

THE UNDERSTANDING OF SANCTIFICATION IN THE WRITINGS OF ELLEN G WHITE

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to determine Ellen White's concept of sanctification or spiritual holiness. Ellen White's definition of sanctification is biblical, gradual, maturing process and a goal for Christian living. She agrees on the point that two elements of justification are distinctive even though they are inseparable, and that justification is the starting point for spirituality. She points out that sanctification experience is as importance to say as for that final judgment because without holiness no one can see God. She considers Christian life as pilgrimage and holiness or sanctification as fitness for heaven. She recognizes that sanctification is not just an emotional thing but it must be manifested inwardly and outwardly in a genuine Christian life. She emphasizes the importance of genuine faith that manifests by good works. She recognizes the Holy Spirit as the agent of sanctification, salvation as restoring man in the image of his Maker, perfection as growing in love rather than faultless or sinless, and holy living as Christian purpose of existence

Key words: Justification, sanctification, holiness

Introduction

Ellen Gould Harmon, the youngest of the eight children was born to the family of Robert and Eunice Harmon on November 26, 1827, in the village of Gorham, Maine, in America. Harmon family was devoted members of the Methodist Episcopal Church and they were faithful, active in church activities until they were dismissed from the Church in 1843 because of their acceptance of the second Advent message.¹

When Ellen was still young her family moved to Portland village in the same state. There in Portland something terrible happen that would change the course of her life. At the age of nine while she with her twin sister Elizabeth was returning home from school a girl about thirteen years old threw a stone at her face hitting her nose. The incident made her health weaken and her formal education impossible.²

However, this misfortune turned to be a blessing in disguise since it provided opportunity to develop better relationship with her Savior.³

Long sickness let her to reflect on her life and William Miller's first visit to Portland in 1840 led twelve-years-old Ellen to be aware of her spiritual need. During

¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 9.

²Ibid., 9-13.

³Ibid., 19.

those meeting her feeling of not being “worthy to be called a child of God” brought her into despair.⁴

Her Childhood and First Conversion

This crisis continued until the summer of 1842, when she attended a Methodist camp meeting at Buxton, Maine, where she could find what she had been looking for a long time. She finally settled her quest in spiritual life not by “self-dependence” but only “by connecting with Jesus through faith that the sinner becomes a hopeful, believing child of God.”⁵

What she had been looking for all the time was the “spiritual ecstasy” that she considered would be the evidence of her acceptance with God. While earnestly and persistently seeking the Lord for forgiveness at the “altar” and sensing her helpless condition, she felt her burdens suddenly lifted and enjoyed a lightheartedness that seemed too good to be true. She described how she felt as she secured her assurance as the following: “There was a surety in my heart that He understood my peculiar trials and sympathized with me. I can never forget this precious assurance of the pitying tenderness of Jesus toward one so unworthy of His notice. I learned more of the divine character of Christ in that short period when bowed among the praying ones that ever before.”⁶

Her Second Blessing Experience

In June 1842, not long after Ellen White became an official member of the Methodist Church, William Miller came for the second round lectures on Second Advent of Christ. During those advent meetings Ellen White wanted to be sanctified and felt that she was not ready for Christ’s coming. She realizes that mere belief in the soon coming of Christ would not save her, that what she really needed was purifying power of the truth.⁷

She longed for sanctification of soul but did not know how to secure it. She said: “My mind constantly dwelt upon the subject of holiness of heart. I longed above all things to this great blessing and feel that I was entirely accepted of God.”⁸

She could not have a clear understanding of sanctification. She was not able to differentiate sanctification from justification. She saw many spiritual ecstasies

⁴Ibid., 14-15.

⁵Ibid., 16-17.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Woodrow W. Whidden II, *Ellen White on Salvation* (Hagerstown, MD.: Review & Herald, 1995), 17-18.

⁸White, *Testimonies*, Vol. 1, 26.

that they called “second blessing” or “full salvation” or “entire sanctification” or “Perfect love” or “holiness of heart,” or “Christian perfection.”⁹

She knew that she did not have such kind of electrifying experience and she thought that was because of her belief in Jesus’ imminent coming. Knowing that without holiness one should not see God and her without having that experience had kept her in a state of great despair for there long weeks.¹⁰

Finally, however, her two consecutive dreams combined with encouragement from her mother and Elder Stockman led her to the sanctification experience that she had been so much longing for.¹¹

In her first dream she saw a temple. In that temple she saw bleeding lamb tied to the central and only pillar of the temple. All who entered the temple must come before the lamb and confess their sin. This dream gave her a new perspective to look for her salvation other than looking herself or her good works. Jesus Christ and His sacrifice became the basis for her sanctification.

In another dream she saw Jesus and she received from Him a “green cord (which) represented faith,” which is “the beauty and simplicity of trusting in God.” These two dreams helped her to understand the ground and means of her sanctification experience. Christ’s righteous is our ground for sanctification and faith in Him is means towards holiness.¹²

Before long while she was attending a prayer meeting, she received a “great blessing” that affected her both physically and spiritually and she could not return home immediately. She began to see God as a loving father rather than a stern tyrant master. She followed Him in a deep and fervent love. She felt the assurance of an indwelling Savior. For six months she was in a “perfect bliss.”¹³

It is no doubt that Ellen White’s sanctification experience was a kind of Methodist second blessing experience even though the crisis was brought on by urgent expectation of Christ’s imminent return rather than the Methodist Holiness revival of her days. Though she herself said that her conversion was not by Methodism the experience itself and the language she used to describe her feeling about her second conversion experience are quite evident that she had a Methodist “second blessing” many American Methodists of her days fervently advocated and expected.¹⁴

⁹Ibid., 27-32.

¹⁰Ibid., 30-32.

¹¹Ibid.22,37.

¹²Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 21.

¹³White, *Testimonies*, Vol. 1, 338-340.

¹⁴Ibid., 16,17.

Ellen White's Concept of Sanctification

Now let us discover how Ellen White understands the nature and meaning, ground and means, the role of the Holy Spirit, and Christian perfection in connection with the doctrine of sanctification or spiritual holiness.

Nature and Meaning

According to Ellen White, sanctification is a state of perfect happiness and holiness in mind. She herself claimed to have received sanctification experience by accepting the timely message of Jesus coming. She believed that only those who accept all the biblical truths could enjoy this blessing because the true sanctification is an entire conformity to the will of God.¹⁵ Biblical passages Ellen White used to support her concept of sanctification are such as the following: 2 Cor. 4:3,4; 7:1; John 17:17,19; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2 Pet. 3:14,18; Phil. 2:12-15; 3:12; John 15:3; and Eph. 5:25-27.¹⁶

Sanctification, Ellen White says, is not a momentous work. It is gradual and lifelong growth in grace. Biblical sanctification has both inward and outward dimension. The hearts of penitent sinners are cleansed by the truth and their character are reflected in their daily lives. A genuine Christian is always perfect in a sense and yet ever needs to be matured. The Son of Man was perfect Christian may increase continually in the knowledge and love of God.’’¹⁷

Ground and Means

Ellen White's struggle in life was to get rid of her sins because she thought that if life would good enough God would accept her as His own. She longed to be a Christian and felt it requires becoming worthy of God's favor instead of claiming His promises.¹⁸

Then she began to realize that she must have total dependence upon Jesus Christ-our only ground for justification as well as sanctification. God's mercy of grace was freely offered and sinner's participation was just to put forth the hand of faith to accept His provision.¹⁹ Her two dreams crystallized her understanding to see the importance of Christ's righteousness as sinner only God's sanctifying act. Her definition of genuine faith is as follows: Truth faith lays hold of and claims the promised blessing before it is realized and felt. I have seen that we must send up our

¹⁵White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol.2, 291.

¹⁶White, *Testimonies*, Vol. 1, 24-25.

¹⁷Ibid., 338-340.

¹⁸Ibid., 338-339.

¹⁹Ibid., 99.

petitions in faith within the second vail and take hold of the promised blessing, and claim it as ours. And we are than to believe that the blessing is ours, and that we receive it, because our faith has hold of it, and according to the word it is ours.²⁰

Faith is dependent on mutual trusting relationship with God. Prior to her new relationship with her Savior as a loving and tender Friend she could not find peace in her mind due to the fact that she considered God as a tyrant who delighted in watching and punishing those who made mistakes. Now she could see Him as a kind, loving Father and thus she could establish a trusting relationship and she would serve Him in perfect love.

Role of the Holy Spirit

Ellen White fully believes that both of her conversion experience were by the influence of the Holy Spirit. Through His convincing power sinners repented and were cleansed by obeying the truth (1 Pet. 1:22). It is the work of the Holy Spirit that changes the hearts as the channel of truth. It is the Sanctifying power of a professed Christian.²¹ Indeed, a genuine Christian will bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit in his life thereby providing evidence for that influence of His sanctifying power (Gal. 5:22,23).

The entire spirituality or holiness of a Christian life is totally dependent upon the working of the Holy Spirit because it is the Holy Spirit Working whit in a repentant sinner's heart that a hopeless sinner into a perfect saint.²² Unless Christian life bears fruit of the Holy Spirit, he or she may not receive God's approval.²³

Christian Perfection

Since sanctification is a lifelong work, there is no point of time, Ellen White says, on can claim that he or she has attained perfection (Phil. 3:12). It is constantly an onward marc. When God's people as an individual as well are perfect and holy and ready for His kingdom. There is constant work for the part a believer to cooperative with the working of the Holy Spirit in perfecting of the saints.²⁴

Ellen white used Jesus as a man to illustrate what is like to be a perfect Christian. Though the Man Jesus was perfect He grew in grace (Luke 2:52).

²⁰White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2, 291.

²¹White, *Testimonies*, Vol. 1, 388.

²²Ibid., 99.

²³Ibid., 289.

²⁴Ibid., 340.

Likewise, even the most perfect Christian may increase continually in the knowledge and love of God.²⁵

Christians are heavenly travelers. Jesus Christian is our Pattern as was well as our Guide. Everyone should strive to excel in imitating Him. On the way to the heavenly kingdom the pilgrims must reflect Jesus Christ in words and in deeds because only those who are purified and holy through suffering, and “have kept themselves separate, unspotted from **the world, He will own as His.**”²⁶

Conclusion

Ellen White’s definition of sanctification is biblical, gradual, maturing process and a goal for Christian living. She agree on the point that justification two elements are distinctive even though they are inseparable, and that justification is the starting point for spirituality. She point out that sanctification experience is as importance to say as for that final judgment because without holiness no one can see God. She considers Christian life as pilgrimage and holiness or sanctification as fitness for heaven. She recognizes that sanctification is not just an emotional thing but it must be manifested inwardly and outwardly in a genuine Christian life.

She emphasizes the importance of genuine faith that manifests by good works. She recognizes the Holy Spirit as the agent of sanctification, salvation as restoring man in the image of His Marker, perfection as growing in love rather than faultless or sinless, and holy living as Christian purpose of existence. She admits a true Christian is perfect but be always sought after but never should be boast full of possessing it. She rejects the idea of faultless or sinless perfection.

²⁵Ibid., 339-340.

²⁶Ibid., 123-133.

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