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## IS SANCTIFICATION A GRADUAL PROCESS?

### I

THE prevailing view with regard to Christian sanctification bespeaks for it, in the normal believer's case, throughout life a growth inevitably protracted and gradual. This growth in the sphere of Divine grace has its counterpart, or parallel, in that of the plant or tree or of the human organism in the realm of physical nature, or in that of novice or apprentice skill in the realm of art. The whole process or progression is, of course, to be accounted as of Divine appointment, a resultant of Divine co-operation bearing throughout the Divine smile of approbation. Each successive stage, again, reached in the process of growth upward is to be estimated as a stabilised niche or level; the holiness, to whatever degree it has attained, becomes a quasi-ingrained element in the personality; what has been called a "constituted" holy "character" is being—so far, has been—acquired and secured.

The subject is truly one to be handled with all reverence, like the covenant ark of old, as well as with mutual sympathy and brotherliness amongst those who would discuss it. Who among us would affect to be qualified to speak upon it as an expert or specialist? Still, one may surely in all humbleness venture on an analysis as to how far the conception stated carries the endorsement of Holy Scripture.

The plant parallel is made to rest almost wholly on the phraseology in the little parable of Mark iv. 26-29, "first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn". The passage is very seldom adduced in direct proof; it is rather a case of mere phrase-adaptation. The context seems plainly less concerned with a personal, self-related, subjective sanctity than with the fruit of Gospel witness. The harvest is that of soul-conversions, following faithful evangelism, as in John iv. 35, the soil being hearts Divinely prepared, and the sickle work the gathering of the converted into Christian fellowship. If Spurgeon's view be allowable, the blade stage may represent reflection, the ear

stage conviction, the final stage saving faith; but we may have here simply a pictorial way of expressing "in due course", and the use of the identical series in the story of Aaron's rod after its one night's deposit in the tabernacle (Num. xvii. 8) may well check any over-readiness to see a protracted gradualness in this parable.

God is indeed the Author of nature as well as the Giver of grace. But are we therefore entitled to find nature to be an exact mirror of grace? The parallel does not go on all fours. Drummond's "Natural Law in the Spiritual World" did not long retain its vogue. See again John iv. 35. The plant on reaching a certain stage of growth decays away to rottenness: not so the Christian soul. The Christian life, moreover, is liable to repeated set-backs and recoveries: is the normal plant capable of sustaining such? Is Satan, too, as unwearied a foe of horticulture and hygiene as of Divine grace?

Does this conventionally accepted analogy secure frank and genuine recognition at our hands in our ordinary estimates of fresh converts' Christian faithfulness? Who, on expressing anxiety about one of these not showing himself as circumspect as could be wished about his company or his pastime, ever gets the answer: "Oh, now, have patience; he is still in the blade stage of his godliness; wait till he arrives at the ear stage, and you will see distinct improvement"?

Bishop Ryle, expounding the Marcan parable, makes the assertion: "God never removes His people from this world till they are ripe and ready," which is a rather hard saying when one bethinks of an epidemic, a shipwreck, a battle.

For the analogue of successive periods in human biology one is sure to be referred to 1 John ii. 12-14, "children", "youths", "fathers". The Apostle is himself so little conscious there of any gradual and measured progressiveness that he does not even place the trio in proper progressive order. Elsewhere he calls all his addressees "little children", nor is it feasible to demonstrate that in this passage the other two categories are mutually exclusive.

We have, on the one hand, Archbishop Leighton, in his exposition of 1 Peter ii. 2, maintaining that Christians should continue permanently to be spiritual babes in a special sense; and, on the other hand, Andrew Murray in his exposition of Heb. v. 14, insisting that they are under orders promptly and

without delay to become spiritually full grown<sup>1</sup> (as Eph. iv. 14 also enforces).

It would be a very commonplace happening for some recognisedly sincere Christian of some years' standing to have had occasion to move his quarters across the seas for a space, say, of five years, and to be returning next week. Would it be anything like so ordinary and usual a happening for his fellow-Christian friends, while awaiting his arrival, to say among themselves: "He was a 'youth' believer when he left here: he will, most likely, be a 'father' believer now—a decidedly riper Christian than when we knew him formerly"? Is that the general and habitual expectation consciously cherished on such occasions, or does any calculation of the kind normally suggest itself at all to one in fifty?<sup>2</sup>

If we could compare an equal number, casually selected, of believers of long standing and those that are relatively novices, with respect to their godliness—assuming we were in any measure qualified to judge—we should in duty bound expect an advantage to lie with the former, in the bulk; but by no means necessarily so in the case of each individual, if history and experience give any guidance. Contrast the young Isaac on Mount Moriah meekly acquiescing to the death in the Divine will, with the aged, bedridden Isaac planning to defeat the Divinely proclaimed theocratic heirship. It was in David's youth that God called him "a man after my own heart"—not, and never again, in his later days. It is indeed observed of this same patriarch king, by Alex. Whyte, how "on his death-bed he failed in that very grace (of spiritual humility) which had been such a strength and ornament to his character". And the same exponent holds that Moses, too, "was as hasty and hot at the rock of Meribah, on the very border of the promised land, as ever he was among the sands of Goshen" (Num. xx. 10; Exod. ii. 10). We may recall the cases of Noah and Solomon from this standpoint.

Here is a statement of Spurgeon's: "I have watched carefully, and . . . if there be any blight upon Christian reputations, it almost always happens to a man of long experience—very frequently to a man who is growing old. I do not know why.

<sup>1</sup> "The full grown, mature, 'perfect' man does *not*, *as in nature*, come with years but consists in the wholeheartedness with which the believer yields himself to be all for God," are his words.

<sup>2</sup> See Kuyper, *Near unto God*, 460-1, on this point.

Whether it is that those advanced people begin to trust in their experience or not, I cannot tell; but so I have marked it around me; the falls are mostly of middle-aged or elderly people" (6/8/74). A similar reflection is made by W. M. Taylor in his *Life of David* (p. 279).

We shall advert further on to N.T. instances of signal attainment in holiness on the part of fresh recruits in the army of Christ. On the other hand, one finds it written in the biography of John McNeil, the Australian evangelist (d. 1896), how "it distressed him to see many (fellow-workers) who in their youth had been ardent spirits, gradually cool off into a prudent moderatism". "Shall I ever get like that?" he would ask; "Is it necessary for a man's ardour to decrease as his years increase? No," he would reply to himself, "by God's grace, I will not alter if I live to be eighty."

Physical agedness, it may not be superfluous to add, is not to be lightly assumed to be an advantage with regard to godliness, be a believer experienced or otherwise. It has its own pitfalls—peevishness, obstinacy, mistrustfulness, avarice. And not few have been the Christian leaders who, after a life of consistent loyalty to Gospel truth, have in their declining days been decoyed, by sentimentalism, or by the seductive manipulation of junior relatives or companions of an incipiently modernist or sacerdotal trend, into serious and sad retrogression from the standards of their earlier years. The Apostle saw occasion to direct Titus to extend his godly admonition to the aged members of the Church to be sound in faith first; then in love and patience (ii. 27). See also the prayer of Ps. lxxi. 18, and Barzillai's demur in 2 Sam. xix. 35.

Bunyan, to be sure, depicts a "country of Beulah" at the close of the pilgrim journey, on the borders of heaven, where Doubting Castle is not even in sight, and nothing is to be seen or heard, felt or tasted, that can offend. Being not much beyond his thirtieth year at the time of writing, the immortal dreamer doubtless had over-optimistically come to regard some aged Christians he knew as having got virtually past the experiencing of all spiritual trial. But, though the *Pilgrim's Progress* is in point of secondary inspiration nearer to Scripture perhaps than all other books, it is clear, from Scripture and all other evidence, that there is no Beulah Land, alas! on this side of eternity.

## II

Now what actually is the expressed, revealed will and command of God with respect to holiness on our part? Beyond question it is that we be "sinlessly perfect"—The following references will be sufficient: Matt. xxviii. 20; Rom. xv. 13; 2 Cor. vii. 1; Eph. iii. 19; Phil. i. 11; Col. i. 10; iv. 12; 1 Thess. v. 22-23; Jas. i. 21; 1 Pet. ii. 1. "All" or "every" or "whole" is the governing word throughout the list.

Alex. Maclaren, expounding "Colossians", writes: "The text (ii. 11) regards the divesting (of carnality) as complete, whereas, as all Christian men know only too sadly, it is very partial, and realised only by slow degrees." Hastings' Bible Dictionary decides that there is no prescribed limit to the victory in sanctification which waits on faith (IV. 395). Wm. Kelly states the matter in these terms: "Justification is not a gradual process like the growth of practical holiness; but even in practice we are called on, not to be getting rid of every weight that encumbers, and the sin that besets, in continuous detail, but to have done with each and all as a fixed principle and an accomplished fact" (*Hebrews*, p. 237).

The aorist tense in Greek shuts out relative duration and non-accomplished action. It is the tense of factness (as somebody puts it).<sup>1</sup> And it is this peremptory tense which vastly preponderates in this particular connection. It appears in all the N.T. references just set down. In Rom. vi. 13 the present tense of a preceding antithetical clause is abandoned for it; in 1 Pet. i. 15 ("Be ye holy") we have the one single N.T. instance of the imperative in this tense and person of a verb to "be" or "become" whose present imperatives (in the same second person) amount to almost thirty. The due fulfilment of the Divine demand for a perfect holiness is clearly not postdated to the close of either life or dispensation. "A definitive act . . . rather than the cumulative result of a slow instinctive process": "definite decision rather than vaguely protracted process"—such are the words of Hastings' B.D. Bishop Handley Moule's comment on Col. iii. 5 is: "Here is no precept of slow amelioration: alike the verb and its (aorist) form suggest ideas of deliverance as entire and as prompt and critical as can well be."

<sup>1</sup> An aorist imperative precludes protractedness, whereas a present imperative does not preclude promptitude, of decisive attainment.

If then this requirement, so oft-repeated, of perfect holiness be positively enunciated from God, our universal failure to fulfil it must be positively sinful on our part as obviously so as King Saul's in the Amalek case, whether it be placed primarily under the heading of original, or altogether under that of actual sin. It is a violation of His claims of sovereign lordship. And it is difficult to conclude that without any explicitly announced modification, it was Divinely replaced eventually by the appointment of a gradual apprentice growth of sanctification. God cannot ask from any man less than perfection; if it is demanded of the unbeliever to bring home to him eventually his inescapable need of a substitute Saviour, it must still be demanded of the believer to prove the perpetuity to him of that need.

It is commonly held, however, that the standard prescribed is not peremptorily requisitioned; that it is rather an ideal, all perfect in itself, yet Divinely allowed to be beyond man's complete attainment here below, in view of the impaired receptivity as to sanctifying grace which has been inherited from the Fall. A protracted, yet sustained, gradualness of advance in pursuance thereof is accordingly the Christian programme conventionally enunciated. "The wages of sin" are made to appear to have taken, in the first instance, the form of a tacit unnotified re-accommodation of His primal holy requirement at the hand of God! How the faulty receptivity which precludes sinless perfection does not militate also against an effective and secure gradual growth in holiness seems never to invite consideration. But, be that as it may, we are asked to understand that, as the plant, after taking a while in the sprout condition, develops ultimately, inch by inch, to maturity; as the coral formation from tedious tiny beginnings at length expands to islet size; so with the Christian's growth in holiness. To judge from the accustomed silence of exponents it seemingly does not greatly matter how meagre and how languid may be the opening and early stages, provided the pace be kept up and eventually improved on to a degree.

"Long years may *have to* pass before the child of God attains the stature of a 'perfect man' in Christ Jesus," says Alex. Whyte, in a handbook of extensive circulation.<sup>1</sup> "Not a few of us," Canon Hay Aitken avers, "are impatient with our-

<sup>1</sup> "Shorter Catech.", p. 88 (the italics are ours).

selves because we do not become holy as quickly as we should like; years roll on, and the process of growth is not so rapid as we should wish.”<sup>1</sup> Now whence this handicap? “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace,” says the Shorter Catechism; and does God the Holy Ghost then require or stand in need of some appreciable interval or period of time for accomplishing His sanctifying work? Holiness imports disengagement from sin: is it thinkable that God has placed a drag on that? “If every year we were to root out one vice, we should become perfect men sooner,” Thomas à Kempis tells us. “Put off a sin, or a piece of it, every day,” re-echoes S. Rutherford.<sup>2</sup> Suppose then that just now I should acknowledge to my friend my proneness to such and such an infirmity, additional to others I am conscious of, and should add reassuringly that, whilst for the time being it must stand over, I mean in five years (or five days) hence to tackle it effectively in its proper turn, would my statement tally with Scripture and Gospel truth?

What are the Scripture texts customarily adduced in support of gradual personal growth in holiness, beside those adapted phrases bearing on nature which have been already dealt with?

Phil. i. 6: “He which began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ” (R.V.). This is (seemingly) the passage which the *Protestant Dictionary* (Wright & Neil), arguing for the view before us, considers to be the only one which “expressly” teaches it. Now a “good work” (*Agathon ergon*, occurring 13 times) is always altruistic, not egoistic or self-related merely. Here it plainly is co-operation in furtherance of the Gospel (vv. 5, R.V., and 7). Such work in its influence and fruit never dies with the present workers, it echoes on, it “abides” (John xv. 16), till the Great Day. “From the first day until now” of verse 5 has its counterpart in the implicit “from now till Advent” of verse 6. “In you” can either mean “in your hearts”, as an inspired impulse; or the Greek preposition *en* may signify “among (you)”, as in verse 15 of the next chapter and often elsewhere in the N.T. Purely personal holiness is not here before the Apostle’s mind.

Phil. iii. 12–14: “Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect; but . . . I press on towards the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God” (R.V.). Here again

<sup>1</sup> *Highway of Holiness*, p. 52. <sup>2</sup> Letter No. 199.



he is not referring to his inner personal life; his subject is the dutiful discharge of his Apostolic mission. His plain call was to discipleship and salvation: his high call was to evangelism and witness (Rom. i. 1; 1 Cor. i. 1; Gal. i. 15, 16; Acts ix. 15; xiii. 2, 47; compare Mark iii. 13, 14; vi. 7; 1 Pet. ii. ix; John xv. 16). Let a Calvinist to-day utter the word "election" and he usually gets a reminder, prompt and glib, that the election is for service. Yes, verily, God gives us holiness, and we give God service. The "prize", available for all Christians (1 Cor. ix. 24), like the "reward" and the "crown" of many other passages, is for faithful performance of the witness duty we are called to. The inspired Apostle must not be made responsible for the mistaken idea that a cloistral holiness is here implied. His advertence just before to "sufferings" shared with Christ can only be to those entailed by Gospel witness, which many another text refers to. Many true souls to-day are getting exercised over the pietistic but non-witnessing Quietism of German "evangelicalism", and, equally, the Englishman's pretentious "reserve about his religion". "Follow Me," was Christ's call, "and I will make you"—not holy only, but—"fishers of men"; and in His parting charges the dominant note can be seen to be, not the duty of subjective sanctity solely, but the claim He has upon His people for their witness to Him and His Gospel.<sup>1</sup> "Not already made perfect"—"not that I have succeeded yet as I could wish in my evangelism, is A. T. Robertson's summary rendering, in complete accord with our Lord's language in His message to Herod Antipas, Luke xiii. 32, "On the third day my work will be done", which literally is "I shall be perfected".

2 Cor. iii. 18: "We all . . . reflecting as (or 'beholding as in'—Amer. R.V.) a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (R.V.). It is too readily assumed, in relation to Greek verbs in the passive or middle voices, that their present indicatives and especially present participles normally express individual progression. So here, forsooth, "are transformed" must mean "are each of

<sup>1</sup>"We ought to regard the Church not as a luxurious hostelry for Christian gentlemen, but as a barracks in which soldiers are gathered who march to achieve victories for Christ."—*Spurgeon*.

"How many spend their time in the work of preparing their hearts, as if their own sanctification were the great end of their calling."—*Evan Hopkins*.

"In times of revival Christians go to work for souls—not go to meetings simply to get blessing."—*Torrey*.

us being progressively or gradually transformed"—all the more surely so because it is combined with a preceding participle ("reflecting" or "beholding") which is in the Greek middle voice. But this is a complete mistake. See, in the very first book alone of the N.T., Matt. iii. 10; xi. 5; xiii. 40; xv. 19; where is the gradualness there? There is none; what is there is serialness, *serial succession*. Similarly Hastings' B.D. points out that Heb. ii. 11 has "no progressive significance, but expresses a constantly growing class" (IV. 393). And the Pulpit commentary on Gal. vi. 13 construes "those who were one after another undergoing the rite"; and again on Rev. vii. 14: "there is a continuous pouring in of them from the world, and this will go on till all be gathered home". Also compare 1 Cor. xv. 29. So the statement lends no support to the tenet of a protracted apprentice growth in holiness. It may be demanded, however, what the clause "from glory to glory" can mean except "from one high degree of sanctity to a still higher", as so many expounders would have it. But the whole foregoing chapter is occupied with a contrast between two "glories", that of the Mosaic economy and that of the Gospel. And where else in Scripture does "glory" signify sanctity? As for the two commonly alleged parallels of construction: "from faith to faith" and "from strength to strength", the "from" in both (Rom. i. 17; Ps. lxxxiv 7, LXX) is *ek* in the Greek denoting development, whereas here it is *apo*, denoting departure. We require to renounce all legalistic glory if we are to become conformed<sup>1</sup> to the glorious image of God's Son.

2 Pet. i. 5 f: "Add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge . . . temperance . . . patience . . . godliness . . . brotherly kindness . . . charity" (A.V.). For "add" the R.V. substitutes "supply", which still less suggests any long-drawn procedure; besides, who would maintain that any temporal, strictly orderly, sequence of the qualities named is insisted on?

Luke xvii. 14: "As they went, they were cleansed." The cure of leprosy always portrays Justification, prior to sanctification; and here the healing was instant, for in the Greek "as they went" means "in the act of their moving off".

Heb. xii. 1: "Run with patience the race." The "race" is the *agon*, or struggle, against anti-Gospel opposition, as also

<sup>1</sup> In Rom. xii. 2, "transform" in the present tense is quite understandable serially, but is further facilitated by grammatical attraction to the present negative imperative preceding.

in 2 Tim. iv. 7. And "patience" is the rendering of a Greek word which (with its verb) represents brave endurance without necessarily involving any idea of prolongation.

### III

Then there are certain other words or terms which, when analysed, especially in their original Greek sense or setting, may be seen to lend no countenance to the tenet in question.

"Grow" or "increase" (*auxanein*). Who questions the blessed fact, stated rightly, that the reconciled believer has a quality of holiness instilled into his heart, by God's grace, so far from being incapable of increase that its reaches towards perfection are Divinely unlimited, non-bounded as well as non-retarded, though never stabilised down here. This capacity has indeed suffered impairment through our own fallen and fleshly nature, and our resultant faulty receptivity; yet who can show that, as an inevitable sequel, the increase in godliness, which is throughout the work of Divine free grace, has invariably in each Christian personality been consigned to leading strings, and restricted to a protracted stage-measured, gradual progress? As for this word, *auxanein*, none will contend that the Baptist held it was strictly by slow degrees that Christ was destined to "increase" in inverse ratio to himself (John iii. 30). Bishop Ryle, by the way, opined that he had in mind the sun and the stars respectively as they appear at daybreak. As used in the spiritual connection, the word is found carrying an intensive prefix in 2 Thess. i. 3, and taking the peremptory aorist form in Eph. iv. 15; 1 Pet. ii. 2; and the latter of those should in reason decide the force of the word in the subsequent 2 Pet. iii. 18. It applies to the growth of the Church collective in Eph. ii. 2; iv. 16 (= Col. ii. 19); and to the enhancement of the Gospel cause resulting from Christian munificence in 2 Cor. ix. 10. In 2 Cor. x. 15 an increased faith on the part of the local Church corporately is needed for evangelistic expansion. The verb relates once (Col. i. 10) to knowledge, as to which attribute we shall refer presently, and this exhausts the occurrences of the word in the Epistles. "Increase" in 1 Thess. iii. 12, R.V., is a rendering of *pleonazein* (in the aorist), which elsewhere is translated "abound", but here has to give way to a synonym (*perisseuein*) with which it stands mated. It means

“get greater”, not “than hitherto” but “than what is usual”. “Increase our faith” in the disciples’ request to Christ (Luke xvii. 5) is literally “Add faith to us” (aorist). It is the very reverse of a *claim* on their part to possess already a measure of it; whilst also the Lord’s response, with its reference to the grain of mustard seed, is not interested in small beginnings of faith, on the score of the smallness, but rather its genuine reality, seeing that twice elsewhere He extols “great faith”. With Him, seemingly, *genuine* faith is ever great in its potency, however newborn. Also “from faith to faith”, in Rom. i. 17, bespeaks no protracted lifelong development necessarily, but doubtless looks from receptive faith at conversion to the habitual assured confidence of the reconciled child of God—faith in God’s pardon over against faith in His keeping power.

“*More and more*”, when met with in our English versions relative to the abounding of some quality in Christian character, naturally implies a repeated *mallon* in the Greek original; yet it is a single *mallon*, meaning simply “still more so”, that is found in all the places, except one (Phil. i. 9) which is concerned with knowledge, an attribute we shall separately touch upon in a moment.<sup>1</sup> “Have life more abundantly” in John x. 10 drops the “more” in the R.V.

“*Edify*”, “build up” (*oikodomein*, with noun), is used with a corporate spiritual significance, about fourteen times in the Acts and Epistles, relative to the Church of Christ which is so commonly compared to a temple (or the Temple). Genuine (as distinct from merely nominal or professing) members can be freshly and continuously enlisted into it, just as a material building can grow gradually, stone by stone.

Still, of the material stones, successively laid on, no single one can itself grow. Besides, a proper material edifice is much more than a gradually amassed and piled-up quantity of stones. It is an embodiment of cohesive, symmetrical stability, a compound quality which also can from the very start amply evidence itself. This assuredly is the element implied in the non-corporate instances when the term is used in the individual spiritual connection. Compare our other English word “brace”, not unknown in architectural phrasing, noting the context in Col. ii. 7; Rom. xv. 2; 1 Cor. xiv. 3; 1 Thess. v. 11; as well

<sup>1</sup> Doubtless in the use of this phrase in one or another evangelical, doctrinal or liturgical statement of past days, the authors had no conscious idea of gradualness.

as in 1 Cor. viii. 10 ("be stiffened"). The personal experience so termed demands no protractedness nor stages of progress.

"Perfect" (adj. *teleios*, with verbs and noun). This N.T. term has no unavoidable protraction in attainment attaching to its significance. It describes one that can be said to have definitely and decidedly "entered into life", a thorough, out-and-out, no-wise self-stunted, Christian.<sup>1</sup> In Eph. iv. 13 the Church as a body is referred to. In 2 Cor. vii. 1, the present participle of the verb is coupled with the decisive aorist of another. As to the "Hebrews" Epistle, the eminent A. B. Davidson's verdict is: "None of the three words, 'purify', 'sanctify', and 'make perfect', appears to be used proleptically, to describe an act . . . the fruits of which progressively manifest themselves. . . . They describe actions done once for all." Ch. vi. 1, he holds to bear simply on the progress of the author's literary task. The R.V. in v. 14 obviously forces the underlying nature-metaphor. Humans have not in nature to wait till they become "full-grown men" before passing from infantile milk nutriment to solid food.

Knowledge is, needless to say, the essential substratum of holiness. Mere brain-knowledge of eternal things available even to an unbeliever we need not linger to notice; as to its futility Scripture is eloquent enough. We are only concerned with saving Gospel knowledge, the knowledge of God's faithfulness and of man's faithlessness, derived from the inspired Word and borne home to the heart by the Holy Ghost. This ought to and cannot fail but expand throughout the Christian's whole life-course. The best of the exponents of the tenet before us seem for the most part to base it upon this fact, though they are apt to adopt more impressive terms, such as "discovery" or "vision", in their statements. And yet is it a common thing for an average conscientious, Bible-reading Christian to discern every year or every five years some specific sin in his life which had not revealed itself before? Where are the memoirs that have narrated such experiences of successive self-discovery? On the contrary, we find it regretfully noted by Kuyper that, whilst an increase of spiritual knowledge is normal among individual believers, a persevering gradual advance in godliness is exceptional.<sup>2</sup> Apparently then increase

<sup>1</sup> Compare Matt. v. 48; xix. 21 ("sell off"); 1 Cor. xiv. 20; Phil. iii. 15; Col. i. 28; iii. 14; iv. 12; James iii. 2. *Near to God* (translation), p. 461.

<sup>2</sup> *Near to God* (translation), p. 461.

of spiritual knowledge, though a support and an incentive to, is no guarantee of, increased holiness.

Thus it seems clear that God's Word affords no satisfying foundation for this tenet we are discussing. The *Protestant Dictionary* advocate has to concede that "little is definitely stated" on the subject in Scripture, and that there is no express and unmistakable text available in its support except one—apparently Phil. i. 6, which has been disposed of above. We submit that in fact no single Bible statement is producible in proof of a protracted and sustained gradualness of growth in holiness being a Divine appointment, or of its positive operation having taken place historically in any one individual case.<sup>1</sup> How strange then is the comparatively unquestioned acceptance or acquiescence which it has obtained among Protestant teachers! "It is admitted on all sides" is the very excusably sweeping statement of Litton.<sup>2</sup> The unreformed mediaeval Church, with its mystics' "ladder of perfection" and such like, had handed it on (though Jovinian, the forlorn Protestant at the close of the fourth and the opening of the fifth centuries, appears to have rejected it). Then in the crucial doctrinal struggle to disentangle justification from its disastrous confusion with its concomitant sanctification, insistence on the decisive immediacy of the former seemed to be made easier by a free-handed, unreserved concession that an apprentice gradualness attached to the other. It safeguarded the needful distinction between imputed and imparted righteousness, against both Romanist and Perfectionist. Awkward implications which would emerge in the future were not at once discerned. The tenet's soundness was taken for granted without further analysis, and so it came to be handed on. Some few, like the noted Dublin Calvinist, Krause, roundly disowned it. And Kuyper says that, whilst it ought to hold true, the plain facts of experience sadly belie it. Oddly enough, too, its best exponents nowadays are constantly expressing themselves with two voices. In their systematic, credal statements they assert it, and then, a moment hence, if not in the same moment, it is implicitly discarded. This holds as to almost all of those cited here.

<sup>1</sup> We do not insist that there never have been instances of such outside Bible narrative.

<sup>2</sup> *Introd. to Theol.*, p. 297.

## IV

Meantime, the Romanist and the Modernist alike may be trusted to uphold the view tenaciously. It breaks ground, the former knows, for the propagation of the high-Church germ theory of justification, with which Bishop Bull's name is specially associated; and according to which the righteousness in virtue of which one is saved is one's own orderly progressive righteousness Divinely foreseen, and anticipatorily set down to one's account. The *Protestant Dictionary* writer, who has been quoted as supporting the tenet which is the subject of this paper, also propounds this justification germ theory, and his words amply demonstrate the affinity or identity between the two: "When God declares the sinner righteous, it is with the design of making him gradually righteous, until at last the process is completed." And, by way of illustration, he adds: "As soon as the raw recruit is enlisted, he is called a soldier, because the intention is that he shall be properly trained until he is what his name implies." Where is the dividing line then between the two notions? Very properly Krause inquires, on the score of the frequent use of the description, "ripening for glory": How long does it take one, after he becomes a believer in Christ, to outgrow his unfitness to go to heaven? And yet there are Protestants who will regard this discussion of ours as a piece of finesse! Furthermore, the tenet cannot help but facilitate acceptance of the now fashionable notion of a holiness-development in the Intermediate State, upon which the now widely propagated practice of prayer for the dead is mainly based. A *gradual* training and progression in holiness which obtains in this life can hardly fail but be "continued in our next". Then the Modernist on his part can see how it must acclimatise people's minds to his evolutionary, utopian, "Christian Liberal", theories.

The complementary article of this tenet remains still to be touched upon. The Christian, thus gradually growing, at length acquires what an authoritative and deservedly revered convention teacher calls "a consolidated character" of holiness.<sup>1</sup> He attains a stabilised "level",<sup>2</sup> registers an abiding niche, in the Alpine ascent of sanctification.

The English Bible term which would lend support to this

<sup>1</sup> Evan Hopkins' *Law of Liberty*, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Bp. Moule.

conclusion is the "(e)stablish" of the Acts and Epistles. This represents, firstly, *sterizein* (11 times) which in sense is not really so immobile and should rather be rendered "to steady", in harmony with its noun-form in 2 Pet. iii. 17 which is there rendered "stedfastness"; secondly, *bebaioun* (3 times) which strictly means "certify", "assure"; and, thirdly, *stereoun* (only in Acts xvi. 5) which the R.V. has altered to "strengthen". We can think of no other.

A more common and concrete way of stating the matter is to speak of the believer becoming endowed with an accumulating stock or deposit of grace, ingrained as it were in his personality, and according to the degree of his equipment with which he is proportionately competent to face successive spiritual emergencies. "Spiritual capital acquired" is Kuyper's way of expressing it.<sup>1</sup>

Now there is many a passage in Scripture calculated to discourage the adopting of such a conception. "My strength attains perfection in (unqualified) weakness," says Christ. "Without Me ye (without exception) can do nothing." "Yet not I, but Christ," re-echoes His apostle (2 Cor. xii. 9; John xv. 5; Gal. ii. 20). The Divinely provided way of escape from under temptation, or the protection of the Divine panoply, apparently remains equally indispensable to all (1 Cor. x. 13; Eph. vi. 13). It harmonises badly also with our familiar comparison of faith to the beggar's hand.

"The holiest believer in the world" he is whom Toplady expects to sing: "Nothing in my hand I bring." John Newton writes: "At my first setting out I thought to be better and to feel myself better from year to year. I expected by degrees to attain everything which I then comprised in my idea of a saint. I thought my grain of grace, by much diligence and careful improvement, would in time amount to a pound, that pound in a further space of time to a talent, and from one talent to many; so that, supposing the Lord should spare me a competent number of years, I pleased myself with the thought of dying rich. But, alas! these my golden expectations have been like South Sea dreams; I have lived hitherto a poor sinner and I believe I shall die one."<sup>2</sup> And Dr. Andrew Bonar left this blunt account of himself: "When I was a young man, after

<sup>1</sup> *Near to God*, p. 461.

<sup>2</sup> At the same time he owns most thankfully to an increase in spiritual knowledge and insight.



my conversion, I had the feeling that if I lived until I was forty or fifty I should be a holy man, but alas, alas, I have reached the age of fifty, and instead of being holier I feel myself more sinful than ever." F. B. Meyer, reflecting on the Ai episode of Joshua's day, concedes: "Victories won in fellowship with God will have imparted no inherent might to us: we are as weak as ever." It may be contended that it was an ingrained grace of humility which itself led to these avowals or disavowals. But what kind of grace is this which would withhold acknowledgment and praise and thanks from God, both for itself and for the gradual growth in stock (if real) of its sister graces?

"The perseverance of the saints is made up of ever new beginnings" is an aphorism which Alex. Whyte quotes approvingly. "Only now it is that I am beginning to be a disciple," exclaimed the primitive martyr, Ignatius. The Apostle Peter, as observed earlier, bids us regard ourselves as, in a sense, permanent babes in the Gospel. S. Rutherford testified: "After all my experience of God's hearing my prayers, yet, when a new trouble comes, I have to hunt up my faith and begin at A B C over again."

But indeed it is the Divine grace, and not our treacherous wills, that has to do the recommencing within us, and that unintermittently. "New supplies each hour I meet," utters Doddridge in his hymn on grace. And what Bible passages, corroborative or illustrative, the thought calls up! The manna which sustained the Israelites in the desert was provided day by day. This was not only to keep in exercise their general trust in God, but to signalise how utterly beholden they were to Him. Here is how Newton represents the case. "They could not hoard the manna up, and were therefore in a state of absolute dependence from day to day. This appointment was well suited to humble them, and thus it is with us in spirituals, we should be better pleased, perhaps, to be set up with a stock or sufficiency at once. . . . But His way is best. His own glory is most displayed, and our safety more assured, by keeping us quite poor and empty in ourselves, and supplying us from moment to moment according to our need."

In Solomon's great prayer at the Temple dedication (1 Kings viii. 59), a fulfilment of what he asks in view of various needs is sought for "as every day shall require"—literally,

“the matter of a day in its day”, exactly as in Exod. xvi. 4, in the manna record. The manna had its parallel later in the prophet Elijah’s ration, first, the bread and meat brought by ravens morning and evening, and after, the meal and oil which without increase or expansion continued to provide daily sustenance (1 Kings xvii. 6, 16). And doubtless, again, it was behind the Apostle’s mind in 2 Cor. iv. 16, in his declaration: “though our outward man decayeth, our inward man is being renewed day by day”—where the word “renew (daily)”, which meets us again in Col. iii. 10 and Heb. vi. 6 (Eph. iv. 23), cannot lexically mean “improve” or “ameliorate”.

What is, or logically should be, the proper significance of the petition in the Book of Common Prayer: “Grant that this day we fall into no sin,” and again “Keep us this day without sin”? Surely it springs from a right spiritual intuition that the true worshippers are to be Divinely maintained in godly living on the manna principle, “moment by moment”. Equally surely it ill consists with the tenet we have been discussing, according to which, strictly speaking, we are to-day inevitably somewhat behind to-morrow in holiness development.

Some of the material or mechanical illustrations that have been ventured upon here are helpful. “Believers,” says Wm. Kelly, “are like watches, in need of habitual winding up.” F. B. Meyer, treating of the visionary candlestick fed without intermission from two olive-trees (Zech. iv), compares the Christian soul to a lamp wick, which “has no pith or power of its own, no stores; which accumulates nothing, is always on the verge of bankruptcy, yet always supplied”.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps the happiest is the diversity, instanced by someone, between the trolley system and the storage battery method in electrically propelled vehicles, with respect to independence of movement.

In keeping with the Divine action relative to the stored-up manna, which was made to stink (Exod. xvi. 20), reliance on a fancied reserve capital of personal spiritual excellence can bring about humiliation and shame. The protests of self-stability and fealty on the part of Peter and his fellow-Apostles on the eve of defection, and their sequel, may be recalled (Matt. xxvi. 33 f.). Spurgeon cautions his hearers, who are understood to have developed their holiness duly: “Perhaps the

<sup>1</sup> Then, true to type, he proceeds on the next page to urge: “Do not weary of the slow advance of your life to Christian perfection.”

very moment you are rejoicing over your *conquered* temper, it will leap back upon you."

## V

Our imperfect receptivity of God's grace, as has been already seen and agreed, precludes perfection of holiness on our part down here. Receptivity, or appropriation, however, is virtually no other than a sonorous synonym for active faith. Defective faith, along with being sinful (John xvi. 9), is compared in Scripture to a sea wave (Jas. i. 6) on the score of its rickety, slippery nature. If man's holiness, then, like his prevalency in prayer (Matt. ix. 29), be according or proportionate to his faith—and, after knowledge, faith constitutes the substratum of holiness—it must be in every man in some measure essentially *fluctuating* or chequered, too. The penalty for our racial defaulting receptivity is that, while we would fain soar securely into an empyrean of righteous perfection, we in each individual case permanently hover at fluctuating levels, till mortality is swallowed up of life. If the evidence for the reality of a regularised, chronometrical "ladder" of spiritual perfection be questionable, that for the ladder's possession of a quasi-ratchet equipment is still more meagre. In Scripture that temporary Evangelical tergiversation at Antioch, recorded in Gal. ii. 11 f., may be instanced. To pass over Peter, let us think of "even Barnabas" (R.V.) already said to be (habitually) "full of the Holy Ghost and of faith", being carried away on the stream of others' dissimulation (literally "hypocrisy")! Rom. vii, again, lies open before us; "We speak in a shallow way," says Alex. Whyte, "of the Apostle Paul being for ever out of that chapter and for ever in Ch. viii; but Paul never spoke in that fashion of himself—he could not. Both chapters were fulfilling themselves within him". Because sometimes "the old man", "the flesh", got uppermost, though by grace Divine far oftener, yea, normally, it was the "new man", "the Spirit".

But, praised be His name! God's faithfulness never fluctuates. And in virtue of that faithfulness, of the certainty of His promises of grace being fulfilled, "the faith of God's elect" cannot come to naught, nor the godliness which springs from it (Titus i. 1; 1 Thess. v. 24). Those whom He savingly calls He predestinates "to be conformed to the image of His Son", and that without any Divinely ordered stays and stages

in the gracious procedure (Rom. viii. 29; 2 Cor. iii. 18). It is "for the sake (or 'accomplishment') of His good pleasure (or 'purpose')" that He "worketh in them both to will and to do" (Phil. ii. 13). His oath to "the father of the faithful", Abraham (Gen. xxii. 17), in its spiritual sense, was that his children, having been delivered out of the hand of their enemies, should (R.V.—not "might") "serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all their days" (Luke i. 73-75).

And does the N.T. post-Calvary history afford any evidence of rudimentary or apprentice stages—a protracted gradualness—being normally displayed in actual practice in the sanctification of specific individual believers? We need not indeed wait till after Calvary: we can look during Calvary at the penitent thief. He was that morning "posting to hell", in the words of Bishop Hall; yet that evening, according to Bishop Ryle, he was "a finished work of the Holy Ghost, in whom every part of a believer's character may be traced"—not that this latter writer is attributing to him an acquired sinless perfection. The very word "sanctify" (in harmony with the terms of the Lord's intercession already in John xvii. 17), we find in the aorist in 1 Cor. vi. 11 in the characterisation of living believers, as well as several times elsewhere also in the perfect tense.<sup>1</sup> Nor was it, of course, merely a matter of discarding some particular flagrant depravity. To be sure, in the case of more than one community, a dwarfed (caricaturing a newborn) spirituality has to be rebuked (1 Cor. iii. 2; Heb. v. 12). But outstandingly godly members would not be lacking, nevertheless. We may instance the body of fresh disciples of Antioch in Pisidia, Acts xiii. 52, "filled with the Holy Ghost". Likewise it is said of Stephen and Barnabas that they were men, not incidentally or temporarily, but habitually, "full of the Holy Ghost"; and they are at once introduced to us in the sacred page as such, without a hint of any preliminary passage through stages or leading strings in their heavenly endowment.<sup>2</sup> Take, in addition, the jailer of Acts xvi: here is Spurgeon's verdict: "He was nothing of a Christian when he thrust the Apostles into prison;

<sup>1</sup> Acts xx. 32; xxvi. 18; Rom. xv. 16; 1 Cor. i. 2; Jude i. A merely rudimentary sanctifying would hardly be thus signalled.

<sup>2</sup> Just once—thirty years later than these opening days of the Pentecostal era—in 1 Tim. iii. 6, we have mention of a "novice" or neophyte, a "newly-sprung", newborn disciple. Such a one is declared to be not qualified for the office of a "bishop". Knowledge, of which "experience" is an advanced form, must, as we have said, be of gradual attainment, barring a special miracle.

and yet, when the sun rose again, there was not a better Christian anywhere than that man was . . . the possessor of Christian graces," etc. Where is the creeping along through "blade" and "ear" stages, we ask, in his case? It was similar with Lydia of Thyatira and the eunuch of Ethiopia and Onesimus, it would seem. Aye, contemplate the Apostle Paul himself: the Scotch Puritan confessor, Robert Traill, ventures to say: "I am apt (inclined) to believe that he was more sanctified in the first hour of his conversion than any man this day in the world." And all these were humans, "subject to like passions as we are". So also it must have proved since Bible days in innumerable cases. A highly esteemed advocate of the "gradual" view himself declares: "I have known, and known of, quite young children who under Divine grace exhibited an extraordinary Christ-likeness" (Dr. Miller Neatby).

By that grace Divine, we who are the Lord's believing ones will not be rendered lethargic or presuming through our possession of the revealed assurance that no unhappy, guilty stumble made on our part will prove to be an irrevocable fall (Ps. xxxvii. 24; Rom. ii. 11)—that, as Rutherford puts it, the godly may be spiritually ducked, but not drowned—that the odd skirmish may be lost, but not the whole battle—that the contingent backsliding of any elect one of His will not spell abandonment by our covenant God, but rather in due season, as in David's case, a re-awakening in mercy as well as judgment. Rather shall we be steadied and heartened for more faithful Christian endeavour and loyalty. As true members of Christ's flock we will hear His voice and follow Him. What needful provision will not be freely communicated to us, seeing that even He, the beloved and only Son of God, was not spared but delivered up for us to the Cross? We shall be inwardly stirred up to ask and re-ask for the continued gift of that Holy Spirit who called us, which according to Divine promise is to be, not meted out in dribblets, but, poured forth richly into the hearts of God's people. We will keep drawing nigh unto God by Christ, who, acting as our faithful High-priest and ever-living Intercessor on high, will save us to the uttermost and make us more than conquerors. And in the great day of His appearing we shall find ourselves perfected absolutely in holiness finally and eternally, like Himself, when we shall see Him as He is.

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