

A Response to the article, “A Dialogue Between Wesley and Confucius on the Theme of Sanctification” by Dr. Seung-an Im

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Introduction

In response to the article, “A Dialogue Between Wesley and Confucius on the Theme of Sanctification,” by Dr. Im, I would try to assimilate some historical views regarding sanctification.

Augustine once said, “Inchoate love, therefore, is inchoate holiness; advanced love is advanced holiness; great love is great holiness; ‘perfect love is perfect holiness....’”¹ But reading several treatises of Augustine, I found out of his inconsistent view on the subject of holiness.² In response to heretics of the day like the Pelagians, Augustine published treatises refuting the possibility of moral holiness. Often said, Pelagians, because of their belief on free will thereby giving power to human to choose good is made possible, for after all, Adam’s sin is not posterity but just imitation.³ Augustine, a *sola gracia* professor never felt ease on the issue that began to influence Latin Christians, penned several articles disproving free will and in effect giving negative views on holiness.

Tantamount to the above statement, one of the great advocates of the teaching of holiness is John Wesley to whom we owe our ecclesiastical heritage. Aside from many of his sermons which discussed the optimistic view of holiness, the well known *On Plain Account of Christian Perfection* has clearly explained the great possibility of holiness in this life both inward and outward. However and interestingly, Wesley emphasized perfect or “pure” love to be the mark of holiness or sanctification.⁴

Wesley’s doctrine of holiness is grounded upon the tripartite grace of God such as *preventing grace, saving or convincing grace and sanctifying grace*. In Wesley’s sermon, “On

¹ Augustine, *On Nature and Grace, Against Pelagius, Chapter 48*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, series 1, volume 1 (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*: CD Rom, version 4, Calvin College: Grand Rapids, Michigan).

² See for example, Augustine, *Concerning Man’s Perfection in Righteousness*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, series 1, volume 1 (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*: CD Rom, Version 4, Calvin College: Grand Rapids, Michigan). Augustin refuted Coelestius of the latter’s position that human can live righteously because of free will.

³ See, W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 652-680; Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 135, 268-277; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, vol. 4*, trans. Placid Solari (Allen, Texas : Christian Classics, 1995), 462-67; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500, vol. 1* (Peabody: Prince Press, 2000), 173-180; E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 327-338.

⁴ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, chapter 8, (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, CD Rom, version 4, Calvin College: Grand Rapids Michigan).

Working Out Our Own Salvation,” he dealt with these three graces on the issue of human’s full recovery to the image of God. Never can anyone be convinced prior to the work of God’s preventing grace. Preventing grace according to Wesley is synonymous with natural image,⁵ which was not totally affected after the fall.⁶ However, in relation to the issue of natural image, one cannot separate to deal with the issue of total depravity, which became obvious on Dr. Im’s paper. But, the paper contradicts itself in viewing Wesley’s understanding of total depravity. While Dr. Im emphasized Wesley’s basic position on total depravity of humanity as Augustinian in former pages of his paper, in the part “optimistic potentiality of humanity” he dealt with human’s unaffected “natural conscience” after the fall, thereby remained human’s capability to understand, will and choose. If this is the case then, Wesley was not Augustinian since Augustine himself taught that everything in human’s image of God was lost after the fall and that includes natural conscience since conscience itself is given by God and therefore according to his image.⁷ According to the author, despite humanity’s fall, still, they are capable to understand, will and choose. When we say total depravity all in human nature is corrupted, depraved and turned back to its real sense of darkness and therefore incapable even to understand, will and choose what is good or bad. In Wesley’s sermon “On the fall of man,” he mentioned that what was totally lost on man was the moral of image of God. He also added that only “part” of the natural image, which was also an indication of God’s image to man was lost.⁸ In this case, I would say that Wesley was semi-Augustinian. Wesley’s basic position in dealing with the issue of human depravity is important in relation to understanding moral holiness. As we see, natural image or conscience works to initiate significant steps toward moral holiness.

I. Wesley’s Position on Sanctification Communicable To Any Culture

The understanding of Sanctification differs from one’s own cultural identity. This is what I see upon reading Dr. Im’s paper. In addition, Wesley’s view of sanctification has several incompatibilities compared to other’s understanding and context. I agree with Dr. Im in some of his points especially in specifying the compatibilities of Wesley and Confucius’s teaching on the subject. However, I beg to disagree to him especially on the major one dealing with “incompatibilities.” When we say “incompatible” it would mean something contradictory. Tracing back the history of the church, Augustine dealt against Pelagius in many of his writings because of doctrinal “incompatibilities.” Or, Irenaeus against Gnostics. Both parties did not work

⁵ John Wesley, “Sermon: On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” III:4 (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, CD Rom, version 4, Calvin College: Grand Rapids, Michigan).

⁶ John Wesley, “Sermon: On the Fall of Man,” II:6 (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, CD Rom, version 4, Calvin College: Grand Rapids, Michigan).

⁷ See Augustine, *On Nature and Grace, Against Pelagius, Chapter 3*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, series 1, volume 1 (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*: CD Rom, Version 4, Calvin College: Grand Rapids, Michigan).

⁸ Wesley, “Sermon: On the Fall of Man,” II:6.

well together and as a result was the condemnation of the latter. Only one excelled upon the other.

Ideally, it is more appropriate to say that it was just Wesley's "method," in dealing with the context of his day to awaken people spiritually, which of course led to social change, which is different to Confucius. While Wesley taught biblically, Confucius taught practically according to the knowledge he gained and the availability of materials of his day. But as theologians, professors and church leaders of today who acknowledge ecclesiastical heritage from Wesley, let us be careful to emphasize the distinctions of our biblically founded doctrine to our very own culture. It is very dangerous as it may just widen the gap between the cultures that we have and what we believe as biblically relevant. It is not bad to contextualize the gospel or the doctrine like entire sanctification but not ideal to treat our own culture superior. As Christian, I firmly believe that the message of the gospel is always and must be above to anyone's culture. To this we could say that Wesley's teaching of biblical holiness is fairly communicable to any culture.

II Confucius's Understanding of Sanctification (Shen) complements that of Wesley's

Dr. Im tries to show the integrity of Confucius's teaching of holiness from an anthropological point of view, which he said, is in some ways different compared to what Wesley taught. Of course, Wesley's understanding of sanctification is firmly biblical and therefore theological, which became relevant to the pre-religious Wesleyan institution such as the Church of the Nazarene international. But how to bridge the gap between these two camps, which also represent in some way the west and the east culture, is what I see as the purpose of this paper – and that must be commended.

What the paper traced concerning teachings of both Wesley and Confucius is for me complementary and not incompatible. Of course the obvious possible disagreement to my position is the issue of Wesley's theological and spiritual spectra whereas Confucius was anthropological and social.⁹ Using the Bible as his basic instrument to lead a revolution of spiritual change, Wesley toured in almost every place of England preaching the message of holiness. And by the grace of God, his effort did not go in vain. Wesley's influence became monumental that it even spread not only in Europe but also in almost all over the world. But thousand of years before Wesley, Confucius of China made an immense influence upon the lives of his people. His teachings, which are regarded as highly significant until today in the countries like Korea, Japan and China, became pavement to ethical change of his people. His golden rule "Do not do to others what would you not like yourself," which is a direct semblance of Matthew 7:12 though stated negatively, became memorable. Confucius's effort, which has been seen in his *Analects*, never went in vain. But the question one may raise is this: "What was the purpose of these two well known teachers?" – the obvious answer would be: "To help people change and get better spiritually (inward) and morally (outward)." Is there any difference? Yes and No! No –

⁹ Compare for example Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* and Confucius's and his disciples on the *Sayings of Lun Yu (499)*, translated in English, www.confucius.org. Access, September 27, 2003. Tzeng Tzu and Yu Tzu were only two of Confucius's disciples who acknowledge trustworthiness and filial piety as very important obligation of individual. Both Confucius and later Mencius gave the same weight on the significance of filial piety in this life.

“if man is clean on the inside, he or she must be clean on the outside because what the inside desires can and will happen.” “Yes – if human is clean on the outside, it does not mean that he is clean on the inside.” Therefore, Confucius’s ethical teachings would complement Wesley’s biblical holiness or perfect love but not vice versa. Wesley’s goal is dual and that is inward and moral or outward holiness while Confucius is moral or outward holiness.

Conclusion

See this truth, the real concept of holiness according to Wesley is perfect love or love for God and fellowmen while to Confucius in order to obtain “shen” or sanctification, one has to exercise filial piety and love for neighbor. The only difference according to Dr. Im is that Wesley believed that perfect love is obtainable by God’s grace whereas to Confucius it is attainable by human practice and effort. However, they are bifocal in a sense of having moral purity. Filipinos do not disregard both. In fact, the “untraced” Filipino trait of “pakikipag-kapwa tao” (having a good relationship with fellowmen) is very important that even today has been treated as highly significant. Then when the Spaniards came, “pagiging makadiyos” (becoming godly) became part of the Filipino religious heritage, which, of course, in a sense relevant to conceptualize Wesley’s understanding of biblical holiness.

Though I agree to Dr. Im’s concluding remarks which aim to validate the necessity of teaching holiness in relation to one’s own culture, I would also say that there is a danger behind it. It is like bending what we believe as a biblically founded doctrine to make it synonymous or inferior to one’s own culture. I do not say that we should neglect the culture that we have. But the Bible and all the doctrines that come out of it must be treated superior and used as an instrument to straighten some of our wrong cultures. It could be so since culture is dynamic. In Wesleyan quadrilateral, the Bible is always treated supreme in order to have a right doctrinal direction. As Nazarene and privileged to have the heritage of Wesleyan tradition, I would dare to say that the Bible itself is the supreme instrument for the propagation of faith and doctrine. Wesley, the *homo unius libri* never hesitated to deal with the basic issues using the Bible as the sole material. However, he never had forgotten the other three significant devices in verifying ecclesiastical teachings but they serve as supplementary to the Bible.

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