

The Agency in Definitive Sanctification

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WHAT are the forces that explain this definitive breach with sin and commitment to holiness and righteousness? The answer is that the saving action of each person of the Godhead at the inception of the process of salvation insures the decisive character of the change thereby effected.

The specific action of the Father is to call men effectually into the fellowship of his Son. In Jesus' own terms it is to donate men to his own Son in the efficacious operations of grace (*cf.* Jn. 6:37, 44, 65). The action bespeaks the radical character of the change. The specific action of the Holy Spirit is the washing of regeneration whereby men are instated in the kingdom of God as the kingdom of righteousness, power, life, and peace.¹ Again, the action and that to which it is directed indicate the momentous nature of the transformation. It is proper, however, to focus attention upon the action of Christ. This is so for two reasons. First, it is by virtue of what Christ has done that the action of both the Father and the Spirit take effect. Second, this aspect of biblical teaching has been more neglected. The bearing of Jesus' death and resurrection upon our justification has been in the forefront of Protestant teaching. But their bearing upon sanctification has not been sufficiently appreciated. It is here we find the basic consideration relevant to our present question.

In the teaching of Paul, the pivots of the change in view are death to sin and newness of life. The starting point of Paul's argument in answer to the false inference that we may continue in sin that grace may abound is, as already observed, that the partakers of grace died to sin. His protestation, "How shall we any longer live in it?" is immediately supported by appeal to the significance of baptism (*cf.* Rom. 6:3). It is baptism into Jesus' death that makes valid the pivotal proposition, "we died to sin." Then Paul proceeds to identify believers with Christ in his burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). This means, therefore, that not only did *Christ* die, not only was *he* buried, not only did *he* rise from the dead but also all who sustain the relation to him that baptism signifies likewise

i. While regeneration is an all-important factor in definitive sanctification, it would not be proper to subsume the latter under the topic "regeneration." The reason is that what is most characteristic in definitive sanctification, namely, death to sin by union with Christ in his death and newness of life by union with him in his resurrection, cannot properly be referred to regeneration by the Spirit. There is multiformity to that which occurs at the inception of the Christian life, and each facet must be accorded its own particularity. Calling, for example, as the action of the Father, must not be defined in terms of what is specifically the action of the Holy Spirit, namely, regeneration. Definitive sanctification, likewise, must be allowed its own individuality. We impoverish our conception of definitive grace when we fail to appreciate the distinctiveness of each aspect or indulge in over-simplification.

died, were buried, and rose again to a new life patterned after his resurrection life, No fact is of more basic importance in connection with the death to sin and commitment to holiness than that of identification with Christ in his death and resurrection. And this relation of Jesus' death and resurrection to the believer is introduced at this point in the development of Paul's gospel, be it noted, not with reference to justification but in connection with deliverance from the power and defilement of sin. So it is the relation to sanctification that is in the focus of thought. What then is this relation?

It might be said that the relation is that which justification sustains to sanctification, that the death and resurrection of Christ are directly the ground of our justification, that justification is the foundation of sanctification in that it establishes the only proper relation on which a life of holiness can rest, and that the relation of the death and resurrection of Christ to *sanctification* is this indirect one through the medium of justification. Or it might be said that by his death and resurrection Christ has procured every saving gift — the death and resurrection are therefore the meritorious and procuring cause of sanctification as well as of justification and in this respect are as directly related to sanctification as to justification. All of this is doctrinally true and does not violate the analogy of biblical teaching. But this analysis of the relation of the death and resurrection of Christ to sanctification does not do justice to Paul's teaching. He brings the death and resurrection of Christ into a much more direct relation to sanctification by way of efficiency and virtue than these foregoing proposals involve. The truth is that our death to sin and newness of life are effected in our identification with Christ in his death and resurrection, and no virtue accruing from the death and resurrection of Christ affects any phase of salvation more directly than the breach with sin and newness of life. And if we do not take account of this direct relationship we miss one of the cardinal features of New Testament teaching. It is not only in Romans 6 that this comes to expression. It is no less patent, for example, in Ephesians 2:1-6. It is the quickening from death in trespasses and sins that is in the forefront when the apostle says: "But God being rich in mercy . . . hath made us alive together with Christ . . . and hath raised us up together." And again in II Corinthians 5:14, 15 this thought is clearly in view — the death and resurrection of Christ insure that those who are the beneficiaries live not to themselves but to him who died for them and rose again. In Colossians 2:20-3:4 the same doctrine is the basis of both rebuke and entreaty.

There are two questions therefore which require some discussion. First, what is this efficiency, in reference to sanctification, residing in the death and resurrection of Christ? and, second, when did believers die with Christ and rise again to newness of life?

In dealing with the first question it is well to turn to one of the most striking statements of Paul. It is Romans 6:7: "For he who died is justified from sin." It can be

effectively argued that the uniform or, at least, all but uniform usage of Paul in reference to the term “justify” must obtain in this instance and that the proposition must refer to justification and not to sanctification. It must be admitted that to suppose a meaning alien to the forensic import of “justify” would be without warrant. But we have to recognize that it is characteristic of Paul to use the same term with different shades of meaning in the same context and it is possible for him to use this term in its forensic signification without reference to what is specifically justification. The particular context must determine the precise application of a term, and in this case it must be observed that Paul is not treating of justification but dealing with what is properly in the sphere of sanctification, namely, deliverance from the enslaving power of sin. The proposition is adduced in support of the consideration that “we no longer serve sin” (Rom. 6:6). “Justified from sin” must be understood in a way that is appropriate to deliverance from the servitude of sin. If we paraphrase the thought it might be rendered, “He who died is quit of sin.” And when we keep in view the forensic character of the term “justify,” we readily detect what is forensic and at the same time consonant with the apostle’s thesis, namely, the judgment executed upon sin in order that we may enjoy emancipation from its thralldom.

Admittedly, it is difficult for us to grasp this juridical aspect of deliverance from the power of sin and it is also difficult to make clear what is involved. But the difficulty arises perhaps from our failure to think through and appreciate this strand of New Testament teaching. In any case, we must look more carefully at the immediate context and the broader aspects of New Testament doctrine on this subject.

It should be noted that Paul in the context refers to the lordship of sin, of the law, and of death — of sin when he enjoins: “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body” (Rom. 6:12) and when he asserts: “Sin shall not lord it over you, for ye are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14); of the law when he says: “But now we have been discharged from the law, having died to that in which we were held, so that we might serve in newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6: *cf.* vss. 1, 4); of death when he reflects on the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection: “Christ being raised from the dead dies no more: death no longer lords it over him” (Rom. 6:9). It is this notion of reigning power as applied to sin, the law, and death that helps us to recognize not only the relevance but the necessity of the judgment executed if we are to be freed from their thralldom, judgment executed in Christ’s death. The lordship wielded by sin cannot be conceived of apart from the power of Satan and of the principalities of iniquity. When our Lord deals with the destruction of Satan’s power it is the language of judgment he uses to express the victory. “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out” (Jn. 12:31). This verse furnishes us with what is perhaps the clearest parallel to Romans 6:7 and indicates that, in overcoming the realm and reign of this world, there is judgment

executed. And our Lord's word is corroborative of the doctrine more fully unfolded in Paul that the death of Christ is that by which this judgment is fulfilled, for Jesus proceeds: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (vs. 32), a reference to the kind of death he should die (*cf.* vs. 33 and John 3:14; 8:28).²

We are compelled to reach the conclusion that it is by virtue of our having died with Christ and our being raised with him in his resurrection from the dead that the decisive breach with sin in its power, control, and defilement had been wrought, and that the reason for this is that Christ in his death and resurrection broke the power of sin, triumphed over the god of this world, the prince of darkness, executed judgment upon the world and its ruler, and by that victory delivered all those who were united to him from the power of darkness and translated them into his own kingdom. So intimate is the union between Christ and his people that they were partakers with him in all these triumphal achievements and therefore died to sin, rose with Christ in the power of his resurrection, and have the fruit unto holiness and the end everlasting life. As the death and resurrection are central in the whole process of redemptive accomplishment, so is it central in that by which sanctification itself is wrought in the hearts and lives of God's people.

2. For further treatment of this subject, *cf.* the present writer, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1959), I, 277-284.

The second question with which we are concerned in this connection is: when did believers die with Christ to sin and rise with him to newness of life? It might appear unnecessary to ask this question because, if they died with Christ and rose with him in his resurrection, the time can only be when Christ himself died and rose again. And since Christ himself died once for all and having risen from the dead dies no more, it would appear necessary to restrict our death to sin and entrance upon newness of life (after the likeness of Jesus' resurrection) to the historic past when Jesus died and rose from the dead. There is the tendency to posit such a severe restriction because it appears to guard and support the interests of objectivity which on all accounts must be maintained in connection with the death and resurrection of Christ. But there are other considerations which must not be discarded. It is to be noted that Paul in one of the passages where this making alive with Christ is so prominent speaks of the same persons as being dead in trespasses and sins, as having at one time walked according to the course of this world, as having conducted their life aforesaid in the lusts of the flesh, doing the will of the flesh and of the mind, and says that they were children of wrath even as others (Eph. 2:1-4). And not only so — he says that it was when they were dead in trespasses that they were made alive together with Christ (vs. 5). Furthermore, it is too apparent to need demonstration that the historic events of Calvary and the resurrection from Joseph's tomb do not register the changes which are continuously being wrought when the people of God are translated from the power of darkness into Christ's kingdom of life, liberty, and peace.

We are thus faced with the tension arising from the demands of the past historical, on the one hand, and the demands of the ethico-religious, on the other. And we cannot tone down the considerations which weigh in both directions.

If we think of the starting point of Paul's argument in Romans 6, namely, "we died to sin," it is obvious that he is dealing with the believer's actual death to sin. This follows for several reasons. (1) He is giving this as the reason why we no longer live in sin and why it is both absurd and impossible to plead the argument of license, "Let us continue in sin that grace may abound." The radical cleavage with the power and defilement of sin is conceived of as having taken place and is instituted by the contrast between death to sin and living in sin. (2) The apostle appeals to the significance of baptism to support his thesis that the persons in view no longer live in sin. "Or do ye not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised unto his death?" (vs. 3). He is, therefore, dealing with that new life which is represented, signified, and sealed by baptism. Hence, it is vital and spiritual union with Christ that must be in view, a union that results in walking in newness of life after the pattern and in the power of Jesus' own resurrection (vss. 4, 5). (3) Death to sin is correlative with, if not interpreted in terms of, the crucifixion of the old man, the destruction of the body of sin, and deliverance from the reigning power of sin (vss. 6, 7). It is, therefore, the new man in Christ Jesus who is contemplated as having died to sin. (4) Those in view are not under law but under grace (vs. 14), and the exhortations directed to them are those appropriate to such as have been emancipated from the dominion of sin — sin shall not have the dominion, therefore they are to reckon themselves to be dead to sin and alive to God (vs. 11).

These reasons place beyond question the conclusion that the persons are regarded as the actual partakers of the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection. Examination of the other passages in which this same teaching appears (II Cor. 5:14, 15; Eph. 2:1-6; Col. 3:1-3; I Pet. 4:1-4) will show the same result. So we must conclude that death to sin and newness of life refer to events which occur in the life history of the believer.

Are we, therefore, to suppose that the death of the believer with Christ and the rising again with him have *exclusive* reference to what takes place within the sphere of the effectual operations of grace in the heart and life of the believer? There are reasons for refusing to grant this inference. (1) We found already that it is impossible to dissociate the death and resurrection of Christ from his identification with those on whose behalf he died and rose again. To make a disjunction here is to rob the death and resurrection of Christ of meaning or purpose; it would make an abstraction impossible in divine conception as well as human. (2) Those on whose behalf Christ died and rose again were chosen in him before the foundation of the world. They were, therefore, in him when he died and rose again, and

it is impossible to dissociate them from the death and resurrection of him in whom they were. (3) The apostle constantly interweaves the most explicit references to the death and resurrection of Christ as once-for-all historic events with the teaching respecting actual, experiential death to sin on the part of the believer. His argument for the decisive and irrevocable breach with sin and translation to new life is bound up with the once-for-allness of Jesus' death. "For in that he died, he died to sin once for all" (vs. 10). This sustained introduction of the once-for-all past historical in a context that clearly deals with what occurs actually and practically in the life history of individuals makes inevitable the interpretation that the past historical conditions the continuously existential, not simply as laying the basis for it and as providing the analogy in the realm of the past historical for what continues to occur in the realm of our experience, but conditions the latter for the reason that something occurred in the past historical which makes necessary what is realized and exemplified in the actual life history of these same persons.

It is necessary to stress both aspects, the past historical and the experiential in their distinctness, on the one hand, and in their inter-dependence, on the other. The experiential must not be allowed to obscure the once-for-all historical, nor the once-for-all historical so to overshadow our thinking that we fail to give proper emphasis to the way in which its meaning and efficacy come to realization in the practical life of the believer. In other words, due emphasis must fall upon the objective and subjective in our dying and rising again with Christ in his death to sin and living again to God. It is only in this way that we can avoid the tendency to deny the vicarious significance of that which Christ wrought once for all in the realm of history as concrete and real as any other historical event.

The principle, or *modus operandi*, illustrated in this instance as it bears upon the question of sanctification, is not essentially different from that which we find elsewhere in connection with the categories which define for us the atonement itself. Christ expiated the sins of his people in the offering of himself once for all — he purged our sins and sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high (*cf.* Heb. 1:3). But sins are not actually forgiven until there is repentance and faith. Christ propitiated the wrath of God once for all when he died on the tree. But until we are savingly united to Christ, we are children of wrath even as others. We are reconciled to God by the death of Christ, and reconciliation is an accomplished work, but we are not at peace with God until we are justified. Admittedly, it is difficult to define the precise relations of the past historical to the continuously operative in these cases. To put it more accurately, it is difficult to determine how the finished action of Christ in the past relates itself to those who are contemplated in that action prior to the time when that past action takes effect in their life history. But this difficulty in no way interferes with the distinction between the finished work and its actual application. Any added difficulty there be in connection with our present topic arises not

from what is intrinsic to the subject but from our unfamiliarity with this aspect of our relation to the death and resurrection of Christ.

Christ was identified with sin when he died, and for that reason alone did he die upon the accursed tree. But, because it was *he* who died, he died to sin — he destroyed its power, executed judgment upon it, and rose triumphant as the Lord of righteousness and life. He established thus for men the realm of life. And since his people were in him when he wrought victory and executed judgment, they also must be conceived of, in some mysterious manner that betokens the marvel of divine conception, wisdom, reckoning, and grace yet really in terms of a divine constitution, as having died to sin also and as having been raised up to newness of life. It is this fact that is basic and central. The mysteriousness of it must not be allowed to impair or tone down the reality of it in God's reckoning and in the actual constitution established by him in the union of his people with Christ. It is basic and central because only by virtue of what did happen in the past and finished historical does it come to pass in the sphere of the practical and existential that we actually come into possession of our identification with Christ when *he* died to sin and lived unto God.

We see, therefore, that the decisive and definitive breach with sin that occurs at the inception of Christian life is one necessitated by the fact that the death of Christ was decisive and definitive. It is just because we cannot allow for any reversal or repetition of Christ's death on the tree that we cannot allow for any compromise on the doctrine that every believer has died to sin and no longer lives under its dominion. Sin no longer lords it over him. To equivocate here is to assail the definitiveness of Christ's death. Likewise, the decisive and definitive entrance upon newness of life in the case of every believer is required by the fact that the resurrection of Christ was decisive and definitive. As we cannot allow for any reversal or repetition of the resurrection, so we cannot allow for any compromise on the doctrine that every believer is a new man, that the old man has been crucified, that the body of sin has been destroyed, and that as a new man in Christ Jesus he serves God in the newness which is none other than that of the Holy Spirit of whom he has become the habitation and his body the temple.

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