

knowledge or ability. The intent of the heart is what he was most concerned with. He also believed that it was possible for each Christian to experience this perfection. He reasoned that it must be so, since God would not command something that is impossible for us to accomplish (“Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect”).

The goal of holiness is not something limited to a sphere of personal spirituality; it does not consist in observing certain devotional exercises and avoiding specific activities, though both of these are surely helpful. There is a social and interpersonal dimension to true holiness. John Wesley said that there is no holiness but social holiness, by which he meant that true love for God cannot do other than to love the neighbor—not in word only, but in deed. We cannot love God, whom we have not seen, and fail to love the brother whom we have seen (1 John 4:7-21).

There has been much discussion and disagreement about when a person is totally sanctified in the moral sense. Even John’s brother Charles disagreed with him over this issue; John believed it was to be expected in this life, while Charles expected it in the moment of death. Later, in 19th century America, the Holiness Movement arose, which took Wesley’s idea of entire sanctification and proclaimed the state as an instantaneous product of faith. The Evangelical Congregational Church has its roots in a Wesleyan inspired work of God in America which began before the Holiness Movement, yet was impacted by it.

Sanctification and the Christian Life in Community

What is all too often overlooked in this discussion is the “how” of the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work in the lives of believers. In spite of the disagreement between John and Charles Wesley over the “when” of perfection, they worked side by side to discern the means by which it could be pursued. They developed a system of accountability by which believers worked together to spur one another toward honest self assessment and mutual encouragement. This included large group meetings for teaching and encouragement, smaller

groups for direct accountability, and still smaller, very intimate meetings for searching the depths of the heart. The structure of the system is certainly open to change as times and circumstances may suggest; the purpose behind it remains sound.

All Christians acknowledge that growing in faith is important. What an emphasis on sanctification puts in front of us is a goal for that growth and a way of measuring our progress toward it. That is, it provides is a way of following the New Testament directives to work with one another within the church body to achieve the goal set before us. It is not the defining of the correct timing of our sanctification that is most important, as though we need to resolve all such controversy before setting out on the path. Instead, it is the engaging of ourselves fully in the mutual encouragement and accountability that leads us toward Christ-likeness. The fruit of this pursuit will be evidence to all that God is indeed at work within us, among us, and through us.

The first Core Value of the Evangelical Congregational Church speaks of commitment to the Word of God, prayer, and the pursuit of holiness. The position regarding sanctification is offered as an explanation of what this pursuit looks like, where it is anchored (the Bible) and how it is driven (the centrality of prayer). We invite and encourage all Christians to image Christ in this way and thus give evidence of his great salvation at work among his people.

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Sanctification

What the Evangelical Congregational Church Believes

Introduction

What is the purpose and what is the goal of the Christian life? Those who believe in Jesus Christ have been saved for eternal life; but what of our lives as Christian in *this* world? What does it mean to be saved *now*?

The Evangelical Congregational Church stands in the Wesleyan tradition of Protestant Christianity. In the broadest sense, this means that the Christian life is a deliberate movement toward Christ-likeness; that is, the believer's actions, attitudes, thoughts, motives, and dispositions are to continually become more and more like those of Jesus. John Wesley's favorite way of expressing this goal was to have perfect love for God and one's neighbor. When John Wesley spoke of perfect love as the goal of the Christian faith—pure love for God and neighbor—he was speaking of *sanctification*, an important but often misunderstood concept in the Christian faith.

What Does it Mean?

Our English word *sanctification* comes from the Latin words *sanctus* (set apart, holy) and *facere* (to make). Thus sanctify means *to set apart or make holy*; *sanctification* is the condition that results from being sanctified, i.e. *holiness*. One may notice two distinct though related aspects of sanctification as described in these terms. Indeed, they are two aspects of the subject clearly found in the Bible. The first is the action of *setting apart*; the second is the character of that which has been set apart. Both Old and New Testament passages point in these directions.

In the Old Testament, we read of many things being set apart (sanctified) for use in the worship of God, including the sacrificial system. The altars, the utensils, the materials used in the construction of the tabernacle, the offerings brought by the people—all of these and more were ceremonially set apart for a very special purpose. While God gave directions for how these objects were to be made, it was not the special nature or making of these materials used that made them different from others; it was the consecrating action of God, represented by the

actions of the priests, which made them holy. They were set apart for His use (see especially Ex. 24:1-7).

More significantly, it was a similar action that set the *people* of Israel apart from all others. It was entirely God's decision and action that set these people apart for a special purpose in the world. This setting apart was then represented by the ritual of sprinkling the people with the blood of the sacrifice (Ex. 24:8). Although they were not any different from other peoples in terms of power or virtue, God chose to make a covenant with them and set them apart for His own redemptive purposes in the world. That is, their *purpose* was to fulfill *God's* purpose.

How were they to do this? They were to reflect God's own character in their lives, both as a visible, national community and as individual members of that community (Lev. 18-25). The One who had set them apart then charged them with the responsibility to live in purity as a testimony to Him among the nations they would encounter. The basic premise, repeated several times in the Book of Leviticus, is quite clear: "You are holy; be holy." God has both set them apart (giving them a purpose), and given them a command to be like Him (setting their goal). They were to conduct their lives and their relationships with other persons differently from the way other people conducted theirs. God gave them instructions covering their relationships with spouses, children, parents, neighbors, fellow Israelites, foreigners—even with animals and the land itself. They were called to a way of life that encompassed all temporal dealings, as well as being drawn into a relationship with God Himself.

In the New Testament, the same pattern is evident, although there is a dramatic change in who is being sanctified and in how that happens. Those who repent of sin and place their faith in Jesus Christ are sanctified in and by Him; that is, we are set apart for his use (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2). The Epistle to the Hebrews specifically refers to Jesus as the fulfillment of all the rites and ceremonies previously given to the people of Israel. Since his death, resurrection, and ascension, it is he who sanctifies people by his own death (Heb. 10:10). The term "saints" means "holy ones" or "those set apart." It is used of entire bodies of believers, not just of certain especially godly people. We are all saints as Christians—not because of our righteousness, but because the God has set us apart.

This Jesus also calls those he sets apart to become like him in all their ways. We are constantly encouraged to be like Christ, to have the mind of Christ in us, to walk "in Him," and to love one another as Christ loved us (e.g., Eph. 4:17-5:2; Col. 3:12-17). As in the Old Testament community of faith, there are both corporate and individual implications of sanctification. We are not set apart merely as isolated believers. The church is set apart to proclaim the gospel through word and deed; yet this happens most effectively when individual members work together through the various gifts the Holy Spirit has given them.

Historical Wesleyan Perspectives

Understood in this way, there is little to generate strong disagreement between Christians. John Wesley, however, raised the possibility of entire sanctification. While he preferred other ways of describing the goal of the Christian life, this term has prevailed as his legacy. What did he have in mind?

John and Charles Wesley were prominent figures in a very significant revival in England during the 1700's; that revival eventually spread to include Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and even the American colonies. Thousands of people were being saved; yet early in the process, the Wesleys were quite alarmed to discover that many individuals who claimed a sometimes dramatic conversion experience were shortly thereafter living life in a very godly manner. They showed no evidence of Christ living in and through them. From this recognition they were moved to examine the message of salvation as found in the Bible and to find ways in which the full message of Christ's work could transform the lives of converts. This work includes the perfecting, or sanctifying, of those who were being saved. It is this emphasis that has characterized the Wesleyan tradition since that time.

What Wesley envisioned was a *perfect love* for God in the heart of the believer. If one loved God perfectly, one would not knowingly sin. The believer may do or say something that is not in keeping with the perfect law of God, but this would only happen because of a lack of