

The Pietist & The Perfectionist

by Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)

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He chastens us for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. --Heb. xii. 10.

SANCTIFICATION is a gracious work of God, whereby in a supernatural way He gradually divests from sin the inclinations and dispositions of the regenerate and clothes them with holiness. p. 474, par. 1, [PIETIST]

Here we meet a serious objection which deserves our careful attention. To the superficial observer, the spiritual experience of God's children seems diametrically opposed to this professed gift of sanctification. One says: "Can it be that for more than ten years I have been the subject of a divine operation whereby my desires and inclinations were divested of sin and clothed with holiness? If this is the Gospel, then I belong not to the Lord's redeemed; for in myself I perceive scarcely any progress; I only know that my first love has become cold and that the inward corruption is appalling. Some dream of progress, but I discover in myself scarcely anything but backsliding. No gain but loss, is the sad footing-up of the account. My only hope is Immanuel my Surety." p. 474, par. 2, [PIETIST]

While the experience of a broken heart vents its grief in this way, others exhort us not to encourage spiritual pride. They say: "We should not foster spiritual pride in God's children, for by nature they are already thus inclined. What is more conducive to spiritual pride than the conceit of an ever-advancing holiness? Is not holiness the highest and most glorious attainment? Is it not our comprehensive prayer to be made partakers of His holiness? And would you have these souls imagine that, since they were converted a number of years ago, they have attained already a considerable degree of this divine perfection? Would you give license to older Christians to feel themselves above their younger brethren? Holiness wants to be noticed; hence you incite them to display p. 474, par. 3, [PIETIST]

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their good works. What is this but to cultivate a spirit of Pharisaism?" p. 475, par. 1, [PIETIST]

We may not rest until this objection of the sensitive conscience is entirely removed. Not as though we could escape all dangers of Pharisaism. This would silence every exhortation to holy living. Light without shadows is impossible; the shadows disappear only in absolute darkness. In the days of the ancient Pharisee, Jerusalem, compared with Rome and Athens, was a God-fearing city. Pharisaism was never more bold than in the days of Jesus. And history shows that the danger of Pharisaism has always been least in the Romish and greatest in the Reformed churches; and among the latter, it is strongest where the name of God is most exalted. Godliness is impossible without the shadow of Pharisaism. The brighter the light and glory of the former, the darker the shadow of the latter. To escape Pharisaism altogether one must descend into the lowest pest-holes of society, where nothing bridles the passions of men. p. 475, par. 2, [PIETIST]

And this is natural. Pharisaism is not a common corruption, but the mildew of the noblest fruit the earth ever saw, viz., godliness. The circles that are free from Pharisaism also lack the highest good; how, then, could it decay there? And the circles in which this danger is greatest are the very circles in which the highest good is known and exalted. p. 475, par. 3, [PIETIST]

But, apart from this aimless skirmishing with the Pharisaic phantom, the scruple mentioned above has our heartiest sympathy. If it were true that sanctification so impressed the soul as to incite it to pride, it could not be the real article; for of all unholiness pride is the most abominable. It is David's sweet and sincere supplication: "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me; then shall I be upright and shall be innocent from the great transgressions." The fundamental conception of grace is so intimately connected with the idea of becoming a little child, and its gift is so strongly conditioned upon a humble position, that the gift which encourages spiritual pride can not a gift of grace. p. 475, par. 4, [PIETIST]

But we are confident that the doctrine of sanctification, as presented in these pages according to the Holy Scripture, has nothing in common with this caricature. Since in Paradise sin sprang from p. 475, par. 5, [PIETIST]

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the first satanic incitement to pride, and all spiritual and carnal unholiness still grows from that poisonous root, it is evident that the first effect of the implanted, holy disposition must be the humbling of this pride, the pulling down of this

stronghold; and at the same time the quickening of a humble, meek, and childlike spirit. p. 476, par. 1, [PIETIST]

The idea that sanctification consists in inspiring the saint with horror for gross and outward sins, without a previous breaking down of self-conceit, is unscriptural and opposed by the Reformed churches. The Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit never applies sanctification to the believer without attacking all his sins at once. "A sincere resolution to live not only according to some, but to all the commandments of God" (Heidelberg Catechism). p. 476, par. 2, [PIETIST]

Of all sins pride is the most accursed, for in all its manifestations it is the transgression of the first commandment. Hence real and divinely wrought sanctification is inconceivable without, first of all, destroying pride, and creating a humble, quiet, self-distrusting, and childlike disposition. p. 476, par. 3, [PIETIST]

And this solves the whole difficulty. He who fears that gradual sanctification will, lead to pride and self-conceit confounds its human counterfeit with the real work divinely wrought. Wherefore, with this objection, he must attack the hypocrite, and not us. p. 476, par. 4, [PIETIST]

However, a wrong interpretation of what the Scripture calls "flesh" might suggest it. If "flesh" signifies sensual inclinations and bodily appetites, and sanctification consisted almost entirely in warring against these sins, sanctification thus understood might be accompanied by an increase of spiritual pride. But by sinful "flesh" the Scripture denotes the entire man, body and soul, including sins which are spiritual as well as sensual; hence sanctification aims at once at the change of man's spiritual and sensual inclinations, and first of all at his tendency to pride. In the preceding article we said that sanctification included a descent as well as an ascent. When the Lord raises us, we also descend. There is no rising of the new man without a death of the old; and every attempt to teach sanctification without doing full justice to both is unscriptural. p. 476, par. 5, [PIETIST]

We oppose, therefore, the attempts of the Pietist and of the Perfectionist, who say that they have nothing more to do with the old man, that nothing remains in them to be mortified, and that all p. 476, par. 6, [PIETIST]

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that is required of them is to hurry the growth of the new man. And we equally oppose the opposite, which admits the dying of the old man, but denies the rising of the new, and that the soul receives all that it lacks. p. 477, par. 1, [PIETIST]

Every true and lasting conversion, according to our Catechism, must manifest itself in these two parts, viz., a mortification of the old man, and a rising, of the new, in equal proportions. p. 477, par. 2, [PIETIST]

And in answer to the question, "What is the mortification of the old man?" the Heidelberg Catechism answers, "A gradual decrease," for it says: "It is a sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins; and more and more to hate and flee from them." While the quickening of the new man is expressed just as positively: "It is a sincere joy of heart in God through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works"--a declaration that is repeated in the answer of the 115th question, which thus describes this mortification: "That all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature"; and which speaks of the quickening of the new man as becoming more and more conformable to the image of God." p. 477, par. 3, [PIETIST]

Hence there are two parts, or rather two aspects of the same thing: (1) the breaking down of the old man; (2) a growing conformity to the divine image. p. 477, par. 4, [PIETIST]

To mortify and to quicken, to kill and to make alive, more and more, this is, according to the Confession of the fathers, the work of the Triune God in sanctification. p. 477, par. 5, [PIETIST]

Sin is not merely the "lack of righteousness." As soon as righteousness, goodness, and wisdom disappear, unrighteousness, evil, and folly take their place. As God implanted in man the first three named, so does sin not merely rob him of them, but it puts the last three in their place. Sin did not only kill in Adam the man of God, but also quickened in him the man of sin; hence sanctification must effect in us the very opposite. It must mortify that which sin has quickened, and quicken that which sin has mortified. p. 477, par. 6, [PIETIST]

~~If this rule is thoroughly understood, there can be no confusion. Our idea of~~
sanctification necessarily corresponds to our idea of sin. They who consider sin as a mere poison, and deny the loss of original righteousness, are Pietists they ignore the mortification of the old man, and always busy themselves adorning the new. And they who say that sin is the loss of original righteousness, and deny its p. 477, par. 7, [PIETIST]

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positive, evil effects, are inclined to Antinomianism, and reduce sanctification to a fancied emancipation from the old man, rejecting the rising of the new. p. 478, par. 1, [PIETIST]

Of course, this touches the doctrine of the old man and the new. The representation that the soul of the converted is an arena where the two are engaged in a hand-to-hand fight is incorrect, and has not a single satisfactory text for its support. We reject the two following representations: that of the Antinomian, who says: "The believing ego is the new man in Christ Jesus; I am not responsible for the old man, the personal, sinful ego; he may sin as much as he please"; and the representation of the Pietist, who considers him still the old man, partly renewed, and who is always busy to remodel him. These two do not belong to Christ's Church. p. 478, par. 2, [PIETIST]

The Scripture teaches, not that the old man is sanctified by being changed into the new; but that the old man must be mortified until nothing of him remains. Neither does it teach that in regeneration a small part only of the old man is renewed-the remainder to be patched up gradually, but that an entirely new man is implanted. This is of greatest importance for the right understanding of these holy things. Sin wrought in us an old man, the body of sin. not merely a part, but the whole, with all that belongs to him, body and soul. Hence that old man must die, and the Pietist with all his works of piety can never galvanize a single muscle in his body. He is altogether unprofitable, and must perish under his just condemnation. p. 478, par. 3, [PIETIST]

In like manner God graciously regenerates in us a new creature, which is also a complete man. Therefore we may not take the new man as the gradual restoration of the old. The two have nothing in common but the mutual basis of the same personality. The new does not spring from the old, but supersedes him. Being only in the germ, he may be buried in the newly regenerate, but he will arise and then God's work appears gloriously. God is his Author, Creator, and Father. Not the old man, but the new man cries out: "Abba, Father!" p. 478, par. 4, [PIETIST]

However, our ego is related to the dying old man and the rising new man. The ego of a non-elect person is identified with the old man; they are the same. But in the consummation of the heavenly glory, the ego of God's children is identified with the new man. p. 478, par. 5, [PIETIST]

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But during the days of our earthly life this is not so. The new man of an unregenerate, but elect person exists apart from him, but hid in Christ. He is still wedded to his old man. But in regeneration and conversion God dissolves this unholy marriage, and He unites his ego to the new man. Yet, despite all this, he is

not yet rid of the old man. Before God and the law, from the view point of eternity, he may be so considered, but not actually and really. p. 479, par. 1, [PIETIST]

And this is the cause of the conflict within and without. All evil ties are not dissolved at once, and all holy ties are not united at once. By the mystic union with Christ the child of God actually possesses the entire new man, even though he should die to-morrow; but he has not yet the enjoyment of it. Being wedded to the new man before God, he is, by a painful process, yet to die to the old man, and by divine grace the new man is to be raised in him. And this is his sanctification: the dying of the old and the rising of the new, by which God increases and we decrease. Blessed manifestation of faith! p. 479, par. 2, [PIETIST]