

Introduction

There is much confusion over the doctrine of sanctification. Our recent studies here at the Chapel on *Understanding the Heart* have exposed confusion and concerns over what the Bible teaches on what is usually labeled as *sanctification*.

This series is a brief overview and in no way intends to be a comprehensive or in-depth view. However, it will attempt to reframe sanctification through a Canonical/Biblical Theology. In other words, we will see how the word and doctrine is developed through the whole Bible *as the Bible develops it*. The New Covenant apostles use the word framed by their exposition of the Old Testament. However, we tend to use this word framed by systematic theology often formulated as an answer to error. This common mistake, defining a doctrine initially by what it is not or cannot be, will then make it more difficult to actually hear what the Bible is saying.

For example, most people when thinking of the doctrine of sanctification are thinking and talking about the process of becoming more holy. In fact, the Bible rarely uses the word this way. The Bible's view of sanctification is that we have been made holy in Christ, we have been sanctified and now we are being conformed by and transformed into what our sanctification has already done. Immediately, people say, "So you don't believe in progressive sanctification?" What I disagree with is using the label "progressive sanctification" for the process of change and growth. Since the word occurs often in the Bible, we should use the word the way the Bible does. Our danger is that we redefine the word and then read our definition back into the text. We therefore import meaning into the text that is not only not there, but may actually be contrary to what the text is saying and intending.

David Peterson's *Possessed by God* has shaped a great deal of the way I think about sanctification and holiness. He writes, "What we need is an approach that is faithful to Scripture, applicable to our contemporary situation, instructed by history's debates, yet advancing beyond the inadequacies of previous formulations." (p.12) I commend that book to you as a careful, Canonical, challenging and comforting treatise.

Christ our Sanctification

1 Corinthians 1:30-31

Russ Kennedy

Introduction Let me describe a church to you. It was located in a cultural, religious and commercial cross-road. The city was a full of the basest of pagan practices. It had been founded as a largely Jewish congregation, but then had grown by a large number of Gentile converts. Its founder and first teacher laid a foundation true to the Scripture and centered on Christ. The church's leadership had become taken over by "super-pastors" and "super-apostles". These men were denying the authority of the New Testament apostles. They were allowing the some of the most licentious behavior to continue unchecked and undisciplined. Yet some were also teaching second-blessing grace in sanctification, which included super-spirituality of having no physical intimacy in marriage. They were drunk and disorderly at the Lord's Table. Their worship services were a chaos of confusion, Charismatic excesses and clutter. The church was marked by division over personalities, minimalizing of doctrine, excessive individualism, destructive self-focus and terrible self-blindness. It had gotten so bad that when its founder returned for a visit to try to deal with the church, it appears that while he was preaching, he was publicly opposed and shouted down.

Now, to many this will sound like many modern churches. But this was a first century church. We have two books of the New Testament written to this church. As we think about the doctrine of sanctification, I want to go to the most unexpected of places where sanctification is spoken of in the most unexpected of ways.

Asserting an Identification of Believers

1 Corinthians 1:2

Listen as Paul asserts that believers are identified as being sanctified.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

The true church at Corinth are all those who have been sanctified by being placed into Jesus Christ, who have been called to be saints, or called to be sanctified, which are all who have called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. These marks are true of all other true believers, everywhere. Paul is writing to them. He is writing to true believers. Twice in this one sentence he refers them as having been sanctified and were called to be sanctified.

Now, this is a bit startling. To the most carnal church in the New Testament, Paul is writing saying they are sanctified, they are saints. How can he do this? Doesn't this sound odd to you? Would you not think it awkward or strange if I said, "It is my joy to preach to you, all of you who have been sanctified, all of you who have

been called to be saints.” If you do not see yourself as being addressed, then you do not understand the way the Bible thinks about sanctification.

If you are a believer, if you have called on the Lord Jesus Christ to save you, you are a saint, you have been sanctified in Christ Jesus. Now, many of you would say, “Yes, that is our position in Christ. But, that is not describing me in the real world where I am growing in sanctification.” Except, yes it is describing the church at Corinth. And it is describing you. You have been sanctified. You are a saint. You may not feel like it. You may not be living it out. Nevertheless, this is your identity. This is who you are because of being in Christ. Because you are called to be saints, God has placed you in Christ and thus has set you apart from sin and set you apart unto God.

What I am concerned about here as I have stated already, is that we have reversed the emphasis in the Bible. The Bible mostly talks about our sanctified state and our sanctified status. In our English Standard Versions, the word in all its forms is used around 18 times in the Old Testament. Every single time it is a one-time event or the status of something or someone. In the New Testament, it 18-29 of its 22 occurrences (not including the word saint, to make holy, etc) it is referring to our standing, our status, our state as sanctified people. Yet, you fully expect that if I am going to talk about the doctrine of sanctification, I am going to be primarily talking about your moral transformation, your so-called “progressive sanctification.”

Just know this: before you can become holy in your attitudes and actions, you have to have been sanctified. The word simply means to be set apart. It is used to refer to identifying someone or something as set apart exclusively for God. It effectively says, “This thing or person is God’s. This thing or person is God’s possession.” Sanctification then is the act of God where he sets us apart from sin and takes us into possession as His own. By virtue of this act, they then are holy unto the Lord. This is the way the word is used all through the Old Testament. Israel are God’s sanctified people. The tabernacle, the priests, the furniture, the vessels, the altars, the acts of worship themselves, the sacrifices, the offerings, the throne and the places where God manifests Himself are all sanctified.

Finally, Jesus comes and is the sanctified One. He is that holy One who is conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. He is set apart unto God as the fulfillment of all that had been sanctified down through redemptive history. Because He is set apart unto God, when we are placed into Him at our conversion, we are set apart from sin and unto God. We become God’s holy possession.

In our justification, we have the righteousness of Christ put to our account so that we are holy in God’s sight. In our sanctification, we are set apart from sin, cleansed and owned by God. Both of these are accomplished fully and definitively at the application of the benefits of the cross to us by the Holy Spirit.

Aimed to Magnify God

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Why is this so? Why has God in the Bible highlighted our sanctification in this way? Well, listen to what Paul says next about the true believers at Corinth.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ Because of Him you are¹ in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Under God's Overarching Purpose (v.29)

God has chosen to carry out His plan in a way designed to counter the way the world thinks. When riches, wisdom, might are prized, God chooses the poor, the foolish, the weak and calls them to be saints. The calling here is the summons into salvation that sanctified and sainted them (v.2).

The reason God has done this is to undermine human pride, reverse human conceit and focus all boasting on Christ. The sinful tendency to elevate human achievement, will and ability had become epidemic in the church. The tonic to be applied and the inoculation against further outbreaks was the central truth that God's electing grace did not necessarily follow the track of human accomplishment. They were called to be saints because they were not all these things. So why are these worldly categories now being used as criteria for Christian boasting. But God has ordered His purpose and plan so that we will boast in Him alone.

In God's Central Person (v.30)

At the center of this is the Lord Jesus Christ. God is the source of our life in Christ. He has made Christ our wisdom, sanctification and redemption. Our sanctification is a matter of who Christ is, what He has done and our being placed into Him. God has caused us to be in Christ. He is the efficient means by which we are in Christ. God did it. Sanctification then is not about what we accomplish. It is not primarily about the achievements of moral progress and ethical excellence. It is not about doing the good works that we have been sanctified to do. Sanctification is by faith. It is believing all that God has asserted to be true of Christ, and thus of all those who are in Him. Having been sanctified in Christ, we are then growing and changing into the image, the character and conduct of the Lord.

With God's Authoritative Precept (v.31)

Since God's purpose is magnify Himself by place Christ as the sum and center of our sanctification, then comes a strong imperative, a strong command. All our boasting is to be boasting in God. Now, this is important for our sanctification.

¹ 2001 ESV text incorrectly reads, "He is the source of your life". 2007 ESV text corrects this.

Because our being set apart unto God and our being called to be saints is totally the sovereign work of God, then He alone gets praise for it. As we grow toward Christ, mature in Him and express our sanctification through a godly life, then we will brag on God. We will praise Him.

But, too often our doctrine of sanctification positions us to boast in ourselves. This is what was happening in the church at Corinth. In the midst of their unbelievable carnality they were boasting of high spirituality. Rather than being humbled by their utter dependence on God for the beginning and the finishing of their holiness, they were taking credit for their own good works. When we think of sanctification as primarily about the progress of our moral goodness, then we will have grounds to boast. But if our sanctification is simply outworking of our faith in God by His Word and through the Holy Spirit, then we have no grounds of boasting. He alone gets all the praise.

But this is an imperative, a command. In other words, God commands us to boast only in Him. So when we sit back and verbally admire our spiritual progress and successes and accomplishments to others, we are sinning. We are disobeying this command. All our true growth in grace, going from glory to glory, makes God look large. He is magnified. He is glorified.

Accomplished by a Definitive Act of God

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

In the middle of Paul addressing real problems of individual and corporate sin in the church, he reminds them of what is at stake and what God has done.

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God

What is at Stake

(v.9-10)

What is at stake? The genuineness of their salvation is at stake. Whether they are true heirs of the kingdom is on the line. The unrighteous do not inherit the kingdom. Well, of course not. Those who are in the old realm of sin do not belong to the family of God and do not inherit the kingdom of their Father, the King.

So why does Paul say this now? Because sinners sin. Those who are in the state being unrighteous will behave in ways that line up with that state. So what follows is an illustrative list of conduct that is not pleasing to God and is what sinners do, what characterizes their lives. Notice that the list here is not just verbs that say what they do, but are nouns representing what they are.

So, why is so important? Well, because of what follows.

What God has Done

(v.11)

God has done some thing decisive and definitive which allows Paul to say, "Such were some of you..." Some of you were, what? Some of them were unrighteous. Some of them expressed their state of unrighteousness in the sins illustrated here. Those who live like this are in the state of being unrighteous. It is important for

them to know this and to not be deceived into thinking that one may live this way and still inherit the kingdom.

But God has put that in the past. They are no longer unrighteous. They are no longer characterized by these sins. These sins do not dominate their lives. They do not continually practice these things in such a way that it is characteristic of them. Now, that is what we tend to say. The state of being unrighteous yields the moral and ethical conduct, the thematic and characteristic sins that go with that state. Sinners sin.

But, they are no longer unrighteous. They are no longer, sinners. They, according to chapter 1 have been sanctified and are saints. This is now their status. This is their identity. God has done a decisive and definitive work that ought to yield moral and ethical conduct, the thematic and characteristic holiness that goes with it. Look carefully at what he says. "You were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified." These are plural, aorist, passive, indicatives. It is plural, thus he is speaking to the corporate body (including us). It is an indicative aorist indicating that has taken place without necessarily saying when it happened. It asserts the factuality of an action. It is passive, so the actions were done to the person, not done by them.

So, three decisive actions have taken place, presumably in the past, but with absolute certainty. Those who were unrighteous have now been cleansed, sanctified and justified. Two of these we usually associate with a one-time act at conversion, cleansing from sin and justification before God. We are washed, we are declared righteous. But at the center of these two is that we are sanctified. So, our once for all sanctification *is essential for our dealing with the sin that sinners do*. Those who are cleansed, sanctified and justified are not anymore unrighteous and marked or characterized by things like the sins listed.

Why am I saying all this? Because I am convinced that if Paul, in dealing with the most carnal church we know of in the New Testament, focuses on the sanctification that occurred once and for all at their conversion, then we need to do so as well. Yet, as those who have been sanctified, they are called to live holy lives that are marked by righteousness, not sin. They are exhorted to change what they are believing and doing. They are to grow in grace. They are to be being transformed. As sanctified persons, be transformed by the grace of God into the image of Christ.

The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit to remove us from the old realm of sin and to place us into Christ is called *baptizo*, “an immersion.” It is transliterated to *baptism* in most places in our English Bibles. What we do in water baptism is a public, physical representation of what God has already done in our spiritual baptism. Listen to Romans 6:1-15. **Transition**

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What we have been saying this evening is the same reality expressed in different words. We have been set free from sin, but we still live in physical bodies in this fallen world. So, we have a definitive and decisive work done by the Spirit of God who applied to us the death and resurrection of Christ at our conversion. Yet, because we live in both the old age and the new age at the same time, we must live out what God says. We must believe it is true. We must then express that belief by not allowing sin to control us. We do so by not surrendering or yielding our bodies to serve lusts. Rather, we surrender to God and yield our bodies to Him. This is living the sanctified life.

Conclusion As we come to the ordinance of baptism, we come with several important Biblical ideas in mind.

We come to publicly confess that we are believers in the gospel. These two young people are making their public profession of faith in Christ. This is the only way the Bible provides. Coming down an aisle, signing a commitment card, standing and answering questions put by a preacher are not making a public profession. These are human substitutions. Does baptism save? Absolutely not. It is something we do. It is an act of obedience done by someone who has already been saved. But how do we know who has been saved? They make their profession of faith public through baptism.

We come to outwardly affirm and physically demonstrate the inward and invisible realities of our salvation. At our salvation, God by His Spirit applied the saving benefits of the death and resurrection to us. A whole host of invisible realities took place. One of them we have discussed this evening, sanctification. God has chosen through this public rite to illustrate for our eyes and for our hearts, what God has already done.

We come to be identified with and joined to the public gathering of the people of God. The consistent witness of the book of Acts is that those who believe, are baptized and joined to the gathered, local, visible church. Spiritual baptism unites us to the body of Christ. Physical baptism unites us to the assembly of Christ.

We come as witnesses and as recipients of the grace of God so that our rejoicing and boasting is in God alone. We will witness an amazing manifestation of the grace of God as we hear their testimonies and see their baptism.

As we join our voices once again in worship:

- Those who are being baptized this evening may slip out now.
- Prepare and poise your heart for joy and gladness.

May we praise God as we pray.