AN EXISTENTIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE
DOCTRINE OF HOLINESS

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If sanctification is a life, as well as a doctrine, it needs an adequate philosophical context to support it intellectually as a doctrine and to enforce its imperatives upon ourselves as individuals in a most vital and compelling way. There is a term, recently appropriated by a large segment of Christianity which bears in itself the moral urgency which has always characterized divine revelation and Biblical truth and preaching. The word is existentialism. In spite of the varied associations brought to this term which would be unacceptable to conservative thinking, there is a core meaning that ought not to be lost by way of intellectual default.

Religious existentialism is a reaction against hollow orthodoxy, falsely correct doctrine and any empty religious profession. It is an affirmation for theological truth presented in such a way that, when properly believed, it demands a thorough transformation of a man's everyday life. Its meaning is simple yet profound. It is eternal truth demonstrated in life situations. The danger in the "Neo Orthodox" emphasis is too great a surrender of the eternal truth. But the danger we face is in affirming a belief in the doctrine of holiness that does not issue in a full and satisfactory expression of that faith in daily living situations. The doctrine of holiness can never find its way into any museum of aesthetically superior creedal objects d'art. The decrees of the Council of Trent and the Westminster Confession are classic examples of creedal perfection. They are intellectual formulations calculated to win intellectual response only. This the doctrine of holiness can never be. It is an existential doctrine displaying its beauty and power, not in verbal eloquence and fine definition but in its morally transforming power in the lives of men. If it could be beautifully expressed apart from that life demonstration, its very beauty would condemn it because the degree of clarity with which it is understood becomes a measure of the
moral responsibility a man has to it. As a segment of Biblical truth it was given to live by not to look at and admire. The uniqueness of Biblical truth is its transforming power.

Jesus was the first real religious existentialist. He, perhaps, never framed a doctrine or issued a command which could be intellectually accepted apart from a radical change in the mode of a man's existence. Every thing he was as a Person or said as a teacher was disturbing to religious complacency, irritating to self-righteousness and terrifically demanding through and through the whole moral structure of man. His hearers had the Old Testament Scriptures, many of them kept the law, but Jesus had a way of stripping the abstractions away from the commandments with one stroke and with another laying bare the poverty stricken souls of men clothed with mere superficial obedience. He applied the law to conscience in a way that demanded a moral response.

No one heard Jesus speak without becoming better -- or worse. No one could listen to him without making some kind of a moral decision. In this Jesus gave truth an existential interpretation. Something had to happen and always did. Matthew heard Jesus' "follow me," and he left his money stall and followed. The rich, young ruler's strict and noble orthodoxy collapsed before the existential interpretation of the law by Jesus. He went sorrowfully away to a deformed life, not a transformed one. Saul (Paul) was confronted by an existential presentation of Christ's person to him. He cried out, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"-- he was told what to do -- and he did it.

Jesus did not underestimate the law or abrogate it, or discredit it, he simply crowded it in on the human conscience until it left no room for mere intellectual approval or mere emotional response or mere verbal assent. Men were forced to put themselves, from the profoundest depth of human personality, in a different relationship to God, to themselves, to others, -- a change which revolutionized the total man, for better or for worse.
The doctrine of sanctification is an existential doctrine more profoundly than it can be said to be a formal doctrine, and it must be existentially interpreted. He who professes this doctrine must, moreover, judge himself by this interpretation. He dare not measure himself and his progress in grace, against too low a level of an understanding of Jesus’ demands nor too complacent a satisfaction with himself as a Christian. He must never underestimate the mystery of the grace of cleansing which the coming of the Holy Spirit provides and he must testify to that grace with the deepest humility and thankfulness, but he must also be forever aware of the fact that sanctification is a radical life transformation, demanding moral alterations running inward to the deepest root of the human personality. Life commitments were contracted at the altar of consecration that cannot remain there at the altar, forgotten or neglected. God’s grace is forfeited by persistently broken promises and failure to daily comply with the existential interpretations of the doctrine of holiness that demanded our decision in the first place.

We are indebted to John Wesley for rediscovering and revitalizing the doctrine of perfection. The perfection which God demands, said he, is the perfection of love. Sanctification is perfect love. But what, we may ask, is perfect love? And we go back to Jesus to find the answer, as Wesley did.

The first commandment is, Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is no other commandment greater than these (Mark 12: 29-31).

Here in a few words is an existential interpretation of holiness that respects yet cuts through all intellectual and creedal formulations and lays bare the human heart before its truth.

When we say, “I love the Lord with all my heart” we have this standard by which to judge our sincerity and it can be a very humbling experience.
These words of Jesus compel a correction to every low view of sanctification. First, it is a definition, with intellectual content in contrast to emotionalism and irrational systems. Love is a hard word to define. No New Testament writer attempts a formal, abstract definition of it. The reason is that love is never an abstraction. It cannot be defined apart from description or illustration and that is precisely what Jesus does. And it cuts to the quick just as Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 cuts to the quick. If it isn't lived, it is too hot to handle. But secondly, the definition by way of intellectual content is so stated as to expose lack of sincerity and to force a genuine personal decision. An examination of the setting of the text shows that Jesus had been under attack from the Pharisees, Saducees, and the scribes. They had asked a number of trick questions in an attempt to trap Jesus. The question asked about the most important commandment was probably another trick question. Jesus answered as the text indicates and -- "no man after that durst ask him any more questions," Why? Because he had trapped them by an existential interpretation of the law. It was no longer simply an intellectual game, but a deadly serious condemnation of moral failure and they knew it. What mattered it whether the commandments were correctly evaluated? Suddenly, corrections ceased to be an intellectual matter, only, and it became a matter of existential concern. Do I keep the commandments? Do I keep them in the way that I know they ought to be kept? These are always uncomfortable questions. And, thirdly, Jesus put this very personal relationship to the law at the very heart of religion. Here is obedience to God taken out of the realm of mere duty, or calculated impeccability and put into the realm of love. It is life crowded to its outside limits with service. Here is not a compartmentalized life -- church duties, home duties, personal rights -- and sacred duties and secular duties, with always a question as to where one ended and the other began -- but life lived in a prodigality of love for God and others that left no room for questions of religious legalism.
When we face this passage of Scripture we are hard-hearted indeed if we do not search our own profession of grace and ask questions of ourselves that may well put us on our knees.

"Thou shalt love the Lord they God with all thy heart."

An existential interpretation of the doctrine of holiness -- or perfect love, -- does not see law primarily as an imposition of obligations upon us, but it does require of us a love to God that proceeds from the deepest depth of human personality up and out to the farthest edge of everything we do. The heart includes the emotions, of course, but signifies a depth of being, beyond and underneath emotions and will and motives. It is the mainspring of life which determines the character of everything we think and do. To love with the whole of the heart means that a civil revolution has taken place in the center of our beings which has dethroned selfishness and "my-way-ish-ness" and has enthroned Christ as Lord. This revolution is always bloody. Somebody dies a violent death. Negatively it always involves a crucifixion of every false object of affection, myself included. Invariably it occurs in a moment of the most profound obedience. It is probably never an abstract promise of obedience, "I'll do what you want me to do, Dear Lord" but always a concrete example of obedience which must be acted upon, immediately.

It may seem a very small thing we have to do, but it is always a very touchy and even a painful thing which will be seen later to run directly to the main artery of the spiritual heart. It is a shock to dethrone self -- but Jesus' existential interpretation of law remains a judgment over us -- not a consolation, until that crucial work is done.

But love is positive too. It is always an outflowing of life's energies. Love is movement. It is not passive and static, but a quality that colors everything we do. Love, as a principle, cannot be defined or located. Love, as a profession, does not distinguish one person from another. But love out of the whole heart gives a fragrance to life that cannot be hidden. It becomes a norm by which distinctions are made between the good and best. It clothes crude, imperfect conduct and faltering service with a winsomeness and loveliness that is always the
hall-mark of a sanctified person. There is no bitterness in love. There is no edginess in it or vindictiveness in any measure. There is good-will through and through it, pouring out in streams of unstudied expression in perfect keeping with the person's natural personality not ever an artificial one.

Do I have love like that? Is my total personality nourished by the artery of love to God and pouring out in service or am I like the Salten Sea in the desert of Southern California which is:

- A sapphire in a dull gold setting
- A sea lower than sea
- A broken promise to a thirsty land
- The desert's mockery. (Sunset Magazine)

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy mind."

Loving God with the whole mind is putting at God's disposal all the intellectual faculties with which we are endowed. It has to do with ability to understand truth. It involves all our capacities for rational thinking and spiritual insights. Love from the whole mind is not a cheap and easy mental assert to truth, after which all curiosity and mental alertness and desire for learning is stilled. It is not the disposition to throw on the Lord the full obligations to fill our gaping mouths with overwhelming brilliance in the hour of service. Loving God with the mind is inconsistent with a closed mind, a mind which rejects investigation and inquiry and fails to rush the fullest possible development of every ability to think properly. God gave man a rational nature as the only reliable way by which he could reveal himself to man. Emotions cannot be a source of revelation. Emotions prompt actions but cannot define its own impulse or interpret truth. The will cannot create truth. The will can only force decisions presented by the mind, never can it stand in judgment over truth. The mind, alone, is the slender thread linking God to man. The stewardship of mental development then is a moral obligation upon us, for only as we nourish this area into full maturity can God make Himself known to us maturely and use us as proper instruments for the Kingdom. God has been forced to forge out sections of the
kingdom with blunted, twisted mental tools for lack of ready men and women and the result is a distorted segment of the kingdom. This existential interpretation of perfect love, stands in grim judgment over any indolence on my part as to my stewardship over my mind.

Loving God with the whole mind involves a passionate endeavor to sharpen that rational tool to its keenest edge. It means that no shoddy, bluffing approach to learning will ever be permitted. It means that we live in the constant awareness that we will be required to give an account of our use of our minds. Did we mufF an opportunity to make a proper and wise and tactful answer to some inquirer after Christ, because we had not adequately prepared our minds to serve God? Then our guilt is great and our repentence must include renewed preparation and discipline. The man or woman who fails to love God with his whole mind can no more expect God to use him greatly or bless him in service or provide him with a depth of understanding of the Scripture, or even to keep him in the center of God’s will in life than one who fails to love God with his whole heart. The Spirit of Truth, which sanctifies, leads us into all truth. He never implants it or drives us into it or violates in any way man’s own initiative in the matter of learning. If we do not keep step with the Spirit of Truth we stand in danger of losing his presence. When I say, "I love the Lord supremely" do I mean that I actually do love him enough to give him as well a prepared mental instrument as it is in my power to provide? Can I honestly say I love him and fail in this matter? Perfect love or sanctification had in it, not as a rider in the contract, but as a main obligation printed in large type the life-long obligation to conscientiously keep a well-disciplined and well-stocked and well-sanctified intelligence through which God can work. Have I kept my part of the contract?

The existential interpretation of the doctrine of holiness then, includes two main emphases: first, attention to the verbal expression of doctrine, as Biblically presented by means of which a strict account may be kept of our stewardship; and second, attention to an adequate life expression of that doctrine in terms of a personal moral transformation.
Sanctification is an act and a life. It is a crisis and a process. It is doctrine but it is doctrine in shoe leather, as well as on the books. Its beauty is not mainly in words, for words apart from vital living condemn it. Its loveliness and power is in a life lived out by the grace of God. Holiness can never be accepted, intellectually, as a philosophy of life, merely. It turns gangrenous apart from the constant flow of living blood out of the deepest heart. Sanctification does not provide character in a nice, neat bundle at an altar, but it clears the ground for character building and remains as a vital relationship to God so long as the recipient works the ground.

Holiness means something. It means everything. It means a beginning but it also means a continuing—and more than that, it means a constantly augmented enlargement of love commensurate with the daily growth of human personality. It may begin in a small soul but no soul can remain small and retain it. It may begin in ignorance but it cannot thrive in ignorance. It may begin in promises but it dies apart from the fulfillment of promises that involves the stewardship of personality development in every area.

To be confronted by the doctrine of holiness is the same as being confronted by Christ. To be confronted by Christ is personal judgment. In Him the law is personified. In Him, all the demands of God, crowd themselves upon us for immediate personal decision. The Bible does not leave us with a historical Christ, only. It confronts us with our living Lord, who cannot be heard by the intellect alone, nor be judged by the intellect, alone. He is heard by the whole man and will be accepted or rejected by the whole man in radical moral decision. To reject Him, thus, however much one may retain an intellectual belief in Him, clouds the heart and darkens the light which illumines the pages of the Bible and makes of it mere words upon which men break fellowship. To accept Him involves the whole man in a moral revolution which transforms the very spring of life itself and thrusts His beauty into every area of a man's nature and service. Sanctification, then, grows up with life, is co-extensive with life, is a dynamic as life for it is the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus.