

ABOUT ADAM CLARKE

Adam Clarke's treatise on entire sanctification follows "Adam Clarke: Holiness Saint And Scholar." If you know little about Adam Clarke beyond the fact that he authored "Clarke's Commentary," you might enjoy reading the following sketch about him before reading his treatise on entire sanctification.

ADAM CLARKE: HOLINESS SAINT AND SCHOLAR

The name of Adam Clarke is synonymous with biblical scholarship and rightly so. His Commentary and Critical Notes on the entire Bible was completed in 1826 and it represented more than 30 years of intense research and writing. Other scholars have written commentaries on the whole Bible, but Clarke's is a thesaurus of biblical, oriental, philosophical, and classical learning unequalled by any other. When it is recalled that all this work was done while Clarke was a busy, itinerant Wesleyan preacher who never had an hour's secretarial help in his life, it, together with all his other publications, indicates a prodigious literary achievement.

Clarke was a Wesleyan scholar and an ardent, convinced expositor of scriptural holiness. No appreciation of the holiness heritage can ignore Adam Clarke. Following the Wesley brothers and John Fletcher, Clarke's is the next name in that illustrious line of holiness preachers and scholars from John Wesley to the present. It is altogether fitting that we should highlight Adam Clarke's contribution to the theology of scriptural holiness. Before looking at his teaching in some detail, a brief sketch of his life and work is necessary.

Adam Clarke was born in the county of Londonderry, North Ireland, in 1760 and was converted in 1779 through hearing a Methodist preacher. Three years later he left home to attend Wesley's school in Kingswood, Bristol, England. Five weeks later he was appointed to his first preaching circuit and for the next 50 years he was a self-taught Wesleyan preacher who, among other academic accomplishments, made himself master of at least 10 languages, ancient and modern.

He served on 24 Methodist circuits in England and Ireland, worked for 3 years in the Channel Islands, was three times president of the English Methodist Conference and four times president of the Irish Methodist Conference. He devoted hundreds of working hours to the newly founded British and Foreign Bible Society and 10 years of painstaking editing and collating of state papers. This latter work was a colossal undertaking. It required the most exact examination, deciphering, and classification of British State Papers from 1131 to 1666. The research was carried on in 14 different locations, including the Tower of London, London's Westminster Archives, and Cambridge University Library. In 1808 the University of Aberdeen conferred on Adam Clarke the honorary degree of LL.D., the university's highest academic honor.

As well as his Commentary, Clarke's publications ran to 22 volumes, including his Memorials of the Wesley Family, Reflections on the Being and Attributes of God, The Manners of the Ancient Israelites, 4 volumes of sermons, 3 volumes of miscellanea titled Detached Pieces, a volume on Christian Missions, A Concise View of the Succession of Sacred Literature, and A Bibliographical Dictionary. Clarke's literary output was phenomenal when it is recalled that he was a full-time itinerant preacher.

A glance at the record of the 24 Methodist circuits he served between 1782 and 1832 shows that his longest domicile in one place was four years, yet his moving from place to place approximately every two years does not seem to have interfered with his reading, writing, and publication. He was elected a member of six of the most learned societies of his day, including the Antiquarian Society, the Royal Asiatic Society, and the Royal Irish Academy. In spite of all the distinctions given to him, Clarke

remained a loyal Wesleyan preacher and a devout, humble believer. Learning I love,” he once wrote, “learned men I prize; with the company of the great and the good I am often delighted. But infinitely above all these and all other possible enjoyments, I glory in Christ--in me living and reigning and fitting me for His heaven.”

Clarke was a preacher of rare power and gifts and, particularly in his latter years, he preached to crowded churches. To his pulpit ministry he brought all the warmth of his Celtic upbringing and all the vast resources of his encyclopaedic learning. Essentially a textual preacher, he made little formal preparation before he entered the pulpit--a method that we lesser mortals should not emulate! “I cannot make a sermon before I go into the pulpit,” he confessed to his friend, Robert Carr Brackenbury, “therefore, I am obliged to hang upon the arm and the wisdom of the Lord. I read a great deal, write very little, but strive to study.” “I ... strive to study”--that was the secret of Clarke’s success both as a preacher and a writer.

A veritable Briareus in his many accomplishments, he explored every available avenue of knowledge, especially the linguistic, the scientific, and the historical. Advising a young Methodist preacher about his studies, Clarke averred: “A Methodist preacher should know everything. Partial knowledge on any branch of science or business is better than total ignorance.... The old adage of ‘Too many irons in the fire’ contains an abominable lie. You cannot have too many--poker, tongs, and all, keep them all going.” It was advice he followed himself before giving it to others. Visiting Liverpool in the north of England in 1832, he contracted the deadly Asiatic cholera and died from it at his London home on August 26.

Adam Clarke was a holiness preacher and scholar. He was enthusiastically committed to Methodist doctrine and experience and particularly to Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection. In a sermon preached from Phil. 1:27-28 titled “Apostolic Preacher,” he explained Christian holiness:

“The whole design of God was to restore man to his image, and raise him from the ruins of his fall; in a word, to make him perfect; to blot out all his sins, purify his soul, and fill him with all holiness, so that no unholy temper, evil desire, or impure affection or passion shall either lodge or have any being within him. This and this only is true religion, or Christian perfection; and a less salvation than this would be dishonourable to the sacrifice of Christ and the operation of the Holy Ghost.... Call it by what name we please, it must imply the pardon of all transgression and the removal of the whole body of sin and death.... This, then, is what I plead for, pray for, and heartily recommend to all true believers, under the name of Christian perfection.” Preaching on Eph. 3:14-21 Clarke interpreted the phrase “filled with all the fulness of God” as descriptive of the experience of full salvation. “To be filled with God is a great thing, to be filled with the fulness of God is still greater; to be filled with all the fulness of God is greatest of all. It is . . . to have the heart emptied of, and cleansed from, all sin and defilement, and filled with humility meekness, gentleness, goodness . . . and love to God and man.” Clarke knew that some Christians were opposed to the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification because they think no man can be fully saved from sin in this life.... They hold out death as the complete deliver from all corruption and the final destroyer of sin as if were revealed in every page of the Bible! Whereas there is not one passage in the sacred volume that says any such thing! Were this true, then death, far from being the last enemy, would be the last and best friend, and the greatest of all deliverers.... It is the blood of Jesus alone that cleanseth from all unrighteousness.” Another familiar argument against Christian perfection was the assertion that indwelling sin humbles believers and keeps them penitent. Clarke replied: “Pride is of the essence of sin . . . and the root whence all moral obliquity flows. How then can pride humble us? . . . The heart from which it [pride] is cast out has the humility, meekness and gentleness of Christ implanted in its stead.” To the further argument that a Christian is surely humbled by the sense of indwelling sin, Clarke replied: “I grant that they who see and feel and deplore their indwelling sin, are humbled. But is it the sin that humbles? No. It is the grace of God that shows

and condemns the sin that humbles us....

We are never humbled under a sense of indwelling sin till the Spirit of God drags it to the light and shows us not only its horrid deformity, but its hostility to God; and He manifests it that He may take it away.”

Preaching some 30 years after Wesley died, Clarke saw this glorious doctrine exemplified by a host of professing Methodists. Replying to the objection that this teaching produced self-righteousness in its professors, Clarke testified: “No person that acts so has ever received this grace. He is either a hypocrite or a self-deceiver. Those who have received it . . . love God with all their heart, they love even their enemies.... In the splendor of God’s holiness they feel themselves absorbed.... It has been no small mercy to me that in the course of my religious life, I have met with many persons who professed that the blood of Christ had saved them from all sin, and whose profession was maintained by an immaculate life; but I never knew one of them that was not of the spirit above described. They were men of the strongest faith, the purest love, the holiest affections, the most obedient lives and the most useful in society.” Adam Clarke wrote and preached and exegeted the doctrine of entire sanctification with all his command of scripture, linguistic expertise, and wide theological reading, but there is one characteristic of his presentation that deserves more attention. He not only believed it was a scriptural doctrine and that it was theologically sound--he enforced it and explained it and defended it with all the passion of an evangelist. Whenever he touched the subject, he had as his dominant concern not only that Christians would believe it and be persuaded of its veracity, but that they might personally claim the experience, enter into it, live it, enjoy it, and testify to it.

“If men would but spend as much time in fervently calling upon God (I.e. to fully sanctify them) as they spend in decrying this doctrine, what a glorious state of the church should we soon witness! . . . This moment we may be emptied of sin, filled with holiness and become truly happy.... The perfection of the gospel system is not that it makes allowance for sin, but that it makes an atonement for it, not that it tolerates sin, but that it destroys it.... Let all those who retain the apostolic doctrine . . . press every believer to go on to perfection, and expect to be saved, while here below, into the fulness of the blessing of the Gospel of Jesus.... Art thou weary of that carnal mind which is enmity to God? Canst thou be happy whilst thou art unholy? Arise, then, and be baptized with a greater effusion of the Holy Ghost.... Reader, it is the birthright of every child of God to be cleansed from all sin, to keep himself unspotted from the world, and so to live as never more to offend his Maker.

All things are possible to him that believeth, because all things are possible to the infinitely meritorious blood and energetic Spirit of the Lord Jesus.” It is surely not out of place to note that the doctrine that Adam Clarke advocated so fervently found rich expression in his own life. Henry Moore, close confidant of both John Wesley and Adam Clarke, said of the latter: “Our Connection, I believe, never knew a more blameless life than that of Dr. Clarke.”

In view of Clarke’s clear and enthusiastic exposition of Christian perfection, it is not a little surprising that the most serious criticism of his teaching has come from the “holiness movement.” Clarke emphasized almost exclusively the instantaneous phase of sanctification and quite neglected the growth phase. “In no part of the scriptures are we directed to seek holiness gradatim.(a gradual onset of holiness) We are to come to God as well for an instantaneous and complete purification from all sin as for an instantaneous pardon. Neither the gradatim pardon or the seriatim purification exists in the Bible.” Clarke’s teaching is further described as throwing “off center” John Wesley’s “theological balance.” But this criticism is quite misleading. It quotes only one brief passage from the chapter titled “Entire Sanctification” in Samuel Dunn’s anthology of Clarke’s teaching, titled Christian Theology. That chapter is a compilation from a number of Clarke’s writings on Christian holiness, and the full text of the originals needs to be studied before such a sweeping judgment is made on three sentences. In the given extract Clarke is speaking exclusively of entering into the blessing, a grace as instantaneous as

justification. Wesley taught this identical truth and to say that Clarke's reiteration of it jeopardized the Wesleyan "theological balance" is quite wide of the mark. And why not quote the very next sentence from Clarke? "It is when the soul is purified from all sin that it can properly grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." And why ignore an earlier passage? "He who continues to believe, love and obey will grow in grace and continually increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The life of a Christian is a growth." Clarke's teaching on entire sanctification is thoroughly Wesleyan; in fact Clarke more nearly follows John Wesley here than any of his contemporary, and later, Methodist theologians--John Fletcher, Richard Watson, W. B. Pope, etc.. Clarke argues, as Wesley did, that in a moment the believer's heart may be cleansed from all sin and filled with God's fullness. Following this crisis of grace there is continuous growth in the entirely sanctified life. This is what authentic Wesleyanism has always taught. Those who want to criticize Clarke here really must go back to the original full text of his writings rather than passing premature judgment on isolated extracts. Far from throwing Wesley's teaching "off center," Clarke reinforced, reemphasized, and revitalized Wesley's "grand depositum"--and for that reason, and others, Adam Clarke inspires holiness preachers today.

Source: "The Preacher's Magazine," by Herbert McGonigle Professor of Church History, British Isles Nazarene College, Manchester, England

--From "Holiness Miscellany and Experiences" By John S. Inskip