The Making of a Saint

by A. J. Gordon, D.D.

For centuries the Roman Catholic Church has been building up an exclusive confraternity known as saints, whose function is to mediate on behalf of the faithful on this earth. These saints, according to church procedure, must already have departed this life and subsequent miracles must have been attributable to their intervention before they could be considered for elevation, beatification, and eventual canonization.

Often, fanatical, even ludicrous, miracles and revelations have been ascribed to individuals long since forgotten, thus setting in motion the slow wheels of ecclesiastical sanctification. The evangelical concept of sainthood stands in complete contrast to this arbitrary formula. According to the Scriptures, sainthood, or holiness, is achieved in this life, on this earth, reaching its complete fulfillment at the second coming of Christ, “when this mortal must put on immortality.” The only instrumentality for conferring or imparting this coveted blessing is the Holy Spirit, sent as Christ’s Ambassador till His return to gather His saints home.

The following message by Dr. Gordon, eminent nineteenth century Bible scholar, is timely for both Protestants and Catholics, especially in view of recent attempts to increase the Roman Church’s roster of so-called saints by the addition of the American Indian girl.

“According to the Spirit of holiness” Christ “was declared to be the Son of God in power by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4). How striking the antithesis between our Lord’s two natures, as revealed in this passage, Son of David as to the flesh, Son of God as to the Spirit. And “as he is so are we in this world.”

We who are regenerate have two natures, the one derived from Adam, the other derived from Christ, and our sanctification consists in the double process of mortification and vivification, the deadening and subduing of the old and the quickening and developing of the new. In other words, what was wrought in Christ who was “put to death in the flesh but quickened in the spirit” is wrought in us through the constant operation of the Holy Ghost, and thus the cross and the resurrection extend their sway over the entire life of the Christian. Consider these two experiences.

Mortification is not asceticism. It is not a self-inflicted compunction, but a Christ-inflicted crucifixion. Our Lord was done with
the cross when on Calvary he cried: “It is finished.” But where he ended each disciple must begin: “If any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:24, 25).

These words, so constantly repeated in one form or another by our Lord, make it clear that the death-principle must be realized within us in order that the life-principle may have final and triumphant sway. It is to this truth which every disciple is solemnly committed in his baptism: “Know ye not that so many of us as were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3, 4).

Baptism is the monogram of the Christian; by it every believer is sealed and certified as a participant in the death and life of Christ; and the Holy Spirit has been given to be the Executor of the contract thus made at the symbolic grave of Christ.

THE THREE DEATHS

In considering the great fact of the believer’s death in Christ to sin and the law, we must not confound what the Scriptures clearly distinguish. There are three deaths in which we have part:

1. Death in sin, our natural condition.
2. Death for sin, our judicial condition.
3. Death to sin, our sanctified condition.

1. Death in sin. “And you ... who were dead in trespasses and sins,” “And you being dead in your sins” (Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13). This is the condition in which we are by nature, as participants in the fall and ruin into which the transgression of our first parents has plunged the race. It is a condition in which we are under moral insensibility to the claims of God’s holiness and love; and under the sentence of eternal punishment from the law which we have broken. In this state of death in sin Christ found the whole world when he came to be our Saviour.

2. Death for sin. “Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ” (Rom. 7:4). This is the condition into which Christ brought us by his sacrifice upon the cross. He endured the sentence of a violated law on our behalf, and therefore we are counted as having endured it in him. What he did for us is reckoned as having been done by us: “Because we thus judge, that one died for all, therefore all died” (II Cor. 5:14, R.V.). Being one with Christ through faith, we are identified with him on the cross: “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20, R.V.). This condition of death for sin having been effected for us by our Saviour, we are held legally or judicially free from the penalty of a violated law, if by our personal faith we will consent to the transaction.

3. Death to sin. “Even so reckon ye also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11, R.V.). This is the condition of making true in ourselves what is already true for us in Christ, of rendering practical what is now judicial; in other words, of being dead to the power of sin in ourselves, as we are already dead to the penalty of sin through Jesus Christ.

As it is written in the Epistle to the Colossians: “For ye died ... make dead practically—therefore your members which are upon the earth” (Col. 3:2, 5, R.V.). It is this condition which the Holy Spirit is constantly effecting in us if we will have it so. “If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body ye shall live” (Rom. 8:13). This is not self-deadening, as the Revised Version seems to suggest by its decapitalizing of the word “Spirit.” Self is not powerful enough to conquer self, the human spirit to get the victory over the human flesh. That were like a drowning man with his right hand laying hold on his left hand, only that both may sink beneath the waves. “Old Adam is too strong for young Melanethon,” said the Reformer.

It is the Spirit of God overcoming our fleshly nature by his indwelling life, on whom is our sole dependence. Our principal care therefore must be to “walk in the Spirit” and “be filled with the Spirit,” and all the rest will come spontaneously and inevitably. As the ascending sap in the tree crowds off the dead leaves which in spite of storm and frost cling to the branches all winter long, so does the Holy Ghost within us, when allowed full sway, subdue and expel the remnants of our sinful nature.

THE SOURCE OF LIFE AND LOVE

One cannot fail to see that asceticism is an absolute inversion of the Divine order, since it seeks life through death instead of finding death through life. No degree of mortification can ever bring us to sanctification. We are to “put off the old man with his deeds.” But how? By “putting on the new man who is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.” “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2), writes Paul.

It is a pointed statement of the case which one makes in describing the transition from the old to the new in his own experience, from the former life of perpetual defeat to the present life of victory through Christ. “Once it was a constant breaking off, now it is a daily bringing in,” he says. That is, the former striving was directed to being rid of the inveterate habits and evil tendencies of the old nature—its selfishness, its pride, its lust, and its vanity. Now the effort is to bring in the Spirit, to drink in his divine presence, to breathe, as a holy atmosphere, his supernatural life.

The indwelling of the Spirit can alone effect the exclusion of
sin. This will appear if we consider what has been called "the expulsive power of a new affection." "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world," says the Scripture. But all experience proves that loving not is only possible through loving, the worldly affection being overcome by the heavenly.

A N D W E F I N D T H I S M E T H O D clearly exhibited in the word. "The love of the Spirit" (Rom. 15:30) is given us for overcoming the world. The divine life is the source of the divine love. Therefore "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Because we are by nature so wholly without heavenly affection, God, through the indwelling Spirit, gives us our own love with which to love himself. Herein is the highest credential of discipleship: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

As Christ manifested to the world the love of the Father, so are we to manifest the love of Christ—a manifestation, however, which is only possible because of our possession of a common life. As one has truly said concerning our Saviour's command to his disciples to love one another: "It is a command which would be utterly idle and futile were it not that he, the ever-loving One, is willing to put his own love within me. The command is really no more than to be a branch of the true vine. I am to cease from my own living and loving, and yield myself to the expression of Christ's love."

THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST

And what is true of the love of Christ is true of the likeness of Christ. How is the likeness acquired? Through contemplation and imitation? So some have taught. And it is true, if only the indwelling Spirit is behind all, beneath all, and effectually operative in all. As it is written: "But we all with unveiled face, reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord, the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:18, R.V.). It is only the Spirit of the Lord dwelling within us that can fashion us to the image of the Lord set before us.

Who is sufficient by external imitation of Christ to become conformed to the likeness of Christ? Imagine one without genius and devoid of the artist's training sitting down before Raphael's famous picture of the Transfiguration and attempting to reproduce it. How crude and mechanical and lifeless his work would be! But if such a thing were possible that the spirit of Raphael should enter into the man and obtain the mastery of his mind and eye and hand, it would be entirely possible that he should paint this masterpiece; for it would simply be Raphael reproducing Raphael.

And this in a mystery is what is true of the disciple filled with the Holy Ghost. Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God," is set before him as his divine pattern, and Christ by the Spirit dwells within him as a divine life, and Christ is able to image forth Christ from the interior life to the outward example.

O F C O U R S E likeness to Christ is but another name for holiness, and when, at the resurrection, we awake satisfied with his likeness (Ps. 17:15), we shall be perfected in holiness. This is simply saying that sanctification is progressive and not, like conversion, instantaneous. And yet we must admit the force of what a devout and thoughtful writer says as to the danger of regarding it as only a gradual growth.

If a Christian looks upon himself as "a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth his fruit in his season," he judges rightly. But to conclude therefore that his growth will be as irresistible as that of the tree, coming as a matter of course simply because he has by regeneration been planted in Christ, is a grave mistake. The disciple is required to be consciously and intelligently active in his own growth, as a tree is not, "to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure." And when we say "active" we do not mean self-active merely, for "which of you by being anxious can add one cubit unto his stature?" asks Jesus (Matt. 6:27, R.V.).

But we must surrender ourselves to the divine action by living in the Spirit and praying in the Spirit and walking in the Spirit, all of which conditions are as essential to our development in holiness, as the rain and the sunshine are to the growth of the oak. It is possible that through a neglect and grieving of the Spirit a Christian may be of smaller stature in his age than he was in his spiritual infancy, his progress being a retrogression rather than an advance. Therefore in saying that sanctification is progressive let us beware of concluding that it is inevitable.

THE WAY TO HOLINESS

Moreover, as candid inquirers, we must ask what of truth and of error there may be in the doctrine of "instantaneous sanctification," which many devout persons teach and profess to have proved. If the conception is that of a state of sinless perfection into which the believer has been suddenly lifted and of deliverance from a sinful nature which has been suddenly eradicated, we must consider this doctrine as dangerously untrue. But we do consider it possible that one may experience a great crisis in his spiritual life, in which there is such a total self-surrender to God and such an infilling of the Holy Spirit, that he is freed from the bondage of sinful appetites and habits, and enabled to have constant victory over self, instead of suffering constant defeat. In saying this, what more do we affirm than is taught in that scripture: "Walk in the

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Spirit and ye shall not fulfill the last of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

Divine truth as revealed in Scripture seems often to lie bet-

between two extremes. It is emphatically so in regard to this

question. What a paradox it is that side by side in the Epistle of

John we should have the strongest affirmation of the Christ-

ian's sinfulness: “If we say that we have no sin we deceiv-

eth ourselves, and the truth is not in us”; and the strongest

affirmation of his sinlessness: "Whosoever is born of God doth

not commit sin, for his seed remaineth in him, and he cannot

sin because he is born of God” (I John 1:8; 3:9).

Now here'sa means a dividing or choosing, and almost all of

the gravest errors have arisen from adopting some extreme state-

ment of Scripture to the rejection of the other extreme. If we re-

gard the doctrine of sinless perfection as a heresy, we regard con-

tentment with sinful imperfection as a greater heresy. And we gravely

fear that many Christians make the apostle's words, "If we say

we have no sin we deceive ourselves," the unconscious justifica-

tion for a low standard of Christian living.

It were almost better for one to overstate the possibilities of

sanctification in his eager grasp after holiness, than to understa-

te them in his complacent satisfac-

tion with a traditional unholi-

ness. Certainly it is not an edify-

ing spectacle to see a Christian worldling throwing stones at a

Christian perfectionist.

SINLESS IN CHRIST

What then would be a true state-

ment of the doctrine which we are considering, one which

would embrace both extremes of state-

ment as they appear in the

Epistle of John? Sinful in self, sinless in Christ—is our answer:

"In him is no sin; whosoever abideth in him sinneth not" (I

John 3:5, 6). If through the communica-

tion of the Holy Spirit the life of Christ is constantly

imparted to us, that life will

prevail within us. That life is

absolutely sinless, as incapable of

defilement as the sunbeam which

has its fount and origin in the

sun.

In proportion to the closeness of

our abiding in him will be the

completeness of our deliverance

from sinning. And we doubt not

that there are Christians who

have yielded themselves to God

in such absolute surrender, and

who through the upholding

power of the Spirit have been so

kept in that condition of sur-

render, that sin has not had

dominion over them. If in them

the war between the flesh and the

spirit has not been forever ended,

there has been present victory in

which troublesome sins have

cleared from their assaults, and

"the peace of God" has ruled in

the heart . . .

For the new-born man to do

evil is to transgress the law of his

nature as before it was to obey it.

In a word, before our

regeneration we lived in sin and

loved it; since our regeneration

we may lapse into sin but we loathe it.

Only let us gladly emphasize this

fact, that as we inherit from

Adam a nature incapable of sin-

lessness, we inherit from Christ

a nature incapable of sinfulness.

Therefore, it is written: "Whoso-

ever is born of God cannot sin, for his seed remaineth in him."

Diligently in His service,

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