

KESWICK SANCTIFICATION

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The doctrine of sanctification is something that ought to interest every Christian. Deep in the heart of those who have truly come to Christ, there is a desire to live a holy life in practical experience. It was out of this commendable desire to experience holy living that the idea of Keswick sanctification was born.

### ESSENCE OF KESWICK SANCTIFICATION

Keswick sanctification is the teaching that Christians can experience continuous victory over sin through the power of the Holy Spirit which counteracts the downward pull of the flesh.<sup>1</sup> As the law of gravity can be counteracted by the laws of aerodynamics, so the law of sin can be counteracted by the law of the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Thus, holiness cannot come through human self-effort, but only through faith in the power of Christ to sanctify.<sup>3</sup> According to Keswick teaching, normally a Christian will come to a crisis point in his life in which he is frustrated with his struggle against sin. In this crisis God reveals to him the truth that he cannot live victoriously in his own strength. Instead he must surrender to Christ trusting in His power to give victory. Though, according to Keswick teaching, it is theoretically possible for a Christian to come to this truth at the moment of salvation, it usually happens at a time subsequent to conversion.<sup>4</sup> The believer will go through a time of intense struggle and frustration before he finds the secret of victory.<sup>5</sup> The struggle with the feeling of inadequacy to live the Christian life ends with an

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<sup>1</sup> J. Robertson McQuilkin, "The Keswick Perspective" in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987): 155. William W. Combs, "The Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, 6, (Fall 2001): 25. <http://www.dbts.edu/journals/2001/Combs.pdf>. Keswick sanctification has never taught eradication of the sin nature, only 'counteraction'.

<sup>2</sup> The writer heard this illustration given in a sermon at Calvary Baptist Church, Warren, Maine.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Whitehall Smith, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 3. Though Mrs. Smith was never officially part of the Keswick Conventions, her teaching could be described as Keswick sanctification.

<sup>4</sup> V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), xv.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, xiii.

emotional experience of peace and rest in the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

### HISTORY OF KESWICK SANCTIFICATION

The Keswick movement has its roots in the Wesleyan tradition and the American Holiness Movement. In 1873, Robert Pearsall Smith traveled to England in hopes to recover from a two-year long bout with headaches. He and his wife, Hannah Whitehall Smith, had made a name for themselves as speakers in the Holiness Movement in America. In England he met with clergymen to talk about holiness and the ‘higher life.’<sup>7</sup> One of those clergymen was Evan Hopkins, Vicar of Holy Trinity in Richmond. One evening in Hopkins’ home, he had a spiritual experience as Smith convinced him of his need for the higher life.<sup>8</sup> He became one of the early leaders of Keswick.

In 1874, at conventions held in Broadlands on July 17-23 and Oxford on Aug. 8-Sept. 1, the American holiness teachings were promulgated. T. D. Harford-Battersby, an Anglican clergyman from the town of Keswick in the lake district of England, attended the Oxford convention and heard William Boardman, Robert Pearsall Smith, and Hannah who had recently arrived from America. At first he was frustrated thinking the teaching to be Scripturally unsound.<sup>9</sup> Later at the same convention, he was convinced when he was greatly moved by an address given by Evan Hopkins. The next morning he awoke “with a sweet sense of His blessed presence and indwelling.”<sup>10</sup> After returning to his parish in Keswick, he determined to hold his own convention in June 1875. The keynote speaker would be Robert Pearsall Smith. Before the

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit-Filled Life*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), 59-62.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase ‘higher life’ was commonly used in the American Holiness Movement. It was very similar, almost a synonym of the Wesleyan second blessing. The phrase became popular through William Boardman’s book, *The Higher Christian Life*.

<sup>8</sup> J. C. Pollock, *The Keswick Story*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964), 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> In reply to a lady who asked him whether he could accept the teaching, Harford-Battersby replied, “No, I cannot. And I do not believe it is sound, or in accordance with Scripture.” *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

first Keswick Convention, Smith spoke at Brighton from May 29 to June 7, 1875. A couple of weeks later a scandal broke that Robert Pearsall Smith had been involved in some inappropriate conduct with a woman.<sup>11</sup> Because of this scandal, Smith never spoke at Keswick, though it was directly through his instruction that Hopkins and Harford-Battersby experienced the ‘higher life.’

Despite Smith’s absence due to the scandal, the first meeting at Keswick went on as planned. It has continued in some form to this day.<sup>12</sup> D. L. Moody’s teaching gendered sympathy for Keswick sanctification in America. His Northfield conferences were similar to Keswick in that he taught a baptism of the Spirit subsequent to conversion. Although he could claim an experience which he called the baptism of the Spirit, he never was able to fully endorse Keswick sanctification. He could not quite bring himself to make the same claims of victory, since he had known Pearsall Smith and other inconsistent Holiness leaders.<sup>13</sup> His teaching on the baptism of the Holy Spirit seems to have had more to do with special power for service, rather than complete victory over sin.<sup>14</sup> Many influential names in modern Church history have been associated with Keswick, such as: A. T. Pierson, F. B. Meyer, Andrew Murray, W. H. Griffith Thomas, C. I. Scofield, J. Hudson Taylor, W. Graham Scroggie, and Alan Redpath.<sup>15</sup> The thing that each of these famous Christians have in common is a similar crisis experience and belief in a Keswick type of sanctification.

#### CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCE OF KESWICK SANCTIFICATION

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<sup>11</sup> Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude, 1872-1921*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 56. Smith’s daughter Alys married Bertrand Russell. Monk gives some interesting information about Pearsall Smith’s immoral conduct. “At the root of the scandal was what his wife, Hannah, called: ‘the subtle doctrine concerning the physical manifestation of the Holy Spirit.’ Taking the image of Christ as the Bridegroom of his followers to its literal conclusion, Robert preached that religious holiness, the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was a kind of consummation so akin to the sexual kind that it could be brought about by sexual submission to one already inspired.”

<sup>12</sup> [www.keswickministries.org](http://www.keswickministries.org)

<sup>13</sup> Pollock, *Keswick Story*, 66-67.

<sup>14</sup> Wholesome Words, Christian Biography Resources, “Why God used D. L. Moody,” R. A. Torrey, [www.wholesomewords.org/biography/biomooody6.html](http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/biomooody6.html).

Although the Keswick Convention is a far cry from what it used to be,<sup>16</sup> there are still strong influences today that promote Keswick sanctification. The *Scofield Reference Bible* interprets Romans 7-8 in a Keswick way. In this passage Paul's struggle is said to be "the record of past conflicts and defeats experienced as a renewed man under law."<sup>17</sup> This Keswick influence in the *Scofield Reference Bible* has been felt throughout Fundamentalist circles. Lewis Sperry Chafer was influenced by Scofield and carried a modified form of Keswick-style teaching into Dallas Theological Seminary.<sup>18</sup> Andrew Murray's books which are still found in abundance in Christian bookstores are full of Keswick teaching.<sup>19</sup> Charles Stanley, famous leader of *In Touch Ministries*, wrote a book on sanctification entitled, *The Wonderful Spirit-Filled Life*. The book is heavily influenced by Keswick teaching. He quotes Hannah Whitehall Smith<sup>20</sup> and speaks about his own experience which came one afternoon while he was reading about J. Hudson Taylor's 'second blessing' experience.<sup>21</sup> These contemporary illusions to Keswick sanctification have a subtle influence on Christians today who may have never even heard of the Keswick Convention. These Christians have a common frustration of struggle with sin, desire for holiness, and hope that through some immediate experience they may be released from the battle. They read these types of books that claim to provide the answer in Keswick sanctification and try to create the same crisis experience about which the author has written. In this way Keswick teaching is still influential.

## EVALUATION OF KESWICK SANCTIFICATION

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<sup>15</sup> Combs, *Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Delnay, "What Happened to Keswick?" *Faith Pulpit* (March 2002).

<sup>17</sup> C. I. Scofield, Editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 1200.

<sup>18</sup> Mark A. Snoeberger, "Second-Blessing Models of Sanctification and Early Dallas Dispensationalism," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 15/1, (2004), 93-105, <http://www.tmsj.edu/tmsj15e.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> The writer's first experience with Keswick teaching was in reading Murray's book, *Covenants and Blessings*, (Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Stanley, *Spirit-Filled Life*, 50.

Keswick sanctification is distinct from Wesleyan sanctification in that it does not fall into the error of eradication. Because of this, Keswick teachers did not have to try to explain away the reality of the sinful nature.<sup>22</sup> They were more realistic about practical Christianity. Its leaders tended to be more Calvinistic than those of the Wesleyan and American Holiness Movements.<sup>23</sup> In this Keswick sanctification is to be commended. There are several problems with the Keswick view of sanctification though.

In Keswick writings it is clear that its view of sanctification is grounded on experience, not Scripture. Experience is the foundation, and Scripture is used to build upon that. In describing this reality about Keswick in a favorable light, Pollock writes about the opinion of an early Keswick speaker, Edward W. Moore:

Many years later Moore emphasized strongly that Keswick ‘took its rise, not in a straining after novel interpretations of the Word but in a deep work of God in individual hearts and lives.’ No one had hit upon a doctrine which then he sought to apply; it was the other way round. Each leader knew that at some date since 1873 his Christian life had been revolutionized, undoubtedly by the Holy Spirit, and each was groping to define in Scriptural terms what had happened.<sup>24</sup>

Pollock’s point is that in Keswick sanctification experience comes first, then attempt is made to back up that experience Scripturally. A statement made by an English man about his friend Robert Pearsall Smith confirms this truth in a simplistic way, “I never gave Smith credit for much intelligence. It was his heart, not his head, which attracted me.”<sup>25</sup> Though the Keswick teachers never took this as far as the Holiness and later Pentecostal groups did, experience is still

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Delnay, *What Happened to Keswick?*

<sup>23</sup> Compare Charles Finney and Asa Mahan with Andrew Murray and W. Griffith Thomas.

<sup>24</sup> Pollock, *Keswick Story*, 67.

a faulty foundation.

In the Keswick view sanctification is presented as an almost effortless, struggle-free work of God in the trusting soul.<sup>26</sup> Gibbs sites Keswick historian Stephen Barabas as saying that victory over sin “is not attained by struggle and painful effort, by earnest resolutions and self-denial, but through the cross. It is stepped into by simple faith.”<sup>27</sup> Though not all Keswick teachers present sanctification as being effortless,<sup>28</sup> most of the time human effort is presented as a hindrance rather than a help. If this was true, one would have to question why certain biblical texts exhort believers to put in effort in sanctification. In Ephesians 4:17-32, Paul exhorts believers to put off sinful behaviors and replace them with godly ones. This is not something that God will do for them, but something they must do themselves. One would think that the mortification in Colossians 3:5 would surely require a certain amount of personal effort. Paul spoke of a great amount of effort that he exerted to keep his body under subjection in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

Certainly the Bible does not present a view of sanctification by human effort alone. No man is able to be holy through his own self-effort apart from God’s help. Sometimes biblical sanctification is almost paradoxical. In 1 Corinthians 15:10, while speaking about his labor for God, Paul explains that it was actually the grace of God working with him. In Galatians 2:20, Paul almost sounds contradictory in describing his Christian life. He has been crucified with Christ, but he is living, but it is actually Christ living in him. Paul was active in living his Christian life, but Christ was actively living in him as well. In Colossians 1:29, Paul speaks of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Christian’s Secret*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Gibbs, “Let Go and Let God: Keswick Movement’s Lasting Impact on Fundamentalism’s View of Sanctification,” Workshop Session 1 - #5, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, Lansdale, PA, 3, <http://cbs.edu/images/stories/nlc/2003/papers/5-%20Let%20Go%20and%20Let%20God.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> McQuilkin, *Keswick Perspective*, 180-181.

his labor as “striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.” Paul put in effort, but it was according to God working in him. Perhaps the best way to describe the Christian’s activity in spiritual growth is “Spirit-filled effort.” The Christian is active, but he is active according to the power of the Spirit within him. Keswick teaching, however, would emphasize the Spirit’s power almost to the exclusion of the believer’s own effort. This could best be summarized by the often used phrase, “let go and let God.”<sup>29</sup>

Along with the downplaying of human effort, Keswick teaching presents the Christian life as a life of rest as opposed to struggle.<sup>30</sup> Though the Bible certainly promises rest to the Christian,<sup>31</sup> it does not imply a complete absence of struggle. The rest spoken of is a peace of soul that comes through a relationship with Christ, not a life free from spiritual battles. Though a Christian may desire a life without struggle, it is not the picture given in the Bible. In Romans 7:14-24, Paul reveals his inward struggle against sin. Keswick-type commentators, such as Scofield, think that this refers to Paul in a defeated Christian state before he comes to a higher life in the Spirit.<sup>32</sup> Though this is better than the Wesleyan idea that Paul was referring to himself in his unconverted state, it is still not what Paul had in mind. Paul was speaking about himself in his present state.<sup>33</sup> In verse 5, Paul uses the verb ἦν (‘we were’) in the imperfect tense to describe his and his readers’ past lives. His use of νῦν δε (‘but now’) in the next verse shows that he is talking about a different time. A change took place from what they were to what they are now. They are now ‘delivered from the law.’ In verses 7-13, Paul speaks about his past, unconverted state again. He uses the pluperfect tense in verse 7, οὐκ ᾔδειν (‘I had not known’),

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<sup>29</sup> Gibbs, *Let Go and Let God*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Christian’s Secret*, 23-25.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 11:28-30

<sup>32</sup> Scofield, *Reference Bible*, 1200. “The ‘I’ which is Saul of Tarsus, and the ‘I’ which is Paul the apostle are at strife, and ‘Paul’ is in defeat. In Chapter 8, this strife is effectually taken up on the believer’s behalf by the Holy Spirit (8.2; Gal. 5.16, 17) and Paul is victorious.”

which certainly speaks of action in the past. In verse 9, Paul uses the word ποτε (‘once’), which has the idea of referring to something in the past. From verses 14-24, Paul changes to use the present tense throughout. He is speaking about what he is in the present time. He is describing his struggle as the normal condition of the Christian life.<sup>34</sup> Galatians 5:17 describes the same battle with the flesh in the Christian’s life. As long as the flesh remains, the Christian’s life will never be a life without struggle.<sup>35</sup>

While those who follow the Keswick tradition are usually sincere believers who truly love the Lord and desire holiness, there can be a danger in their type of teaching. It can lead people to be disillusioned with the Christian life. Some people may think they have finally found a life of rest only to find the battle with the flesh just as strong as ever.<sup>36</sup> Other people may find themselves on a never-ending quest for a life of victory that is unattainable. They may begin to question themselves as to why they cannot find the ‘secret’ or the ‘blessing’ like others. H. A. Ironside described this type of disillusionment after having labored for years under the holiness teachings of the Salvation Army:

I reasoned that the Bible promised entire relief from indwelling sin to all who were wholly surrendered to the will of God. That I had thus surrendered seemed to me certain.

Why then had I not been fully delivered from the carnal mind? It seemed to me that I had

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), 292.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther, translated by J. Theodore Mueller, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 96-100.

<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1312-1313. (4.15.12) Calvin says about Paul, “He therefore says that he has a perpetual conflict with the vestiges of his flesh, and that he is held bound in miserable bondage, so that he cannot consecrate himself wholly to obedience to the divine law [Rom. 7:18-23].”

<sup>36</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Conversion the Great Change and Experiences after Conversion* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1977), 32-35. Spurgeon spoke of a brief period of disillusionment shortly after he was converted. He thought the struggle with sin was supposed to be over since he was saved, but instead he found his flesh actively working still. He went back to the Methodist Chapel where a week earlier he had trusted Christ. This time the preacher preached from Romans 7 and said that Paul was speaking about an unconverted man. Hearing this, Spurgeon left and never went back.

met every condition, and that God, on His part, had failed to perform what He had promised.<sup>37</sup>

Though Keswick teaching is not entirely the same as Salvation Army perfectionism, it still makes claims that it cannot fulfill. It paints a picture of sanctification that is based more on romantic ideals than reality. It is interesting to note that the promises of Keswick teaching do not seem to have been fulfilled in the life of the leader of the first Keswick Convention, Harford-Battersby. His personal confessions do not coincide with the claims of Keswick sanctification.

Pollock writes:

Harford-Battersby in his eight remaining years neither fully overcame his nerves nor lost his reserve and self-mistrust: 'I have not maintained the Christ-life as I should have done,' he told himself two months after Oxford. He still littered his diary with confessions of an introspective Christian never satisfied with his growth in sanctity, but balanced now by a growing awareness that 'whenever I have trusted Him I have never been disappointed in Christ.'<sup>38</sup>

In the end, Harford-Battersby's personal confessions seem more aligned with the Bible's teaching on sanctification than with the Keswick ideal. It seems that he struggled with the flesh until the day he died.

While there are many good men who hold to Keswick teaching and much to be commended in it, it seems to be theology based on romantic thinking rather than on a realistic interpretation of Scripture. No matter how appealing Keswick sanctification sounds to the Christian, he must be careful not to base his beliefs on idealistic emotional experience instead of on sensible Scriptural exposition.

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<sup>37</sup> H. A. Ironside, *Holiness: the False and the True* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1982), 28.

<sup>38</sup> Pollock, *Keswick Story*, 31.

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