

ON SANCTIFICATION

Term Defined: Sanctification is that work of God's free grace, in which those appointed heirs of eternal life are renewed in their whole being after the image of God and enabled to progressively die to sin and live in righteousness. Where justification and adoption affect the state and standing before God, sanctification implies an alteration in the actual condition of the individual. ***"And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."*** 1Cor. 6:11.

Various Terms Employed: The Bible, as a whole has a great deal to say concerning holiness. Consequently it comes as no surprise that the subject is considered under several terms and images. In the main the most commonly used terms (*qodesh* in the OT and *hagios* in the NT) have as their dominant motif the idea of separation. In the religious context it comes to express the idea of separation from evil. With respect to the believer this has two dimensions, viz., (1) that of being set apart or consecrated to God (because He is set apart from the creation) and (2) set apart from evil. This idea is not confined to people but extends to inanimate objects and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. ***"Do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"*** Jn. 10:36. Also, ***"and for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth."*** Jn. 17:19.

Non-Biblical Notions of Holiness and Sanctification:

1. **Perfectionistic ideas of holiness:** This view, in its varying forms teaches the possibility of some kind of perfection for the Christian *in this world*. It is usually traced back to the teachings of John Wesley and is explained in numerous ways.
 - a. Wesley held that perfection was obtainable and consisted in the believer having the ability to not be guilty of any *willful* known sins. Sins in ignorance would not count in his view.
 - b. Wesley at times would explain it as *perfect love*. Here the believer, though not perfect in holiness could be considered as perfect if he could judge himself as loving God perfectly. I.e., with the totality of heart, will, mind and strength.
 - c. Others have held that perfection consists in ones ability to live to the *fullest potential* of holiness *at the particular time*.

Several things can be said here relative to the Wesleyan idea of sanctification. (1) It weakens the biblical definition of sin. Sin cannot be relegated to that which the sinner is aware of. Rather it is measured by the objective standard of the Law of God. **Cf. Ps. 19:12;**

1Cor. 4:4. (2) It also weakens any realistic understanding of perfection. One must ask, what can be meant by a perfection that is actually imperfection. The perfection the Scriptures speak of is absolute and utter conformity to the image of God in Christ. Well did Warfield note:

Nothing can be more important than that the conception of perfection be maintained at its height.... The habit of conceiving of perfection as admitting of many imperfections-moral imperfections, glossed as infirmities, errors and inadvertences- not only lowers the standard of perfection and with it the height of our aspirations, but corrupts our hearts, dulls our discrimination of right and wrong, and betrays us into satisfaction with attainments which are very far from satisfactory.¹

Moreover, to hold to a possibility of perfection in this world positively mitigates against the clear teachings of Holy Scripture. **Cf. 1Ki. 8:46; Ps. 130:3; Pro. 20:9 Ro. 3:23; Ja. 3:2.**

- 2. Keswick or victorious Christian (or Higher Life) ideas of holiness:** These views are somewhat related to Perfectionistic teachings. However, they are somewhat distinctive in that, in general, they introduce and emphasize levels to the concept of Christian growth in grace. Typically three levels are held: **(1)** the *natural* (unregenerate) man, **(2)** the *carnal* (regenerate but un-surrendered) Christian and **(3)** the *spiritual* (fully surrendered) Christian.
- a. The following analogy will often be used. The Church is filled with well meaning Christians who have stopped short of the fullness of what God has for them. They are Romans 7 Christians, still languishing in the 'wretched man that I am' doldrums. He that would be spiritual must push on to Romans 8. That is the 'no condemnation' heights. Now, the way to get there is by full or total surrender to God.
 - b. Here holiness is somewhat equated to surrender, and consequently the law of God is no longer the standard, but the subjective level of one's surrender to God.
 - c. Concomitant with this equating of holiness with 'full surrender' is a belief that there is an objective experience obtainable that will significantly and permanently increase ones holiness, so as to lift one above a specific temptation once and for all.

The Keswick understanding is faulty and breaks down in the very analogy they couch the view in. Romans 6-8 is a unit, a coherent

¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, Vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 457-58.

whole. NO new subject is introduced, but rather Paul's entire argument begins in Romans 6:1. Therefore the entire pericope intends to address his initial question regarding the possibility of continuing in sin (a suggestion so repulsive to his holy soul that it elicits a strong outburst of revulsion). Taken together it isn't possible to derive the various categories necessary to the Keswick understanding.²

Biblical Notions of Holiness and Sanctification:

1. **Old Testament Idea of Holiness:** In the Old Testament the idea of holiness has as its object, in the first place, God; Himself. He is set forth as unapproachable, this because He is utterly distinct from the creature. Holiness does not confront us as a mere attribute among attributes in God. Rather holiness can be properly predicated of God in His totality. God is as holy in His wrath as He is in His righteousness. His kindness is a holy kindness; His wisdom is a holy wisdom. There is nothing in God, of which holiness cannot be predicated. **Ex. 15:11; 1Sa. 6:20; Ps. 99:9; Isa. 6:3; Rev. 15:4.** This distinct 'otherness' of God is the soil out of which the ethical understanding of God emerges. This essentially in three respects.
 - a. This majestic distinctiveness of God elicits a deep awareness of impurity and self-abasing bordering on extinction in the creature. **Isa. 6:5; Zech. 3:3.** The sinful creature invariably sees himself as absolutely profane in the presence of the thrice-holy God. Thus the idea of holiness as pristine purity was developed.
 - b. This purity is not a passive quality in God, but an active principle that flashes forth as a raging furnace to uphold His own honor. **Nu. 10:1-3; Isa. 5:24; 10:17; 33:14, 15.** Thus the holiness of the Almighty God expresses itself in various ways in the Old Testament. It is the impetus for all the terrible judgments that burst forth upon His enemies **Gen. 6:5-7:15:16;** and the enemies of His people **Ex. 15:11, 12.** It is expressed in His election of Abraham and the separation of the nation Israel from the surrounding world. **Ex. 19:4-6.** It is the explanation for His patient bearing with and sparing His unfaithful people, that the unholy world would have nothing to rejoice over in the failure of His purposes. **Nu. 14:13-21; Hos. 11:9.**
 - c. This notion of holiness also came to be applied to objects and persons that were placed in a special relationship to God. Thus, the land of Canaan, the city of Jerusalem, the temple-mount, the tabernacle and temple, the Sabbaths, and high feast days of Israel

² The view also argues and seeks to prove that there is a category that can be called the carnal Christian from 1Cor. 3:1ff. But this is obviously incorrect. Nowhere does the passage suggest that Paul approves of some the Corinthians immaturity. Therefore it is incorrect to argue a status that functions as an legitimate resting place from what appears to be a level of immaturity he disapproves of and intends to lead them out of.

were all holy to the Lord because they were brought within the orb of His radiant purpose and majestic person. Likewise, the prophets, Levites, and priests were called holy, because the Lord laid hold of them for service. This concept is of great importance in the development of the New Testament teaching of sanctification, because it becomes patently evident that we have not yet risen to the ethical sphere even here. A person could thus be holy unto the Lord and utterly devoid of the grace of God in his heart. Thus we await further development. **Je. 31:31-34; Eze. 36:25-27.** In the Old dispensation as in the New, ethical holiness results from the sanctifying grace of the Spirit of God. Nevertheless, we are to hold firmly in view the fact that holiness is never to be considered as merely ethical for it is first understood in its relational component. It is ethical purity with respect to God or it is utterly wicked.

- 2. New Testament Idea of Holiness:** In the New Testament direct references to the holiness of God are conspicuous in their absence. There are surprisingly few direct references to the holiness of God found in the New Testament. Those found are primarily Old Testament citations and what remains will largely be attributed to the Apostle John. **Jn. 17:11; 1Jn. 2:20; Rev. 6:10.** The primary explanation for this striking difference is because in the New Testament holiness is specially predicated of the Holy Spirit, by whom the believer is sanctified and led onward to His eternal resting place. **2Thess. 2:13, 14; Tit. 3:5-7.** It is wondrous to find that *hagios* appears in connection with the Spirit of God nearly 100 times. Beyond this critical distinction the concept of holiness in the New Testament has much in common with that of the old. Consider well the trenchant words of Berkhof:

In the former as well as in the other ethical holiness is not mere moral rectitude, and sanctification is never mere moral improvement. These two are often confused in the present day, when people speak of salvation by character. A man may boast of great moral improvement, and yet be an utter stranger to sanctification. The Bible does not urge moral improvement pure and simple, but moral improvement in relation to God, for God's sake, and with a view to the service of God. ...At this very point much ethical preaching of the present day is utterly misleading; and the corrective for it lies in the presentation of the true doctrine of sanctification.³

The larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith defines sanctification in the following manner:

³ Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology. p. 532.

Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.⁴

The Basis of Sanctification:

1. **Sanctification grows out of the believer's union with Christ.** In **Romans 5** Paul makes it clear that as we have formerly reaped the totality of the consequences of Adam's sin, we now enjoy the benefits of Christ's triumph. In short, He has, ***"become for us wisdom from God- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."*** **1Cor. 1:30.** Because, ***"our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin."*** **Ro. 6:6.** It is as we are united to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit that we are delivered from the power of sin. **Romans 6:1-7** makes the point that the believer partakes of a comprehensive union with Christ. We are united to Him in His death and His life; which results in a new power and purpose in life.
2. **Sanctification is predicated on the mediatorial work of Christ.** The believer's sanctification is counted among the pearls that accrue to and are bestowed upon us by Jesus Christ, Redeemer of God's elect. ***"And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."*** **1Cor. 6:11. Cf. Acts. 20:32; Ro. 6:5,6; Phil. 3:10; 1Pe. 1:3.** Christ in His work definitively delivered the believer from the penalty and power of sin. **Ro. 6:1-4.** Moreover, He delivers from the crippling and condemning voice of the law. **Ro. 8:1-3.**

The Nature of Sanctification:

1. **It is a supernatural work of God.** The new life in grace, imparted in regeneration, is a life that perfectly corresponds to new life in nature. Thus sanctification is not merely the drawing out of that life. Rather, it is a work whereby God, through supernatural means builds, strengthens and matures the new nature. It is clearly depicted as God's work. **1Thess. 5:23; He. 13:20-21.** It is also set forth as the fruit of the believer's union with Christ. **John 15:4; 1Cor. 1:30; Gal. 2:20.** Moreover, it is described as a work of God in man and thus cannot, for that very reason be a mere human work. **Eph. 3:16; Col.**

⁴ Smith, Morton H., *The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards*, (Escondido, CA: Ephesians Four Group) 1999.

- 1:11. Therefore nothing can be more wrong than to give the impression that the work of sanctification is merely the shedding of certain sinful acts.
2. **It has two dimensions.** Sanctification involves an immediate definitive dimension and a progressive dimension. Our New life is in the heavenlies where we are seated with Christ, far above the ravages and reach of sin and death. **Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1,3.** But it is also true that our bodies are still 'in this world' and exposed to sin, temptation and ultimately temporal death. Thus we must strive with all our might in the strength that God gives to conform our present earthly reality to our spiritual heavenly reality. **Eph. 2:10; Col. 3:2, 5ff.** We praise God that this too is God's work in us and through us, even as we strive we are but, ***working out our salvation with fear and trembling*** knowing that ***"it is God who is at work in us both to will and to do His good pleasure."*** Phil. 2:12,13.
 3. **It consists in two parts.** Sanctification has two aspects and they are inseparable and co-essential to the concept itself.
 - a. **Sanctification involves the mortification of the old man.** The Scripture speaks of a gradually but sure destruction of old sinful nature, whereby the pollution and corruption of the old life is removed. **Ro. 6:6; Col. 3:5.** The Bible frequently speaks of this in the language of crucifixion and in connection with the death of Jesus Christ. ***"Those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires."*** Ga. 5:24. Here the old man or nature (and other related terms and images) signifies human nature as it is controlled and dominated by sin.
 - b. **Sanctification involves the gradual growth and maturation of the new man.** Cotemporaneous with the dissolution of the old sinful nature is the raising of the new holy disposition. The new nature is exercised and strengthened resulting in a growth in grace. **Eph. 4:15; 1Th 3:12; 2Pe. 3:18.** In other words, ***"They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. Ps. 84:7.*** There can be no more direct statement with respect to this aspect of sanctification than Paul's words to the church at Corinth. ***"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."*** 2Cor. 3:18.
 4. **It involves the entire man; body and soul, heart, will and mind.** It stands to reason that if sanctification involves God's work inside the individual then it, of necessity, involves the changing of man's total being. Sanctification leaves no part of the life untouched. **1Thess. 5:23; 2Cor. 5:17.** Moreover, this implies that this process is one that proceeds from the inside out. Thus change predicated of the body presupposes change of the heart, mind and will. In general the body is

considered as that instrument through which sinful inclinations and passions express themselves. **Ro. 6:12-14.** Thus sanctification effects all the powers and faculties of the soul: the understanding, **Jer. 31:34**; the will, **Ezek. 36:25-27**; **Phil 2:13**; the passions, **Ga. 5:24**; and the conscience, **Tit. 1:15**; **Heb. 9:14.**

5. **It is work in which believers participate.** To say that man participates in the work of sanctification is not the same as asserting that sanctification is part God and part man; rather it is both all God and all man. That is, God has willed to sanctify His creation in cooperation with the efforts inherent in the rational beings who are subject of the work. Therefore, the how of how God does it is inclusive of the efforts of the creature. God never sanctified anyone apart from the subject's striving after holiness. That this is so is clearly evident from: **(1)** the insistent and repeated warnings that believers avoid sin and temptation. **Ro. 6:12-13**; **13:12-13.** **(2)** This is equally lucid from the frequent and fervent pleas to live holy lives. **Ro. 8:12-13**; **12: 1-2**; **13:14**; **Ga. 6: 7,8, 15.**

The Characteristics of Sanctification:

1. **It is a work that occurs at both the conscious and subconscious levels.** Therefore it is both the immediate work of the Spirit of God and dependant upon the use of God appointed means: viz., the prayerful study of the word of God and the fellowship of the saints.
2. **It is usually a lengthy process and never fully complete in this life.** There are cases where regeneration and conversion are immediately followed by temporal death. However the norm is a protracted struggle with the powers and principalities, sin and temptation, dwelling both within and without. The work of sanctification is never completed in this life.
3. **It is a work that is finally completed in temporal death.** Sanctification is finally and utterly made complete at the point of or immediately after temporal death with respect to the soul and at the general resurrection of the dead with respect to the body. This is demonstrable because **(1)** the Scripture gives eloquent testimony to the fact that there are none who can claim sinless perfection in this life. **1Ki. 8:46**; **Prov. 20:9**; **Ro. 3:10, 12**; **Ja. 3:2**; **1Jn. 1:8.** **(2)** It is equally urgent and insistent that those who pass through the portal of death are perfected in holiness. It speaks of the souls of just men made perfect, **Heb. 12:23**; and they being without blemish, **Rev. 14:5.** Moreover, we are informed that in the new Jerusalem there shall in no wise be any thing permitted that tends toward defilement. **2Pe. 3:13**; **Rev. 21:27.** Finally, in the general resurrection, at the coming of Christ; we shall be raised anew with bodies that are conformed to the body of His glory. **Phil. 3:21.**

The Author and Means of Sanctification:

1. **The Author of Sanctification is the Triune God.** It is not burdensome, given the religious climate of the present time, to state repeatedly and forcefully; God is the author. Sanctification is a work of God! Man may be privileged to co-labor, but his striving is but decreed means. Therefore he can take no credit for the work. All his efforts are absolutely and utterly dependent upon God, who supplies the grace day-by-day and moment-by-moment.

Sanctification is especially ascribed to the Holy Spirit in Scripture, **Ro. 8:11; 15:16; 1Pe. 1:2**. In so far as it takes place in the subconscious life, it is effected by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, His workings in the conscious life employ the use of several means:

- a. **The Word of God.** The primary instrument, made use of by the Holy Spirit in the work of sanctification, is the Word of God. It provides all the external rules for holy conduct. It is the only rule given to direct us in how we may glorify and enjoy God. It acts in us to excite holy emotions, affections and actions. It exhorts us to duty and warns us of spiritual danger. **1Pe. 1:22; 2:2; 2Pe. 1:4, 19**.
- b. **Prayer.** We frequently find in the Scriptures examples of holy men before God in earnest prayer for increase in grace. **Eph. 1:15-22; 3:14-19; Col. 1:9-13**. Jesus reminds us that by asking, seeking and knocking on the door of the Heavenly Father we receive ongoing strength and comfort from the Spirit of God. **Lk. 11:9-13**.
- c. **Fellowship.** It is as we live in community with one another in love and burden bearing, that we fulfill the law of Christ. **Ga. 6:2**. The Scripture makes it clear that The gift of Christian unity is used by the Spirit of God to promote the peace, happiness and holiness of the Bride of Christ as she obtains the full measure of manhood. **Eph. 4:1-15**.
- d. **Providential Guidance.** God leads the believer providentially in such a way as to lead him onward to growth in holiness, by making him more conformable to the image of Christ. His providential dealings with His people act to more deeply impress and imprint the truth upon their minds and hearts. It must also be maintained that the Word of God is necessary to rightly interpret His providences. **Ps. 119:71; Ro. 2:4; Heb. 12:10**.

Conclusion:

Thus we find that sanctification is a piece of a glorious whole: the glorification of God in the total redemption of the believer. The work is a divine work from beginning to end. Because it is divine the believer has all the incentive necessary to strive toward Christian maturity in Christ. Though sin is with us throughout the course of this life we need not despair. God has given us His Son and in doing so He has given us everything we need to live under God with full assurance that sin

will never have dominion over us again. We have the assurance of the eternal Almighty God that this is so.