Father, Son and Spirit - is the source of sanctification, our attention must turn to the expected human response. Salvation, the gracious gift of God, is never pressed upon us apart from our personal choice. God has given us the possibility of free decision. This free choice is as important in sanctification as it is in the new birth. To love God with a total love is not a one-sided decision. It requires a conscious act of the will on our part. We are disciples, not robots.

The E.C. Church stresses entire sanctification, not as an "unreachable star", but as a mature righteousness which every Christian may attain. As a "state" it means that "true holiness" is a purity of life or a single-minded commitment to love God which is possible in this life. To say that it is "reached" means that the believer opens himself to all of God, that is, the fullness of love, by an unconditional dedication. We place no conditions on our love for God. This commitment of all that a person is or may become is possible only for the regenerate believer. The penitent sinner surrenders and ceases from rebellion, while the child of God offers himself to God in love. If it can be said that the repentant sinner experiences a full surrender to God, the child of God may come to realize the fullness of love. The question is not whether the regenerated believer loves God. It is whether he will love the Father with his entire love, nothing reserved. Such love is possible only through the Holy Spirit's activity in us.

To say that a "state" is attained does not imply that the Christian is now a finished product. It is *part of a whole* product just as adolescence is a state (and a stage) of whole life process. The Church is right to speak of a state attained but that means that a specific stage of the journey has been reached, not arrival at the end.

RIGHTEOUSNESS GIVEN BY GOD

The righteousness which is experienced in sanctification is not a special kind of righteousness. It is always the righteousness of Christ which is realized in our total relationship to Christ. Nevertheless, when perfect love fills the heart the relationship to Christ is marked by a release from the sinful mind (or, will) which marks the whole human race. This righteousness is not a possession which we have stored up independent of Christ. The relationship is always the organic relationship of vine and branch (John 15). Separated from the life of Christ we are only unrighteous.

What is the difference between the righteousness of the regenerate believer and the righteousness of those who have experienced entire sanctification? In the new birth we receive the Holy Spirit in His undivided power. God's righteousness is never incomplete. Prior to conversion, humanity stands before God in a state of rebellion, seeking fulfillment in self-centeredness. The new birth creates a right relation with God, but the new believer is not spiritually mature. He is an infant, ordinarily attuned to the pattern of self-seeking. This hinders him from realizing the divine fullness, the wholeness of love; that is, loving God and his neighbor completely. In conversion we receive all of

God, but He does not possess all of us. We are not spiritually complete because we have not made the consecration of love. Prior to our adoption as children of God we have no basis for understanding Christ's call to perfect love. In our new life in Christ that changes. Usually this change is gradual, but in time we can receive the consciousness of the total claim of Christ upon our lives. At that point we come to the fullness of love. Although the Father is patient with our immaturity and concerned because we are still turned inward toward ourselves, He seeks always to bring us to perfect love. If we do not will to love God wholly, then we cannot know the meaning of entire sanctification.

Why does not the gracious and mighty God completely heal and restore His likeness in Christians who have received the new birth? The answer is found in part in the lessons of Christian discipleship. The disciple learns obedience, takes up his cross, struggles and matures. The struggle never saves or justifies him. It simply demonstrates the intensity of his participation in the fight of faith. Those who wait for some divine energy to make up for their lack of discipline, remain in the state of infancy.

Another part of the answer is found in the element of preparedness for this state of Christian life. Those who come to Christ have always sought to live out of their selfish resources. The typical new Christian - the babe in Christ - is a new creature, but a weak saint. Although his peace is sure (Romans 5:10, and his joy may be strong, his grasp of the divine expectation of complete love is ordinarily fragile (God's grasp on him is not fragile). Knowing the "*washing of regeneration*" and the "*renewing of the Holy Spirit*" (Titus 3:5-8), or, in other words, being sanctified at the level of the infant (I Corinthians 1:8, 3:1-3), God now begins to call to a full conformity to the image of God, that is, a mature commitment to God in love.

THE TIME

The time for appropriating this fullness of God is "in this life". The discipline of holy living is never simple or easy. It is never easy for man to totally sacrifice himself to God (as taught in Romans 12:1-2). Some persons will quickly realize the right of the divine will over their lives and will open themselves to the perfection of love, which is to love God with all their hearts and their neighbor as themselves (Matthew 22:37-39). Others will struggle longer over the powerful claims of God upon their lives and find the way more difficult to follow. Some teaching which are prevalent in Christian churches will lead some to conclude that sin is so persistent in life that there is no hope for freedom from sin until the time of death. In that belief one can scarcely look for the perfect love which is promised to Christ's disciples.

As the Christian disciple learns obedience and grows in Christian faith and love, a time will come when he reaches a crucial place of dedication to God. Now he faces the challenge of perfect love, a commitment as significant as the experience of the new birth. The question is whether he will love God fully or not?

The "crisis of love" describes our specific intention to give full obedience to Christ's commandments. Obedient love is a life-long challenge and response. While there are daily decisions or crises in every life which test our commitment, there will be that one comprehensive consecration which gives all of these separate moments their unity. Otherwise, the Christian life is in continual flux. When we are born again the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). That divine love calls for the response of love from us. In both a gradual and an instantaneous sense this response of love answers to God's love in full dedication. Sanctification *is* gradual. This is the process of discipleship. It is also instantaneous; when God's full will is chosen and we are made whole in God's love.

That there are many crises in the Christian life is obvious. However, the nature of discipleship suggests the attainment of a specific commitment which shapes every subsequent choice. Like

marriage, this decision must be nurtured; it must face testing as long as earthly life lasts.

Nothing in this discussion should suggest or imply that there needs to be a great gap in time between the crisis of the new birth and the crisis of unreserved love; between the act of surrender to God and the act of consecration. Usually it is our consciousness of the more intensive claims of sonship which is deficient. However, that is our lack of insight, or our spiritual immaturity. It may be that we have not learned from the preaching and teaching of the Word that God calls us to go onward to the promise of total love. Whatever the problem, God claims our whole lives for himself. Now it is our decision.

HUMAN LIMITATION

Finally, we notice what the E.C. Church declares concerning human limitations. The perfection of love does not imply any perfection of human action. While it is easy to excuse our sins as an extension of our humanity, we must not make another mistake in considering every limitation to be sin. To do this is to short circuit the work of Christ in us, deterring the process which leads to sanctification, since even human failure, however, like stumbling over my own adverb, not itself sinful, may do damage or wrong to someone. Performed unintentionally, these mistakes still produce hurt or pain. In such a situation I am called upon to seek the forgiveness of the one who has been harmed. Although my intentions are shaped by love, I have not been successful in perfectly expressing that love in a particular situation. The human infirmities have not changed the fact of love, but these weaknesses demonstrate that no Christian has reached the perfect *expression* of the love principle which rules in his life. As long as we live, the gulf remains between intention and execution (carrying out the intention). This need not result in discouragement. As St. Paul expressed it: *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us"* (II Corinthians 4:7).