

# MEDITATIONS

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## The Two Phases of SANCTIFICATION

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“... to them that **are sanctified** in Christ Jesus called to be **saints**..” 1 Corinthians 1:2

Like every Bible subject, the doctrine of sanctification must be “rightly divided” (2 Tim. 2:15). References to this theme, in other words, must be interpreted according to *the analogy of faith*—the most basic rule of Biblical interpretation—lest Scripture appear to contradict itself.

This practice of comparing Scripture with Scripture and of synthesizing the parts to make a systematic and unified whole arises from the presupposition that Scripture presents a logically consistent message. The Bible’s Author, the eternal Logos<sup>1</sup>, is not capable of self-contradiction (2 Tim. 2:13b).

Apparent contradictions between two Biblical references, therefore, must be attributed to the interpreter’s lack of understanding, instead of any possibility of antithesis in the nature of God. The challenge facing the interpreter of Scripture is to explain apparently contradictory passages so that coherence and consistency is achieved. The Bible student who dismisses the discipline of “rightly dividing” God’s word, opting instead for the practice of inserting the popular definition of a term whenever it occurs will necessarily find himself embracing diametrically opposite principles as equally true.

<sup>1</sup> The word “logic” derives from this Greek root and the principle of logic—i.e. the cause/effect dynamic and the law of non-contradiction—is built into the very fabric of God’s various works.

The solution to this dilemma is to recognize that Scripture presents its doctrines as truths with more than one phase. Consider, for instance, the Bible doctrine of sanctification.

In one place we read that people “are sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10), and in another, that sanctification is “by the truth; for [His] word is truth” (Joh. 17:17). How should these apparently contrary ideas, i.e. that sanctification is a fact that occurred at the cross by means of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that sanctification is a prospect that depends on the application of God’s word, be reconciled?

Reconciliation of the passage in question comes when the student of Scripture understands that the doctrine of sanctification is presented as a truth with two primary phases. We might distinguish between the two by the adjectives *positional* and *practical*, or better still, *eternal* and *ethical*. Eternal sanctification<sup>2</sup> speaks of the gift of Divine grace whereby God’s elect are made holy. It involves four sub-categories: (1) a covenant phase, in which God “set apart” a people from the human family as His own (cf. Heb. 10:14); (2) a legal phase, in which Christ made them holy by His death (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; Heb. 2:11); (3) a vital phase, in which the Holy Spirit imparts a holy nature in regeneration (cf. Eph. 4:24); and (4) a final phase, in which all of God’s people will be made completely and entirely holy (cf. 1 Ths 5:23).

Ethical, or practical, sanctification, on the other hand, describes the process by which the individual is more and more conformed to Christ’s image in his daily conduct and behavior. The failure to distinguish between the two—i.e. the sanctifying grace that determines eternal fitness and the call to holiness in daily behavior and conduct—inevitably

<sup>2</sup> By the label “eternal sanctification”, I mean “sanctification that affects eternal salvation” or “sanctification that has eternal consequence”.

produces the popular antithesis that couples Divine sovereignty and human responsibility in eternal salvation.

First Corinthians 1:2 neatly summarizes these two phases. Addressing the saints at Corinth, Paul writes "... to them that **are sanctified** [*hagiazō*] in Christ Jesus, called **to be saints** [*hagios*]." The first reference—"are sanctified"—describes what some have called *definitive* sanctification; the second—"called to be saints"—describes *practical*, or in the words of the late systematic theologian, Elder R. V. Samels, *Christian* sanctification. Paul's point is that these believers at Corinth had already been positionally sanctified through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Now, they were called to be in daily, practical behavior what they already were in a positional sense before God.

The two phases are not synonymous. The first, i.e. "are sanctified in Christ," is definitive and sure; the second, i.e. "called to be saints", is tentative and uncertain. The first is instantaneous the second involves a process. The first is immediate; the second, mediate. The first is total and absolute; the second, partial and conditional. The first is independent of external factors; the second depends on a variety of external factors. The first is a reality; the second, prospective.

Perhaps someone will object, "Why do we need these qualifying terms? Why can't we simply accept the fact that the verb 'to sanctify' means 'to make holy' and leave it at that? Why do we need to divide the subject into these confusing categories?"

Answer, "Because Paul divided the subject into categories in 1 Corinthians 1:2." If Biblical references to "sanctification" always describe something that has eternal consequence, then how do we make sense of the apostle's insistence that the Corinthians were both *already* sanctified, yet *called to be* sanctified? If they were already completely holy, then how might they improve on that fact? If Christ had already sanctified them at the cross, then in what sense are they further called to sanctification? It is only when one understands the principle that the holiness necessary to fit someone for heaven is a gift of God's free grace, and that those so fitted are further called to manifest that holiness in their daily walk and conduct that coherence and hermeneutical consistency is attained.

The failure to distinguish, in the interest of "simplicity", between the eternal and ethical phases of sanctification and to always interpret the verb "to sanctify" in eternal terms does not, in fact, simplify, but confuses the issue, for it forces one to say both that sanctification is a fact because of the cross and that it is not a fact, because it is contingent on hearing and receiving the word. Understanding, however, that this theme is presented in Scripture as both an eternal fact and an ethical prospect resolves the antithesis "... to them that **are sanctified** in Christ Jesus, called **to be saints**"

### The Eternal Phase

The verb "are sanctified" in 1 Corinthians 1:2 is in the Greek *aorist* tense. It speaks of a past, completed action with ongoing results. The *aorist* describes punctiliar or "snapshot" action—a once-for-all, instantaneous event. It is the verb employed when eternal sanctification, in its various subcategories, is meant. There are four such subcategories.

**1. Covenant Sanctification.** First, God "set apart" a people to be His own in the everlasting covenant. Hebrews 10:14 identifies the benefactors of Christ's atoning death in terms of those who were set apart by the Father in the covenant: "*For by one offering, He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified*". For whom was Jesus himself "sanctified [i.e. set apart in covenant] and sent into the world" (Joh. 10:36)? Who receives the benefit of eternal perfection secured by Christ's death? For whom did Jesus Christ die? He died for those that the Father set aside as His own. He died for the elect.

**2. Positional Sanctification.** Next, the Lord Jesus Christ positionally sanctified these "set apart ones" at the cross (1 Cor. 1:2). It is in this sense that Paul affirms, "*Who of God is made unto us.. sanctification*" (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ came to do the Father's will, by which will "**we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all**" (Heb. 10:10). Referring to the spiritual union that resulted from the Savior's atoning death, the writer to the Hebrews says, "*For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one, for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren*" (Heb. 2:11). Hebrews 10:29 also makes reference to the fact of positional sanctification in what is arguably the most sobering warning against "willful sin" (v. 26) in the

entire Bible: "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he **was sanctified**, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?"

**3. Vital Sanctification.** The *aorist* is also employed to speak of the application of redemption to the individual's heart in regeneration, at which point the individual is made holy in a vital and personal sense: "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye **are sanctified**, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). Paul informs his readers that the "new man" they are to "put on" in a behavioral sense is the very same "holy" principle that God has created in the soul: "Put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and **true holiness**" (Eph. 4:24).

**4. Entire Sanctification.** Finally, Scripture teaches that all who were set apart by God in the covenant, positionally sanctified by Christ at the cross, and given a new and holy nature in regeneration, will be finally and entirely sanctified at the resurrection of the dead: "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. Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it" (1 Ths 5:23-24). Not until the grace of glorification will the individual child of God be personally free from sin, though now, in Christ his "sanctification", he is positionally holy and fit for heaven.

### The Ethical Phase

Those who "are sanctified" by Christ, having been made holy in a positional and vital sense, are further "called to be holy" in an ethical or behavioral sense. They are "called to be saints" by the gospel. The gospel calls them, in other words, to be in practice what they already are in position: "But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation [lit. behavior]" (1 Pet. 1:15). Ethical sanctification might be defined as the increasing conformity of one's life and conduct to the image of Christ.

This call to ethical holiness, unlike the definitive work by which a person is made holy, is communicated by means of God's word: "Sanctify them through thy truth thy word is truth" (Jno. 17:17). It is as a person hears and obeys the word of God

that he is able more and more to "put off the old man" and to "put on the new man" in personal conduct and behavior (cf. Eph. 4:22ff). Sanctification in this practical sense does not involve an actual change of nature (for that has already taken place in regeneration when the new man was "created in... true holiness"—Eph. 4:24), but a change of behavior—ethical renewal, if you please. The new man that God has created in the heart must now be "put on" in personal conduct.

Peter's metaphor for this dynamic of ethical progress toward spiritual maturity is "growth in grace" (2 Pet. 3:18). Like every form of growth and development, spiritual growth is a process. It is a process contingent on the reception of and response to the word of God (1 Pet. 2:2).

Of course, neither the positional nor the vital aspects of sanctification are processes of development. The *aorist* tense, again, speaks of punctiliar or "snapshot" action, like the opening and closing of a camera's shutter. But personal development toward spiritual maturity is progressive. It occurs in stages—"first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear."

Mark 8:22 records the only miracle the Lord Jesus ever performed in stages. He never raised the dead in stages—here a little, and there a little—but on this occasion, our Lord healed a blind man in stages. As such, this episode from Christ's public ministry illustrates the principle of progressive sanctification. Like the blind man whose sight was gradually restored, the believer's understanding of the truth, ability to control his attitudes, and consistency in daily godliness seldom (if ever) reach full maturity at once. A sign reading "Under Construction" might be placed around the believer's neck, for there will always be ethical renovations needed so long as he lives in a fallen house of clay.

Further, unlike the definitive phase of sanctification which is the uniform experience of every one of God's elect people, practical sanctification varies from person to person. Though every regenerate person experiences a radical change in the new birth, not every one progresses to the same point of spiritual maturity. The discrepancy in spiritual development is due, at least in part, to the extent to which one person makes use of the means

God has provided for growth, while another may neglect those same means

Every day, the believer must make a conscious effort to mortify the flesh and consecrate himself anew to Christ (Lk. 9:23). His mind needs ongoing renewal by God's word (Rom. 12:2; cf. Eph. 4:23 – note that the imperative “be renewed” means, literally, “keep on being renewed”). Every day, he must willingly subject every aspect of his life to the scrutiny of God's word, repenting of his sins, and committing himself afresh to the standard of holiness personified in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

According to Ephesians 4:22-24, practical sanctification, in general terms, is a matter of “putting off concerning the former conversation [i.e. lifestyle; conduct] the old man” and “putting on the new man”. Verses 25-32, then, serve to make specific application of that general principle.

First, the old way of talking must be crucified and slain, i.e. “put away lying”, and a new habit of speech developed in its place, i.e. “speak every man truth” (vs 25, 29). Next, old attitudes must be replaced by new and godly attitudes. Sinful anger, bitter resentments, and malicious ill-will toward others must be subdued and supplanted by

kindness, goodwill, tenderheartedness, and a forgiving spirit (vs 26, 31, 32). Also, the old lifestyle of dishonesty and theft must be mortified and a new ethic of honest labor and self-sacrificing love to others developed in its place (v. 28).

This “put off/put on” dynamic is not a “once for all” event. It is a constant and ongoing process. As time passes, growth and progress should be evident in one's ability to quickly recognize sin and to live like Jesus lived with greater consistency; nevertheless, when the end is attained, I suspect there will be occasion to say, “There is yet much more land to be possessed.”

Indeed, God calls us to holiness— “to be saints”. Though the challenge to attain that high mark is the ultimate priority of the child of God, it must never be the ground of his comfort and hope, for his progress will always be marginal at best. His comfort and assurance derives instead from the knowledge that Christ has already sanctified his people, once and for all, by His death. That truth will prove to be a solid bedrock in life and in death.

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