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THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION

“Sanctification,” says the *Shorter Catechism*, “is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and to live unto righteousness.”

Dr. A. A. Hodge points out that the term “to sanctify” is used in two different senses in the Scriptures: (1) to consecrate or set apart from a common to a sacred use; (2) to render morally pure or holy.

At the outset, stress must be laid upon the fact that sanctification is the work of the Triune God. Any teaching which states that man has the power to sanctify himself is a product of unsanctified reasoning. We can no more sanctify ourselves than we can make atonement for our sins. That God is the Author of sanctification is proved by such Scriptures as the following: “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. v. 23). “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. v. 25–27). “But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth” (2 Thess. ii. 13).

From these Scriptures we learn that the three Persons of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all have part in the believer’s sanctification. It is, however, God the Holy Spirit to whose agency the work of sanctification is particularly ascribed.

Essentially, then, sanctification is a supernatural work; but, notwithstanding this, we are not to be idle. We are called upon to co-operate with God. The fact that we are able to do this indicates that God has been pleased to manifest Himself to us in grace. That we are believers proves that this grace has been implanted within our hearts, and by it we are able to overcome the world, the flesh and the devil, and employ God’s appointed means of sanctification. Without Divine grace this co-operation is impossible.

In the work of sanctification two actions are involved, a negative and a positive. To use the language of Paul, we "put off all these, anger, wrath, blasphemy, etc." And we "put on as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, etc." So we forsake the things which appeal to the old nature and embrace the holy things of the Spirit. These two actions correspond to the two parts of sanctification, namely, the mortification and abandonment of the old nature and the quickening and strengthening of the new. These two actions will continue to operate while life lasts. Perfection will only be reached in glory. John Newton sums up the spiritual condition of every living saint when he says: "I am not what I ought to be; I am not what I wish to be; I am not what I hope to be. But blessed be God, I am not what I used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

We must not, like the Romanist, confuse sanctification with justification. They are distinguishable in theory, but inseparable in practice. The word justification is a forensic term, and signifies that a person is reckoned righteous. It is concerned with our standing before God rather than our condition. By justification we are pronounced righteous on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Christ which is imputed to us when we believe in Him. By sanctification we are made righteous in virtue of the fact that the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, dwells within us. There are thus two kinds of Christian righteousness: the one without us which we receive by imputation; and the other within us which is the work of the Holy Spirit. To use Hooker's phrase, "Holiness is inherent".

Justification is complete, and therefore it is never repeated. Sanctification, on the other hand, is progressive, and admits of degrees. All believers are equally justified, but not all are equally sanctified. Then again, justification precedes sanctification, as we must first be reconciled to God before we can be united to Him and thus be made holy. The one goes before the other as the cause before the effect.

Sanctification begins at regeneration. In the words of John Calvin, "the term sanctification denotes separation. This takes place in us when we are regenerated by the Spirit to newness of life, that we may serve God and not the world." Charnock defines regeneration as "a mighty and powerful

change wrought in the soul by the efficacious working of the Holy Spirit; wherein a vital principle, a new habit, the law of God, and a divine nature are put into and framed in the heart, enabling it to act holily and pleasing to God." Owen speaks of it as "an habitual holy principle wrought in us by God and bearing His image."

Regeneration, then, is the first step towards a life of sanctification. At regeneration we are able for the first time to exercise saving faith in Christ. This God-given faith unites us to the One who is the source of all holiness, and in virtue of this fact we are empowered to live a holy life. In Alexander Whyte's handbook on the *Shorter Catechism* the following incident is recorded. Dr. John (Rabbi) Duncan's daughter having heard a good sermon on one occasion on the words, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification", and having spoken well of it to her father, he at once replied, "Did it begin with regeneration?" This question takes us to the very root of the matter. For "it is as essential to a truly holy life as it is to a good sermon on a holy life, that it begin with regeneration" (Hodge).

The theory of Perfectionists that entire sanctification is attainable in this life is unsound, as nowhere in the Scriptures do we read of a saint claiming that he is fully sanctified and free from imperfection. On the contrary, Paul says: "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. vii. 18-25).

To those who argue that Paul here is speaking of his unregenerate state we would direct attention to the observation of Bishop J. C. Ryle: "What I do lay stress upon is the broad fact that the best commentators in every era of the church have almost invariably applied Romans vii to advanced believers. The commentators who do not take this view have been, with a few bright exceptions, the Romanists, the Socinians, and the

Arminians. Against them is arrayed the judgment of almost all the Reformers, and the Puritans."

In addition to Romans vii we have the words of John: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. . . . If we say that we have not sinned we make Him a liar and His Word is not in us." Nor does the word "perfect" used in the New Testament give any countenance to the theory of sinless perfection as it means "fully grown" or "adequately equipped". The word teaches us the possibility of mature growth and full equipment for Christian service.

Christian experience disproves the theory of sinless perfection. For when we read the biographies of such holy men as Bradford, Hooker, Ussher, Baxter, Rutherford, McCheyne and all the Puritans, we find that they were constantly speaking and writing about their sins and imperfections. In fact, the more sanctified and holier we become the more conscious we are of indwelling and actual sin.

And they who fain would serve Thee best
Are conscious most of wrong within.

The means which are appointed to promote sanctification are of two kinds—inward and outward.

(a) The *inward* means of sanctification is Faith. "Faith is the instrument of our justification—and hence of our deliverance from condemnation and communion with God—the organ of our union with Christ and fellowship with His Spirit. Faith, moreover, is that act of the regenerated soul whereby it embraces and experiences the power of the truth, and whereby the inward experiences of the heart and the outward actions of the life are brought into obedience to the truth" (Hodge).

(b) The *outward* means of sanctification are:

1. *The Scriptures.*

The Scriptures have a great sanctifying effect upon the soul of the believer. "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (John xv. 3). "Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy word is truth" (John xvii. 17). "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren . . ." (1 Peter i. 22). David says: "Thy word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against Thee" (Ps. cxix. 11). Alexander Whyte says: "From the heart are the issues of life, and unless the truth be lodged in

the heart, it is impossible it can be practised in the life. Practice is the end of all reading and preaching." "The source of all evils", says Chrysostom, "is our ignorance of the Word of God".

Luther had very definite views of the sanctifying effect of the Scriptures upon the believer. The Word, according to the Reformer, "is the high, chief, holy possession from which the Christian people takes the name 'holy', for God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches; nay, it is the very holiness of God. [Moreover] the Holy Ghost Himself administers it, and anoints and sanctifies the Church, that is, the Christian, holy people with it" (P. S. Watson, *Let God be God*, p. 170).

2. *The Sacraments.*

The sacraments are a means of sanctification. Baptism is a confession of faith, a mark of consecration and union with Christ. The *Larger Catechism* speaks of baptism as "an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's." Old divines sometimes spoke of "improving our baptism", by which they meant deriving spiritual benefit from it.

The Lord's Supper keeps before us the love wherewith Christ loved us and gave Himself for us. It is a means of grace. Calvin speaks of pious souls deriving great confidence and delight from this sacrament. George Gillespie argues at length that the Supper is not a converting ordinance, but that it is given to nourish and increase the life of grace when it has been already begun.

3. *Prayer.*

It is impossible to think of the work of sanctification progressing without prayer. It is therefore not without significance that all the great saints of bygone days spent much time in the prayer closet. Hodge points out that "prayer is a means of sanctification—(a) as the act in which the soul engages in communion with God; and (b) since God has promised to answer believing prayer with the donation of spiritual gifts" (John xiv. 13, 14).

4. *Providence.*

Considerable progress is made in sanctification under the superintending hand of Providence. Providence, whether favourable or not, is used to sanctify believers. Paul says: "We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation

worketh patience (endurance) and patience **experience**, and experience hope" (Rom. v. 3 f.). The writer to the Hebrews says: "whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth" (Heb. xii. 6). This is one of God's methods of discipline which at the time may seem grievous, "nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby" (Heb. xii. 11). Samuel Rutherford testifies: "I never knew by my nine years' preaching, so much of Christ's love as He hath taught me in Aberdeen by six months' imprisonment."

The work of sanctification involves all the faculties of the individual. In the words of Owen: "In the sanctification of believers, the Holy Ghost doth work in them, in their whole souls, their minds, wills, and affections, a gracious supernatural habit, principle, and disposition of living unto God; wherein the substance or essence, the life and being, of holiness doth consist."

The blow of sin damaged all the faculties of man. In regeneration and sanctification they are renewed and redirected. Sanctification enlightens the intellect, thus enabling the individual to grow, not only in grace, but also in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The object of the affections is changed so that the believer is able to set his affections on things above where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. The will is given freedom and is enabled to will that which is spiritually good. The soul delights to dwell in the presence of God. The body is the temple of the Holy Ghost. Such is the extent of the work of sanctification. Thus Paul is able to say: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature (creation); old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. v. 17).

There has been much erroneous and confused thinking about the subject of good works. All we need to say here is that good works, that is, works that are acceptable to God, are simply the evidences of sanctification. We can no more conceive of sanctification without good works than we can conceive of justification without saving faith. Luther said: "Good works do not make a good man but a good man does good works." Or, as Toplady said, "Grace cannot be severed from its fruits. If God gives you St. Paul's faith, you will soon have St. James' works". And it is by performing good works, "the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith", that "believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their

brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto; that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end eternal life ” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*).

Whiting Bay, Arran.

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