

Holiness - the False and the True

Holiness - the False and the True (1914)¹

By Dr. Harry Ironside (1876-1951)

"My Conversion to God"

"It is my desire, in dependence on the Lord, to write a faithful record, so far as memory now serves me, of some of God's dealings with my soul and my strivings after the experience of holiness, during the first six years of my Christian life, ere I knew the blessedness of finding all in Christ. This will make it necessary at times, I have little doubt, to 'speak as a fool'—even as the apostle Paul did: but as I reflect on the need for such a record, I think I can say with him, 'Ye have compelled me.'

"If I may be privileged to thereby save others from the unhappy experiences I passed through in those early years, I shall feel abundantly repaid for the effort it will take to thus put these heart-experiences before my readers."

". . . when the knowledge of salvation was mine, I went at the first opportunity, the night after my conversion, to an 'Army' street-meeting, and there spoke for the first time, in the open air, of the grace of God so newly revealed to my soul."

". . . in my new-found joy I had no conception that I still carried about with me a nature as sinful and vile as existed in the breast of the greatest evildoer in the world. I knew something of Christ and His love; I knew little or nothing of myself and the deceitfulness of my own heart.

"As nearly as I can now recollect, I was in the enjoyment of the knowledge of God's salvation about a month when, in some dispute with my brother, who was younger than I, my temper suddenly escaped control, and in an angry passion I struck and felled him to the ground. Horror immediately filled my soul. I needed not his sarcastic taunt, 'Well, you are a nice Christian! You'd better go down to the Army and tell what a saint you've become!' to send me to my room in anguish of heart to confess my sin to God in shame and bitter sorrow, as afterwards frankly to my brother, who generously forgave me."

"Holiness: the Great Desideratum"

"From this time on mine was an 'up-and-down experience,' to use a term often heard in 'testimony meetings.' I longed for perfect victory over the lusts and desires of the flesh. Yet I seemed to have more trouble with evil thoughts and unholy propensities than I had ever known before. For a long time I kept these conflicts hidden, and known only to God and to myself. But after some eight to ten months, I became interested in what were called 'holiness meetings,' held weekly in the 'Army' hall, and also in a mission I sometimes attended. At these gatherings an experience was spoken of which I felt was just what I needed. It was designated by various terms: 'The Second Blessing';

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'Sanctification'; 'Perfect Love'; 'Higher Life'; 'Cleansing from Inbred Sin'; and by other expressions.

"Substantially, the teaching was this: When converted, God graciously forgives all sins committed up to the time when one repents. But the believer is then placed in a lifelong probation, during which he may at any time forfeit his justification and peace with God if he falls into sin from which he does not at once repent. In order, therefore, to maintain himself in a saved condition, he needs a further work of grace called sanctification. This work has to do with sin the root, as justification had to do with sins the fruit.

"The steps leading up to this second blessing are, firstly, conviction as to the need of holiness (just as in the beginning there was conviction of the need of salvation); secondly, a full surrender to God, or the laying of every hope, prospect and possession on the altar of consecration; thirdly, to claim in faith the incoming of the Holy Spirit as a refining fire to burn out all inbred sin, thus destroying in toto every lust and passion, leaving the soul perfect in love and as pure as unfallen Adam. This wonderful blessing received, great watchfulness is required lest, as the serpent beguiled Eve, he deceive the sanctified soul, and thus introduce again the same kind of an evil principle which called for such drastic action before.

"Such was the teaching; and coupled with it were heartfelt testimonies of experiences so remarkable that I could not doubt their genuineness, nor that what others seemed to enjoy was likewise for me if I would fulfil the conditions.

"One aged lady told how for forty years she had been kept from sin in thought, word, and deed. Her heart, she declared, was no longer 'deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked,' but was as holy as the courts of heaven, since the blood of Christ had washed away the last remains of inbred sin. Others spoke in a similar way, though their experiences were much briefer. Bad tempers had been rooted out when a full surrender was made. Evil propensities and unholy appetites had been instantly destroyed when holiness was claimed by faith. Eagerly I began to seek this precious boon of holiness in the flesh. Earnestly I prayed for this Adamic sinlessness. I asked God to reveal to me every unholy thing, that I might truly surrender all to Him. I gave up friends, pursuits, pleasures—everything I could think of that might hinder the incoming of the Holy Ghost and the consequent blessing. I was a veritable 'book-worm,' an intense love for literature possessing me from childhood; but in my ignorant desire I put away all books of pleasurable or instructive character, and promised God to read only the Bible and holiness writings if He would only give me 'the blessing.' I did not, however, obtain what I sought, though I prayed zealously for weeks.

"At last, one Saturday night (I was now away from home, living with a friend, a member of the 'Army'), I determined to go out into the country and wait on God, not returning till I had received the blessing of perfect love. I took a train at eleven o'clock, and went to a lonely station twelve miles from Los Angeles. There I alighted, and, leaving the highway, descended into an empty arroyo, or water-course. Falling on my knees beneath a sycamore tree, I prayed in an agony for hours, beseeching God to show me anything

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that hindered my reception of the blessing. Various matters of too private and sacred a nature to be here related came to my mind. I struggled against conviction, but finally ended by crying, 'Lord, I give up all—every thing, every person, every enjoyment, that would hinder my living alone for Thee. Now give me, I pray Thee, the blessing!'

"As I look back, I believe I was fully surrendered to the will of God at that moment, so far as I understood it. But my brain and nerves were unstrung by the long midnight vigil and the intense anxiety of previous months, and I fell almost fainting to the ground. Then a holy ecstasy seemed to thrill all my being. This I thought was the coming into my heart of the Comforter. I cried out in confidence, 'Lord, I believe Thou dost come in. Thou dost cleanse and purify me from all sin. I claim it now. The work is done. I am sanctified by Thy blood. Thou dost make me holy. I believe; I believe!' I was unspeakably happy. I felt that all my struggles were ended.

"With a heart filled with praise, I rose from the ground and began to sing aloud. Consulting my watch, I saw it was about half-past three in the morning. I felt I must hasten to town so as to be in time for the seven o'clock prayer-meeting, there to testify to my experience. Fatigued as I was by being up all night, yet so light was my heart I scarcely noticed the long miles back, but hastened to the city, arriving just as the meeting was beginning, buoyed up by my new-found experience. All were rejoiced as I told what great things I believed God had done for me. Every meeting that day added to my gladness. I was literally intoxicated with joyous emotions.

"My troubles were all ended now. The wilderness was past, and I was in Canaan, feeding on the old corn of the land. Nevermore should I be troubled by inward drawings toward sin. My heart was pure. I had reached the desirable state of full sanctification. With no foe within, I could direct all my energies toward vanquishing the enemies without.

"This was what I thought. Alas, how little did I know myself; much less the mind of God!

"Sunshine and Clouds"

"For some weeks after the eventful experience before described, I lived in a dreamily-happy state, rejoicing in my fancied sinlessness. One great idea had possession of my mind; and whether at work or in my leisure hours, I thought of little else than the wonderful event which had taken place. But gradually I began to 'come back to earth,' as it were. I was now employed in a photographic studio, where I associated with people of various tastes and habits, some of whom ridiculed, some tolerated, and others sympathized with, my radical views on things religious. Night after night I attended the meetings, speaking on the street and indoors, and I soon noticed (and doubtless others did too) that a change came over my 'testimonies.' Before, I had always held up Christ, and pointed the lost to Him. Now, almost imperceptibly, my own experience became my theme, and I held up myself as a striking example of consecration and holiness! This was the prevailing characteristic of the brief addresses made by most of the 'advanced' Christians in our company. The youngest in grace magnified Christ. The 'sanctified'

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magnified themselves. A favorite song will make this more manifest than any words of mine. It is still widely used in Army meetings, and finds a place in their Song or Hymn books. I give only one verse as a specimen:

Some people I know don't live holy;
They battle with unconquered sin,

Not daring to consecrate fully,
Or they full salvation would win.

With malice they have constant trouble,
From doubting they long to be free;

With most things about them they grumble;
Praise God, this is not so with ME!

"Will the reader believe me when I say that I sang this wretched doggerel without a thought of the sinful pride to which it was giving expression? I considered it my duty to continually direct attention to 'my experience of full salvation,' as it was called. 'If you don't testify to it, you will lose the blessing,' was accepted as an axiom among us.

"As time went on, I began to be again conscious of inward desires toward evil — of thoughts that were unholy. I was nonplused. Going to a leading teacher for help, he said, 'These are but temptations. Temptation is not sin. You only sin if you yield to the evil suggestion.' This gave me peace for a time. I found it was the general way of excusing such evident movings of a fallen nature, which was supposed to have been eliminated. But gradually I sank to a lower and lower plane, permitting things I would once have shunned; and I even observed that all about me did the same. The first ecstatic experiences seldom lasted long. The ecstasy departed, and the 'sanctified' were in very little different from their brethren who were supposed to be 'only justified.' We did not commit overt acts of evil: therefore we were sinless. Lust was not sin unless yielded to: so it was easy to go on testifying that all was right."

"My thoughts of sin, as well as of holiness, were very unformed and imperfect. Therefore it was easy, generally speaking, to think that I was living without the one, and manifesting the other. When doubts assailed, I treated them as temptations of the devil. If I became unmistakably conscious that I had actually sinned, I persuaded myself that at least it was not willful, but rather a mistake of the mind than an intentional error of the heart. Then I went to God in confession, and prayed to be cleansed from secret faults."

"[Owing to a later low state of spiritual experience,] I was tormented with the thought that I had backslidden, and might be lost eternally after all my former happy experiences of the Lord's goodness. Twice I slipped out of the building when all were in bed, and made my way to a lonely spot where I spent the night in prayer, beseeching God not to take His Holy Spirit from me, but to again cleanse me fully from all inbred sin. Each time I 'claimed it by faith,' and was brighter for a few weeks; but I inevitably again fell into

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doubt and gloom, and was conscious of sinning both in thought and in word, and sometimes in unholy actions, which brought terrible remorse."

"Again I spent the night in prayer . . . [and believed) that the work of full inward cleansing was indeed consummated, and that I was now, if never before, actually rid of all carnality.

"How readily one yields himself to self-deception in a matter of this kind! From this time on I became a more earnest advocate of the second blessing than ever; and I remember that often I prayed God to give my dear mother the blessing He had given me, and to make her as holy as her son had become. And that pious mother had known Christ before I was born, and knew her own heart too well to talk of sinlessness, though living a devoted, Christ-like life!

". . . [I was] generally confident that I was living out the doctrine of perfect love to God and man, and thereby making my own final salvation more secure. And yet, as I now look back, what grave failures I can detect — what an unsubdued will — what lightness and frivolity — what lack of subjection to the word of God — what self-satisfaction and complacency! Alas, 'man at his best estate is altogether vanity.'

". . . [a later experience] showed me . . . that the carnal mind was still a part of my being."

"In vain I searched my heart to see if I had made a full surrender, and tried to give up every known thing that seemed in any sense evil or doubtful. Sometimes, for a month at a time, or even longer, I could persuade myself that at last I had indeed again received the blessing. But invariably a few weeks would bring before me once more that which proved that it was in my particular case all a delusion.

"I did not dare open my heart to my assistants in the work, or to the 'soldiers' who were under my guidance. To do so I felt would be to lose all influence with them and to be looked upon as a backslider. So, alone and in secret, I fought my battles and never went into a holiness meeting without persuading myself that now at least, I was fully surrendered and therefore must have the blessing of sanctification. Sometimes I called it entire consecration and felt easier. It did not seem to be claiming too much. I had no conception at the time of the hypocrisy of all this.

"What made my distress more poignant was the knowledge that I was not the only sufferer. Another, one very dear to me, shared my doubts and anxieties from the same cause. For that other it eventually meant utter shipwreck of faith; and one of the loveliest souls I ever knew was lost in the mazes of spiritualism. God grant it may not be forever, but that mercy may be found of the Lord in that day!

"And now I began to see what a string of derelicts this holiness teaching left in its train. I could count scores of persons who had gone into utter infidelity because of it. They always gave the same reason: 'I tried it all. I found it a failure. So I concluded the Bible

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teaching was all a delusion, and religion was a mere matter of the emotions.' Many more (and I knew several such intimately) lapsed into insanity after floundering in the morass of this emotional religion for years—and people said that studying the Bible had driven them crazy. How little they knew that it was lack of Bible knowledge that was accountable for their wretched mental state—an absolutely unscriptural use of isolated passages of Scripture!"

"The language of my troubled soul, after all those years of preaching to others, was, 'O that I knew where I might find Him!' Finding Him not, I saw only the blackness of despair before me; but yet I knew too well His love and care to be completely cast down.

"The Struggle Ended"

"But at last it began to be clear to me that the holiness doctrine had a most baneful influence upon the movement. People who professed conversion (whether real or not the day will declare) struggled for months, even years, to reach a state of sinlessness which never was reached; and at last they gave up in despair and sank back in many instances to the dead level of the world around them.

"I saw that it was the same with all the holiness denominations, and the various 'Bands,' 'Missions,' and other movements, that were continually breaking off from them. The standard set was the unattainable. The result was, sooner or later, utter discouragement, cunningly concealed hypocrisy, or an unconscious lowering of the standard to suit the experience reached. For myself I had been ensnared by the last expedient for a long time. How much of the second there was I do not dare to say. But eventually I fell a victim to the first. And I can now see that it was a mercy I did so.

"At last I found myself becoming cold and cynical. Doubts as to everything assailed me like a legion of demons, and I became almost afraid to let my mind dwell on these things. For refuge I turned to secular literature, and sent for my books, which some years before I had foresworn on condition that God would give me the 'second blessing.' How little I realized the Jacob-spirit in all this! God seemed to have failed; so I took up my books once more, and tried to find solace in the beauties of essays and poetry, or the problems of history and science. I did not dare to confess to myself that I was literally an agnostic; yet for a month at least I could only answer, 'I do not know' to every question based on divine revelation.

"This was the legitimate result of the teaching I had been under. 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 met every condition, and that God, on His part, had failed to perform what He had promised. I know it is wretched to write all this: but I see no other way to help others who are in the same state that I was in for that awful month.

"Deliverance came at last . . ."

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"Little by little, the light began to dawn. We [the author and an acquaintance] saw that we had been looking within for holiness, instead of without. We realized that the same grace that had saved us at first alone could carry us on. Dimly we apprehended that all for us must be in Christ, or we were without a ray of hope.

"Many questions perplexed and troubled us. Much that we had believed we soon saw to be utterly opposed to the word of God. Much more we could not understand, so completely warped had our minds become through the training of years . . . The great truth was getting a grip of me that holiness, perfect love, sanctification, and every other blessing, were mine in Christ from the moment I had believed, and mine forevermore, because all of pure grace. I had been looking at the wrong man—all was in another Man, and in that Man for me! But it took weeks to see this."

"And I have been learning all along my pilgrim journey that the more my heart is taken up with Christ, the more do I enjoy practical deliverance from sin's power, and the more do I realize what it is to have the love of God shed abroad in that heart by the Holy Spirit given to me, as the earnest of the glory to come. I have found liberty and joy since being thus freed from bondage that I never thought it possible for a soul to know on earth, while I have a confidence in presenting this precious truth for the acceptance of others that contrasts with the uncertainty of the past.

". . . I desire . . . to sum up . . . my impressions of the Holiness movement.

"Observations on the Holiness Movement"

"Since turning aside from the perfectionist societies, I have often been asked if I find as high a standard maintained among Christians generally who do not profess to have the 'second blessing' as I have seen among those who do. "My answer is that after carefully, and I trust without prejudice, considering both, I have found a far higher standard maintained by believers who intelligently reject the eradication theory than among those who accept it. Quiet, unassuming Christians, who know their Bibles and their own hearts too well to permit their lips to talk of sinlessness and perfection in the flesh, nevertheless are characterized by intense devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, love for the word of God, and holiness of life and walk. But these blessed fruits spring, not from self-occupation, but from occupation with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

"The great professing body who are scarcely clear or pronounced as to anything, I do not here take into account. I refer rather to those among the various denominations, and those outside of all such companies, who confess Christ boldly and seek to be a testimony for Him in the world. Compared with these, I repeat, a far lower standard of Christian living is found among the so-called holiness people.

"The reasons are not far to seek; for in the first place the profession of holiness induces a subtle spiritual pride that is often the veriest pharisaism, and frequently leads to the most manifest self-confidence. And secondly, the next thing to saying I live without sin, is to say that nothing that I do is sin. Consequently, the teaching of holiness in the flesh

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tends to harden the conscience and to cause the one who professes it to lower the standard to his own poor experience. Any who move much among those in this profession will soon begin to realize how greatly prevalent are the conditions I have described. Holiness professors are frequently cutting, censorious, uncharitable and harsh in their judgment of others. Exaggerations, amounting to downright dishonesty, are unconsciously encouraged by and often indulged in their 'testimony' meetings. The rank and file are no freer from vulgarisms, slangy expressions, and levity in conversation than ordinary persons who make no such profession; while many of the preachers are largely given to sensational and amusing sermons that are anything but serious and edifying. And all this, mark you, without sinning!

"The apostle Paul emphasizes 'envy, strife and divisions' as evidences of carnality, and designates them as the works of the flesh. Where have divisions, with all their accompanying evils, been more manifest than among the rival holiness organizations, some of which roundly denounce all connected with the others as 'backsliders,' and 'on the road to hell'? I have heard such denunciations on many occasions . . . I have observed that debt and its twin brother, worry, are as common among such professors as among others. In fact, the sinfulness of worrying rarely seems to be apprehended by them. Holiness advocates have all the little unpleasant ways that are so trying in many of us: they are no more free from penuriousness, tattling, evil-speaking, selfishness, and kindred weaknesses, than their neighbors.

"And as to downright wickedness and uncleanness, I regret to have to record that sins of a positively immoral character are, I fear, far more frequently met with in holiness churches and missions . . . than the outsider would think possible. I know whereof I speak; and only a desire to save others from the bitter disappointments I had to meet leads me to write as I do. Among Christians generally there are failures that shock and wound the sensibilities of many, occurring from time to time, through a lack of watching unto prayer. But surely, among the holiness people, such failures, if they ever occur, do so at very rare intervals! Would that I could say so. Alas, it is far otherwise! The path of the holiness movement . . . is strewn with thousands of such moral and spiritual breakdowns."

"On the other hand, I gladly concede that both in the ranks of the religious-military society of which I was once a member, and in other holiness organizations, there are many, very many, pious, devoted men and women whose zeal for God and self-abnegation are lovely to witness, and will surely be rewarded in 'that day.' But let no one be blinded by this to suppose it is the holiness doctrine that has made them such. The refutation of this is the simple fact that the great majority of martyrs, missionaries and servants of Christ who in all the Christian centuries have 'loved not their lives unto the death,' never dreamed of making such a claim for themselves, but daily owned their sinfulness by nature and constant need of the advocacy of Christ.

"The testimonies of many who were at one time prominent in other organizations where holiness in the flesh is preached and professed fully agree with mine as to the large percentage of 'backslidings' from virtue and personal purity.

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"Superstition and fanaticism of the grossest character find a hotbed among 'holiness' advocates. Witness the present disgusting 'Tongues Movement,' with all its attendant delusions and insanities. An unhealthy craving for new and thrilling religious sensations, and emotional meetings of a most exciting character, readily account for these things. Because settled peace is unknown, and final salvation is supposed to depend on progress in the soul, people get to depend so much upon 'blessings,' and 'new baptisms of the Spirit,' as they call these experiences, that they readily fall a prey to the most absurd delusions. In the last few years hundreds of holiness meetings all over the world have been literally turned into pandemoniums where exhibitions worthy of a madhouse or of a collection of howling dervishes are held night after night. No wonder a heavy toll of lunacy and infidelity is the frequent result.

"Now I am well aware that many holiness teachers repudiate all connection with these fanatics; but they do not seem to see that it is their doctrines that are the direct cause of the disgusting fruits I have been enumerating. Let a full Christ be preached, a finished work be proclaimed, the truth of the indwelling Spirit be scripturally taught, and all these excrescences disappear.

"Perhaps the saddest thing about the movement to which I have referred is the long list of shipwrecks concerning the faith to be attributed to its unsound instruction. Large numbers of persons seek 'holiness' for years only to find they have had the unattainable before them. Others profess to have received it, but are forced at last to own it was all a mistake. The result is sometimes that the mind gives way beneath the strain; but more frequently unbelief in the inspiration of the Scriptures is the logical result. It is for persons dangerously near these shoals of infidelity and darkness that I have penned these papers. God's word remains true. He has not promised what He will not perform. It is you, dear troubled one, who have been misled by faulty teaching as to the true nature of sanctification, and the proper effects of the indwelling Spirit of God. Let neither gloomy unbelief nor melancholy disappointment hinder your . . . searching the Scriptures daily whether these things be so. And may God in His rich grace and mercy give every self-occupied reader to look away to Christ alone, 'who, of God, is made unto us wisdom: even righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.'