

Sanctification

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The word used to express the thought of sanctification is a Greek verb which means “to set apart”. It is used of our Lord’s mission. He said “for their sakes I sanctify myself” (John 17:19). It is used of our attitude towards God. “Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts” (1 Peter 3:15). The sanctified person is thus one that is set apart for the worship and service of God. This is made even clearer by the use of the corresponding Hebrew used in the Old Testament where it is applied not only to God but to days and to inanimate things (see for example Exodus 20:11 compared with Genesis 2:3 and Leviticus 8). We need to keep this fact clearly before us. Some people say quite wrongly that you cannot consecrate or sanctify an inanimate object. The same word is used of men and days and things set apart for God. While that is true we must also remember that sanctification has regard to the nature of the object sanctified. Where the object is an inanimate thing then the purpose is fully realised when the use is characterised with reference to the worship or service of God. When the object is a natural being then there must be an adequate reference of the personality. Hence in this case sanctification must mean the setting apart of affections, feelings and will for the service of God. When the reference is to God or our Lord Jesus Christ sanctification means either the placing of God in our hearts or minds in the position due to him as creator and Father or the self-dedication of our Lord Jesus Christ to the work assigned to him by his Father. If we keep the various meanings of the word clear in our mind it will greatly assist us in establishing the New Testament teaching on the sanctification of the individual Christian. We confine our study in this article to that particular aspect of sanctification.

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A most important question at once arises. Do we set ourselves apart or are we set apart through the agency of another? Many times in the Old Testament and occasionally in the New Testament men are exhorted to sanctify themselves (see e.g. Leviticus 11:44, Joshua 3:5, 1 Chronicles 15:12, 2 Chronicles 30:3, 1 Peter 3:15). But both in the Old and the New Testaments God is said to sanctify his people (see e.g. Leviticus 21:8-15, Numbers 8:17, John 17:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 8:12). How are we to reconcile these apparently contradictory statements? We can see, on a careful reading of the scriptures, that God is the Prime Agent, but because humans are rational beings he evokes a response in their hearts and wills. The office of true sanctification belongs to the Holy Spirit of God. God the Father is said to sanctify them “that are preserved in Jesus Christ and called” (Jude 3:1). But the divine agent to whom he has committed this work is the Holy Spirit. Therefore there are two elements in sanctification as there are two elements in justification. The work of God by which he initiates and brings to completion the process. The work of man whereby, wrought upon by the living Spirit, he responds to God’s call. In justification he exercise faith in the promises of God revealed through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. In sanctification he exercise faith in the enabling power of the Holy Spirit also revealed in promise. God is the worker, but he works in us “to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). There is a distinction between sanctification and justification which we shall discuss later. In the circumstance mentioned here they are identical. In both cases, if we may so express it, god has regard to the nature of man and does no violence to his material being.

When we recognise this fact it becomes important to consider the means employed by God for our sanctification. It does not seem to much to say that pre-eminently the scriptures are set before us as the means of sanctification. The word "holy" applied to them comes from the same root as the word used for "sanctify". Men were set apart by God to reveal his truth to others and therefore they were "holy men of God, speaking, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). The very origin of the scriptures is thus associated with the idea of separation to God which is the essential feature in sanctification. Again Saint Peter exhorts us "as babes desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby". (1 Peter 2:2). The word

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"sincere" reminds us that this is an operation of God upon hearts and wills. If we look at the revised version of this text we see that sincere may mean "spiritual" or "reasonable". When God touches our hearts we should long for the nourishing milk of God's word just as an infant seeks milk for its daily nourishment. The word of God directs our minds and thoughts to the things of God. A Christian cannot grow unless the nourishment contained in God's word is eagerly sought after and absorbed. This is strongly emphasized in our Lord's prayer in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. He prays ~~for his disciples~~ "sanctify them through thy truth, thy word is truth". (5:17). Earlier on the same occasion our Lord addressing his disciples said "now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (John 15:3). Saint Paul exhorts the Colossians "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom" (Col 3:16). The sanctifying grace of God is not an unintelligible impulse moving us forward without any cooperation of our intellectual powers. On the contrary, it is a justified natural course of action determined by an apprehension of the truths contained in God's word. We need to remember this continually lest we become victims of our own imagination or subject unduly to emotional reactions without any rational ground. Emotion has its own place in our spiritual development as in our ordinary life but in both it must be controlled and regulated by the higher faculty of reason. God's word is the great instrument which he employs to reveal his will and to guide us into the paths of righteousness. It is by reading and pondering on its messages that we understand what the will of the Lord is. Another means employed by the spirit to which much reference is made is the exercise of prayer. Our Lord was emphatic on the value and necessity of constant prayer. He said to his disciples "watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). This injunction was given more than once by our Lord (see Mark 13:33 et seq.). It is intended that we should translate the promises and warnings of God's word into petitions to him that he would graciously enable us to rest in his promise and duly heed his warnings. Prayer is not only a private exercise, when we pray to our Father in secret, but it is also a public exercise when we join with others presenting our common needs and our common desires to the heavenly Father. In this way we are constantly reminded of our duty towards others and exhorted especially to exercise the grace of forgiveness on behalf of those who have injured us. In our desire for sanctification we should ever remember that we are members one of another, our acts and desires react greatly on others as their acts and desires react equally on us. We should never forget that we are one body in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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These two facts in sanctification are joined together when we set apart anything to service ~~and glory~~ of God (see 1 Timothy 4:5). Some see in Ephesians 5:26 a reference to Christian baptism in relation to sanctification of the church. But the language is not sufficiently determinate to establish it. It may mean the cleansing by the word as water cleans the body. Much more likely it means the cleansing accomplished by the word when water is employed as a sign. This could refer to baptism but it would attribute the cleansing efficacy to the word spoken. At any rate we are safe in saying that the two great means of sanctification of the individual specially emphasized in scripture are the word of God and prayer. We have next to consider the results of sanctification. Comparing ourselves to the sanctification of natural beings we have to ask "what affect has true separation to God on the life and conduct of the individual? The New Testament is very explicit on this matter. God's command is "be ye holy for I am holy". The majesty of the Divine Being is clearly manifest in his complete isolation from sin. He is of purer eyes that to behold iniquity. Our sanctification, if we are separated to him, must exhibit a like characteristic. Hence we are warned to "mortify our members which are upon the earth". (Col 3:5). We are to be followers of God "and to walk in love" (Ephesians 5:1 -2). We are to "lay aside every weight and the sin that doth so easily beset us" (Hebrews 12:1). Out of a wealth of references these may indicate with sufficient clearness the purpose and result of sanctification. ~~But~~ It is necessary to notice that in every exhortation the presence of sin is assumed. We are told to "mortify" that is to put to death our members. We are told to lay aside weights and the sin that is all around us (as the words in Hebrews could be rendered) but it is not suggested that the weights are permanently cast off, or that certain members when slain – two unknown words here - to slay other members upon the earth no longer arises. To this consideration of the texts in question must be added the oft repeated warning to watch as well as to pray (see e.g. Col 4:2, Eph 6:18, Acts 20:28-31). In many of these passages the possibility of defeat through lack of diligence is clearly indicated. The two classical passages which expressly declare that this possibility is always present Romans 7:14 -21 and Galatians 5:16 – 18. This seem an appropriate place to introduce the distinction between Justification and Sanctification to which ~~we have already referred~~ reference has already been made. Justification is a complete act of God. "there is therefore no no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). On the other hand sanctification is presented as a continuous process. "Not" says Saint Paul, "as though I had already attained, either were already perfect". He speaks a little later in the same context of those who are perfect (Phil 3:12 – 15). We can reconcile both statements by remembering that the word "perfect" has in it the idea of an attainment of an end. Hence there can be a relative perfection as well as an absolute perfection. A child may be a perfect child and yet reach not the higher ideal of attaining manhood. But we are not limited to this passage in an attempt to discover the progressive character of sanctification. Saint Paul

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Assumes that "we know in part" but the time will come when we shall know as also we are known" (1 Corinthians 13:9-12). James is still more explicit and reminds us that "in many things we offend all" (James 2:3). The aim of this progressive purpose is aptly given to us in the words of saint Paul that we "may grow up into him in all things" until finally we reach "the measure of the stature of the

fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13 – 15). There is a progressive movement, in the power of the Holy Spirit towards the final attainment of resurrection liberty when both our bodies and our souls will be perfectly redeemed. This is put popularly in the statement that by justification we are free immediately from the penalty of sin, by sanctification we are daily delivered from the power of sin, by glorification the final experience of complete redemption, we are freed from the presence of sin. We are not promised immunity from temptation no freedom from the possibility of sinning, but we are promised divine aid against the enemy.ⁱ The Holy Spirit lusts against the flesh that resident evil that abides in us until we are redeemed from this earthly condition, first by joining our released spirit to “the spirits of just men made perfect and finally by the quickening of our mortal bodies through the same spirit”. The means offered us through which the blessed Spirit conveys the gift of victory are, primarily, prayer and the study of God’s word. Mindful of our relentless enemies we constantly watch, convinced of our constant weakness we daily pray, earnestly seeking the will of God we read diligently his holy word. A life thus lived is truly set apart. Others will take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus.

ⁱ These are statements in the 1st Epistle of John (see 3:6, 9, 5:18) which seem to make against this assertion. A careful study of the epistle can correct this hasty view. What John is arguing is that the new life is incompatible with sin and that sin must be regarded as something alien to the Christian. We need to remember it is that Epistle which teaches us that “if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”.