

Definitive Sanctification

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WHEN we speak of sanctification we generally think of it as that process by which the believer is gradually transformed in heart, mind, will, and conduct and conformed more and more to the will of God and to the image of Christ until at death the disembodied spirit is made perfect in holiness and at the resurrection his body likewise will be conformed to the likeness of the body of Christ's glory. It is biblical to apply the term "sanctification" to this process of transformation and conformation. But it is a fact too frequently overlooked that in the New Testament the most characteristic terms used with reference to sanctification are used not of a process but of a once-for-all definitive act.

We properly think of calling, regeneration, justification, and adoption as acts of God effected once for all and not requiring or admitting of repetition. It is of their nature to be definitive. But a considerable part of New Testament teaching places sanctification in this category. When Paul, for example, addresses the believers at Corinth as the church of God "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (I Cor. 1:2) and later in the same epistle reminds them that they were washed, sanctified, and justified (I Cor. 6:11), it is apparent that he coordinated their sanctification with effectual calling, with their identity as saints, with regeneration, and with justification. Again, when in II Timothy 2:21 we read, "If a man purge himself from these, he will be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, meet for the master's use, prepared unto every good work," there need be no question but the term "sanctified" is used in the same sense. And when he says that "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:25f.), it is most likely that the sanctification referred to is explicated in terms of "the washing of water by the word." Although in Acts 20:32 and 26:18 "the sanctified" could have reference to the complete sanctification of the age to come, the usage in Paul's epistles would favor the signification whereby believers are viewed as the sanctified.

The substantive "sanctification" has a similar connotation. "God hath not called us unto uncleanness but in sanctification" (I Thess. 4:7). "God hath chosen you a first fruits unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth, unto which he also called you through our gospel" (II Thess. 2:13, 14).¹

1. Cf. I Pet. 1:2.

The terms for purification are used with the same import (Acts 15:9; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 2:14).

We are thus compelled to take account of the fact that the language of sanctification is used with reference to some decisive action that occurs at the inception of the Christian life and one that characterizes the people of God in their identity as called effectually by God's grace. It would be, therefore, a deflection from biblical patterns of language and conception to think of sanctification exclusively in terms of a progressive work.

What is this sanctification? No passage in the New Testament is more instructive than Romans 6:1-7:6. The teaching here is oriented against the question with which Paul begins: "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" a question provoked by the exordium accorded to grace in the preceding context. "Where sin abounded, grace superabounded, that as sin hath reigned in death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:20, 21). If the grace of God and therefore his glory are magnified the more according as grace overcomes sin, the inference would seem to be: let us continue to sin in order that God's grace may be the more extolled. It is this inference the apostle rejects with the most emphatic negative at his disposal, properly rendered in the corresponding Hebrew idiom, "God forbid." The perversity of the inference he lays bare by asking another question: "How shall we who are such as have died to sin live any longer therein?" (Rom. 6:2). The pivot of the refutation is: "we died to sin." What does Paul mean?

He is using the language of that phenomenon with which all are familiar, the event of death. When a person dies he is no longer active in the sphere or realm or relation in reference to which he has died. His connection with that realm has been dissolved; he has no further communications with those who still live in that realm nor do they have with him. He is no longer *en rapport* with life here; it is no longer the sphere of life and activity for him. The Scripture brings this fact of experience to our attention. "I saw the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not; yea, I sought him, but he could not be found" (Ps. 37:35, 36). "As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more" (Ps. 103:15, 16).

In accord with this analogy the person who lives in sin or to sin lives and acts in the realm of sin — it is the sphere of his life and activity. And the person who died to sin no longer lives in that sphere. His tie with it has been broken, and he has been translated into another realm. In the most significant sense those who still live in the realm of sin can say: "I sought him, but he could not be found." This is the decisive cleavage that the apostle has in view; it is the foundation upon which rests his whole conception of a believer's life, and it is a cleavage, a breach, a translation as really and decisively true in the sphere of moral and religious relationship as in the ordinary experience of death. There is a once-for-all

definitive and irreversible breach with the realm in which sin reigns in and unto death.

The antitheses which the apostle institutes in this passage serve to point up the decisive breach which this change involves. *Death in sin* means the service of sin as bondservants (vss. 6, 16, 17, 20); sin reigns in our mortal bodies (vs. 12); obedience is rendered to the lusts of sin (vs. 12); we present our members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin and as the bondservants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity (vss. 13, 19); we are free (footloose) in respect of righteousness (vs. 20); sin has dominion over us and we are under law (vs. 14). *Death to sin* means that the old man has been crucified and the body of sin destroyed — we no longer serve sin (vs. 6); we are justified from sin (vs. 7); we are alive to God and live to him (vss. 10, 11); sin no longer reigns in our mortal body and does not lord it over us (vss. 12, 14); we present ourselves to God and our members as instruments of righteousness to God so that we are servants of righteousness unto holiness (vss. 13, 19); we are under the reign of grace (vs. 14); we render obedience from the heart to the pattern of Christian teaching (vs. 17); the fruit is unto holiness and the end everlasting life (vs. 22). This sustained contrast witnesses to the decisive change. There is no possibility of toning down the antithesis; it appears all along the line of the varying aspects from which life and action are to be viewed. In respect of every criterion by which moral and spiritual life is to be assessed there is absolute differentiation and [this*] (Supplied by the editor) means that there is a decisive and definitive breach with the power and service of sin in the case of every one who has come under the control of the provisions of grace.

Although Paul is the chief exponent of this doctrine it is not to be forgotten that the same strand of thought appears also in one of Peter's epistles. Of Christ he writes: "Who his own self bare our sins in his body upon the tree, in order that we having died to sins might live to righteousness" (I Pet. 2:24).² And again Peter writes: "Since therefore Christ hath suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, because he who hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sins, to the end that no longer should he live the rest of the time in the flesh to the lusts of men but to the will of God" (I Pet. 4:1, 2). I take it that in the first passage quoted the thought is after the same pattern that we find in Paul, that those for whom Christ died vicariously are reckoned also as having died in and with Christ and, as Christ's death was death to sin once for all (*cf.* Rom. 6:10), so those dying with him die also to sin. And in the second passage the identification with Christ is indicated by the two clauses in identical terms, namely, "suffered in the flesh," in the first instance applied to Christ and in the second to those being exhorted, with the implication that this suffering in the flesh has as its consequence cessation from sins. The interweaving of the indicative and the imperative is likewise reminiscent of what is so patent in Paul's epistle to the Romans.

2. ἀπογενόμενοι though not used by Paul in this connection, and *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament, must be given the force of "having died."

We may now turn to the apostle John. The incisiveness and decisiveness of John's first epistle appear at no point more striking than where he, in terms peculiar to John himself, deals with the subject of our present interest. We think particularly of I John 3:6-9 in which the antithesis is most pronounced and might readily be interpreted as teaching sinless perfection. There are, however, several considerations which show that sinless perfection is not John's meaning.

1. If John's intent was to inculcate sinless perfection, then this passage would prove too much. In that event every regenerate person would be sinlessly perfect and only sinlessly perfect persons would be regenerate. The terms are that "every one who is begotten of God does not do sin . . . and he cannot sin because he is begotten of God" (I Jn. 3:9). On John's own teaching sinless perfection is not the indispensable accompaniment of regeneration. In I John 2:1, John makes allowance for the incidence of sin in those whom he addresses as "little children" and directs us to the provision for this eventuality: "If any one sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous." Again, it is difficult, to say the least, to interpret the words, "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (I Jn. 1:7), as not reflecting on the continuously cleansing efficacy of the blood of Christ. If there is provision for sin in the believer, then regeneration does not insure sinless perfection.

2. John says expressly: "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (I Jn. 1:8). If John in this case were thinking of past sin only, we should wonder why he uses the present tense. For on the assumption of sinless perfection there would be no present sin, and the use of the present tense would be misleading and constitute for his readers something of a contradiction to what on the premises would be one of the leading theses of the epistle.

3. John insists that "it hath not yet been manifested what we shall be" (I Jn. 3:2). This is defined for us in the same verse as likeness to the Father, a conformity such as will be achieved when the children of God will see him as he is. Anything short of that conformity is not sinless perfection. But this is precisely the shortcoming John affirms — "It hath not yet been manifested." This confirmity is the hope entertained and, because it is that hoped for, the outcome for the believer is self-purification after the pattern of the Father's purity. "Every one who has this hope in him [i.e., the Father] purifieth himself even as he is pure" (I Jn. 3:3). Self-purification implies impurity that needs to be cleansed.

4. John implies that sin may be committed by a believing brother: "If any one see his brother sin a sin not unto death, he will ask, and he will give him life for those who sin not unto death" (I Jn. 5:16). This is incontestably a reference to sin committed by a believer.

Sinless perfection cannot, for these reasons, be the import of John 3:6-9; 5:18. What then does the decisive language of John mean? The usage of our Lord as reported by John in his Gospel provides us with an index to John's intent in the first epistle.

In answer to the disciple's question concerning the man born blind: "Who did sin, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus said: "Neither hath this man sinned nor his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (Jn. 9:2, 3). Jesus could not mean that the son and his parents were sinlessly perfect and had never sinned. The thought is simply that the blindness was not due to some specific sin for which the blindness had been inflicted as a punishment, the assumption underlying the disciples' question.

In the sequel to the foregoing incident Jesus said to certain of the Pharisees: "If ye were blind, ye should not have sin; but now ye say we see; your sin remaineth" (Jn. 9:41). Again, sinless perfection cannot be in view in Jesus' statement, "Ye should have no sin." Jesus is thinking of the particular sin characteristic of the Pharisees, that of self-complacency and self-infatuation. From that sin they would be free if they were humble enough to acknowledge their blindness.

Finally in John's Gospel, Jesus is reported to have said: "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin. But now they have no cloak for their sin" (Jn. 15:22). Obviously, Jesus is speaking of the great sin of rejecting him and his Father (*cf.* Jn. 3:19).

Thus, in each instance, though the terms are absolute, some specific sin is in view, and the same principle must apply to the language of John with which we are concerned. Furthermore, in this epistle John himself gives us examples of the differentiation in terms of which we are to interpret his teaching. Whatever may be the sin unto death as distinguished from the sin not unto death (I Jn. 5:16, 17), there is undoubtedly radical differentiation in respect of character and consequence. It is the latter a believer is contemplated as committing but not the former. Since, according to 3:6-9; 5:18, the regenerate do not commit sin, it is surely justifiable to conclude that the sin he does not commit is the sin unto death.

In I John 4:2, 3 the apostle propounds the test of Christian faith. It is the confession that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. John's antithetic incisiveness appears here again. "Every spirit that confesseth Jesus Christ come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that confesseth not Jesus is not of God." The force of verse 3 is that every one that does not confess Jesus, in the identity defined in verse 2, does not confess Jesus at all. We must infer that the sin a regenerate person does not commit is the denial of Jesus as come in the

flesh or indeed the failure to confess Jesus Christ as come in the flesh. Speaking positively, everyone begotten of God believes and confesses that Jesus as come in the flesh is the Christ (*cf.* I Jn. 5:1). This is the faith that overcomes the world, and this victory is the mark of every regenerate person (*cf.* I Jn. 5:4). The upshot of these propositions is simply that the believer confesses Jesus as come in the flesh, believes that this Jesus is the Christ and that he is the Son of God, and cannot apostatize from this faith. The believer is the one who has secured the victory over the world, is immune to the dominion of the evil one, and is no longer characterized by that which is of the world, “the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (I Jn. 2:16). It is, therefore, in these terms that we are to interpret the sin that the person begotten of God does not commit and cannot commit.³

John’s language and patterns of thought differ from those of Paul, but the doctrine is to the same effect that for every believer in Jesus as the Christ and as the Son of God there is the decisive and irreversible breach with the world and with its defilement and power. And on the positive side, the characterization is no less significant of the radical differentiation from the realm of the wicked one. The person begotten of God does righteousness, loves and knows God, loves those who are begotten of God, and keeps the commandments of God (I Jn. 2:3-6, 29; 4:7, 20, 21; 5:2, 3).

3. The interpretation that the regenerate person does not habitually sin labours under two liabilities. (1) The term “habitually” is not a sufficiently well-defined term. (2) This characterization leaves too much of a loophole for the incisiveness of John’s teaching; it allows that the believer might commit certain sins though not habitually. This would contradict the decisiveness of such a statement that the one begotten of God does not sin and cannot sin.

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