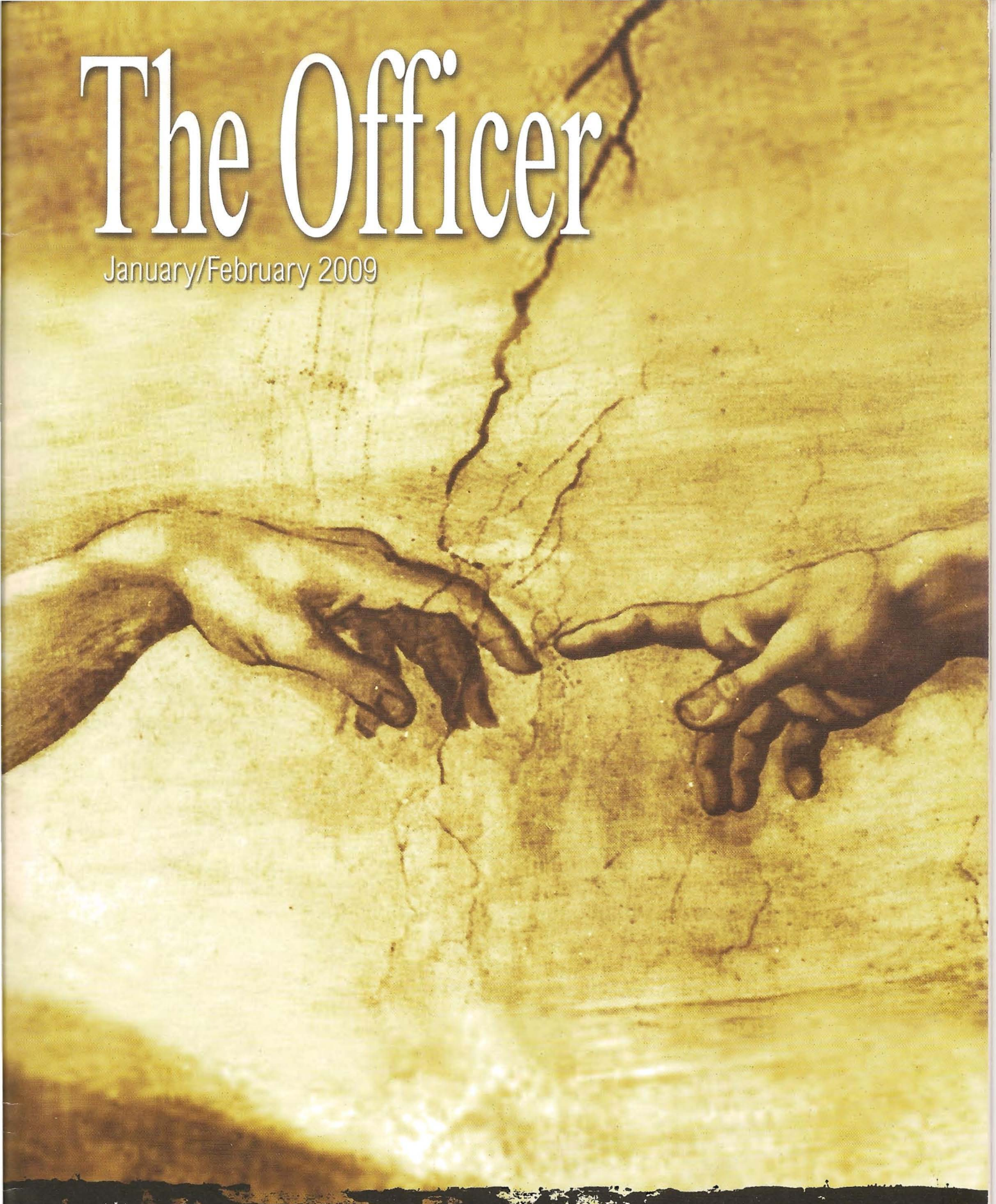
The Officer

January/February 2009



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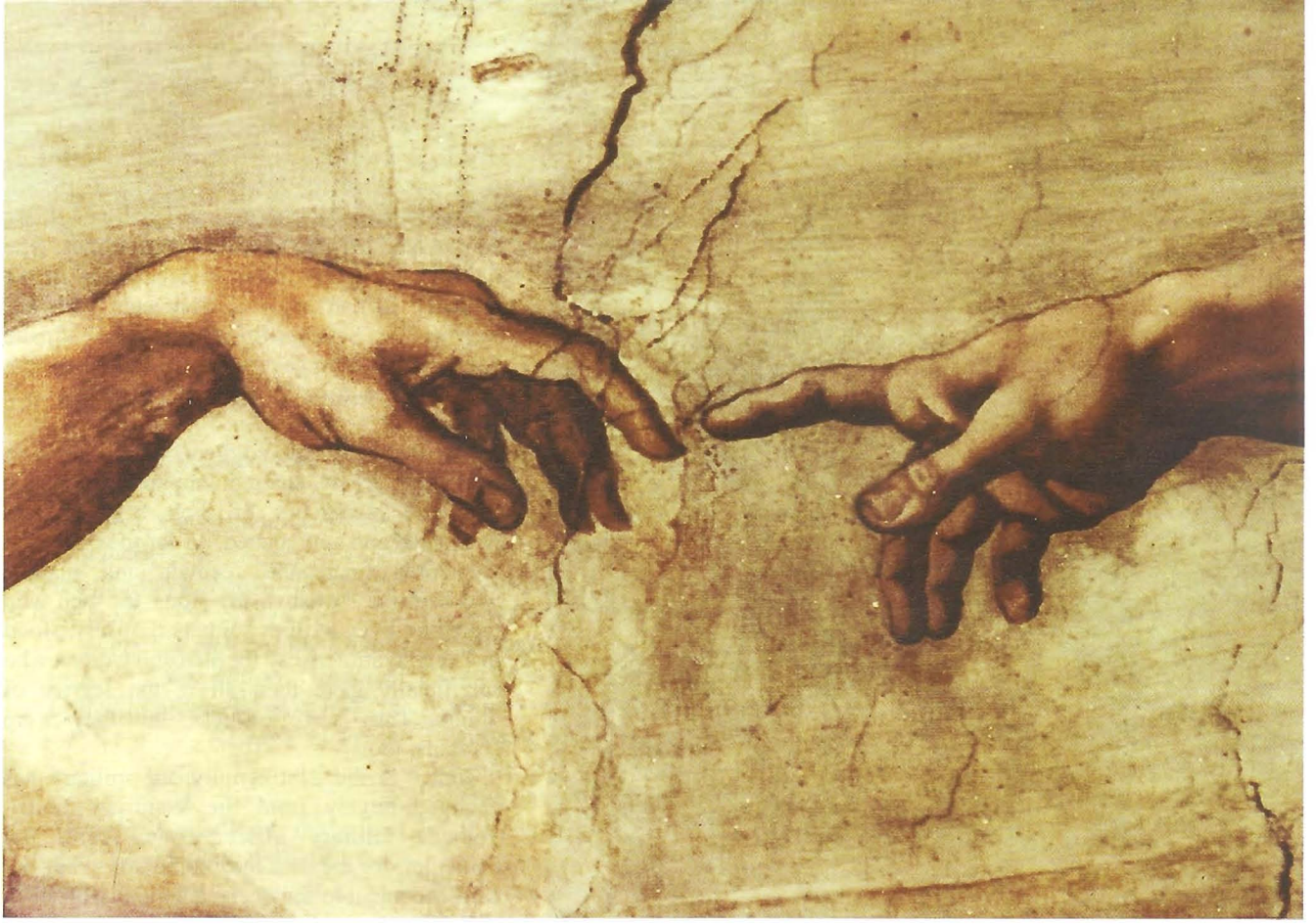

HOLINESS THEOLOGY: SEARCHING FOR A CORE CONCEPT

by Captain Kerry Kistler

AN amazing discovery startled the art world not many years ago. For centuries the people of the world had lifted their eyes heavenward at a spectacular masterpiece painted on the ceiling of a chapel. Its creator was Michelangelo Buonarroti. The 8,000 square-foot fresco took more than four years of his life to create and when it was finished the ceiling of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel in Rome stood as an unequalled monument to one man's creative genius.

For nearly five centuries, the 343 biblical figures, most larger than life, had peered 66 feet down in dark, sombre hues from their lofty plaster 'canvas'. Michelangelo had apparently limited his palette of colours to melancholy shades of greys, browns and muted blues. Or so the experts had decided. Scholars had concluded that Michelangelo was a superb artist but a terrible colourist.

Other learned men had concluded that this style of painting was evidence of a tormented artist. Still other experts insisted, as *Life* magazine reported, that he had restricted his palette to 'stony' colours 'to give his figures the quality of painted sculpture and integrate them with their architectural setting'. The masterpiece certainly was dark and eventually this quality was elevated to a virtue.

But the art world was stunned when restorers began the delicate work of cleaning the gigantic fresco one square inch at a time. For six years the restoration continued quietly, but in time academics, historians and art experts began to view the work in progress and they were amazed. Where muted earth tones had been before they now saw brilliant colours – stunningly bright and rich. For centuries the fresco had been wearing a grim, multi-layered skin of accumulated grime composed of dust, soot from oil lamps, tallow candles and incense, leached salts from roof leaks and multiple coatings of animal glue which had darkened with age.

Amazingly, as this polluted mask was carefully cleaned away, the critics cried foul. The nature of the masterpiece, as

it had been viewed for nearly 500 years, was being changed and the thought that certain pet theories were so wrong was unbearable to the experts. Never mind that the masterpiece was being restored to its original condition as centuries of accumulated gunk were cleansed away and the beauty of the master's original intent revealed. Critics managed to find fault and complained that 'the soul of the fresco had been stripped away'. This skewed logic was punctuated with the exclamation of one critic that he 'would probably [have to] look at it with dark glasses'.

How terribly tragic that some would not welcome and celebrate the restoration of a masterpiece! Yet this unfortunate prejudice is a continual counterpoint to the truth of holiness as defined by an experience of cleansing restoration. To some experts, proposing a radical cleansing is nearly unbearable. It contradicts long-held pet theories about what God is able to do in restoring the masterpiece of a pure nature to the heart of man.

And for those who do submit to God for a cleansing of the soul's deepest stain, beware – plenty of informed experts and critics will continue to view the genuinely restored (sanctified) person through dark glasses in an attempt to deny that the work was ever done. Never mind that what is at stake is a beautiful restoration of the soul toward God. If a person believes that dark, stony colours are an unchangeable part of the composition, then there's no hope for a complete and thorough cleansing.

So it is with our understanding of carnality – that dark, polluting, stony sinful nature – and what God proposes to do about it. We must have a proper orientation or we are sure to offer a skewed understanding of holiness and its core notion.

'ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION IS MORE THAN A ONE-TIME EVENT OR EXPERIENCE. IT IS TO BE FOLLOWED BY A VITAL, EXPANDING, SPIRIT LIFE WHICH IS LIVED OUT DAILY'

It's helpful to restate the holiness movement's classic definition of holiness doctrine as championed by generations of holiness scholars. A synthesis of this position states that every person is born with a sinful nature but God has provided a way for every true, born-again Christian to be cleansed from it while they are yet alive.

At the moment of that cleansing we are filled with the fulness of God's Holy Spirit. This produces in us perfect love for God and man and empowers us for greater service to God. It also enables us to have consistent victory over temptation and sin. This experience is an undeserved act of God's love in response to our act of total consecration and faith. Yet entire sanctification is also more than a one-time event or experience. It is to be followed by a vital, expanding, Spirit-filled life which is lived out daily.

To be sure, this definition of holiness (also known as entire sanctification) invites a wide variety of commentary, but that is the essence of the doctrine.

Some writers on holiness – and I particularly have in mind Jay Oord and Michael Lodahl, the authors of *Relational Holiness* – have strayed from the accuracy of this classic definition, being nearly silent on the concept of holiness as incorporating a crisis experience which brings about a purifying restoration to the soul. Instead they prefer to speak of holiness only in terms of love as its core notion or atom.

To them, every other understanding of holiness is merely contributory. But is love really the atom of holiness or is holiness more like the nucleus of the atom? And is love more like the electrons which spin in orbit around it? Though they are bound together in a co-dependent balance, they are still distinctly different components of the same atom.

Oord and Lodahl's logic rightly says, 'When contributing notions are treated as core notions, problems arise.' Predictably, the closest their book ever comes to affirming the 'second work of grace' paradigm is found in the first preface, which is not even written by the authors.

David Felter's comments should have been made the first chapter of the book. He says, 'In this relational journey is a profound sense of process leading to a juncture that culminates in a moment of surrender and consecration. This yieldedness signals the onset of a dynamic element in God's masterpiece wherein the Holy Spirit cleanses and purifies the believer's heart, filling it with a love that excludes all self-centeredness.' He affirms traditional holiness theology when stating, 'Both movements [two works of grace] are essential if one is to live in the relational holiness described in this work.'

Do Oord and Lodahl accept the notion of a second work of grace? Near the end of the book the authors cast seeds of doubt by sceptically asking this question, which they never answer with clarity: 'Is there truly available an experience of God that can touch our hearts and lives so deeply that we may become renewed and empowered to love?' Their cryptic answer is vague at best: 'Such an experience continues to be expected, at least officially, in denominations that bear the Wesleyan stamp.'

Their true position is ultimately betrayed by this comment: 'Dancing cooperatively with the Master changes, little by little, the dancers themselves.' This is very different from the classic understanding of holiness which says that God proposes (and provides) a large change, effected by God's miraculous grace, followed by lots of other little-by-little changes.

Clearly, entire sanctification is being redefined by the authors to mean 'relational holiness' when it once meant something quite different.

For a description of the traditional holiness 'formula' we would do better to turn to J. Kenneth Grider's book *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*. In this he states: 'There are two special moments in a person's life when crisis experiences are received on the road to redemption.'

Grider contends: 'Calling this work of grace "entire

sanctification" also has the advantage of suggesting its most significant aspect: the cleansing away of original sin.' Indeed, Grider, when speaking of the sin nature as it relates to entire sanctification, uses 30 times in 40 pages words like expelled, crucified, destroyed and other like terms which connote a radical crisis of soul cleansing.

Grider documents meticulously the holiness movement's classic position on a cleansing in sanctification: 'This is perhaps the most basic component of the second work of grace. John Wesley taught a radical cleansing away of original sin at entire sanctification, and this has been standard teaching in the holiness movement.'

He then offers a list of later holiness writers, stating that they all 'clearly taught that one component of the second work of grace is a real and radical cleansing from original sin'.

What is Oord and Lodahl's assessment of this rich history? They think 'the fundamental identity of the holiness movement – its theological distinctive – is becoming extinct. Perhaps it is only the organisational machinery that keeps the tradition alive, while its theology no longer exerts influence.'

Even though the doctrine of holiness was widely preached, understood and experienced in years gone by, it now seems passé. Why is that? It was once one of the major support beams in numerous denominations for well over a hundred years.

A sad truth succinctly proclaimed by Oord and Lodahl states that 'unless distinctions that identify real differences are named, the denominations that comprise the holiness tradition may as well fade into mainstream evangelicalism'.

Oord and Lodahl state: 'Love provides holiness with the foundation it needs to flourish as the theological distinctive of the holiness tradition.' So, does love produce holiness or does holiness produce love?

I submit that holiness, at its core, is a renewing of our minds actuated by total surrender. Jesus shows us the path by example. He went to a cross, died and then rose from a tomb. This same pattern applies to us as his disciples (Matthew 16:24). This is a submission to God's wrecking ball – of a tearing down and reconstruction of our inner man.

Jesus said: 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:19). In holiness, our temple of 'self' is pulled down and rebuilt into something new and better – a 'resurrected' mindset. The stony heart has been rolled away and we step forth in new power. This is not a suppression of self-will but rather a being set free, as from a tomb. When Jesus stepped from the tomb, he was the same and yet he was very different. When we are sanctified wholly we are still the same in many ways and yet radically remade in others. Our 'spiritual DNA' is altered.

Therefore, a renewing of the mind is closer to a proper understanding of holiness than merely defining holiness as love. Holiness is something larger than love. It is a kind of foundation on which a house of love is built.

This clearly reflects one of Jesus' parables. If we don't go deep enough – if we stop short and refuse to pay the price – our house of love is in danger of collapse when life's storms would flood and overwhelm us. Holiness, then, while obviously infused with love, is first an overhauled, renovated and rebuilt mindset which allows love to be pure and undivided (1 John 4:18, Luke 10: 27).

The 'system' looks something like this: God's love for us produces holiness in us from which his perfect love may flow through us. Thus, love is not the essence of holiness but rather it is the expression of holiness.

Oord and Lodahl insist that love is the key definer of holiness but fail to address the fact that a sinful nature is love's greatest enemy. Their argument for love as the core of holiness is really not too far off. It simply stops too short and pulls slowly away from the historical understanding of holiness as outlined by Grider.

'IF WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE TARGET OR FAIL TO POINT IT OUT CLEARLY TO OUR PEOPLE, THE HOLINESS STORY WILL EVENTUALLY BE LOST WITH US AND WE WILL NO LONGER BE A HOLINESS MOVEMENT'

So what? These few degrees of separation may seem unimportant at first but are actually more crucial than many understand. *The War Cry* retells the story of the Apollo 13 spacecraft and how pilot Jim Lovell had to manually steer the crippled spacecraft towards home: 'Perhaps most amazing was how Lovell had to steer the cumbersome spaceship without the aid of instruments into a scant two degree pie-shaped angle upon hitting the Earth's atmosphere. If they exceeded 5.5 to 7.5 degrees, the craft would either have burned up or skipped into space toward forever.'

This is a valuable metaphor for the future of the holiness movement and therefore The Salvation Army. It is through a narrow window of a few degrees that we must fly our cumbersome holiness ship. Will we miss the target?

How does this apply pragmatically? As leaders, we are the ones commissioned to deliver some sort of holiness definition to our people. Grider reminds us that a 'considerable knowledge of the economy of God's grace is ideally a prerequisite of entire sanctification'.

If our people don't have this understanding of what is offered by God we short-circuit their desire to seek it. If the answer to being holy is simply 'to love', then a deeper work will probably remain undone. As Thomas Cook has said, 'To hit a mark we must know where it is.' If we do not understand the target or fail to point it out clearly to our people, the holiness story will eventually be lost with us and we will no longer be a holiness movement. As Oord and Lodahl bluntly put it, we will finally become 'a curious historical footnote'.

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