DEFINITIVE SANCTIFICATION AS A SAFEGUARD AGAINST UNBIBLICAL MODELS OF PROGRESSIVE SANCTIFICATION

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Introduction: Some of you attended a lecture that I gave two years ago at this venue on the importance of seeing the believer’s sanctification as part of the Gospel for which we are “together.” My suggestion then was that the trending evangelical emphasis on “Gospel” is largely a reassertion of the biblical doctrine of justification (which I naturally applaud), but with inadequate emphasis on the second, experimental aspect of the duplex beneficium of union with Christ, viz., regeneration, together with its close relative definitive sanctification.

As a matter of some review (and for those of you who have no knowledge of that earlier lecture, a summary of that lecture), I’d like to spend some of our time this morning revisiting that topic in brief. I began then with a suggestion that there are two polar errors (which amount to Gospel errors) that routinely occur when attempting to harmonize the doctrines of justification and regeneration: legalism (or Pharisaism) and libertinism (or antinomianism).

• By legalism I do not mean, as some popular definitions of the term suggest, the use of rules (even extrabiblical ones) in managing or measuring one’s sanctification. What I mean is the historically established idea that one’s progress in sanctification contributes in some sense to one’s righteous standing before God. Now some of you here may not like my definition, but in the interest of making sure that we are all thinking the same way, it is this definition that I have in view, whether or not you use the term in this way.

Other than Pharisaic Judaism (perhaps), Roman Catholicism stands as the most recognizable of all historical proponents of the legalist error. The following reflects the essence of the Romanist position:

In the Roman Catholic Model, both justification and sanctification are viewed, in at least some sense, as experimental in nature—a matter of “good works.” It is true, of course,
that the Western Church has preserved a greater forensic emphasis in justification than has the Eastern Church; still, the declaration of righteousness in Romanist justification can never be totally divorced from the *infusion* of righteousness that occurs when the believer’s faith journey begins. The preliminary justifying act changes not only the believer’s standing, but also his nature, rendering him capable of “works of the Spirit” or sanctification. If one persists in these works, then he/she can earn a *final* justification based substantially on those works.

Much may be said positively of the Romanist model. It recognizes that justification necessarily begins with grace and cannot be achieved through “works of the law.” It also insists that justification is not “fiction,” refusing to acknowledge the validity of any “faith” that fails to bear fruit. Most importantly, it supplies a credible “engine” for the believer’s life of good works—a feature lacking in some Protestant soteriologies.

Of course we cannot be content to heap praise on the Romanist model, because it is, in the final analysis, “another Gospel.” It disregards the biblical emphasis on justification by grace *alone* (contra Rom 11:6; Heb 10:10), requiring the performance of meritorious “works of the Spirit” to complete the justification process (contra Rom 4:1–8); radically wrests the biblical idea of imputed righteousness into infused righteousness (contra Rom 5:12–19); and, rather than casting justification as a proper source of relief and joy (Rom 5:1), uses the threat of an incomplete justification instead as a means of extortion for the benefit of the pope and his henchmen.

Protestantism is not without its own legalistic expressions. The *New Perspective on Paul* has waded into semi-Romanist waters, as has the *Auburn Avenue Theology/Shepherdism* of Reformed vintage. And we would be remiss to ignore isolated expressions of Puritan and fundamentalist practice that leave one wondering whether at least *some* members of these movements *really* understand the nature of biblical justification and the believer’s faultless standing before God in Christ.

- **By libertinism** I refer to an opposite problem, namely, the neglect of perseverance in good works as a necessary fruit of faith. Those who commit this error are sometimes treated with milder censure because theirs is viewed not as a *Gospel* error, but as a *post-Gospel* error: they have gotten justification right and thus are Christians, even if they get sanctification wrong. To think so lightly of this error, however, does not comport with Scripture, which sees this error as scarcely less damning (if at all) than the legalist error: “Faith without works is dead,” James says (2:14–17); to which the author of Hebrews adds, “Without sanctification, no one will see the Lord” (12:14). This is a serious problem, and, yes, a *Gospel* problem.

So where does this problem come from? Historically, I would hazard, the libertine error begins as a matter simply of doctrinal neglect. Early Lutheranism is a classic example of this phenomenon. So infatuated were the early Lutherans with their rediscovery of immediate and total justification by grace through faith in the imputed righteousness of Christ that sanctification simply took a back seat in terms of emphasis. It’s not as though Lutheran soteriology was wrong, per se, just a bit overbalanced toward one aspect of soteriology (justification). However, it was not long before that imbalance led to instances of Romans 6:1 reasoning cropping up in Lutheran life: “We should go on sinning so that
grace will abound!” And so the Lutherans gained something of a reputation for licentiousness (some of it undeserved, but still based in part on historical realities).

It is here that the problem ceases to be a matter of orthodox neglect and moves into the realm of heterodoxy. The error here is failing to recognize regeneration as the necessary companion of justification or to one degree or another minimizing the importance of regeneration as the second part of the *duplex beneficium* found in union with Christ.

One attempt to correct this error on the continent was Pietism, an idea that flourished in the English-speaking world even as it evolved into more familiar forms such as Holiness, Wesleyan, and Keswick theologies, collectively labeled “perfectionist” theologies in B. B. Warfield’s classic history of this theological impulse.¹ These groups, to their credit, did much to promote holiness among believers, but did so at the expense of a Scripturally informed theology. Note the following diagram:

For the perfectionist, progress in good works is laborious and stunted in the immediate aftermath of justification, relying strictly on a response of grateful “reckoning” by “positionally” sanctified, but dispositionally unaltered believers. Real progress in sanctification instead occurs when by faith the believer is vaulted into a sanctified state² by means of some second work of grace, variously known as a “perfect love” (Wesley), “full surrender” (Keswick), or other expressions such as “the deeper life,” “consecration,” “dedication,” or iterative “fillings with the Spirit.” So while be believer’s status as justified supplies a reason to be holy, the energy for actually becoming holy comes later. In fact, in some expressions of the perfectionist model, it is possible that the second work, while a hopeful step in the Christian journey, might never occur at all.

The perfectionist, we must concede, sees clearly the idea of post-conversion good works as an important biblical motif. He is also rightly aware of the need for something additional to justification as the experimental and efficacious engine for good works (unlike some modern antinomians, like, say, Tullian Tchvidjian, who imagine that simply “preaching the gospel to myself” [i.e., reminding myself that Christ has done everything necessary to secure my justification] is sufficient to fully empower the believer’s walk). The problem with the perfectionist model is that it fails to adequately consider the realities of regeneration and the attendant idea of definitive sanctification as the only experimental basis for sanctification that a believer will ever need.


² Note the emphasis here on a sanctified state, that leads to Warfield’s verdict that this family of theology is perfectionist in nature. Rather than viewing the believer’s new experience as a new nature/disposition that believers cultivate and develop, sanctification is instead viewed as an instantaneous triumph that puts the believer on a “higher plane.” This confusion is seen clearly in debates between the Free Grace movement and the so-called “Lordship” model. When the Free Grace advocate hears the Lordship position that assurance is sourced in part in the believer’s sanctification, his ear cannot help but hear “assurance by perfection.” This hearing is inaccurate, but perhaps understandable in view of the firmly Keswick roots of the Free Grace movement.
This leads me, then, to the Reformational understanding of this state of affairs (i.e., a view held by proponents of all three branches of the Reformation—Reformed, Lutheran, and to a lesser degree Anglican), features of which will supply the topic of my defense today.

**Definitions:** For the discussion underway, we really have five terms in need of definition, some quite without controversy, others more contested. Note the following:

- **By justification** I mean God’s declaration or regard of the believer as righteous, not on account of his works, but due to the gracious imputational exchange of the sinner’s guilt for Christ’s righteousness.

- **By regeneration** I mean quite simply to the impartation of the new nature.

- **By union with Christ** I mean more than the spiritual union of the believer with Christ’s spiritual body (the church universal), expanding the idea (a la John Murray in his *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*) to include all of the redemptive benefits that accrue to the believer by virtue of his association with Christ, whether forensic (i.e., declarative/positional) or experimental (i.e., experienced/definite).

- **By definitive sanctification** I mean the subjective shift of ethical/experimental capacity wrought in the believer’s person, concomitant with regeneration, whereby the old man is put to death, thus freeing the believer from the power and bondage of depravity and rendering him immediately capable of progress in personal holiness.

- **By positional sanctification** (which does not appear in the diagram above and which I am critiquing) I mean the objective change of status, concomitant with justification, whereby the believer is graciously set aside for God’s service. In positional sanctification, there is no experimental energy supplied for sanctification; rather the believer enjoys a position on which he may “reckon” (Keswick theology) or of which he may regularly remind himself by “preaching the Gospel to himself” (Tchividjianism).

It is the goal of this paper to demonstrate that the idea of definitive sanctification is exegetically and theologically preferable to the idea of positional sanctification and, further, that adopting the idea of definitive sanctification can be an important corrective both to legalism and libertinism.
A Defense of Definitive Sanctification

From a historical standpoint, definitive sanctification has a much better provenance than positional sanctification. Though the label “definitive sanctification” is a twentieth-century one and thus a new one, the concept is ancient, and stands as the common understanding of the Reformers.

- For Melanchthon, justification is the work of Christ *extra nobis*, regeneration the person of Christ *in nobis*. It is the latter (and not the former) that effects Christ’s displacement of the totally depraved old man and marks the “beginning of obedience” and “beginning of all virtues.”

- For Calvin, initial sanctification is located not in the believer’s justification, but in his decisive and fundamental breach with the power of sin. The power of regeneration is such that sin, while continuing to dwell, no longer reigns in the believer. The Christian advances in holiness, thus, according to twin principles, “vivification” (regeneration) and “mortification” (definitive sanctification).

- For Turretin, sanctification has two aspects: (1) “a priori” sanctification or regeneration, by which the believer undergoes “an habitual change in qualities” and (2) “a posteriori” sanctification, by which the believer experiences “an actual change in life and morals.” For Turretin, the latter may wax and wane, but the former can never be removed or rendered wholly undetectable.

- For Owen, “in regeneration…consists the second part of the work of the Holy Spirit, in order unto the completing and perfecting of the new creation.” He adds that “the whole of our sanctification and holiness is contained in the promises [Ezek. 36:25–29] that we will be cleansed from the defilements of sin, whatever they be, to have a heart inclined, disposed, enabled, to fear the Lord always, and to walk in all his ways and statutes accordingly, with an internal habitual conformity of the whole soul unto the law of God is to be sanctified or to be holy.” Thus sanctification commences with a new *heart* and *habit* synonymous with regeneration (definitive sanctification) that flowers into a life of conformity to God (progressive sanctification).

The label “positional sanctification” is of older vintage (mid-nineteenth century), but of much more dubious provenance. The term was popularized (and quite possibly coined) by Asa Mahan.
as a means of explaining the failed ministry of the Pelagian revivalist Charles Finney. Mahan first discovered Finney in a state of deep despair borne from the latter’s discovery that ten years of strident evangelism had produced no lasting results. Mahan encouraged Finney with the understanding that Finney’s converts had merely been justified and “positionally” sanctified, and that a second trip around his initial preaching circuit with the message of the baptism and filling of the spirit unto personal holiness would complete Finney’s mission of creating holy Christians. With this advice began that foul chapter of church history known as revivalism, which, once connected with the emerging Keswick theology, became a major blight in the history of the fundamentalist movement.

So thorough, in fact, has been the reach of the label “positional sanctification” that it is used even by those who would reject its theological implications. Indeed, it is likely that many in this room were unaware before this lecture that positional sanctification was a defective term and one potentially unsuited to the biblical understanding or that another, more suitable term for the idea of initial sanctification is even available.

From a theological standpoint, positional sanctification suffers from a single major deficiency, viz., its logical inadequacy to accomplish what it purports to do. It is impossible, logically, for a legal, objective concept to effect a concrete, subjective result. “Positional” sanctification can no more produce holiness than a birth certificate can produce physical flourishing or a death certificate can end it. Certificates are legal/objective; life and death are experienced. Likewise, the believer’s legal status (his justification or “position”) can in no sense overcome the crippling subjective effects of depravity or impel practical holiness. This is the great weakness of positional sanctification—and a weakness recognized by both critics and proponents of the idea. It is for this reason that almost every historical advocate of positional sanctification either (1) gives in to antinomianism or (2) supplements justification with some additional, post-conversion basis for holiness (whether a second work of grace, inventive works of the Spirit, threats/rules, etc.). In short, positional sanctification is of almost no practical value, theologically speaking.

The idea of “definitive” sanctification, on the other hand, has tremendous theological value. It powerfully effects in the believer’s nature and disposition changes that both enable and energize holiness. It delivers a crippling blow to the power of sin and produces in the believer new thoughts, affections, and impulses that incline him toward greater and greater heights of holiness. In short, definitive sanctification accomplishes all that it intends without supplementation or novel doctrines.

From an exegetical standpoint (certainly an important factor and for some the only factor of consequence) definitive sanctification also fares well. Sanctification and assurance are not tied expressly to the forensic reality of justification in Scripture; instead, sanctification and assurance are connected directly to the experimental realities of regeneration (the birth of the new man) and its counterpart definitive sanctification (the death of the old man and breach of sins power). Note the exegetical and theological sequence in the following representative texts:

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10Both Anthony Hoekema and J. I. Packer, for instance, who have written brilliantly and extensively against the Holiness/Keswick/Revivalist approach to sanctification, use the term positional sanctification with little or no qualification, seemingly unaware that the alternative label definitive sanctification has been in circulation now for over half a century.
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<th>Passage</th>
<th>The Indicative Dynamic of Sanctification</th>
<th>The Imperative Expression of Sanctification</th>
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<tr>
<td>Romans 6:1–14</td>
<td>All of us … have been baptized into Christ Jesus (v. 3) [We were raised] to walk in newness of life (v. 4)</td>
<td>Verses 11–14: <strong>Therefore</strong> now consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus [i.e., believe it and act on it]. Let not sin <strong>therefore</strong> reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. <strong>For</strong> sin no longer has dominion over you!</td>
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<td>Ephesians 4:17–32</td>
<td>You have been renewed in the spirit of your mind (v. 22). You put on the new self, the one created according to God’s likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth (v. 24).</td>
<td>Verses 25–32: <strong>Since</strong> you put away lying, Speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another. Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and don’t give the Devil an opportunity. The thief must no longer steal. Instead, he must do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need. No foul language is to come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. And do not grieve God’s Holy Spirit. You were sealed by Him for the day of redemption. All bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander must be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.</td>
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<td>Colossians 3:1–17</td>
<td><strong>Since</strong> you have been raised with the Messiah (v. 1) <strong>Since</strong> you have put on the new self.</td>
<td>Verses 5–17: <strong>Therefore</strong>, put to death what belongs to your worldly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, God’s wrath comes on the disobedient, and you once walked in these things when you were living in them. But now you must also put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another… <strong>Therefore</strong>, God’s chosen ones, holy and loved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, accepting one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, put on love—the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of the Messiah, to which you were also called in one body, control your hearts. Be thankful. Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.</td>
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**Conclusion:** Based on the foregoing, it seems conclusive that history, theology, and exegesis are united in privileging the idea of **definitive sanctification as an experimental counterpart to regeneration over positional sanctification as a legal/forensic counterpart to justification.** What is at stake here is not so much a label (as we have suggested, some continue to use what I have suggested is an inferior label in defense of the biblical ideal of sanctification); instead, at stake is the practical unpacking of the believer’s progressive sanctification. Without an *experimental* basis for holiness sourced in the believer’s union with Christ, sanctification is apt to err either by (1) merely reckoning on a positional basis and thus drifting toward easy-believism and/or antinomianism or (2) inventing an experimental basis for sanctification alien to Scripture and thus drifting toward pietism and/or Pharisaism.

Far better, it seems, to follow Peter’s rubric that God “gave us *everything* required for life and godliness...[when we]...became partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world.”