

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

THE NATURE OF SANCTIFICATION:

WHAT ROLE, IF ANY, DO WE PLAY?

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Some Christians may wonder, “Why is it important to examine the nature of sanctification?” In response, although it initially seems like an abstract concept, sanctification is something that Christians experience on a daily basis – when interacting with God rather than the world, when deciding whether or not to obey Him, and when determining how to align our lives with His plan. Because God wants us to be sanctified, understanding how this happens is one of the most important practical issues of the Christian faith. Specifically, what does God do and what do we need to do? If we want to love God and obey Him, we cannot afford to ignore this issue.

As it will be shown, Scripture often speaks of sanctification in terms of the Holy Spirit, but even *this* is confusing. In the history of Christian theology, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit has at times been underdeveloped, and at other times, avoided entirely.¹ Most recently, the Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and Third Wave movements of the 20th century have contributed both new insights and new questions for the Church to consider. With these recent developments, the Christian Church is far from consensus when it comes to the Holy Spirit’s activity. As a result, if Christians do not adequately understand the role of the Holy Spirit, then neither can we understand our role!

This study will strive to outline a balanced understanding of the nature of sanctification – that is, how the Holy Spirit sanctifies a believer and how we respond in turn to the Spirit. Rather than starting from an anthropomorphic perspective, this paper will start with the theocentric concern of how God accomplishes sanctification within our lives – namely through His agent of the Holy Spirit. As this study unfolds, it will become clear how we as humans should respond to

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 869.

the Holy Spirit. After defining terms, both roles will be examined in respect to each aspect of sanctification.

A Definition of Sanctification

Simply stated, sanctification is the “attainment of Christ-likeness,” or the renewing of the whole man into the image of God.² Negatively, it involves the mortification of our sin through the work of the Holy Spirit.³ From a Christian perspective, sanctification does not occur separately from salvation, but like justification, regeneration, and glorification, it is an inseparable part of our salvation experience. Sanctification can be thought of as ‘salvation applied to everyday life,’ because it is this aspect of salvation that transforms our thoughts, intentions, and actions.

Sanctification is initiated by God’s character. Just as God is holy, those who interact with Him are called to be holy. Many verses speak to this expectation, most explicitly in Isaiah 40:25, Leviticus 11:45, and Habakkuk 1:12-13, though it is more accurate to think of the entirety of Scripture as addressing this expectation. From a Christian perspective, moral living is not an empty requirement, but it is rooted in the very nature of God. Sanctification, therefore, is not an option, but a mandatory concern for believers. So to truly understand the purpose of sanctification, a person must consider the nature of who God is.

²Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (electronic ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1988), 318.

³Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 229.

Three Senses of Sanctification

Theologians have made an important distinction between three senses of sanctification: positional, progressive, and final sanctification.⁴ Although the Bible does not use such wording, this terminology is helpful for those studying the concept of sanctification, because Scripture describes sanctification in various ways. The word “sanctification” has a wide semantic range, so in order to avoid unnecessary confusion, it is important to specify which aspect of sanctification is being discussed.

For an analogy, one can think of a tree. There is a seedling, a sapling, and finally a fully mature tree, yet the word “tree” can be used in a comprehensive sense, including all of these stages. In a similar way, Scripture uses the concept of sanctification. While we can think of sanctification in a comprehensive way, the Bible speaks of sanctification in an initial sense, a progressive sense, and a final sense. When approaching this topic, therefore, it is helpful to examine each of these specifically.

Divine and Human Roles in Positional Sanctification

New believers in Christ are described in the Bible as “sanctified,” even though we would not expect this to be the case. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 1:2 when he addresses the Corinthian believers as saints. As shown by the vices listed in the epistle, the Corinthians were leagues away from being ethical. They were struggling with matters of sexual morality, strife, selfishness, gluttony, as well as other forms of immorality. Yet in spite of their immorality, Paul affirms that the Corinthian believers were saints through the Holy Spirit. The

⁴ Though they essentially refer to the same thing, due to their emphases, I slightly prefer these labels over “initial sanctification” and “complete sanctification.”

fact that believers can be referred to as the “sanctified” is not because of their ethical actions, but on account of their connection to Christ through the Holy Spirit.⁵

This initial sense of sanctification is only possible through position in Christ, and it is the Holy Spirit that makes this effective. Whereas Christ’s righteousness is an objective reality that is external to a person, the Holy Spirit makes Christ’s holiness effectual within the human heart. New believers do not suddenly become moral themselves, but through their union with Christ, they share in His perfect morality and are inwardly transformed. Like the first glimpse of a sunrise, it is the beginning of a new day. God considers new believers “sanctified” because of the work of the Holy Spirit within their hearts. At the beginning, sanctification may seem incomplete to us, but from God’s view, believers can be considered saints.

In light of this, the Holy Spirit deserves credit from the start. Roman Catholicism recognizes “real, internal sanctification effected by grace,” but goes too far by asserting that humans contribute good works to their salvation.⁶ The Reformers, on the other hand, rejected that man’s sanctification could contribute to salvation. Only the Holy Spirit can bring us into relationship with God. As Calvin put it, God gives his children “the Spirit of adoption, whose agency forms them anew into his image.”⁷ Therefore, when believers are justified, they become sanctified – which is only possible through the involvement of the Holy Spirit. In Trinitarian

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 20:32; 26:18; Romans 15:16; Ephesians 1:13-4, 2:22, 3:16, 4:4; Hebrews 10:29; 2 Timothy 2:21.

⁶ Joseph Pohle. "Sanctifying Grace." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 6. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909. [cited 5 Sept. 2009] Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06701a.htm>

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Translation of: *Institutio Christianae religionis*.; Reprint, with new introd. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846.; Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), III, xi, 6.

language, “God the Father saves, through the work of Christ, effected experientially by the Spirit.”⁸ Thus, when a believer is sanctified by the Holy Spirit, he or she is inwardly changed.

It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between “who does what” because of the close connection between justification and sanctification.⁹ Ralph Erskine, a poet from the early 18th century, observed that a Christian is clothed with the righteousness of Christ, but “by His Spirit’s work within / He forms my gracious holy dress.”¹⁰ In other words, the Spirit compels a person towards the righteousness of Christ, but also works internally in order to make that person holy. Thus, because of the Holy Spirit’s work, a believer is not only perceived as holy in God’s eyes (justified), but actually made holy within (sanctified). As Erskine recognizes, the Holy Spirit is responsible for sanctifying the human heart.

Before a human being can contribute to the cause, God graciously sanctifies a person the moment that they are saved. This is clear in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, where Paul explains that God chooses his children for salvation “by means of the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” In other words, through the Holy Spirit, God sets that person apart – away from their former life and towards a new life in Christ. This is referred to as *positional* sanctification because it refers to a person’s location in relation to Christ. As Gordon Fee points out, according to Paul, there is “no

⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 128.

⁹ Most Protestant theologians would affirm that justification and sanctification are logically separable, but they cannot be torn apart from each other.

¹⁰ Ralph Erskine, *The Sermons and Practical Works of Ralph Erskine*. (Glasgow: W. Smith and J. Bryce Booksellers, 1778) vol. 10, pp. 283-290.

genuine conversion that does not include the sanctifying work of the Spirit.”¹¹ Sanctification is not merely a possibility for new believers; it is actual and experiential.¹²

As unfathomable as it sounds, through the conduit of the Holy Spirit, believers share in Christ’s holiness from the very beginning. Raised to new life, a Christian experiences what it means to “die to sin” and to become “as white as snow.”¹³ When a rebel lays down his arms and turns to Christ, he immediately becomes a saint. There is no waiting period. His identity has become so revolutionized that God no longer sees him as a rebel, but as one who is set apart for Christ’s kingdom. In terms of spiritual positioning – transferring from the realm of darkness to the kingdom of light – Christians are immediately sanctified. A person outside of Christ’s kingdom lives without restraint, but a person who unites with Christ is immediately set apart for the Kingdom.¹⁴

Thus, even though sanctification continues throughout a person’s life, sanctification should not be merely spoken of as a secondary work because, in reality, it begins at conversion. In this sense, our position in Christ has an immediate effect upon our ethical life.¹⁵ A believer does not *earn* the right to be sanctified, but receives it by God’s grace.

¹¹ Fee, 79.

¹²Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (, Tyndale reference libraryWheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1164.

¹³ Romans 6:2; 1 John 1:9

¹⁴ Acts 20:32; 1 Corinthians 1:2,30; 2 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 2:11; Hebrews 3:1; Hebrews 10:10,14; Hebrews 13:12; 1 Peter 1:2

¹⁵ Fee, 130.

Divine and Human Roles in Progressive Sanctification

When most Christians speak of holy living, they are referring to becoming more and more like Christ, or what theologians describe as *progressive* sanctification.¹⁶ As seen above, sanctification begins when the Holy Spirit draws us into union with Christ, but the Holy Spirit continues to work in our lives.¹⁷ This process is similar to the healthy development of a human relationship. It is good news that God does not give up on us after our conversion, but His Spirit continues to work in our lives, helping us to become more like Him, thus enabling us to relate with Him better.

Believers are called to live holy lives because the Holy Spirit dwells within them. In order for believers to relate with the Holy Trinity, God calls his people to live according to his holy standard. “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified,” and in 1 Thessalonians 4, morality is connected with the giving of the Holy Spirit. Believers should strive to honor God through a holy lifestyle because of the Holy Spirit’s presence in their lives.¹⁸ On the contrary, when believers sin like the pagans, they reject God “who gives his Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 4:8).

In a unique way, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit helps us to obey God’s moral law. To be sure, there was a concept of sanctification prior to Christ (Lev. 19:2; Ex. 19), but it was primarily understood in an external sense as “a technical term of cult ritual.”¹⁹ With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, however, holiness became much more of an inner reality – so that as Jeremiah 31:31-33 explains, God’s law would be “written on their hearts.” Speaking of these

¹⁶ John 17:17,19; Romans 6:1-22; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, 5:23

¹⁷ As Calvin, Barth, and other Reformed theologians observe, there is a distinction between justification and our sanctification, but they are closely connected.

¹⁸ See Psalm 51:11 for an Old Testament perspective on the connection between God’s presence and holy living.

¹⁹ Ferguson, 613.

latter days, God promised, “I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek. 36:27). Because of this sense of indwelling, the Holy Spirit makes Christ’s holiness *practical* in our lives. Our hearts are experientially affected by the presence of God’s Spirit within us.

In everyday life, this inner presence of the Holy Spirit helps us to live a moral life by convicting us of sin and by leading us towards truth. We are not lone rangers in the effort to follow Christ, but we are fully dependent upon the Holy Spirit for our holiness. It is true, as Stanley M. Horton has written, the Spirit is “necessary” for our sanctification.²⁰ We cannot manage holy living on our own, but as Scripture teaches, we need a helper to empower us. We cannot be set apart as witnesses for the Kingdom unless the Holy Spirit enables us (Acts 1:8). Thus, our role is to respond to the enablement of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture teaches that both the Holy Spirit and our reliance upon the Holy Spirit are required for holy living. It is not merely a matter of professing religious beliefs or exercising our will power. Instead, there needs to be confidence in the Spirit of God. As Paul instructed to the believers in Philippi, “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”²¹ In the original Greek, *κατεργάζεσθε* was often used to describe the cultivation of farm land, so Philippians 2:12-13 can be paraphrased as “keep on cultivating the salvation that God has given you.”²² In light of this passage, there needs to be balance in our understanding of sanctification, but clearly, the ultimate cause is God’s work within us. As John Murray put it, “*because* God works we work.”²³

²⁰ Stanley N. Gundry, ed. *Five Views of Sanctification*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 157.

²¹ Philippians 2:12-13

²² Gundry, 71.

²³ Gundry, 72.

Properly understood, therefore, sanctification means that we respond to Holy Spirit's work with work of our own.

Similar to how plants receive light from the sun, Christians need to be actively reliant upon the Holy Spirit for holy living. It is through the Holy Spirit that we are able to bear supernatural expressions of moral and spiritual fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22).²⁴ Zenas Bicket points out that because “growth is the result of life...so holiness is the result of an indwelling, living Spirit.”²⁵ This life is so dramatic that believers in Christ are capable of ceasing the “practice of sinning,” or what is commonly understood as “habitual sin.”²⁶ As impossible as it may sound to some, Scripture teaches that we can bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit, meaning that our lives can reflect the supernatural qualities of the God in everyday life. Both plants and humans need to receive power from an external source – though unlike plants, human beings must willingly *decide* to receive the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Divine and Human Roles in Final Sanctification

All Christians eventually experience a fuller sense of sanctification. This “fullness” is not limited to a small minority, nor is it very far off. This final aspect of sanctification is described in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 and 1 John 3:2. For those who trust in Christ, whatever evil remains will be overcome with good. The coming of Christ will inaugurate a new era when believers will fully resemble Christ's character and his moral perfection. Including our sin,

²⁴*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Gal. 5:22-23.

²⁵ Gundry, 128.

²⁶ This is a powerful truth that is rarely addressed by non-Wesleyan theologians. In Gundry's *Five Views of Sanctification*, only the Wesleyan theologian directly addresses 1 John 3:5-9.

temptation, and our memory of sin, all of the “former things” will be removed when we enter the Holy City, so we can dwell with God and relate to Him in a more personal way (Rev. 21:3-4).

Yet again, the primary agent of sanctification is God Himself.

This should not surprise us. The Holy Spirit enables our holiness not as an end in itself – so that we can be applauded as moral people – but in anticipation of what is to come. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit introduces the latter days and points towards Christ’s return, so there is an eschatological aspect to the Spirit’s work in the Church. As Stanley E. Porter recognized, “Paul insists upon holy and pure behavior and conduct in the lives of believers in anticipation of the return of Jesus Christ.”²⁷ While there are earthly benefits of moral living, we should be strongly motivated by Christ’s eminent return. Those who truly believe in Christ should live holy lives now in anticipation of what is coming.

We can be confident that God will not leave us imperfect and unfinished. The Holy Spirit testifies within us that that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), so that we can be assured that God will complete his work within us (Phil. 1:6). Although we frequently fall short of God’s glory, we can be confident that God will eventually make humanity good again. Thankfully, Paul was not wasting words when he prayed for the believers will be sanctified “through and through” (1 Thess. 5:23). This prayer will finally be answered, without exception, for every person who trusts in Christ.

²⁷Gerald F. Hawthorne et al., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 397.

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