

The Christian Life (16): Sanctification (Part 1)

Biblical terms such as holy, holiness, sanctify, and sanctification form a family of similar (if not synonymous) words. Basic to their meaning are the concepts of separation, ownership, usefulness (devotion), and purity. Simply put, to sanctify is to separate for holy purposes. "It signifies separation from a common to a sacred use, or dedication to the service of God" (Shaw).¹ "The word *to sanctify* is used in two related senses in Scripture. First, to consecrate or set apart from a common to a sacred use (Jn.10:36). Second, to render morally pure or holy (1Cor.6:11)" (Hodge).² Thus, sanctification is the work of God in separating sinners from this world to Himself, in order to restore His image and likeness in them.

I. Sanctification: Its Distinction

1. *Definitive sanctification*. Scripture speaks of sanctification in two stages: definite or initial sanctification and continual or progressive sanctification. Definitive sanctification refers to the initial aspect of sanctification that is complete or final. While all Christians are *being* sanctified they have all equally *been* sanctified. Thus, Scripture speaks of our sanctification as a past fact and a present reality: "to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1Cor.1:2); "we have been sanctified" (Heb.10:10); "but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified" (1Cor.6:11). Notice, these three are past facts. All Christians have been washed (regenerated), sanctified (initially or definitively), and justified (declared righteous). "We properly think of calling, regeneration, justification, and adoption as acts of God effected once for all, and not requiring or admitting of repetition. It is of their nature to be definitive. But a considerable part of NT teaching places sanctification in this category. We are thus compelled to take account of the fact that the language of sanctification is used with reference to some decisive action that occurs at the inception of the Christian life, and one that characterizes the people of God in their identity as called effectually by God's grace" (Murray).³ "They who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are also farther sanctified, really and personally, through the same virtue, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them."⁴

The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith speaks of the beginning of sanctification: "They who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart and new spirit created in them through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection..." It is evident that this description is intended to describe the *beginning* of sanctification because of the phrase that follows, "are also farther sanctified..." There is an initial sanctification and a "farther" sanctification. There is the inception of sanctification and there is the increase of sanctification.⁵

Thus, as with every aspect of our salvation, sanctification (both in its initial and ongoing form) is the result of our union with Christ. "But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God (regeneration), and righteousness (justification), sanctification (both initial and progressive), and redemption (glorification – the redemption of our body)" (1Cor.1:30). We have been "sanctified in Christ" (1Cor.1:2). It's by virtue of our union with Christ that these blessings are applied. We are regenerated,

¹ Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, 142-143

² A.A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary*, 195

³ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:277

⁴ 2LBC, 13:1

⁵ Jeff Johnson, *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith*, 236

sanctified, and justified in (and for the sake of) Christ. Thus, Scripture uses several imageries to describe this definite sanctification: the old heart is washed or purified, a new heart is given, the old man (or flesh) is crucified, we die to sin as a master, we put off the old man, and die to the law as a broken covenant. "Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him" (Rom.6:6-8). "For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal.2:19-20). "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal.6:14). "Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead. That we should bear fruit to God" (Rom.7:4). "And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal.5:24).

When a person dies he is no longer active in the sphere or realm or relation in reference to which he has died. His connection with that realm has been dissolved; he has no further communications with those who still live in that realm, nor do they have with him. It is no longer the sphere of life and activity for him. The person who lives in sin, or to sin, lives and acts in the realm of sin—it is the sphere of his life and activity. And the person who died to sin no longer lives in that sphere. His tie with it has been broken, and he has been translated into another realm. This is the decisive cleavage that the apostle has in view; it is the foundation upon which rests his whole conception of a believer's life, and it is a cleavage, a breach, a translation as really and decisively true in the sphere of moral and religious relationship as in the ordinary experience of death. There is a once-for-all definitive and irreversible breach with the realm in which sin reigns in and unto death.⁶

Thus, regeneration and definitive sanctification are intimately and necessarily related. "To the pilgrims of the Dispersion...elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (1Pet.1:2). The Father chose them, the Spirit sanctified them, so that they could obey (believe) the gospel and be justified. Here "by Sanctification of the Spirit" refers to regeneration (which refers to a radical change of the soul). "Definitive sanctification is simply another way of referring to that basic and radical change that takes place in a sinner's moral and ethical condition when he is united to Christ in effectual calling and regeneration. It reminds us of the fact that progressive sanctification does not take place in a vacuum" (Waldron).⁷ Thus many Reformed theologians equate initial sanctification with regeneration. "Initial sanctification is the implanting of the seeds of grace in the soul at first and is the same with regeneration" (Boston).⁸ "Initial sanctification is the same as regeneration, whereby we come 'new creatures;' – 'old things being done away, and all things become new'" (Shaw).⁹ Regeneration is the beginning of sanctification" (Dagg).¹⁰ "The foundation of sanctification is laid in regeneration" (Gill).¹¹ And yet, while initial sanctification

⁶ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:279

⁷ Sam Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 207-208

⁸ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 1:655

⁹ Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, 143

¹⁰ J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology and Church Order*, 1:285

¹¹ John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 552

and regeneration are related, the latter (regeneration) is logically prior to the former. "Thus, sanctification follows upon regeneration and effectual calling, at least in the order of nature, and supposes those actions of God as going before it" (Witsius).¹²

Initial sanctification is the same as regeneration, or the renewing in effectual calling. It is the sowing of the Spiritual seed of grace in the heart of the dead sinner. "Whosoever is born of God does not practice sin; for His seed remains in him" (1Jn.3:9). In initial sanctification, the Spirit of Christ enters the heart with all His train of spiritual graces and implants them there. He introduces spiritual life, impresses the soul with the image of God, creates new inclinations and motions, or, in other words, forms the new creature. This He does in an instant. How inexpressibly happy is the soul that is favored with it! In this initial sanctification, the sinner is entirely passive.¹³

To be more specific, the old man has been put off (crucified) and the new man has been put on (resurrected). "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (Col.3:9-10). Christians are not part old and part new man. The old man has been put off and the new man put on. "Believers should not see themselves as divided between two centers, the 'old man' and the 'new man,' like a nation divided in civil war with two competing capital cities. Rather, we are like a nation united under one king reigning from one capital city (the heart), but with cells of enemy soldiers scattered across the land and engaging in guerrilla warfare against our souls" (Beeke).¹⁴ "The old man is the unregenerate man; the new man is the regenerate man created in Christ Jesus unto good works. It is no more feasible to call the believer a new man and an old man, than it is to call him a regenerate man and an unregenerate" (Murray).¹⁵ "Definitive sanctification is the decisive transfer of a person from the kingdom where sin reigns to the kingdom where grace reigns, a transfer that happens when the person is united to Christ" (Beeke).¹⁶ "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit" (Rom.8:9). That is, we are no longer in the realm of the flesh (controlled by the flesh) but in the realm of the Spirit (controlled by the Spirit).

(1) The old man is put off. By "old man" is meant native or natural man. The condition in which we are born. "By the *old man* is meant corrupt nature, which is as old as a man is in whom it is, and which he brings into the world with him" (Gill).¹⁷ We are all born in spiritual and moral darkness, under the law, slaves of sin, sons of the devil, and lovers of the world. All of this is changed when the old man is put off. This is once-for-all act never to be repeated or retracted. The old man with its reigning lusts, has been crucified. And so, while the flesh (old man) remains (and to the extent that it does it remains evil), it no longer reigns: "knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Rom.6:6). Here the phrases "our old man" and "the body of sin" are synonymous. The latter referring to how our old man used our bodies (or members). As the old man has been crucified, so the body of death has been crucified (i.e., 'the body as conditioned and controlled by sin'¹⁸). "For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of-

¹² Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2:6

¹³ John Colquhoun, *Sermons on Important Doctrines*, 188-189

¹⁴ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:636

¹⁵ John Murray, as quoted by Beeke, 3:636

¹⁶ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:640

¹⁷ John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 552

¹⁸ John Murray, *Romans*, 220

lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness" (Rom.6:19).

(2) The new man is put on. The new man has been radically renovated as spiritual life has been infused into every faculty of the soul. "The renewing takes place in all parts; no part of the soul remains unrenewed. The understanding is enlightened, the will renewed, seeking to be well-pleasing to God" (Kersten).¹⁹ The new man is righteous and holy having been recreated in the image of God. "The new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph.4:24). The new man is "a new creation" (2Cor.5:17), "filled with all goodness" (Rom.15:14), "renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (Col.3:10), a "slave of righteousness" (Rom.6:18), and "delights in the law of God" (Rom.7:22). "Just as in justification a believer is properly freed from the guilt of sin and has life given him (the title to which is, as it were, settled in adoption), so in sanctification the same believer is freed from the bondage and stain of sin, and the purity of God's image is restored to him" (Ames).²⁰ Thus, within initial sanctification the soul is endowed or infused with a gracious and holy disposition. Within this renewing and recreating work of God the sinner is passive and/or acted upon. "When sanctification denotes the first implantation of spiritual habits, it is a mere blessing from God, in procuring which we do not co-operate with Him, but receive it from Him" (Witsius).²¹ "Definitive sanctification brings about an entirely new spiritual condition or situation. It is being in Christ Jesus, with all that means in terms of grace, forgiveness, power and spiritual resources" (Waldron).²² "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Rom.6:14).

The man from whom the old life has gone out, and into whom the new life has come, is still the same individual. The same being that was once 'under law' is now 'under grace.' His features and limbs are still the same; his intellect, imagination, capacities, and responsibilities are still the same. But yet old things have passed away; all things have become new. The old man is slain, the new man lives. It is not merely the old life retouched and made more comely, defects struck out, roughnesses smoothed down, graces stuck on here and there. It is not a broken column repaired, a soiled picture cleaned, a defaced inscription filled up, an unswept temple whitewashed. It is more than all this, else God would not call it a new creation. Hear how God speaks! He calls us 'newborn babes' (1Pet.2:2), 'new creatures' (Gal.6:15), a 'new lump' (1Cor.5:7), a 'new man' (Eph.2:15), heirs of a 'new name' (Rev.2:17), expectants of 'new heavens and a new earth' (2Pet.3:13).²³

The putting off of the *old man* is always accompanied with the putting on of the *new man*, by which are denoted all those qualities wherein the excellency of the divine image is placed. These come under the appellation *new man*, because they overspread the whole man, so that there is nothing in the sanctified person, no part, no faculty, that remains untouched, or neglected, by the sanctifying Spirit and unadorned with new habits. And as the citadel and throne of virtue stands in the mind and inward parts, therefore Paul

¹⁹ G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:437

²⁰ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 168

²¹ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2:7

²² Sam Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 208-209

²³ Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, 2-3

speaks of the *inward man* (Rom.7:22) and Peter of the *hidden man of the heart* (1Pet.3:4).²⁴

2. *Progressive sanctification*. Scripture not only describes our sanctification as a past fact but as a present and progressive reality: "those who are being sanctified" (Heb.2:11); "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified" (Heb.10:14); "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1Thess.4:3). Thus, it's correct to say that every Christian *has been as is being sanctified*. "Sanctification is both the present state of believers (they are sanctified in Christ) and their progressive growth (they are being sanctified by Christ), for which they must engage their effort by faith in God's promises" (Beeke).²⁵ "Regeneration (definite sanctification) must be supplemented by sanctification, or otherwise the soul would remain at a standstill—if such a thing were possible: for it seems to be an unchanging law in every realm that where there is no progression, there must be regression. That spiritual growth which is so essential lies in progressive sanctification, wherein all the faculties of the soul are more and more brought under the purifying and regulating influence of the principle of holiness which is implanted at the new birth, for thus alone do we 'grow up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ' (Eph.4:15)" (Pink).²⁶

(1) It's a continual process rooted in past and unmovable realities. Whereas definitive sanctification is a one-time act, progressive sanctification is an ongoing process, rooted in the realities of definitive sanctification. Progressive sanctification is dependent upon definitive sanctification. "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds" (Col.3:9). In other words, live in a way that reflects this change. Because "you have put off the old man with his deeds," no longer live as the old man did. "Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom.6:11). To "reckon" means "to consider" or "count." Paul isn't telling us to "make" ourselves dead to sin, but to consider or view ourselves as dead to sin. Every Christian is "dead to sin" and "alive to God in Christ." These are facts equally true of every Christian. And this is in part, the purpose of baptism. "Whall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it. Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death" (Rom.6:1-3)? "Baptism 'tells' faith that the old life in Adam has gone; new life in Christ has begun. When I respond to my baptism in faith it tells me: 'The believer no longer has the same relationship to sin he or she used to have; you are no longer under its dominion as you once were; you have been raised into new life with Christ—that is why it is inconceivable that you would continue in sin'" (Ferguson).²⁷

Definitive sanctification is the basis of progressive sanctification. Because you have died to sin in the death of Christ and have been raised in union with Christ to newness of life (Rom.6:1-10), here is what you must do, Romans 6:11, "Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord." He is not saying reckon this to be so in order to make it so. No, it is so. You are dead, indeed, so sin and alive to God in union with Christ. This is a fact. But now you must believe it and reckon it to indeed be so. Then, in light of this reality, verse 12 tells you what you must do: "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its

²⁴ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2:12-13

²⁵ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:642

²⁶ A.W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification*, 89-90

²⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 78

lusts." You are no longer the old man you once were. Being united to Christ you have been raised with Him to a new life. His Spirit now lives within you. Therefore, in this confidence put away sins and pursue holiness! Do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.²⁸

(2) It's a difficult process wherein we are responsible and active. Whereas we are passive in definitive sanctification, we are active in progressive sanctification. Every Christian must fight, struggle, strive, and work if they are to be sanctified. "Sanctification is a thing for which every believer is responsible. Believers are eminently and peculiarly responsible and under a special obligation to live holy lives. They are not as others, dead and blind and unrenewed; they are alive unto God, and have light and knowledge, and a new principle within them. Whose fault is it, if they are not holy, but their own? On whom can they throw the blame, if they are not sanctified, but themselves" (Ryle)?²⁹

In initial sanctification the Spirit acts alone, and the poor sinner is wholly passive, and can do nothing that way. For he is dead in sin and cannot move out of its dominion. He lies in the grave like the dry bones, which cannot live, nor stand up till they be breathed by the Lord Himself. In progressive sanctification, though the sinner does act towards his own sanctification (2Cor.7:1), yet he acts not but as he is acted by the Holy Spirit (Phil.2:13). In vain will he spread out his sails if the wind from heaven blow not (Cant.4:16). No blow of his struck in the battle against lusts will do execution if the Spirit do not carry it home.³⁰

(3) It's a constant process brought about by the Spirit through means. While sanctification is the work of the entire Trinity (1Thess.5:23; Eph.5:25-26), it's especially ascribed to the Holy Spirit (Rom.15:16; 2Thess.2:13; 1Pet.1:2). "Christ sends His Holy Spirit into our hearts, which is the efficient cause of all holiness and sanctification—quickenings, enlightening, purifying the souls of His saints" (Owen).³¹ The Spirit brings about this sanctification through means. "When I speak of 'means' I have in view Bible reading, private prayer, regular attendance on public worship, regular hearing of God's Word and regular reception of the Lord's Supper. I lay it down as a simple matter of fact, that no one who is careless about such things must ever expect to make much progress in sanctification" (Ryle).³² "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (Jn.17:17); "who are sanctified by faith in Me" (Acts 26:18). Christians are sanctified by the Spirit primarily through a believing use of the word and prayer. "When Scripture commands us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, it is commanding us to make diligent use of the means the Spirit employs in effecting our holiness" (Riccardi).³³ Thus, it is the Spirit who blesses these means (word and prayer) by working faith in our hearts. "Faith is the mediate or instrumental cause of sanctification. It unites us to Christ, who is the source of the new life within us, and also of our progressive sanctification, through the operation of the Holy Spirit" (Berkhof).³⁴

²⁸ Jeff Johnson, *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith*, 236

²⁹ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, 19

³⁰ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 1:655-656

³¹ John Owen, *Works*, 2:199

³² J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, 20

³³ Michael Riccardi, *Sanctification*, 20

³⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2:537