

Understanding the Doctrine and Process of Sanctification
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Introduction

The need for personal sanctification in believers is very clear in the Scriptures. But what is not so clear is the process by which a believer becomes experientially sanctified. This paper will examine the doctrine and practice of sanctification, with a view toward understanding how a believer can experience progressive sanctification as God has intended for every believer.

I. The Meaning of Sanctification and Sin

The basic meaning of “sanctify” is to set apart for a special purpose or use (Exod 19:10). Theologically, it describes a person being set apart for God (1 Cor 6:11). A person before salvation did not belong to God and was not qualified to be God’s possession, to be rightly related to God, and to be used of God. The work of sanctification sets that person apart from sin and the world unto God and to God’s purpose for him. 1 Peter 2:9 describes believers as being “a people belonging to God, that [they] may declare the praises of him who called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Sanctification, or being set apart to God, is described in Scripture as past, present, and future. In other words, the believer has already been sanctified, is progressively being sanctified, and will ultimately be sanctified. These are described as positional, progressive, and ultimate sanctification.¹ *Positional sanctification* is the act of being set apart to God and made holy at the time of salvation. Hebrews 10:10 says that believers have been sanctified or “made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus once for all.” 1 Corinthians 1:30 says that for believers, all of whom are in union with Christ, Christ has become our sanctification. *Progressive sanctification* is the process by which a believer’s positional sanctification is becoming reality in his

¹Chafer, Lewis Sperry, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 6* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993) 284-5.

experience. It involves genuine life change in that, more and more often a believer does the will of God in the power of God. It is the process of becoming like Christ (2 Cor 3:18). It describes the process of spiritual growth (2 Pet 3:18). *Ultimate sanctification* is the culmination of the process of becoming like Christ. Becoming like Christ is the believer's destiny (Rom 8:29), and it will happen when the believer meets Christ and sees him face to face, whether by physical death or by the rapture (1 John 3:2). The believer will then be ultimately transformed and will thus take on the character of Christ, without having to battle against the sinful nature any longer.²

In order to describe sanctification in a believer's life, it is necessary to adequately define sin. Sin is described as any action, attitude, or thought that does not conform to God's will or character, especially as revealed in the Bible. Romans 3:23 says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It is "missing the mark" of that which glorifies God and conforms to his glory. It is overstepping God's boundaries that are revealed in his law (Rom 4:15). Sin includes wrong actions that are done, as well as right actions that are not done.³

Sin, however, does not *only* include actions, attitudes, and thoughts. Sin in the Bible is also described as a principle or force that human beings possess (Rom 7:23, 8:2).⁴ This force of sin empowers people, believers and unbeliever alike, to commit acts of sin. Paul describes the effects of the sin-principle ("the law of sin") in a believer's life in Roman 7:14-25. The law of sin creates a great struggle within a believer who desires to do the will of God. The principle of sin, if not properly dealt with, will continue to lead a believer to sin against God.

At salvation, the believer has his human nature renewed (2 Cor 5:17, Titus 3:5), which allows him to have the possibility of overcoming the law of sin (Rom 6:6, 8:2).⁵ A saved person

²Ryrie, Charles, "Contrasting Views on Sanctification." *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982) 190.

³Enns, Paul, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989) 310.

⁴Barackman, Floyd Hays, *Practical Christian Theology* (Binghamton, NY: Niles and Phipps, 1990) 241-2.

⁵I prefer to understand humans as having *one* human nature, which is sinful because of the law or

is no longer wholly and completely dominated by the sin-principle, even though he still possesses the sin-principle until ultimate sanctification (1 John 1:8). The “old-self,” or “old-man” has been “put off” (Col 3:9) and a “new self,” or “new man” has been “put on” (Col 3:10). This describes the fact that a believer’s old way of life, before he was a believer, has been done away with, and that he is now capable of living life in a new manner.⁶ The believer can now choose to avoid domination by the sin-principle. This choice is highlighted in Ephesians 4:22-24. Believers have been taught to “put off” the old way of life, and “put on” the new way of life. In an ongoing process, a believer is supposed to put into practice the fact that he has been renewed.

II. The Basis for Sanctification

Sanctification finds its basis in God’s salvation of humans. Every human being begins life as a sinful person, and is declared by God to be unworthy and unrighteous (Rom 3:10, 3:23), therefore deserving of death and eternal punishment (Rom 6:23). Human attempts to keep the law of God cannot overcome the state of being unrighteous before God and unworthy of a relationship with him (Rom 3:20). But God in his grace has made a way for people to experience deliverance from sin and its penalty. Through the work of Christ in dying as a substitute for humans, God can declare believing people to be righteous, firmly on the basis of Christ’s work, not their own works (Rom 3:24-26).

At the time of salvation, God the Holy Spirit does several things in a believer. First, the Holy Spirit regenerates the believer (Titus 3:5, 1 Cor 6:11 “washed”). This is the work of the Holy Spirit by which he cleanses and renews the believer, giving him new life in Christ (Rom 8:2, Eph 2:1-8).⁷ Second, the Holy Spirit baptizes the believer into the body of Christ. That is, the principle of sin (Rom 7:23, 25), yet renewed, having the capacity to overcome the law of sin (Floyd Barackman, *Victors, Not Victims* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993) 93-102; *contra*. John Walvoord “The Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective.” *Five Views on Sanctification*, series ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 201-208).

⁶Walvoord, 208.

⁷Walvoord, 210.

believer is brought into spiritual union with Christ and with other believers (1 Cor 12:13, Gal 3:27, Rom 6:3-4).⁸ Through this baptism, a believer can enjoy the privileges of the work of Christ in his death. All that the believer experiences “in Christ” is the result of being brought into spiritual union with Christ by the Spirit’s baptism (Eph 1:3-13).⁹ Through this baptism of the Holy Spirit, the believer, because he belongs to Christ, can be said to have “crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). This baptism of the Holy Spirit is not something that Scripture says a believer should pray for. It happened at salvation, and it is not an experiential act. Third, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer at the time of salvation. This means that the Holy Spirit has come to live in or dwell in the life and body of every believer, permanently (Rom 8:8-9, John 14:16-17). Hence, a believer always has in him the very presence of God. Chafer writes, “The direct reason for invoking a holy life is that believers are already temples of the Spirit.”¹⁰ By his indwelling, the Holy Spirit serves as God’s seal on the believer (Eph 1:13, 4:30, 2 Cor 1:22). God placed his mark of ownership upon the believer in the person of the Holy Spirit. The presence of God the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is a guarantee that the full experience of redemption and eternal life will eventually come (2 Cor 5:5).

While the previous paragraph outlined what the Holy Spirit has done at salvation which forms the basis for the continuing process of sanctification, it is necessary to point out that sanctification is a work that involves the Trinity. Sanctification is a work of the Father (John 17:17, Heb 12:10), a work of the Son (Eph 5:25-27, Titus 2:14, 1 Cor 1:30), and a work of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet 1:2, 2 Thess 2:13, Titus 3:5).¹¹

III. The Ongoing Process of Sanctification in a Believer’s Life

A. The Goal of Sanctification

⁸Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology*, 179.

⁹Ryrie, Charles, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969) 49-50.

¹⁰128.

¹¹Hoekema, Anthony, “The Reformed Perspective.” *Five Views on Sanctification*, 68-70.

The goal of sanctification ultimately is to become like Christ, who represents for us the image of God (2 Cor 4:4).¹² Romans 8:29 says that believers will be “conformed to the likeness of his Son [Christ], that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Believers will eventually take on the moral character of Christ, and will have resurrected, recreated bodies like Christ’s. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says that believers “are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” There is a final aspect of becoming like Christ that Romans 8:29 seems to emphasize. When our bodies have been glorified and renewed, believers will finally be like Christ (1 John 3:2). But this process is at work in the believer’s present earthly life, because believers are commanded to “be imitators of God” (Eph 5:1). Paul challenges believers, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Thus the moral qualities of Christ set the pattern to which believers must aspire to in their earthly lives. It is Christ’s desire to make his church holy and pure so that she can be offered to him as clean church (Eph 5:25-27). It is a church, a people, that reflects him and his character. So while believers anticipate the final glorious occasion of being ultimately made like Christ, they are to make effort in this life to reflect the character of Christ, in ever-increasing degrees.

Scripture gives us information about what difference being sanctified makes in a believer’s character. It is the “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-23, and it is contrasted with the acts of the “sinful nature” or the flesh, which is the human nature dominated by the sin-principle. When the Holy Spirit dominates the believer’s human nature, the result is the moral qualities of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” The natural result of the Holy Spirit dominating or controlling the life of the believer is the character described in these verses. This provides insight into what it means to be “like

¹²Ibid., 66.

Christ.”

There are some who teach that humans can achieve a measure of perfection in this life, that the sinful nature can be eradicated. This is called by some “entire sanctification,” and was propagated by John Wesley.¹³ But 1 John 1:8 and 10 point out that believers cannot and should not claim to be without sin. People who make such a claim have redefined sin, so that it no longer means any action, attitude, or thought that fails to conform to God’s character and revealed will.¹⁴ The goal of sanctification is to be like Christ, but that will not entirely happen until we see Christ.

B. The Continuing Ministry of the Holy Spirit

As it relates to the believer’s sanctification, the main ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit is his filling of the believer. The ministries of regeneration, baptism, and indwelling happen instantaneously at salvation; but believers are commanded to regularly “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18). This command is in the present tense, and it seems to indicate the need for believer to continually be filled with the Spirit. This concept of “filling” seems to suggest control.¹⁵ It is contrasted with the word picture of being controlled or under the influence of wine. Rather than living life under the influence of alcohol, the believer is to live life under the influence of the Holy Spirit. This is where the power to live properly comes from. It is only when the Holy Spirit controls a believer that the believer’s life can bear the fruit or result of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. When a believer is controlled by his own desires and by the sin-principle, the works of the flesh will result. But when he is controlled by the Spirit, the moral qualities listed are the result.

C. The Believer’s Responsibility in Sanctification

¹³Ibid., 83.

¹⁴McQuilkin, J. Robertson, “Response to Deiter.” *Five Views on Sanctification*, 53-54.

¹⁵Ryrie, Charles, *Balancing the Christian Life*, 111-112.

While positional and ultimate sanctification are fully the work of God apart from human intervention, progressive, experiential sanctification in a believer's life involves a partnership between God's work and the believer's appropriate response to God's work. This human responsibility forms the basis for the commands for believers to be holy or sanctified (1 Pet 1:15-16). 2 Corinthians 7:1 challenges the believer, "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God." The believer's ability to purify himself, as commanded, is based on God's work in his life. The partnership that is to exist is clearly seen in Philippians 2:13, where Paul says, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." In other words, the desire to be sanctified and the ability to be sanctified come from God. As he gives us the will and the strength, only then can we "work out our salvation" or display the outworking of our salvation (vs. 12). Apart from God's power, the believer has no hope of experiencing progressive sanctification (Rom 7:13-25). There are several facets of the believer's responsibility in sanctification.

1. The believer must yield to the control of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit must control a believer in order for that person to progress in sanctification. But the Holy Spirit's control depends on the believer's yieldedness to him. Romans 6:13 commands the believer to offer himself as an instrument to be used and controlled by God. This follows the recognition that the believer has "died to sin," meaning that he is no longer subject to the domination of sin (vs. 11-12). It is in yielding oneself to God that a believer can "live a new life" (vs. 4).¹⁶ Romans 12:1-2 also commands believers to offer their bodies to God as a living sacrifice. This results in being transformed by God into a person who does the will of God.

¹⁶Chafer, 276.

Chafer shows from the Scriptures three conditions or prerequisites for being “filled with the Spirit.”¹⁷ These commands are closely related to being yielded to God. The first is “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph 4:30). The Holy Spirit is grieved when the believer rebels against him, refusing to listen to and be led by the Spirit. The believer is to do that which pleases, rather than grieves, the Holy Spirit. The second command is, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire” (1 Thess 5:17). This happens when a believer resists the prompting of the Spirit, saying no to the Spirit and suppressing the promptings of the Spirit in his life.¹⁸ The third command is to “live [or walk] by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16). This involves moving through life, day by day, walking with and depending upon the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ The phrase “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25) pictures a moment-by-moment interaction with the Holy Spirit, staying sensitive to the control or filling of the Spirit.

2. The believer must confess known sin.

In order to be filled by the Spirit and to avoid grieving and quenching the Spirit, the believer must maintain a sensitivity to his own sin. The purposes of sanctification are not served when believers ignore their sins, or worse, assume that they have none (1 John 1:8, 10). No one will be perfectly controlled by the Spirit in this life, and therefore believers will commit sin on occasion. In order to “keep in step with the Spirit,” the believer must acknowledge their specific sins of action, attitude, and thought (1 John 1:9). Complete forgiveness of sin is given when the condition of confession is met. Confession, in essence, is to acknowledge the sin and agree with God’s assessment about that sin, that it fails to measure up to his standard of holiness.

3. The believer must replace wrong actions with right actions.

Colossians 3:9-10 demonstrates that a believer has “put off” the old manner of life, and

¹⁷Ibid., 232-268.

¹⁸Walvoord, 218.

¹⁹Ibid., 220.

has “put on” the new manner of life. Because of this, he should act accordingly by living a proper life (the specific command in verse 9 is, “do not lie to one another”). Ephesians 4:22-24 suggests that believers have learned how to “put off” the old way of life and “put on” the new way of life. It seems that there is an aspect to the new life which has already been “put on” (positionally) while at the same time, the believer is instructed to “put on” in experience what he already put on in position.²⁰

Ephesians 4:22-32 gives several examples of “putting off” wrong behavior and replacing it with right behavior. Lying should be replaced with speaking the truth (vs. 25). Sinful anger should be replaced with properly dealing with the cause of anger (vss. 26-27). Stealing should be replaced with working and giving (vs. 28). Unwholesome language should be replaced with language that builds others up (vs. 29). And bitterness should be replaced with kindness and forgiveness (vss. 31-32). These specific examples suggest an important pattern: to overcome wrong behaviors in the Christian life, replace them with right and positive behaviors and habits, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Rather than trying *not* to do wrong, replace the wrong with the right.

4. The believer must resist the devil and sinful temptation.

The devil and his forces represent one of the believer’s primary enemies. 1 Peter 5:8-9 commands the believer to stay alert and resist the devil, our adversary. Ephesians 6:10-18 says that the believer is able to be strong in spiritual battles by relying on God’s power (vs. 10). It is in the power of God that a believer can resist his spiritual enemies. 1 Corinthians 10:13 encourages the believer to resist temptation to sin, because God is able to provide a way to stand up to temptation by refusing to give in.

5. The believer must spend time in God’s word and in prayer.

²⁰Chafer, 270.

Life change that leads to a greater degree of holiness has much to do with a person's exposure to the Word of God. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that God's Word is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." As the Holy Spirit does his work of controlling the believer, he uses the revealed will of God – God's word – to influence the believer's behavior. Prayer is also an important practice for spiritual growth. In Ephesians 6:18, Paul concludes his teaching about spiritual armor with the challenge to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions," because prayer is necessary to fully experience the power of God at work. It is in prayer that the believer expresses his dependence upon God.

6. The believer must be in community with other believers.

In the Scriptures, believers are commanded to continue to meet with one another. In Hebrews 10:24-25, it is the author's command that believers challenge each other on to greater love and good deeds. To that end, he says that believers must keep meeting together in order to have the opportunity to sharpen one another spiritually.

7. The believer must submit to God's discipline.

As painful as it can be, God's discipline of his people is intended to produce greater spiritual growth. In Hebrews 12:5-11, believers are challenged to willingly submit to God's discipline, because it is an expression of his love, and it produces holiness in us (vs. 10).

8. The believer must undergo training.

There is a difference between ongoing training and merely trying harder. Paul told Timothy, "Train yourself to be godly" (1 Tim 4:7). Training requires discipline (1 Cor 9:27) and it also requires continual, repeated exposure to good habits and practices (1 Tim 4:16). This allows genuine progress to be evident to observers (1 Tim 4:15). Training occurs when a believer regularly practices the above seven responsibilities; this allows these things to become habitual

and regular. It should be the regular habit of believers that they walk in the Spirit and thus see their lives progressing in godliness and holiness.

Conclusion

This brief paper has outlined what sanctification is, what it is based upon, and how it is attained in a believer's life. Christians need to know through faithful preaching and teaching of these principles that living a life of spiritual growth and fruitfulness is possible and is, in fact, expected by God. With Paul, we exclaim, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 7:24-25a).