

Sanctification:
A Theological Position Statement

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Introduction

In this paper I will discuss my understanding of the Christian doctrine of sanctification. I will first present a brief definition of the biblical view of sanctification and then describe its two main aspects. This paper will then focus on my understanding of two main items involved in the process of sanctification: how sanctification actually takes place in the life of a believer and the relationship between faith and works in sanctification.

Definition and Explanation

God is holy and requires that the people who are in fellowship with him also to be holy. The Apostle Peter says, “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”¹ Sanctification is the work of God by which he makes us holy.

A more complete or full definition describing sanctification is the “gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which he delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to him.”² It is the process whereby we are renewed according to the image of God, conformed to the image of Christ, and enabled to die to ourselves and live to God.

In the New Testament, the process of sanctification is usually ascribed as the work of the Holy Spirit.³ The Holy Spirit is the Comforter who was sent after the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus⁴ and is the one who is now leading us into all reality.⁵ God the Holy Spirit is applying the effective work of Christ to our lives.⁶

¹ 1 Peter 1:15-16. Unless otherwise noted, the scripture verses contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989) 192.

³ 1 Peter 1:2; Rom 15:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Titus 3:5.

⁴ John 14:16-17.

⁵ John 16:13.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 3:18.

There are two main aspects of sanctification that need to be distinguished from each other. The more formal sense of sanctification means ‘to set apart from other things’ as sacred, rather than being common or profane. This is the positional standing of every believer in Christ; we have all been sanctified by the blood of Jesus⁷ and through his death on the cross.⁸ But this aspect of sanctification is distinct from a believer’s actions or moral condition. This objective sense is used in 1 Corinthians 1:2 when Paul addresses the Corinthians believers as “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus.” Calling them ‘sanctified’ has nothing to do with whether or not they were living lives free from sin and pleasing to the Lord. This is clearly shown by the fact that in chapter 3 (verses 1-3) he calls the Corinthians believers “people of the flesh” and “infants in Christ” who are living out jealousy and quarreling. Although they were sanctified objectively by being in Christ, their lives had not been subjectively sanctified and renewed by the Holy Spirit.

But belonging to God and being set apart to him is not merely an external, objective matter. Although, on the one hand, when Christ was crucified on the cross I was crucified with him,⁹ on the other hand, I must “die every day”¹⁰ and “put to death the deeds of the body”.¹¹ This more subjective aspect of sanctification is the dispositional change whereby our lives are made new and we are conformed to the image of Christ. We are changed in a way to be morally pleasing to God, transformed in our disposition, and living according to the will of God. The remainder of this paper will be concerned with this aspect of sanctification.

This subjective side of sanctification is referred to in many ways throughout the New Testament. It is talked about as being “conformed to the image of his Son”¹² and leading a life

⁷ Hebrews 13:12.

⁸ Hebrews 10:10.

⁹ Galatians 2:19-20.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:31.

¹¹ Romans 8:13.

¹² Romans 8:29.

worthy of God's calling over us, with humility, gentleness, patience, and love.¹³ It is also referred to as being transformed and renewed,¹⁴ especially in our minds and our way of thinking.¹⁵

How Sanctification is Accomplished

There are a number of ways in which sanctification is accomplished in the life of a believer. Following are some practical ways that the sanctification process is carried out. Each of these ways includes aspects of both God's operation and our cooperation. After describing how sanctification is accomplished we will talk in more detail about the relationship between God's work and our human responsibility.

We are sanctified by believing into Christ and thus being in union with him. We are made holy, both objectively and morally, by being united to Christ in his death and resurrection. In Romans 6, verses 1 through 10, Paul talks about the fact that we have been crucified with Christ, were buried and raised with him, and therefore are now dead to sin. Then in verses 11 and 12 he starts talking about applying this truth to our lives by accounting ourselves to be dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Since we are dead to sin in our union with Christ, we should not allow sin to have dominion over us.¹⁶ Furthermore, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:30 that Christ himself is our sanctification. Thus the only way that we can be sanctified is by being one with Christ. These passages clearly show that our sanctification takes place in our union with Christ.

Another way we can be sanctified is by means of the truth, contained in the words of the Bible. In John 17:17, Jesus prayed concerning his disciples that the Father would "sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." It is by God's truth being applied to our lives that we are made holy and free from sin. Jesus also says in John 8:32, "you will know the truth, and the truth will

¹³ Ephesians 4:1-2.

¹⁴ Titus 3:5.

¹⁵ Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23.

¹⁶ Cf. Colossians 3:1.

make you free.” And then Psalm 119:9 declares, “How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word.” As we imbibe the truth contained in the words of the Bible, our minds and lives get renewed and transformed into Christ’s image. This is one of the most fundamental ways that our lives undergo the process of sanctification.¹⁷

Sanctification also takes place by means of faith. Not only is our justification by faith, our sanctification is by faith.¹⁸ It is by faith that we continue to live in the good of our union with Christ. Galatians 2:20 talks about us being crucified with Christ as an objective fact, but then Paul states, “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.” The objective fact of our union with Christ is not sufficient. We must continually grasp this fact by faith so that it can be effective in our lives. It is also by this faith that we can recognize that in union with Christ sin no longer has control over us and thus we should no longer “be enslaved to sin”.¹⁹ We must exercise this faith so that we will not continue to “carry out the desire of the flesh.”²⁰

Sanctification not only takes place as we individually exercise faith, but it also happens in context of fellowship with other believers in the church. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 4:15 when he says, “we must grow up in every way into ... Christ,” and in this context explains that this happens by each member of Christ’s body “speaking the truth” to one another and being in relationships governed by love. He further talks about this truth in 1 Thessalonians 5:11 when he says, “encourage one another and build up each other.” We make progress in the Christian life not just by ourselves, but as members of the body of Christ.

¹⁷ Cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Romans 12:2.

¹⁸ Acts 26:18.

¹⁹ Romans 6:6.

²⁰ Galatians 5:16. Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

God's Operation and Our Cooperation

The process of sanctification is viewed both as a gracious act of God, by which he operates to make us holy and conformed to the image of Christ,²¹ and also as an operation in which we as believers are actively engaged.

We must first fully know that it is God who is the one who is making us holy. It is not a work that we can accomplish without his operation in us. In John 17:17, Jesus prayed that the Father would sanctify those who believe in Christ.²² The first time in the Bible where Jesus introduces the thought of believers being sanctified, he does so by asking the Father God to perform this work. The Apostle Paul also makes this clear in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 when he prays, “may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely.” Again, it is God who is doing the sanctifying work.

However, the Bible also makes it clear that the process of sanctification is something in which we must actively be engaged by cooperating with God's working within us; God is operating in us and we must cooperate with him.²³ In Romans 12:1-2, Paul urges us as believers to present our “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,” and we are furthermore instructed to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Clearly this shows that we as believers must responsibly participate in God's work to transform us into the image of Christ. Second Corinthians 7:1 also tells us that we must “cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit.” Surely our sanctification is not done over us as we are passively sitting by, but only as we are actively engaged in God's operation within us.

²¹ Romans 8:29.

²² Cf. verse 20.

²³ Philippians 2:12-13.

Faith and Works in Sanctification

But having said that we have an active part in the process of our sanctification, we must equally be clear that, just as our good works do not justify us, so it is not our good works that produce our sanctification. God brings about our sanctification as we cooperate with his working within us. The works that we do are not a means of sanctification but the fruit that will come out of the lives of those who are being sanctified. Galatians 5 (verses 22 through 23) makes it clear that the morally good actions that come from our lives are called “the fruit of the Spirit.” These works are not actions that we do in order to become holy; they are actions and attitudes that grow out of our fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 2:10 again makes this clear when Paul says that we were “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” In talking about good works, this passage again makes it very clear that good works are not a means of our sanctification. In fact, we are not even the ones coming up with good works; God has prepared these good works for us and only in Christ Jesus are we enabled to perform these good works. Surely good works are not the means to our sanctification but the fruit that flows out of a life that is being conformed to the image of Christ. We are not sanctified *by* good works, but *unto* the living out of good works.

Conclusion

Sanctification includes that objective aspect of being set apart unto God and his purpose and the subjective aspect of being freed from the pollution of sin, being conformed to the image of Christ, and living according to the will of God. It is the operation of God the Holy Spirit in our lives, and yet involves our responsible participation. It comes about practically by our union with Christ, taking in the truth contained in the Bible, living according to faith in God’s operation, and fellowship with other members of the body of Christ. We are not sanctified by any good works that we perform, but rather a sanctified life will produce good works to the glory of God.