

## Sanctification – by faith

Reading:

<sup>1</sup> Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup> according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. (1 Peter 1:1-2)

<sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Christ).’ (Acts 26:18)

We have said what holiness is and the whole notion of holiness is rooted in the holy intra-trinitarian relationship of the Triune God. It is a relationship where one receives and gives to the other. This is also expressed in the redemption of humanity, the unveiling of the story of salvation from creation to the new creation. Holiness can never become ours because it is the very nature of God. We can only become holy in relationship with God. That can only come about through the salvific work of Christ and the work of the Spirit in effecting that relationship. We receive this blessing of God by faith.

What we want to do in this study is to see why sanctification is by faith and the way it relates to justification by faith and the union with Christ. Along the way, we will do away with the term ‘progressive sanctification’.

There are two contrasting approaches in talking about sanctification. One camp defines this as a once and for all initial union with God. The other talks about holiness as a progressive work in our lives. We will look at the use of this word in scripture and try to make sense of the discussion in the theological literature.

First, let us look at Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian Christians. He said,

<sup>32</sup> And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32)

Notice that the verb is in the passive, meaning that it is something that has been done to them or for them. Notice too that sanctification is a state of their being and not a progressive process. This happens when one has been brought into Christ. This connection between conversion and sanctification is made clear when Paul recounted his conversion experience. That is what the Lord told Paul regarding his mission.

<sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Christ).’ (Acts 26:18)

Here Paul was putting his defence before King Agrippa. The context is Paul’s testimony to the commission he received from Christ. Paul was sent to preach the word in order that their eyes may be opened to see the truth of all that Christ has done and to turn to Him. We know that that is the work of the Spirit in them. To receive the forgiveness of sins is another way of saying that they are justified. We do not need to say more about justification by faith in our reform setting. In this context then we see that Paul has placed justification and sanctification together and both are by faith in Christ.

In other words, it is not starting with conversion and then working towards a process of sanctification. This was what the Holiness Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century taught – sanctification as a post-conversion experience. It is a doctrine of a second work of grace leading to Christian perfection. While the teaching claimed that it is still a work of grace, the underlying basis is a doctrine of works. It rents asunder the work of Christ and the Spirit which should not be as we see in 1 Peter 1:2.

according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: (1 Pet. 1:2)

We are sanctified by faith in Christ, a conversion experience. This should not be difficult to follow. Holiness is what God is. To have our sins forgiven and to be brought into Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, we cannot but be holy because God is holy. That is why scripture talks about sanctification as an initial experience. If that were to be a process, then we will need to talk in terms of being more holy which is not the case.

Since sanctification is the initial encounter with Christ the Lord when we are received into Him, then it must involve a setting apart to Christ because there cannot be two lords in our lives. Our sanctification is through the sacrifice of Christ, the same as in justification.

<sup>10</sup> And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ... <sup>14</sup> For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Heb. 10:10, 14)

This is an interesting pair of verbs on sanctification. In verse 10, the verb 'sanctified' is the perfect tense indicating an action that has been completed and the effect in the now. It is also in the passive voice meaning an action that has been received. That is well and good and is what we have been saying so far.

Then we come to verse 14. The imperfect in verse 14, 'being sanctified', infer a continuing or repeated action which has been started in the past. However, we need to note that the sense in which it is used is 'Christ has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified'. This refers to sanctification that is completed and will continue for all time as believers respond to the claims of Christ. Many have interpreted this as referring to 'progressive' sanctification. However, we need to note that the verb is in the passive voice, and certainly does not infer anything that we do because Christ has perfected this sanctification. This being so, we certainly cannot use this to justify sanctification that is progressive. Rather, it is referring to sanctification that has been completed and perfected 'for all time'. The passive 'being sanctified' infers that our sanctification is perfected and maintained by Christ for all time.

This use of the word 'sanctification' as a single initial event is repeated in several other texts.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: (1 Cor. 1:2)

And such were some of you. 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. (1 Cor. 6:11)

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, (1 Cor. 1:30)

These texts put sanctification at the beginning of the Christian life. It happens when we are in Christ, washed, justified and sanctified. Similarly, Paul wrote to the Ephesians and put sanctification in a relational context. This is because we have been possessed by Christ.

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27)

I have made this point in the last study. Sanctification is relational like the marriage relationship. We have already noted that it is the work of Christ in us, the Spirit sealing the reality of this relationship in us. We have said much regarding the work of Christ in our sanctification. We also need to note the work of the Spirit in sanctification and this is put clearly by Peter and Paul.

<sup>2</sup> according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: (1 Pet. 1:2)

<sup>13</sup> But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. (2 Thess. 2:13)

The Spirit directs us to the work of Christ as we all know. Our cleansing by the blood of Christ is our justification. That is our regeneration, an initial work by Christ and the Spirit. We cannot separate the work of the Triune God in justification, regeneration and sanctification. Therefore, we cannot think of sanctification as a process or a second blessing. Sure, we grow in maturity, but we do not use the term sanctification for that. I will say more about that in the last study.

Furthermore, we need to see that faith is not initiated by us. The founder or pioneer of our faith is Jesus as Hebrews tells us.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a... cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)

We need to see that from beginning to end it is the work of God in us. Paul made this clear when he wrote to the Philippians, a righteous not of his own.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— (Phil. 3:8-10)

So, we see that justification and sanctification are by faith. One is an external transaction on our behalf and the other internalised to unite us with God. Putting the latter in another way, we may say that the other (sanctification) is internalised as we have been united with Christ. When that happens, we cannot but be sanctified. This involves a participation in the Godhead as we have seen in our study last week.

### **Its relationship to justification**

Justification is a major theme in the New Testament especially in Romans. The Reformation highlighted this and rightly so. It is based on the salvific work of Christ on the cross, a forensic emphasis that is imputed to us so that we have a right standing before God. It is justification by faith. However, we have also pointed out earlier that sanctification is also by faith. We need to repeat Paul's testimony before King Agrippa.

<sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Christ).' (Acts 26:18)

Not only is justification by faith, sanctification is also by faith in Christ, faith in all that Christ has done in His incarnation, death and resurrection. Thus, our belief in Christ, i.e. faith, and union with Christ, has to be the channel by which we come to the Father. This is only possible because of the Tri-union in the Godhead. John made this clear in his gospel.

<sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21)

The work of Christ and the Spirit in sanctification is affirmed by Calvin in his Institutes.

... faith rests upon the knowledge of Christ. And Christ cannot be known apart from the sanctification of his Spirit. (Institutes III.1.viii)

Regarding the relationship of justification to sanctification, it seems reasonable to have sanctification

grounded in the forensic work of Christ applied in justification, and not the other way round. Though we appropriate both by faith in Christ, we may say that we can only be sanctified after we have been justified. However, both are the work of Christ and the Spirit in us as Paul pointed out in Corinthians.

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, (1 Cor. 1:30)

Calvin did not see an *ordo salutis* in this as these two happen at the same time as we become incorporated into Christ, justified and sanctified. It is all because of our union in Christ. Calvin pointed this out clearly.

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. ... It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits. (Institutes III.1 i)

We have seen this quote in our last study. It is an important statement to say that we cannot separate these theological terms like we do in a flow chart. They happen all together as we are taken into the Godhead. I think we can see quite clearly by this stage that the holiness of God is not an attribute that can be imparted or given to another. We can only be holy in relation to God and this relationship can only be brought about by the work of Christ and made real to us by the Spirit. Thus, we cannot be sanctified apart from being in Christ.

### **Sanctification as a process**

Having considered the above we need to acknowledge that there is a process of change in the life of the Christian. Having come to faith in Christ, we grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Peter says.

<sup>5</sup>For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup>and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, <sup>7</sup>and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. <sup>8</sup>For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:5-8)

There is certainly growth in our relationship with Christ, but when this is referred to, Peter did not relate it to sanctification. Just like in the marriage relationship, there is a growing appreciation of the other, but that does not make them more husband and wife. And as we grow in Christ, we are being transformed by the Spirit.

<sup>18</sup>And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

Again, as Paul is writing about our transformation in the Lord, he does not talk about it as sanctification. However, Paul did make the plea for us to present our bodies to righteousness leading to sanctification. We have seen this passage before.

<sup>19</sup>I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. ... <sup>22</sup>But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. (Rom. 6:19, 22)

This is a difficult passage to reconcile. It would appear on the surface that it lends weight to the argument for progressive sanctification. Reviewing the literature, scholars have argued both ways, a status or positional sanctification and a progressive sanctification. We can read it as our works leading to sanctification. This cannot be so as the scripture passages that we have presented so far attest to

sanctification by faith in Christ and the Spirit, and not by works. Just as justification is by faith, so we cannot accept a position that leads to sanctification by works. However, the argument goes that of course it is not by works, but by the ‘progressive’ work of the Spirit in us. While that may be so and we cannot deny that that process is going on in our lives, yet we cannot use that to justify ‘progressive’ sanctification.

I read this as status sanctification. We need to read the text this way, ‘now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to (*the state of*) sanctification (*already achieved*)’. What Paul is trying to say is that now that you have been sanctified, lead your lives as governed by your state of righteousness and sanctification. Paul made a similar appeal later on when he admonished them to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy to God.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom. 12:1)

There is no connotation of progressive holiness here. We do not present our bodies as a living sacrifice to attain to holiness. Rather, our bodies are already made holy and acceptable to God and that is why God accepts it as a living sacrifice. When we live for Christ, as we should, because we have been sanctified, this holy living sacrifice is acceptable to God. The sacrifice is holy not because it comes from us, but because of the work of the Holy Spirit within us, i.e. His work of sanctification already done.

### **A matter of terminology**

To be holy or sanctification is an encounter with the holy God. As such it is preferable to us the term in its positional sense, i.e. a definite (status) sanctification by faith when one is justified by God. We can understand why some have used the term ‘progressive sanctification’. As we grow in Christ, we are ‘being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Cor. 3:18). There is no doubt that as we come to understand the things of God better, we will change the way we live and do things. There were things that we longed to do in the past, but we no longer want to do them. It would be helpful not to use the term sanctification in that context, but to call it growth in faith. Growth in holiness is not a preferable expression as it implies degrees of holiness in a person and which is not.

### **By faith alone**

However, whatever we may want to call it, to be holy is the work of the Spirit in us even before the point of our conversion or awakening. As we embrace Christ and His salvific work, we do so by faith. In so doing, we are justified by faith. This is a forensic term. In other words, the law will not be used to judge us despite all our failures.

As holiness cannot be maintained outside of Christ, we need the continuing work of the Spirit in keeping us in the union with Christ. Thus, holiness is maintained not by our conformity to the law. In that case is the law null and void. We will explore this in subsequent week.

For Luther this was like a private Gethsemane. He prayed like this, and we will use this as our prayer in closing.

“Oh God. Almighty God everlasting, how dreadful is the world. Behold how its mouth opens to swallow me up, and how small is my faith in thee. Oh the weakness of the flesh and the power of Satan. If I am to depend upon any strength in this world, all is over. The knell is struck. Sentence has gone forth. Oh God, oh God, oh thou my God, help me against all the wisdom of this world. Do this, I beseech thee. Thou shouldst do this, by thine own mighty power. For the work is not mine, but thine. I have no business here. I have nothing to contend for with these great men of the world. I would gladly pass my days in happiness and peace, but the cause is yours, and it is righteous and everlasting, oh Lord. Help me, oh faithful and unchangeable God. I lean not upon man—it were vain. Whatever is of man is tottering. Whatever proceeds from him must fail. My God, my God, dost thou not hear? My God, art thou no longer living? Nay, thou canst not die; thou dost but hide thyself. Thou hast chosen me for this work; I know it. Therefore, oh God, accomplish thine own will and forsake me not for the sake of thy well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ—my defence, my buckler, my stronghold.” (Amen.)