Developing a Theology of Sanctification

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[This is an early paper I wrote in graduate school (2003) on the problems most Christian traditions have with defining and explaining sanctification.]

The aim of this paper is to examine existing theories of sanctification in the light of both the Scriptural description of the Christian life and the realities of the Christian experience. In part one I will briefly reflect on the major historical developments of the doctrine of sanctification. Then in part two I will cross-examine their major divergent themes, where my critique will be presented in more detail. For that critical review I will be drawing heavily on the principles and context of transformation recently published by Dallas Willard,[1] and thus much of his concept of sanctification will be presented as well, albeit indirectly, by way of critique on the classical views.

1. Analysis of Historical Development[2] and Distinctives of Major Variations

1.1 Prior to Reformation

Sanctification was never really treated as a separate doctrine until the time of the Reformation. Although there are writings of the early Church Fathers that we would now associate with such a doctrine, at the time they were primarily reacting against various heresies that were undermining important aspects of the Christian faith. These problems ran the entire spectrum from antinomian heresies that attempted to do away with any requirements for holy living, to teachings about the perfectibility of the saints. For example, both Clement of Alexandria and Augustine wrote against doctrines of perfection, arguing that such teaching underestimated the extent of the damage done by sin. They defined sanctification as a divine work of God that produced gradual holiness, and that such work would not be fully complete until after this life.

Medieval Catholic theologians spoke generally about how God's love can change one's life, and also about an infusion of sanctifying grace that follows the forgiveness of sin. But they did not articulate a distinct doctrine of sanctification. Thus the call to holiness was still tied to regeneration, theologically. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274CE) provided a fairly comprehensive description of sanctification in his teaching that a total conversion to a life of obedience, love of God, and love of neighbor would result in gradual holiness. At the same time, the rise of monastic and ascetic lifestyles and the abuses of the Church began to alter the general understanding of Christianity to the point where human effort was needed for the operation of divine grace. So by the time of the Reformation, grace and works were heavily interdependent for both salvation and living the Christian life.

1.2. Reformed Theology[3]

The reformers rejected the formula of "faith plus works" and made salvation "by faith alone" the cornerstone of their doctrine. In recognition of the fact that Christians needed to practice personal holiness but were incapable of enacting any part of their salvation, Reformed doctrine made a technical distinction between justification and sanctification. Justification was thereby limited to the removal of the *guilt* of sin, whereas sanctification was defined as that "gracious operation of the Holy spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which He delivers us as justified sinners 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."[4] This was understood to have both a definitive aspect (Rom.6:2-3; Col.3:9-10) and a progressive aspect (Rom.12:1ff; 2Cor.7:1), but could never result in sinless perfection in this life (1Jn.1:8,10).

Unfortunately, the Reformed tradition has always held to a fairly pessimistic view of human nature and the possibilities for holy living. For there is a constant reminder that human nature has been virtually ruined by sin, and that Christians can never rise above their identity as "sinners who have been forgiven."[5] This is especially devastating to those who are struggling spiritually. In fact, one of the criticisms that has been leveled against the Reformed position is that it offers little hope for the defeated Christian.[6] As we will see later, this weakness in the doctrine is a direct result of the radical split between conversion and sanctification, so that in some ways, one of the most important principles of the Reformed position (by faith alone) has proven to be also one of its greatest weakness.

1.3. Lutheran Theology[7]

For Luther, sanctification was heavily rooted in an imputed righteousness granted by the Holy Spirit at the time of conversion. At the same time, he believed in the endurance of sin in the life of a believer and the general inability to remove it. This almost self-contradictory effort to explain sanctification had the effect of rendering it more or less unworkable in any practical sense. The concept of an initial imputed righteousness has come to be understood today as almost a presumption of innocence among churchgoers by virtue of their being Lutheran. When combined with the belief that human nature is more or less unredeemable, one is left with little reason to pursue holiness beyond a general expectation of good works as a way of demonstrating that regeneration has actually occurred. Such a view of sanctification offers little more than what one would find in Unitarianism or even an ethical lifestyle in secular society.

Whereas Calvin made too great a division between justification and sanctification, Luther failed to make enough of a distinction to develop a functional explanation of spiritual growth. The result seems even more impotent than the Reformed position.

1.4. Wesleyan Theology

As a result of the deficiencies in the teaching of the reformers, a number of movements emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that expressed a desire for a more holy lifestyle. For example, both the Pietists and Puritans accused the reformers of equating true religion with right doctrine, and instead taught that true Christianity required experiential holiness.

John Wesley (1703-1791CE) added clarity to this shift in Protestant emphasis and taught that the supreme overriding purpose of God's plan of salvation was to renew people's hearts in His own

image, not just remove the guilt of sin. He went on to define a doctrine of sanctification that centered upon a "second work of grace" in which "the war within oneself might cease and the heart be fully released from rebellion into wholehearted love for God and others." [8] Wesley believed that freedom from sin was the birthright of every believer, and that Christians could expect to become completely free of "deliberate" sin. He also taught that in learning to love, bearing fruit of the Spirit, and restoring the image of God in the soul there was no stopping point or place of arrival. Spiritual growth was expected to be significant and life-long.

Wesley's impact on the Christian world was nothing short of phenomenal, and his uncompromising quest for a victorious Christian walk was long overdue in Protestant theology. However, his critics have leveled some charges that are hard to answer. First, they claim that his definition of perfection (the ability to refrain from conscious sin) is not found in the NT. Second, the need for a "second work of grace" or "crisis experience" is hard to support from the biblical text, and many people who at one time claimed to have had the experience later noted that neither the ability nor the tendency to sin was removed.[9] So although he was correct in charging that the reformers left us with weak doctrines of sanctification, his own theological formulation was itself too weakly grounded in Scripture.

1.5. Pentecostal Theology

The Pentecostal movement of the twentieth century again placed personal holiness at the forefront of the Christian life. The main contribution of this movement was its reaction against the prevailing image of the Holy Spirit as some vaguely defined member of the Trinity who did something mysterious to Christians which somehow enabled them to live better. Instead, they emphasized the ability to experience the Holy Spirit as a vibrant being that would manifest Himself in miraculous ways and transform Christians by his felt presence. Believers were encouraged to seek a crisis experience subsequent to conversion that was referred to as "the baptism in the Holy Spirit" which brought the believer into a new relationship with the Holy Spirit that in turn made the work of sanctification more of a reality.

Broadly speaking, the movement was divided over whether there ought to be two major works of grace or three. Those who added the "baptism" to Wesley's second work of grace became known as the Pentecostal Holiness movement, whereas those who added the "baptism" experience to a more Reformed view of Christianity have been largely identified with the Assemblies of God church. In either case, they faced the task of locating this extra crisis experience in the NT. They seemed to fare somewhat better theologically than Wesley, in part because of the separation of Pentecost from the Passover, and partly due to the ambiguous accounts in Acts regarding the initial reception of the Holy Spirit. Still, critics have called their exegetical methods into question and have written some very extensive rebuttals of these doctrines.[10]

Both branches of Pentecostalism tended initially to describe holiness in terms of things that Christians should not do, though over time sanctification was clarified to mean both separation from evil and dedication to God. This was further delineated as both an instantaneous sanctification which occurs at conversion (or the second work of grace), and an ongoing sanctification which results from continual yielding to the dominion of the Holy Sprit. The main legacy of the Pentecostal renewal continues to be that of bringing the work of the Holy Spirit out of abstract

theology and into the practical world, and insisting on growth in holiness as an expectation for every believer.

1.6. Keswick Theology

The Keswick movement took an alternate approach to the problem of spiritual growth that bypassed much of the theological baggage associated with the above traditions. They rejected the formulations of both Wesley and the Pentecostal movement while at the same time retaining the demands of Scripture for significant, real-world sanctification. They accomplished this by declaring that the true identity of the Christian is one who has been set free from sin ***at conversion***, and that the power to live in the Spirit is the birthright of every believer. Thus, Christians are new creations who are no longer under the tyranny of sin, but who have a new relationship with God that allows Him to live in them and renew them after His image. They taught that the primary reason why many Christians do not experience this sort of life is simply unbelief, which can be expressed several ways: ignorance concerning one's own victorious identity, passive spiritual drift, lack of trust, self-reliance, and open rebellion.

Unfortunately, they went on to establish a doctrine of perfectionism that sounds a bit like Wesley. But in spite of this, the theology of the Keswick movement has much to offer. It is realistic about the nature of humans, but grants to the Holy Spirit the power to overcome the evil tendencies of the flesh. It is incredibly optimistic about the potential of the Christian to live above the downward pull of sin, and most of its teachings are well grounded in the NT. Their greatest contribution to the theological world is their emphasis on the true identity of the believer as a new creature.

1.7. Dispensational Theology

Beginning with a strong Calvinistic foundation which emphasizes the depravity of human nature, Dispensationalism teaches that at salvation God gives us a ***second***, perfect nature that lives alongside of the old nature which is virtually unredeemable and unaffected by either justification or sanctification. This effectively traps the Christian in a permanent internal war (Rom.7:14ff). How the person manages to arbitrate between these two natures (is the will independent of both?) or how one grows spiritually when the old nature is intractable and the new one is already perfect, is never well explained. Nevertheless, the Christian is supposed to be repeatedly "filled" with the Spirit in order to become more sanctified. And although being filled is technically the prerogative of God, it can be facilitated by obedience and yielding to the will of God generally.

Whereas Keswick seems to have captured the best of all of the other traditions, Dispensationalism has managed to pick up some of the worst. The two-nature innovation is typical of Dispensational reductionism and results in a number of double binds which the believer must contend with. In practice, sanctification is reduced to repression of the old nature, following a well-defined set of ethics, and considerable self-effort, all the while mentally crediting the Holy Spirit who shows little evidence of any real power. It is also plagued by moralism and judgmentalism and tends to view any Christian who struggles as morally weak or disobedient.

2. Cross-Section Analysis of Major Themes in Sanctification Theology

Given the above overview of the prevailing views of sanctification, I will now attempt to re-examine what appears to me to be the major questions. What is the position of the Christian after conversion in regard to sin and the work of the Holy Spirit? What are the means by which Christians are sanctified? And what is the potential for a fully victorious Christian life exemplified by the fruits of the Spirit?

2.1. The Christian Identity and Spiritual Position from Justification

Virtually all Christian traditions agree that there is some element of separation from sin that occurs at the point of conversion which undermines the power of sin in the life of a believer. However, apart from the Keswick theology, most have difficulty defining the character of that release in any concrete terms, and most are unable to present a cohesive relationship between the freedom obtained at salvation and the sanctification that occurs throughout the rest of life. I believe there are various reasons for these difficulties that stem from some underlying presuppositions about the nature of conversion.

Perhaps the single most significant misunderstanding of Christian conversion in my view is the idea that the primary goal of conversion is the removal of the guilt and penalty of sin. This concept may be expressed metaphorically as a court hearing in which the guilty person is pardoned in spite of his guilt. The deficiency in this perspective (which can be traced directly to Calvin and Luther) is that it reduces conversion to a legal transaction performed in heaven, and the transition from "death to life" becomes a description of one's future destination rather than an experiential reality. Thus, "going to heaven when you die" has been a dominant evangelistic theme within many Protestant traditions, especially the Reformed and Dispensational. But in the NT, the forgiveness of sin is mainly a means to an end, namely, the reconciliation between God and people (2Cor.5:18-19). Going to heaven is only meaningful within the context of our relationship with God, and is often not even mentioned as part of our conversion.[11] The NT describes the nature of this conversion not as a legal arrangement, but as a transformation of dramatic proportions: a new creation (2Cor.5:17), coming alive from the dead (Rom.6:13), given freedom from bondage (Gal.4:3-5:1), and the like.

This distinction is crucial. The traditional "gospel of sin management"[12] produces an inherently weak doctrine of sanctification, because it removes any substantive connection between a person's conversion and their life in the real world. But the gospel of the Kingdom, that we can become different than we are and be indwelt by the God of the universe, is intimately related to and forms a foundation for living differently. Here the Keswick focus is light-years ahead of the Reformed tradition.

A closely related issue is the understanding of the Christian's identity. Reformed theology keeps Christians partially bound to the sin nature and never lets them rise above the status of a "sinner who has been pardoned." This in turn makes a viable doctrine of sanctification very difficult to expound. But if instead Christians are "saints who are capable of sin"[13] the believer then has an intrinsic means by which the Spirit can work wonders. In fact the NT says much about our identity: we are called to reign in this life, and to consider ourselves resident aliens, free persons, and new creatures. Here again the Keswick emphasis is much closer to the tenor of the NT in its use of transformative language.

This brief review is intended to show that the strength of a given doctrine of sanctification is heavily dependent upon the corresponding concept of salvation; specifically, what is considered to be the primary aim of salvation, and what the basic identity of the redeemed is after conversion. I believe a proper metaphor for the Christian condition after conversion can be found in Israel's position after crossing the Jordan River and entering the land. At that point they had already been granted the territory, for which they thanked God. Yet before them lay a vast area of fortified cities inhabited by giants. And "sanctification" was the means by which they subdued the land. This metaphor perfectly integrates the initial event with the victories that followed; conquering the land was the very reason for entering it in the first place. In the same way, sanctification of the believer ought to be the aim of justification/regeneration. History has shown that without an intimate relationship between the two, sanctification will suffer both in theory and practice.

2.2. The Means of Sanctification

Almost all traditions agree that the role of the Holy Spirit is to lead believers into truth, to produce fruit in their lives, and in some fashion to reduce the effects of sin and increase the inclination to holiness. As shown above, the descriptions of how this is realized in the life of the believer have taken many forms over the years. The various traditions have attempted to explain both the activity of the Spirit and the responsibilities of individual believers. But in practice many Christians live defeated lives and seem unable to rise above their problems. And in spite of centuries of teaching on this issue, it is not uncommon to find Christians who effectively believe that sanctification is the result of either: (1) professing Christ long enough; (2) an ever increasing effort in one's own strength; or (3) making as effort and asking God to bless it. How do we account for this disparity between theology and practice? The answer to this question is fairly complex, but once again I am convinced that it is caused largely by mistaken presuppositions (in addition to those handicaps described above that are inherited from our understanding of conversion).

The first problem is that we have a much too narrow concept of both sin and sanctification. The sinful condition is generally defined as the evil we do and the inclination to do evil. But that is too limited. It is also the damage sustained by the human soul and its effects on our lives. We were not designed to live in a fallen world or with the experiential knowledge of evil. They are both far too toxic (Gen.2:17; Rom.8:6). We are continually traumatized by both the absence of the things that we need to live well, and the presence of things which are harmful. This is why sanctification must be broadened to include the healing of the entire person, not just the removal of the inclination to sin, and why it is necessary for Christians to learn how to live as residents in the Kingdom of God[14] (Col.1:13-14). Spiritual defeat is not just about sinning; it is about succumbing to the powers of darkness in a fallen world in all of its forms. And holiness is not just about resisting sin; it is about actually living under the principles and authority that we were designed for. Sanctification, then, is the process of transformation that makes such a life realistically possible, since Christians are certainly unable to do so on their own.

Another important observation is the tendency for most doctrines of humanity to gloss over *why* people sin. The common understanding is that it is because human nature is bent that way. But that is a bit like saying a person steals because he is a thief, and it fails to explain why Adam sinned prior to his fallen state. Adam sinned because he was deceived; no more and no less. The basic principle behind behavior is that people act out of what they believe, and in this fallen world people are

deceived about nearly everything that matters: who they are, why they exist, how to be safe, what is important, how to be fulfilled, and the like. This underlying cause for evil is why the Holy Spirit has been given to Christians as a teacher of truth, and why the ministry of the Spirit is cause for great hope in overcoming evil. As He reveals the mistaken goals and beliefs about one's identity and choices, a disciple becomes realigned with the principles of the Kingdom and by nature submits to the reign of God in his or her life.

At this point I have already begun the transition to discussing the basic means of sanctification, which is well captured by the term "participation" with the Holy Spirit. A Christian cannot undo the damage done to the soul or change his nature by an act of the will, any more than one could move a boat forward by pushing on the inside of the hull. That is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in us. The task of the Christian is to learn how to raise the sail so that one cooperates with the wind "wherever it wishes to go." In large part this begins with hearing the voice of God, which every Christian must learn how to do (Jn.10:1-18; 14:16-26). Within that context the Holy Spirit can bring to light the worldly (deceptive) belief systems that permeate the human soul, reveal His truth, and transform our minds (Rom.12:1-2), lead us into repentance, or even deliver us from spiritual bondage.

This also implies that *choice* plays a central role in everything that Christians do. Not that we are able to do right by sheer willpower, but that we can choose to align with what the Spirit of God is revealing to us. Regardless of how one understands the abilities of the human will prior to conversion, any meaningful doctrine of sanctification requires that the human will be set free from bondage in order to enable participation with the Spirit. For it is by choice that Christians flesh out their beliefs, for good or ill (Js.1:14-26). Again the metaphor of Israel is helpful. In spite of being a tribe of nomads, they were commanded to conquer fortified cities. The key point was that <u>God himself actually provided the victories</u>. Their task of obedience was to deliberately move toward their enemies and challenge them. That was how they participated. In similar fashion, a major task for the Christian is to let the Spirit identify the next stronghold and to move toward it, allowing the Spirit to perform the work of deliverance.

In very practical terms, this process is carried out by a holy submission to the spiritual disciplines,[15] and by deliberate engagement in spiritual warfare for healing and deliverance. Neither of these is taught well in most denominations,[16] either in practice or theory. Yet both are crucial for the realization of holiness in the life of a Christian. When properly understood and practiced, they provide an effective and tangible means for sanctification, especially for Christians who are struggling or defeated.

Of course all of this must be wrapped in the context of an authentic Christian community, because much of what we must overcome and relearn is relational in nature. Once again, I must point out that the traditional doctrines of the Church have glossed over an important aspect of sanctification, in this case the value of community. Only in recent years have we had any serious consideration of the relational nature of the Gospel and its implications for spiritual growth (though even the quality of some teaching on community is questionable).

2.3. The Christian Potential

Simply stated, I believe that the "land" will never be fully taken. The extent of the damage done to the human soul is so extensive that we will never finish the work in the time allotted to us. But in participation with the Holy Spirit, we *can* break the power of the enemy and live out much of our rightful inheritance as children of the Kingdom. Furthermore, sanctification is not an ever-growing burden of effort; it is how we were designed to live. That is why Jesus said that His yoke is easy and His burden light.

3. Conclusion

It is incredibly ironic that the central theme of the New Covenant is that we shall live as the people of God, and yet the doctrines upon which that relationship depends seem terribly confused and even misdirected. In some cases we have gone so far as to codify our rejection of and disbelief in transformation of the Christian's basic nature, in spite of the overwhelming message of the NT to the contrary. But as was stated above, ideas have consequences, and we can only live out what we believe. To whatever extent our formal statement of faith denies us tangible freedom from sin and our underlying presuppositions miss their mark, we will live out our lives in self-inflicted bondage. And to my mind, the long-term decline of the Western Church is evidence enough that some of our core beliefs need to be questioned. A proper doctrine of sanctification rooted in an understanding of why we have been saved and to what purpose could point the way toward authentic transformation. And that would change the course of history.

[1] Willard,Dallas: *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In God*. HarperCollins, San Francisco CA, 1998

[2] For general historical development I have relied heavily on Muller, R.A.: "Sanctification", *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.* Bromiley, G.W., ed. vol. 4, pp.321-331.

[3] Cranfield, Charles: Paul's Teaching on Sanctification. *Reformed Review 48* (Spr 1995) pp.217-229

[4] Dieter, Hoekema, Hortan, McQuilkin, Walvoord: *Five Views on Sanctification.* Zondervan, Grand Rapids MI, 1987, p.61.

[5] An interesting contrast is portrayed in Robert Saucy's "Sinners" Who Are Forgiven or "Saints" Who Sin?, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (Oct-Dec 1995): 400-412

[6] Dieter, Hoekema, Hortan, McQuilkin, Walvoord: *Five Views on Sanctification.* pp.88-89.

[7] G.C.Berkauwer: *Faith and Justification*. Eerdmanns, Grand Rapids MI, 1952. pp.71ff

[8] Dieter, Hoekema, Hortan, McQuilkin, Walvoord: *Five Views on Sanctification.* pp.15-27

[9] Dieter, Hoekema, Hortan, McQuilkin, Walvoord: *Five Views on Sanctification.* p.51

[10] Dieter, Hoekema, Hortan, McQuilkin, Walvoord: *Five Views on Sanctification.* pp.143-145.

[11] Since so much of the NT is devoted to descriptions about salvation, it would be impossible to make an exhaustive list of references, but here are a couple of examples: Rom.6:1-7:6; 2Cor.5:15-17

[12] This is a term coined by Dallas Willard to identify dogmas that focus on removal of sin rather than transformation of the person.

[13] Refer to Robert Saucy "Sinners" Who Are Forgiven or "Saints" Who Sin? for a more in-depth discussion of this contrast.

[14] This is the core theme of Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy*.

[15] A most excellent explanation of how disciplines change us and why they differ from meritorious self-effort is offered in *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard.

[16] To be fair, in recent years some Pentecostal and a few evangelical churches have begun teaching a balanced view of spiritual warfare.