## Sanctification

### А. Terminology

The Hebrew and Greek terms used for sanctification are קֹדֶשׁ (*kodesh*)*,* טָהֵר (*taher*), and ἁγιασμός (*hagiasmos*). The Hebrew term קֹדֶשׁ(*kodesh*) is rarely used in a secular sense – usually in a religious one. Therefore, its basic meaning is hard to decipher. Nonetheless, it probably denotes “separation.” The Old Testament conventionally employs it to describe something especially set apart for Yahweh. Typically, קֹדֶשׁ (*kodesh*) relates to physical items, for example, objects associated with the tabernacle.

The term קֹדֶשׁ (*kodesh*) has a wider application, though, than just to items of worship. It refers also to the behavior expected of God’s people. Sanctification implies a certain type of behavior, namely, separation from sin. God called His people “chosen.” He chose them to belong exclusively to Him. Moses said to Israel, “You are a holy people to Yahweh your God; Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6).

Another Old Testament term related to sanctification is טָהֵר(*тахэр*). Its primary meaning is “to cleanse.” Like the word קֹדֶשׁ (*kodesh*), it applies both to the cleaning of items, and to purity in moral behavior. The following verses illustrate this second usage:

- Create in me a clean (טָהֵר) heart, O God (Ps 51:10).

- Then I will sprinkle clean (טָהֵר) water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse (טָהֵר) you from all your filthiness and from all your idols (Ezek 36:25).

The Greek term that corresponds to the Hebrew קֹדֶשׁ (*kodesh*) is ἁγιασμός (*hagiasmos*). The original usage of this word was to describe an item that instilled fear. Therefore, its verbal form originally meant, “to recoil.” Another meaning assigned to ἁγιασμός (*hagiasmos*) was “clean.” Therefore, we see cohesion between the Greek and Hebrew conceptions of holiness. In both systems, the idea of “holiness” indicated something special or unique, something that one cannot flippantly approach.

### B. Survey of Biblical Teaching

**1. Old Testament**

From the beginning of creation, God called people to holiness. He gave the first humans a commandment not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order to provide them an opportunity to express their love for and trust in Him through an act of obedience. Before He destroyed the earth with a flood, He showed favor to Noah, who was “a righteous man, blameless in his time” (Gen 6:9). Later in time, Yahweh chose Abraham and commanded him, “Walk before Me, and be blameless” (Gen 17:1).

When God called Israel to Himself, He called them to be a people separated unto Him. Through Moses, He commanded, “You shall consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am Yahweh your God” (Lev 20:7; сf. 19:2; 11:44-45). Furthermore, we read, “You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel” (Lev 22:32). Yahweh’s name is holy (Lev 20:3; сf. 1 Chr 16:10; Ps 105:3). Throughout the Old Testament, He is known as the “Holy One of Israel” (2 Kin 19:22; Ps 71:22; Isa 1:4; etc.).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Since Israel belongs to the Lord, they bear His name. It was possible, then, for Israel to misrepresent Him. God is jealous for his name and therefore said to His people, “So you shall keep My commandments, and do them; I am Yahweh. You shall not profane My holy name” (Lev 22:31-32). Those who belong to the Lord must abstain from sin, since they bear the Lord’s name.

Moreover, God’s presence dwelt in the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a holy place, that is, a place set apart for Yahweh. In it was a special chamber, the “Holy of Holies,” the place of God’s manifest presence. There were special garments for the high priest, which no one else could wear. There were also special objects used only for worship in the tabernacle. A certain part of the harvest was set apart for the Lord, which no one else could partake of. A holy anointing oil was prepared that could not be used for secular purposes.

In Numbers chapter 16, we read of some Levites who desired to become priests. They therefore burned incense before the Lord, and the Lord struck them down. God then commanded, “As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered sheets for a plating of the altar, since they did present them before Yahweh and they are holy” (Num 16:38). That which is presented to the Lord becomes holy to Him. God takes care to distinguish that which belongs to Him from that which belongs to others. In other words, He makes a distinction between what is holy and what is profane (i.e., common).

The establishment of the Old Testament sacrificial system also reflects God’s holiness. Israel could not approach a holy God without the high priest offering sacrifice for them. The highest expression of the sacrificial system was the Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make propitiation for the sins of God’s people (Lev 16-17).

Holiness among God’s people also involved observing the Law, both in its moral and in its ceremonial aspects. Regarding the latter, the Torah abounds in commands concerning kosher foods, care for the tabernacle, rules for the priesthood, etc. Abstaining from leaven after Passover symbolized a purging from sin (Ex 13:6-7). Observing feast days and paying tithes reminded the people that they belonged to Yahweh (Lev 27:30).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Muller provides the following helpful commentary on the purpose of the ceremonial law:

Such formal or ritual consecration should be viewed as a religious or “pre-ethical” stage in the development of the concept of personal human holiness or sanctification…. The sense of distinction between the sacred and the profane and the need for formal separation from the profane in order to serve the holy God precede and ultimately provide the foundation for an ethical understanding of separation from the world or worldliness to divine service.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Another important aspect of holy living for God’s Old Testament people was separation from the surrounding Gentile nations. Yahweh feared that close ties with Gentiles could lead to moral and ritual degeneration, resulting in apostasy from true faith: “Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst” (Ex 34:12; сf. Josh 23:13; Ex 23:33; Deut 7:16).

God’s people committed themselves to obey the Law: “All that Yahweh has spoken we will do!” (Ex 19:8). However, Israel demonstrated the opposite – disobedience to the Law from the very first day. The Law revealed their fallen human nature and inability to obey God. They needed to experience a “circumcision of the heart” (Deut 30:6), which became available only in the future.

In the Old Testament historical books, obedience was required to enjoy covenant relationship with Yahweh: “O Yahweh, the God of Israel, there is no god like You in heaven or on earth, keeping covenant and {showing} lovingkindness to Your servants who walk before You with all their heart” (2 Chr 6:14). The leaders of God’s people were no exception. God said concerning Solomon: “I will establish his kingdom forever if he resolutely performs My commandments and My ordinances, as is done now” (1 Chr 28:7).

In the Old Testament poetical books, God continues to exhort His people to holy living. The way to God is a way of holiness (Ps 24:3-6; 15:1-5). He summons His people to obey, “You have ordained Your precepts, that we should keep {them} diligently,” (Ps 119:4) in order to receive blessing (Ps 25:12-13; 125:4; 119:165). Disobedience leads to ruin (Ps 125:5; Prov 21:16). So then, Israel must guard their hearts (Prov 4:23) and refrain from sinning (Prov 4:14-15).

However, the poetical books also indicate that God is ready to aid His people in attaining sanctification. He instructs Israel through His Word (Ps 119:9, 11; Ps 1:1-3) and also helps them to fulfill it (Ps 119:32-45, 117, 173-175). The psalmist appeals to Yahweh for strength to resist sin (Ps 19:14; 36:11; 119:29).

Finally, the prophets continually reprove God’s people and urge them to forsake lawlessness and idolatry, to return to Yahweh, and to keep His covenant and His Law: “Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to Yahweh, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isa 55:7). In this way, Israel will inherit a blessing from the Lord: “If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land” (Isa 1:19, сf. 26:7; 33:15-16). Yet, “if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword" (Isa 1:20).

The prophets, however, also hold out hope for a future spiritual renewal of Israel, more so than in any other section of the Old Testament. Through Isaiah, God promises, “I have seen his ways, but I will heal him” (Isa 57:18). Jeremiah predicts, “I will heal your faithlessness” (Jer 3:22), and, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it” (Jer 31:33).

The most striking promise of Israel’s future sanctification is found in the prophetic writings of Ezekiel. Yahweh states, “I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them (Ezek 11:19-20). This theme repeats later in Ezekiel’s prophecy:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances (Ezek 36:25-27; сf. 29, 33).

White concisely summarizes the Old Testament teaching on holiness:

Thus God is holy; “separate” from nature, other gods, and sinners; unapproachable except by mediation and sacrifice (Isa. 6:3–5). Men and women “sanctify” God by obeying his commands (Lev. 22:32; Isa. 8:13; 1 Pet. 3:15). Israel *is* inherently holy, separated by God from “the peoples” to be his own. Yet Israel must *become* holy, by obedience, fit for the privilege allotted her.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**2. New Testament**

Since the Lord Jesus lived in a transition period between the old and new covenants, He appealed in His teaching on holiness to both the Old Testament and His personal authority. The classic example of this combination of factors is found in His Sermon on the Mount, especially in chapter 5. There, Christ cites the Mosaic Law, and even intensifies it, applying it to the internal life of His hearers. To our amazement, He concludes this section by saying, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

Jesus often warned about the dangers of sin. Employing a hyperbole, He cautions His disciples, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you” (Matt 18:8). He relates the degree of dedication He expects of His followers: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mk 8:34). We see the same call to radical discipleship in Mark 10:21, where the Lord charges a certain rich man, “Go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” Muller comments,

Thus Jesus’ preaching issues a clear call to a decision for God, for the kingdom and against the world, that marks the basic fact of the separation of all those who belong to God from the profane, the sinful, and the demonic.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Luke especially emphasized the choice between God and riches. For example, only in this Gospel do we find the following words of Christ: “Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life” (Lk 21:34). Along with Matthew, Luke challenges his audience with the words, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (Lk 16:13; сf. Matt 6:24)

The book of Acts continues the theme of the holiness of Christ’s Church. God punished Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit by striking them dead (Acts 5:1-10). Because of this, “Great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:11). At the same time, Paul assures the Church that God does not leave the believer to struggle with sin alone, but empowers by His Word (Acts 20:32). Sanctification is accomplished through faith in Christ (Acts 26:18).

The General Epistles put special emphasis on the holiness of believers. The epistle of James, for example, is full of exhortations concerning practical Christian living and obedience to the Lord. Along with this, James charges his readers to “keep oneself unstained by the world” (Jam 1:27). In his brief epistle, Jude warns about moral lassitude in the Christian life. Nonetheless, he gives us the assurance that God “is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy” (Jude 24).

Peter also comments on the theme of sanctification. In 1 Peter 1:15-16, he cites Leviticus 19:2: “Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all {your} behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” Since believers have “purified (their) souls” (1 Pet 1:22), they must put away sin (1 Pet 2:1, 11) and live for righteousness (1 Pet 2:24). In his second epistle, Peter encourages believers to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). In chapter 1 of this epistle, Peter details the process by which a person progresses in sanctification (2 Pet 1:2-11).

Finally, the author of Hebrews exhorts his audience to “lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us” (Heb 12:1) and to “press on to maturity” (Heb 6:1). He teaches that believers should strive for holiness wholeheartedly (Heb 12:4), and the sanctification that is necessary to “see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). For this reason, God disciplines His people “so that we may share His holiness” (Heb 12:10).[[6]](#footnote-6)

At the same time, the author of Hebrews acknowledges that believers in Jesus already possess the status “holy” (Heb 3:1). Throughout his epistle, the author speaks of sanctification as an accomplished fact: “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). Jesus, “(sanctified) the people through His own blood” (Heb 13:12, сf. 9:13-14; 10:14, 29). White explains that the author is referring to “status, not character.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Muller summarizes sanctification in the epistle to the Hebrews as “the objective consecration of believers effected in and through Christ’s sacrifice.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, the author of Hebrews emphasizes the active role of Christ in this process. He is the “author and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:2) and “He who sanctifies” (Heb 2:11).

We find the most highly developed treatment of the topic of sanctification in the writings of the apostle Paul. First, he confirms that God indeed calls believers to holiness. God has “saved us and called us with a holy calling” (2 Tim 1:9) and “called us… in sanctification” (1 Thes 4:7). God’s will is our sanctification (1 Thes 4:3).

Believers must present themselves as children of the light (1 Thes 5:4-8). They must live “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27), “worthy of the calling” (Eph 4:1), and “worthy of God” (1 Thes 2:12), bearing the fruit of righteousness (Phil 1:11), especially love (Gal 5:13-14).[[9]](#footnote-9) They are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ (Col 3:10; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Commenting on Paul’s writings, White notes that sanctification is a holistic process, involving spirit, soul, and body. Christians must dedicate their bodies to the Lord (1 Cor 6:13), be renewed in their minds (Rom 12:2), and cleanse their spirits (2 Cor 7:1). In fact, in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Paul affirms that these three aspects of human nature are undergoing the process of sanctification. White concludes, “Paul did not think of holiness only in physical terms.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

As we mentioned in our survey of Hebrews, Paul points out that sanctification has two aspects: sanctification as a position and sanctification as a process. Because of our position in Christ, believers are already holy before God. Jesus “became to us… sanctification” (1 Cor 1:30), and we “were sanctified… in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11).[[12]](#footnote-12) Correspondingly, Paul calls Christians “holy” (Col 1:2). He assigns that designation even to believers in Corinth, whose behavior did not always line up with that status (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1). So then, although believers in Christ are still going through the process of sanctification, their holy status before God derives from their position in Christ.

The key passage in Paul, and likely of all Scripture, that succinctly unfolds the process of sanctification is Philippians 2:12-13: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for {His} good pleasure.” Here, we encounter both sides of the process: the divine side and the human side. Sanctification is a joint effort between God and His people. Muller comments:

In every aspect of their ethical holiness or newfound righteousness Christians are to recognize that not they themselves, certainly not their own work or their own will, but God working in them is the source of their holiness or righteousness.[[13]](#footnote-13)

From God’s side, Paul teaches that He already accomplished our sanctification through the death of Jesus. Paul states in Romans 6:6, “Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with {Him}, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” Note that our sinful nature has already be done away with through Jesus’ death.

The believer has already been circumcised by the circumcision of Christ (Col 2:11-13; Rom 2:28-29; Phil 3:3). Circumcision in the Old Testament served as a symbol of the sanctifying power of Christ’s death. Other passages also speak of Christ’s death as a means of deliverance from sin’s power. Colossians 3:3 reads, “For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” When Jesus died, the believer died with Him to sin. Galatians 5:24 also speaks of the death of Christ as the means for deliverance from the power of sin: “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” This deliverance from sin’s power took place at the moment of Christ’s death.

We may draw still more examples from Paul’s epistles. In 2 Corinthians 5:14, he teaches, “One died for all, therefore all died.” In some miraculous way, God joined us with Christ in His death so that His death became our death and provides us with deliverance from sin’s power. Galatians 2:20 proclaims the same: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” Finally, Paul writes to Timothy, “If we died with Him, we will also live with Him” (2 Tim 2:11). Murray comments, “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.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Johnson comments on a commonly held misconception of sanctification, “Sanctification is sometimes thought of as our response to the saving work of Christ rather than as an integral part of that work. Similarly, we often conceive of our holiness as rooted in our attempt to manifest our gratitude to God for forgiveness, rather than as a manifestation of our new life in Christ.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In other words, believers are powerless to sanctify themselves. It is accomplished only by virtue of identification with Christ in His death and resurrection.

Sanders summarizes Paul’s teaching about our co-crucifixion with Christ and the resulting deliverance from the power of sin: “By *sharing* in Christ’s death, one dies to the power of sin or to the old aeon, with the result that one belongs to God…. The transfer takes place by *participation* in Christ’s death.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

According to Paul, along with our participation in Christ’s death, the Holy Spirit plays an integral role in our sanctification. We frequently see the Holy Spirit mentioned as an active participant in this process (Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 6:11).[[17]](#footnote-17) The Spirit lives within believers, leads them, and produces through them spiritual fruit (Gal 5:16-23). People filled with the Spirit lead godly lives (Eph 5:18-21) and experience inner renewal (Col 3:10). We may confidently assert that the Spirit “activates” in the lives of believers the victory over sin that Jesus accomplished by His death.

Having, then, examined the divine side of sanctification, we inquire as to the human side. Paul teaches that leading a godly life, first of all, comes from knowing the will of the Lord. Therefore, he prays that the church would be “filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please {Him} in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:9-10).

Second, one must display active faith in the completed work of Christ for deliverance from the power of sin. One must embrace the truth that Jesus already obtained for us victory over the sin nature. Galatians 2:20 reads, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the {life} which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” Romans 6:11 repeats this thought, “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Faith is the attitude of heart that considers oneself a victor over sin in Christ. We again encounter this truth in Ephesians 3:16-17: “…that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” We note that Christ dwells and expresses His life in a heart of faith.

This attitude of faith requires us to alter our thinking. Romans 8:5-6 is insightful here: “Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh…” A “fleshly” person reflects on his or her own ability to live a holy life. This approach, however, leads to certain failure. Unlike the “fleshly” individual, the spiritual person sets their minds on “the things of the Spirit,” that is, relies on the intervention of the Holy Spirit and is aware of the victory over sin that is available in Christ. This idea is confirmed in Romans 12:2, where we learn that we are transformed by “the renewal of our minds,” and also in Ephesians 4:23, where we read that a key element for victorious living is being “renewed in the spirit of your mind.”

Third, the human will must take part in the process of sanctification. In Romans 12:1, Paul forcefully speaks of total devotion to the Lord: “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, {which is} your spiritual service of worship.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Moreover, he insists on laying aside one’s old lifestyle (Eph 4:22; Col 3:8-9) and of “exercising” godliness (1 Tim 4:8: 1 Cor 9:25-27; Phil 3:13-14).[[19]](#footnote-19) Believers “perfect holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor 7:1). They “sow” to the Spirit (Gal 6:8), submitting to Him (Rom 6:10).

When we compare Colossians 3:9-12 and Ephesians 4:22-24, we discover an interesting fact. In the former text, Paul writes that believers have already “laid aside the old self with its {evil} practices, and have put on the new self.” Here, he is speaking from the vantage point of our union with Christ. In Him, our sanctification is already complete. We accept this by faith. On the other hand, Ephesians 4:22-24 reads, “Lay aside the old self… and put on the new self.” Now, the apostle speaks from the point of view of our present experience. Even though in Christ, believers have already laid aside the old self, one must make application of this truth in practice, which requires the participation of the human will in submission to the Holy Spirit.

Concerning the role of the Law in the process of sanctification, it is curious to note that Paul considers that the Law does not only lack the power to justify, but also is unable to sanctify. In Romans 7:1-4, Paul claims that in Christ believers have died to the Law and that this is a necessary step in order to bear fruit for God: “Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God” (v. 4). Paul considered the Law not only powerless to justify a person, but also a hindrance to sanctification. One must be delivered from the Law to make progress in spiritual life (see Rom 6:14; 7:1-4; Gal 2:19-20; 2 Cor 3:6).

Paul further explains his position in chapter 7 of his epistle to the Romans. He assures us that the Law is indeed holy and spiritual. The problem is, though, that people, in their sinful state, cannot keep it (v. 7-23). The nature of sin is such that when one hears a commandment, sin immediately produces a resistance to it. This is why Paul claims, “The power of sin is the Law” (1 Cor 15:56).[[20]](#footnote-20)

According to Paul’s teaching, sanctification is achieved not by observing the Law, but by life in the Holy Spirit. Immediately after discussing peoples’ failure to keep the law and the need for deliverance from it (Rom 7), he introduces the theme of life in the Spirit (Rom 8). He specifically speaks of this contrast in Galatians 5:18: “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.” For a more complete discussion of the role of the Law in the life of the believer, see chapter 8 in volume 2 of this series.

We must note that deliverance from the Law does not justify an immoral lifestyle. In order to motivate people for godly living, however, Paul usually appeals to other principles besides the Mosaic Law: the principle of love (Rom 13:8-10; 1 Cor 13:13; Gal 5:6), the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16-18; Rom 8:4, 14), the imitation of God (1 Cor 11:1; Eph 4:32), union with Christ (Rom 6:2, 11; Col 2:20; 3:3), the teachings of Jesus (1 Cor 7:10; Acts 20:35) and the apostles (1 Cor14:37; 2 Thes 3:14). The Law of Moses is occasionally appealed to as supplemental to these principles (Rom 13:8-10; Eph 6:2-3).

Finally, since sanctification involves our participation, Paul warns that Christians can fall away during the process of sanctification: “We also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor 6:1; сf. 1 Cor 10:1-12). On the other hand, Paul’s writings also abound in promises that God will aid and support the believer in this process: “{For I am} confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6), and, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely…. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (1 Thes 5:23-24; сf. 1 Cor 1:8-9). Paul personally held fast to this confidence (2 Tim 4:18).

We find the final contribution to the New Testament teaching on sanctification in the writings of the apostle John. Chapter 17 of John’s Gospel contains Jesus’ prayer for His disciples – that the Father would “keep them in Your name” (v. 11) and “keep them from the evil {one}.” Jesus Himself “was keeping them in Your name” (v. 12) and sanctified Himself “that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth” (v. 19). Similar mentions of Christ’s keeping power are found in John 6:39 and 10:28-29.

John emphasizes sanctification even more so in his epistles. He characterizes true believers in Jesus as those who walk in the light (1 Jn 1:7) and in the truth (2 Jn 4). They strive for victory over sin (1 Jn 2:1). They practice righteousness (1 Jn 3:7) and abstain from sin (1 Jn 3:6). Nonetheless, John acknowledges that believers are still undergoing the process of sanctification (1 Jn 1:8; 2:1) and stresses the importance of confessing sins to the Lord (1 Jn 1:9).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Unlike Paul, John says less about how exactly the believer attains holiness, except for following Christ’s example (1 Jn 2:6) and preparing for future glory (1 Jn 3:3). This eschatological hope can motivate to holy living, as well as the fear of being put to shame at His coming (1 Jn 2:28). At the same time, though, in John’s Gospel, Jesus is pictured as the vine that supplies the branches (i.e., His disciples) with life-giving nourishment to grow spiritually.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Finally, the book of Revelation deals with sanctification in the first three chapters, where Jesus addresses the churches of Asia Minor with various instructions and rebukes to stir them on to holy living and spiritual victory. He promises rich rewards to the “overcomers.”

### C. Conclusions

**1. The Meaning of Sanctification**

In light of our survey of the biblical material on the topic of sanctification, we may come to several conclusions. As was noted above, sanctification is both a positional status in Christ and the process of transformation into His likeness. So then, in a certain sense, the justified believer is already holy even before beginning the process of sanctification. Christ is the believer’s sanctification.

On the other hand, one must not neglect the practical side of sanctification, accomplished with the aid of God’s Holy Spirit. Muller provides this apt summary: “In one sense believers are consecrated to God and blameless before Him because of the work of Christ, but in another sense they must still be perfected in the day of Christ.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Therefore, after receiving God’s gift of justification, believers begin the sanctification process, through which they are transformed into Christ’s image. Erickson confirms, “Sanctification is the continuing work of God in the life of the believer, making him or her actually holy.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Mueller echoes the same thought, “In its narrower, or strict, sense, sanctification denotes the inward spiritual transformation of the believer, which follows upon, and is inseparably joined with justification.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

The process of sanctification incorporates two interrelated aspects: overcoming sin and being transformed into Christ’s image. Paul highlights both of these aspects:[[26]](#footnote-26)

- Overcoming sin: “Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor 7:1).

- Transformation into Christ’s image: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

They are juxtaposed in Ephesians chapter 4:[[27]](#footnote-27)

- Overcoming sin: “Lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” (Eph 4:22).

- Transformation into Christ’s image: “Put on the new self, which in {the likeness of} God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:24).

In the following excerpt, White contrasts these two aspects, stressing the second:

Sanctification is not primarily negative in the NT, “keeping oneself unspotted,” not mainly self-discipline. It is chiefly the outflow of an overflowing life within the soul, the “fruit” of the Spirit in all manner of Christian graces (Gal. 5:22–23), summed up as “sanctification.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

The process of sanctification is a joint effort involving both God and the Christian. Philippians 2:12-13 brings this out well: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for {His} good pleasure.” On the one hand, believers must “work out their salvation,” that is, actively participate in striving for holiness. On the other hand, God “wills” and “works” to enable the believer to succeed in the task.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Let us detail God’s work in sanctification. First, as indicated above, the New Testament clearly testifies that victory over sin has already been provided through the death of the Savior, who destroyed the power of sin on the cross. The work of the Holy Spirit is closely associated with the saving work of the Son through His death, resurrection and glorification. The Spirit actualizes in the life of believers what Jesus accomplished for them through those events.

In particular, the Spirit delivers to Christians the victory over sin that Christ secured on the cross: “If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom 8:13). On the one hand, Jesus already annihilated our sinful nature 2000 years ago (see Rom 6:6). Now, the Spirit applies the grace of Christ to believers. With the help of the Spirit, believers can “put to death the deeds of the body” in practice. Correspondingly, the New Testament often refers to sanctification by the Spirit, who renews, leads, strengthens, corrects, and realizes sanctification in the lives of Christians.

God’s part in the work of sanctification also includes the Father’s loving discipline. The classic passage in this regard is Hebrews 12:5-11, where we learn, “Those whom the Lord loves he disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:6). In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul also refers to the discipline of the Lord: “When we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world” (v. 32), which God sometimes administers through the agency of the Church (1 Cor 5:3-5).

The human side of this process, consisting of three elements, is detailed in Galatians 5:19-25:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

The first element is knowledge of God’s will, which is necessary in order to know how to conduct oneself. Toward that end, Galatians 5:19-23 lists the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. In this way, Paul enlightens his readers how to live and please the Lord.

The second element is active faith by the person being sanctified. Believers must rely on what Christ has done to provide salvation for them, including the destruction of their sinful nature (v. 24). Mullen expresses this truth well, “Though God sanctifies by grace, human beings are responsible to appropriate God’s grace by faith. Faith is ‘the’ means of sanctifying grace,” and, “A believer grows in sanctification by living according to his or her new identity” in Christ.[[30]](#footnote-30)

We may cite other authors supporting this view:

Thus, growing in grace is an increasing living *outside of* myself, living *upon* Christ. It is looking to Him for the supply of *every* need…. The more the heart in occupied with Christ, the more the mind is stayed upon Him by trusting in Him (Isa. 26:3), the more will faith, hope, love, patience, meekness, and all spiritual graces be strengthened and drawn forth into exercise and act to the glory of God.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Victory over all the power of the evil one is not by human works or self-effort but on the basis of the believer’s faith in his position in Christ…. It is believing that we are “in Christ” that alone routs the devil.… Realizing we are what we are “in Christ” (Rom 6:1-10) and reckoning upon our wondrous position of union (Rom 6:11) is the ground and the source of our power over the devil and his hosts.[[32]](#footnote-32)

All acceptable obedience comes from the soul’s union with Christ.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Verse 25 reveals the final step in this process – submission: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” If we are expecting power from the Spirit to live holy lives, then we must allow the Spirit to work in our lives and change us.

However, if believers rely on their own strength to attain holiness, they will inescapably fail. This is why Paul cautions against reliance on the Law for sanctification (Rom 7). The Law paradoxically stimulates the “flesh” and strengthens sinful impulses. The primary goal of the Law was to lead sinners to the place of desperation and hopelessness so that they would trust in the Lord and not in themselves, leading to an attitude of humility before Him.

Mueller well describes the relationship between the Law and faith: “While the Law reveals sin (mirror)… the power to accomplish sanctification and do good works comes alone from the Gospel.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Knowledge of good and evil alone (from the Law) does not result in life transformation, as is evident in the moral failure of God’s Old Testament people. Only the gospel can provide the power to make progress in spiritual life.

The following illustrations can aid us in understanding the relationship between faith and submission. When wanting to start a car, it would be foolhardy to simply sit in the driver’s seat and expect the car to drive itself. The driver must turn the key and operate the car. Likewise, it profits little to simply expect God’s intervention in our spiritual lives, while we do nothing, adopting a passive attitude toward spiritual growth.

On the other hand, it is equally foolish to stand behind the auto and attempt to push it with the key. The driver must utilize the power of the engine. In a similar way, believers can never make progress in their spiritual life relying on their own strength. One must rely on the finished work of Christ. Faith and submission harmoniously work together and complement each other.

We may suggest another illustration. To light a match one needs two elements: a matchbox and oxygen in the air. The atmosphere may contain enough oxygen to do the job, but without a person’s participation striking the match, there will be no result. On the other hand, a person can strike the match all day, but if oxygen is somehow lacking, there will also be no result.

In a similar way, God’s power, made accessible through Christ’s redemptive work, is necessary for spiritual progress. A person, though, must apply effort and cooperate with the grace of God in Christ in a way similar to one striking a match. In addition, believers must create in their lives an atmosphere of faith, expecting the power of God to manifest, and strive for holiness within the context of that atmosphere of expectation.

Finally, we recall that asceticism has no value as a means of attaining holiness. We discussed this issue in detail in chapter 5 of this volume, in the section on “Distortion of God’s Plan.”

**2. When is Sanctification Completed?**

Previously in this chapter, we have discussed how to obtain victory over sin and lead a holy life. The question remains, though, as to when we can expect to secure this victory – in this life, or only after death. John Wesley and his followers advanced the thesis that Christian perfection was possible while still on the earth. We will investigate this claim later in this section and conclude that sanctification is a process that continues throughout the Christian life. For the time being, we will draw a parallel between progress in sanctification and Israel’s conquest of Canaan.

It is curious to note that when God commanded His people to conquer the Promised Land, He spoke thus: “You shall *take possession* of the land and live in it, for I *have given* the land to you to possess it” (Num 33:53, also see Josh 1:3; 6:1; 8:1; 10:8). So then, even before Israel entered into the Land of Promise, they already possessed it. Similarly, in Christ, we already possess victory over sin in virtue of the fact that our old nature was crucified with Him so that through His death, sin’s dominion over us would come to an end.

Furthermore, God specifically determined the boundaries of Israel’s inheritance in Canaan: “I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River {Euphrates} (Ex 23:31). However, the land was already occupied by strong cities and peoples, even giants. Israel needed to take possession of the land gradually, overthrowing one city at a time. Sanctification occurs in the same way. Step by step, believers wage war against their vices and increasingly gain victory over them.

It is interesting to note that Israel took total possession of their inheritance only during the reigns of David and Solomon (1 Kin 4:21). Until that time, much of their territory was still occupied by the Canaanites. Can we not expect a similar experience? The Bible promises that when our “David” appears, i.e., Jesus Christ, we will attain perfection: “We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is” (1 Jn 3:2). The final aspect of our union with Christ consists of our glorification at the revelation of His glory: “When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (Col 3:4).

**3. The Relationship between Sanctification and Justification**

A question that troubles many is the relationship between justification and sanctification. In other words, are we justified by faith alone, or must we do a certain number of good works or reach a certain level of holiness to attain to eternal life? For a resolution of this dilemma, we refer the reader to chapter 20 on “Faith” for a detailed discussion.

### D. Historical Survey

Throughout the course of church history, different schools of thought have arisen concerning the sanctification of believers. The goal of this section is to describe and evaluate these different views in light of the biblical revelation.

**1. Early Church**[[35]](#footnote-35)

Early Christian teachers did not develop a comprehensive theology of sanctification, but nonetheless they laid great stress to the need for holy living. They focused on the three central Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. Polycarp, for example, spoke of “the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you, and which, being followed by hope, and preceded by love towards God, and Christ, and our neighbor, ‘is the mother of us all’” (*Philippians*, 3.2).

In a similar way, Ignatius emphasized the importance of love: “None of these things is hid from you, if ye perfectly possess that faith and love towards Christ Jesus which are the beginning and the end of life. For the beginning is faith, and the end is love. Now these two, being inseparably connected together, are of God” (*Ephesians,* 14.1). We can also cite the letter of Clement of Rome to the church in Corinth, where he eloquently praises the virtue of love (chps. 49-50). Muller summarizes that the early Fathers “clearly expect a striving toward perfection grounded in the grace of God and described in terms of the three greatest gifts of the Spirit,” that is, faith, hope, and love.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Later in the Early Church period, the Church began making a distinction between “ordinary” Christians and those who aspired to a higher level of godliness. The “ordinary” believers were held to a lower standard. Cyprian and Ambrose determined that the common believer should observe the Ten Commandments, while the more “advanced” would aspire to love, even for one’s enemies. This later group included monks and clergy (see Ambrose, *On the Duties of the Clergy*, 1.11.36-37).

Contrary to this, others insisted on holiness or even moral perfection from all Christians. Montanists, for example, emphasized separation from the world to such a degree that they refused to interact with people in society. The Church in general, however, rejected Montanism.

Gnostics claimed that through special “mystical” revelation, their adherents could find deliverance from all vices and attain perfection. Clement of Alexandria, though, refuted this view. He argued that only Jesus attained perfection in this life. His disciples must wait until death for total deliverance. Although Clement rightly rejected Gnosticism, nevertheless, his disciple Origen introduced distortions into the Christian understanding of sanctification, namely, ascetic practices.

In the fourth century, Pelagius began to teach that people are not subject to inherited depravity from Adam and are able to live righteous lives in their own strength. Augustine opposed and refuted his teaching. In his teaching, Augustine recognized that sanctification requires the intervention of God’s grace. He made famous the saying, “Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt” (*Confessions*, 10.40). Unlike Pelagius, Augustine claimed that fallen humans cannot do good. Muller writes, “At the heart of Augustine’s personal spirituality was the experience of divine grace regenerating the will and rendering it capable of doing the good.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Augustine was ready to admit that Christians, in theory, could reach moral perfection in this life, since nothing is impossible for God. At the same time, he doubted that anyone actually attained it.

Evaluating the Early Church’s teaching, we can state the following. In line with biblical teaching, the early Fathers correctly taught that the cardinal Christian virtues are faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13). However, from the earliest Christian writers, we see a neglect of the believer’s union with Christ, which provides the grace that enables the believer to overcome sin and live righteously. From Augustine’s time, though, the Church began to place more emphasis on the role of God’s grace in sanctification.

Moreover, although the Church rightly rejected false views on sanctification, such as Montanism, Gnosticism, and Pelagianism, it improperly created a distinction between “ordinary” and more “advanced” believers in Christ. The Bible makes no such distinction, but calls all Christians to the same moral standard. Even though James 3:1 hints at a double standard, it is misguided to teach that only “advanced” believers should strive to excel in the virtue of love (see Jn 13:35). Finally, the tendency in early Christianity toward asceticism is also a deviation from the truth of God’s Word. Chapter 4 of this volume reveals the inadequacy of this approach.

**2. Middle Ages and Catholicism**[[38]](#footnote-38)

A primary feature of the Western understanding of sanctification in the Middle Ages was the idea of “sanctifying grace.” Working off Augustine’s teaching of the need for grace in sanctification, leading Catholic theologians Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas proposed that through water baptism, God gives the recipient so-called “sanctifying grace,” which enables the newly baptized to grow in holiness and produce spiritual fruit (see *Sentences,* 1.17; *Summa Theo.,* i/2, q. 113).

For Catholics, this impartation of sanctifying grace is equated with justification. This diverges from the biblical and Protestant view. Catholics see justification not as the imputation to sinners of a right standing with God, but rather as an impartation to sinners of a righteous nature, which enables them to perform good works leading to salvation.

Concerning the degree of sanctification available in this life, Aquinas held to three levels of perfection. Only God attains to the first level. Believers can enjoy the second level, but only after death. In this life, they can attain only to level three, which is “perfection in love, according to which all words, all thoughts, all the affections of the soul, and the whole strength or power of the individual, are referred to God and willingly subjected to God.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

Nevertheless, Aquinas doubts that every Christian can reach this third level. Therefore, he embraced the Early Church’s view of two types of Christians – ordinary and exceptional. The former must keep the commandments, while the later pursue perfection through good works and abstinence from worldly fancies. This “higher path” is for monks and clergy.

White provides a summary of the Catholic view:

In the apostolic church, the essence of sanctification was a Christlike purity; in the patristic church, withdrawal from the contaminations of society. This hardened, in the medieval church, into asceticism (a dualistic misapplication of Paul’s athleticism). This involved a double standard: “sanctity” and “saintliness” came to be applied only to the “religious” person (priest, monk), whereas a lower attainment, compromising with the world, was tolerated in the “ordinary,” “secular,” or “lay” Christian.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Finally, we must not fail to mention the role of sacraments in Catholic theology. As mentioned above, water baptism supplies “imparted” grace that enables obedience. Other sacraments, especially the Eucharist, also impart grace and strength for overcoming sin and living for the Lord.

In assessing the Catholic approach, we heartily affirm the need for God’s grace in sanctification. Yet, we take issue with the Catholic practice of confusing sanctification with justification. In addition, we challenge the teaching that the new birth is effected through water baptism. Finally, the Early Church’s distinction between different “classes” of Christians, which Aquinas endorsed, is refuted earlier in this chapter.

**3. Eastern Orthodox**

In Eastern Orthodox thought, human nature was initially created good. The goal of sanctification is to restore that original moral condition, and then to take humanity beyond that to the level of the divine (i.e., deification). Sin is, then, foreign to true human nature.[[41]](#footnote-41)

However, people themselves are unable to make themselves holy. God’s grace is mandatory.[[42]](#footnote-42) In this regard, the Orthodox teaching coincides with Catholic dogma. Unlike Catholicism, though, the “grace” that effects sanctification is not merely spiritual power that enables obedience, but an impartation to believers of God Himself in His so-called “uncreated energies,” which results in their deification.[[43]](#footnote-43) Therefore, the goal of sanctification for Orthodoxy is to become god, or, more precisely, to be deified through participation in God’s uncreated energies (see chapter 8).

The Orthodox view of sanctification derives from its understanding of the nature of sin, which we discussed in chapter 5 or this volume. Let us briefly recap this view. The Orthodox consider that people do not inherit depravity from our forefather Adam, but only mortality.[[44]](#footnote-44) Mortality is what leads to sinful behavior. Because people fear death, they focus more on earthly things than on heavenly ones. Behavior, in turn, follows after our thought processes. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve reflected more on spiritual/heavenly concerns and consequently conducted themselves in submission to the Lord. After death entered the world, people became engrossed in affairs connected with their earthly survival. As a result, vices like passion, fear, sorrow, anger, hatred, etc. entered the human experience.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Correspondingly, Nikon claims that our problem is that the “mind... has become enslaved to irrational passions.”[[46]](#footnote-46) He also writes, “Just like the soul longs for future pleasures, the body longs for present and temporary pleasures.”[[47]](#footnote-47) In the words of Maximus the Confessor, “Having become a transgressor and mixing his rationality with sensuality, people acquired a passionate drive to know sensual things.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Mantzaridis adds, “Man, subject to corruption and death, is constantly spurred on to sin and becomes a slave to it .”[[49]](#footnote-49) Meyendorff describes human nature as “bound by mortality, inevitably sinful.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

The Orthodox view is also expressed in the following excerpts:

The necessity of satisfying the needs of the body… lead to “passions,” for they present unavoidable means of temporary survival…. There is indeed a consensus in Greek patristic and Byzantine traditions in identifying the inheritance of the Fall as an inheritance essentially of mortality rather than sinfulness, sinfulness being merely a consequence of mortality.[[51]](#footnote-51)

From the “old Adam,” through his natural birth, man inherits a defective form of life – bound by mortality, inevitably sinful, lacking fundamental freedom from the “prince of this world.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

The Orthodox tradition of Saint Marcus Eremita does not feel that people participated in Adam’ sin: “We are passed down by inheritance not transgression, but death.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

The path to victory over sin, then, in Orthodox thought, is not deliverance from sin through the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on the cross, but through the victory over death that He secured through His resurrection. Kuraev writes, “We consider that Christ came in order to rise from the dead (1 Pet 3:21). We are saved not by the death of Christ, but rather that in Him death lost its power.”[[54]](#footnote-54) After people are delivered from their fear of death, they can then turn their attention to heaven and conduct themselves accordingly.

In addition, since sin is rooted primarily in physical passions, aroused by death, the key to victory over sin lies in suppression of bodily necessities, i.e., in overcoming passions by acquiring the quality of *apatheia,* i.e., “impassibility.”[[55]](#footnote-55) One should embrace ascetic cleansing not only from “all that is… sinful,” but also from “all sensual and mental images.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

Let us qualify this point. On the one hand, Orthodoxy rejects the teaching that matter is in itself evil. Nikon comments here:

The ascetic struggle is waged not against matter, but against the unnatural, contra-natural. Bodily necessities are not killed off, but their improper use. Using created things is not forbidden, but their abuse.[[57]](#footnote-57)

On the other hand, since the material world and bodily necessities distract from spiritual things, abstaining from bodily desires has practical value.

Mantzaridis, looking at this question from the vantage point of Gregory Palamas, adds necessary elements to our discussion. In agreement with what has already been said, he connects sin with attachment to the physical: “Man loves the world because he loves his own body, while a love of the spirit generates love for God,”[[58]](#footnote-58) and, “The source of passions is the concern for the flesh…. Excessive satisfaction of bodily desires breeds the passions.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Nonetheless, he still believes in the essential goodness of the physical: “The body is good…. What is evil, and should be considered the child of sin, is concern for the body.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

Therefore, one should withdraw for contemplation of God and develop a spiritual mindset in order to obtain a higher level of morality and spirituality. This is best accomplished through the monastic life: “By restricting even the proper use of God’s gifts, the monk mourns for the misuse of these gifts by Adam, which expelled man from Paradise, and concentrates himself on preparing for the age to be,”[[61]](#footnote-61) and, “The stillness of the desert provides man with the fittest atmosphere for pursuing his work of concentration and self-awareness.”[[62]](#footnote-62)

We need to include still another consideration. A key to Orthodox thinking is distinguishing “nature” and “person,” both in regard to God and to humans. They even propose the existence of two wills in people: the natural will, which corresponds to “nature,” and a gnomic will, which corresponds to the person. The first was initially oriented toward God, but was weakened by the Fall. The second appeared only at the time of the Fall and enables individuals to make free decisions in spite of their weakened condition.[[63]](#footnote-63) Correspondingly, the war against sin is waged on two levels: in human nature, and in the individual person.

The victory over sin accomplished by Christ addresses only the sanctification of human nature since He allegedly took upon Himself not each individual person, but only the so-called “general human nature” (see chp. 8, “Deification”). This victory must be actualized in the individual person by personal effort with the aid of the Holy Spirit.[[64]](#footnote-64) Lossky claims, “The work of Christ applies to human nature…. The work of the Holy Spirit applies to the human person.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

This “personal effort” includes repentance, grieving, humility, prayer, and fasting. In order to gain victory in this struggle, one must “apply all powers of the soul to the reasoning powers as the reflection of the Divine powers contained in them.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Victory is secured by a «genuine turning to God in lifelong repentance, faith, and love.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Receiving the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, plays a vital role in obtaining the divine “energies.”

In repudiation of this system, we note that the Bible teaches that the human dilemma lies not in persons’ physical condition or in distractions made by it, but rather in the sinful nature of the human heart:

- For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders…. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man (Mk 7:21-23).

- The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jer 17:9).

Even some Orthodox theologians concur that we indeed inherit from Adam a sinful nature.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Moreover, although Eastern Orthodoxy officially adheres to the goodness of the material world, yet in practice it treats it as something that hinders spiritual development. This is why Orthodox teachers laud the monastic life and ascetic practices. However, the Bible plainly teaches that suppression of legitimate bodily desires does not aid in overcoming sin (see discussion in chapter 5, in the section on “Distortion of God’s Order”).

In addition, the goal of sanctification is not deification. We made this clear in chapter 7 of this volume. The Bible also does not support the concept of God’s “uncreated energies” (see chapter 1 in volume 3).

**4. Protestantism**

**а. Lutheranism**

Lutheran theology places emphasis on justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ. Consequently, sanctification is seen to play a secondary role in God’s plan. Holy living is the result of the justification received by grace through faith.

Lutherans teach that one is both justified and sanctified by faith in Christ: “Sinners (are) declared just and holy (sanctified) by faith alone in what Jesus has done.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Moreover, “True sanctification, then, is simply trusting that God has taken charge of the matter.”[[70]](#footnote-70) One of the manifestations of the old nature, possibly the most prominent, is when someone attempts to add something to the requirements for salvation. Therefore, Christians must “die to the possibility of contributing to righteousness by deeds.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

On the other hand, true believers are zealous for good works, yet without abandoning their position of justification by faith alone. God’s commands in Scripture are “means by which believers open their lives to the transforming grace of God.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Luther himself wrote much about the power of the Spirit transforming the lives of Christians.

Luther’s disciple and successor, Philip Melanchthon, devoted more attention to the doctrine of sanctification. He wrote, “The keeping of the law should begin in us and increase more and more” (*Apology,* 2.136).[[73]](#footnote-73) Thus, Melanchthon deviated from Luther’s thought, claiming that Christians cooperate with God in obtaining righteousness. As a result, debates arose among Lutheran theologians concerning the place of good works in God’s salvation plan. They resolved the issue with the publication of the *Formula of Concord*, which determined that justification is independent of the Law or good works, yet good works are the necessary results of regeneration.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Along with this, the *Formula of Concord* underscored three functions of the Law: (1) containing and suppressing sinful behavior in society, (2) conviction of sin in unbelievers, leading to their conversion to Christ, and (3) spiritual guidance for believers.[[75]](#footnote-75)

In our assessment of the Lutheran view, we concur with the emphasis on the independence of justification from good works. In this way, the Reformers restored a fundamental evangelical truth, lost by the Early Church and the Church of the Middle Ages. Lutherans also correctly claim that good works follow justification and do not serve as a means of salvation, but the result of a salvation already secured by faith.

On the other hand, a weakness in the Lutheran position is the claim that sanctification is merely “trusting that God has taken charge of the matter.” In truth, it involves transformation of the believer’s nature.

**b. Reformed Faith**

Reformed faith, based on the teachings of John Calvin, in many ways overlaps with Lutheran theology.[[76]](#footnote-76) First, unlike Catholic doctrine, Reformed faith does not confuse the issues of justification and sanctification, but appropriately keeps them separate. People are justified by faith alone. Sanctification comes as a result of imputed righteousness. Moreover, Christ, in His redemptive work, has already accomplished positional sanctification for believers (Heb 10:10, 14; 1 Cor 1:2). In addition, Reformed faith acknowledges the believer’s union with Christ (see chapter 6). In Christ, believers’ sinful nature has already been vanquished and they acquire victory over it through faith.

On the other hand, this victory over sin secured by Christ is progressively actualized in the lives of believers through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians must submit themselves to the Spirit. At the same time, there is no place in this process for human boasting, since God produces this life-transformation. Additionally, the good works performed with the power of the Spirit do not merit a person’s salvation. We inherit God’s kingdom through faith.

Unlike the Orthodox position, Reformed faith rejects the idea that God communicates to believers some type of “divine energies” that transform their lives. God adds nothing to the human constitution, but rather renews the believer’s already existing human nature to produce behavior coinciding with the will of God.

Reformed faith diverges from the Catholic view in that is rejects the claim that the standard of holiness for ordinary believers can differ from the standard expected from more “advanced” believers. Unlike Methodist teaching (see below), Reformed faith debunks the claim that Christian can reach perfection in this life.

In evaluation of the Reformed position, we affirm its basic postulates, which are well supported by Scripture. We especially applaud the Reformed stand on the role of union with Christ in the sanctification of believers.

**c. Pietists, Methodists, and Pentecostals**

Among Protestant denominations that arose during and after the Reformation, some stressed personal holiness in the lives of believers more than others. Such groups feared that emphasis on justification by faith alone could lead to neglect of Christian morals. Among such groups are the Pietists and Methodists.

Pietists separated from Lutherans who believed that only partial sanctification was attainable in this life and taught that believers would always struggle with sin, often unsuccessfully. Pietists emphasized the development of Christian character more than right doctrine. They insisted, “Regeneration ought to lead to the practice of holiness and to an intimate personal relationship with God.”[[77]](#footnote-77) They believed in being led by inner guidance and the prompting of the Holy Spirit in their hearts for defining and demonstrating holy living.

John Wesley, though, advanced a more substantial theology of sanctification, including the claim that believers can attain perfection in this life. He identified this experience with the “circumcision of the heart” (Deut 30:6).[[78]](#footnote-78) At the same time, Wesley supported the Evangelical view that justification comes through faith in Jesus alone, and that sanctification was a separate work of God.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Here, we must clarify that in Wesley’s opinion, “perfection” does not mean that believers will never err, but rather that they will never intentionally sin. They may still commit sins of ignorance. According to Wesley, Christians may attain perfection in love, but not necessarily in knowledge. In other words, the “perfected” Christian will always be guided by right motives.[[80]](#footnote-80)

In Wesley’s words, perfection is when we have “so entire a love to [God], that you may love nothing but for his sake.”[[81]](#footnote-81) A person receives by faith God’s grace of sanctification in one moment of time, but after this begins “a gradual dying to sin and growth in grace and finally leads to a time at which the believer is perfected in love by God.”[[82]](#footnote-82) The process of sanctification requires “vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of the commandments… in denying ourselves and taking up the cross daily.”[[83]](#footnote-83) Even though he acknowledged that the Law did not justify, Wesley nonetheless felt that it was useful in the pursuit of holiness.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Wesley thought that Christians may reach perfection at any moment of time, but this usually occurs at the moment of death.[[85]](#footnote-85) Reaching perfection in this life does not mean that this condition will necessarily be permanent. It can be lost. In addition, even after attaining perfection, a believer can still grow in grace.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Wesleyans appeals to Scripture for support. Jesus charged His disciples, “Be perfect” (Matt 5:48). Paul prayed for the Thessalonian church, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely” (1 Thes 5:23). John taught, “No one who abides in Him sins” (1 Jn 3:6), and Paul expected that “the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4).

Even the Old Testament hints at complete victory over sin. Psalm 130:8 reads, “He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” God promised His people through Ezekiel, “I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols…. I will save you from all your uncleanness” (Ezek 36:25, 29). Again, appealing to Paul: “Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor 7:1). Of note is that Paul uses the word “perfecting” here. Finally, God’s goal for the Church is to “present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Eph 5:27), i.е., to perfect her.[[87]](#footnote-87)

How does Wesley suppose that a person attains sanctification? It comes not by human effort, but by the work of God’s Spirit (Rom 9:28). Believers, though, must exercise active faith in God’s intervention in their lives. Finally, when the Lord reveals sin in believers’ lives, they need to repent of it.

Some followers of Wesley stressed, even more than their founder, sanctification as a momentary experience. They also expected that, after receiving this sanctifying experience, the believer would be able to live above sin. This differs from Wesley’s teaching about a progressive experience of sanctification. In order to receive this special impartation of grace, these followers of Wesley taught one must earnestly seek it through prayer.[[88]](#footnote-88) They sometimes termed this experience the “baptism in the Holy Spirit.”[[89]](#footnote-89) This movement became known as the “holiness movement.”

However, many subject the teaching of Christian perfection to the following critique. Paul, a mature and experienced believer in Jesus, declined to claim that he had reached perfection: “Not that I have already obtained {it} or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12).

In Philippians 1:6, we learn that God continues His sanctifying work “until the day of Jesus Christ.” So then, it seems improper to expect the completion of that process until that time. Yet, even before that time, departed believers are spoken of as “the spirits of {the} righteous made perfect” in heaven (Heb 12:22-23).

Concerning 1 John 3:6, we must consider that when John writes, “No one who abides in Him sins,” he employs the Greek present tense verb, which can indicate progressive or repeated action. Consequently, John may have in view not that Christians never sin, but that they do not lead a sinful lifestyle.

White comments on Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect,” that the Greek adjective τέλειος (*teleios*) does not necessarily mean “sinless,” but could mean reaching one’s goal, completion, or maturity.[[90]](#footnote-90) The Lord Jesus, then, may not be calling His disciples to sinless perfection in this life, but rather to spiritual maturity. Muller, commenting on Philippians 3:15, concurs that when Paul uses the word τέλειος (*teleios*) in this passage, “he most certainly does not mean an absolute perfection, like the divine perfection, but rather a maturity in faith.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

We object to the teaching of the “holiness movement” that through a single experience of “entire sanctification,” a person’s sinful nature can be eradicated so that this individual never sins again. The apostle John warns against such a teaching: “If we say that we have no sin, we lie, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8). If people are convinced that they can never sin again, then when they do inevitably sin, they will not be able to admit it, but will deceive themselves into thinking that they have not. Hence, “the truth is not in them.”

The Bible contains many references to spiritual growth and exhortation to Christian maturity, which clearly indicates that sanctification is not a momentary experience but an ongoing process. For example, Peter writes, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). Furthermore, Philippians 1:9 reads, “This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment.” In addition, in Hebrews 12:14, we read, “Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.” In this verse, we encounter the verb διώκετε (*diokete*), i.е., “pursue,” which, as a Greek present imperative, communicates progressive or continuous action. In other words, we continually pursue holiness.

On a historical note, the views of the holiness movement are directly connected with the launching of the Pentecostal movement. The earliest Pentecostals advanced the teaching of three separate experiences with the Holy Spirit. People begin their walk with the Lord through the new birth, by virtue of which they become children of God. Then, one must receive complete sanctification through a crisis experience in prayer. Only then is one ready to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit for spiritual power in ministry.

Later in the history of the Pentecostal movement, some adherents began to teach that there were only two special experiences with the Holy Spirit: the new birth and the baptism in the Spirit. Sanctification was seen as a progressive experience rather that as a crisis experience. Consequently, there exist to this day two trajectories in Pentecostalism: proponents of three experiences with the Spirit, and proponents of two experiences. We affirm the two-experience Pentecostal view as being most consistent with Scripture.

The well-respected Pentecostal theologian Stanley Horton supports the “two-experience” view.[[92]](#footnote-92) His theology also incorporates some elements of the Keswick teaching (see below), which emphasizes the redemptive work of Christ as the source for victorious Christian living. Horton feels that sanctification is realized progressively and reaches its culmination only after death. He also asserts that sanctification depends in part on the participation and effort of believers.

In the early years of their movement, Pentecostals followed certain practices of the holiness movement, such as strictly abstaining from tobacco, alcohol, gambling, theater, card playing, sports, cosmetics, immodest dress, etc. Holiness was often closely association with such external behaviors. We caution, though, that an overemphasis on external indicators of holiness can distract from the more vital internal changes of the heart (Matt 23:25-26). In addition, some of the holiness “taboos” appear extreme.

**d. Keswick**

A unique and quite revolutionary approach to sanctification was advanced at the end of the 19th century in Keswick, England.[[93]](#footnote-93) In that city, a yearly conference was held (and is still held, with modifications) on the theme of sanctification. The conference was founded by Thomas Harford-Battersby, pastor of St. John’s Anglican Church in Keswick, along with the Quaker Robert Wilson. The movement that arose from the Keswick meetings is called the “Higher Life Movement.”

The “Higher Life Movement” is a combination of Reformed theology and the enthusiasm of early Methodism. In line with Reformed theology, Keswick taught that believers have already died with Christ to sin (Rom 6), and in the strength of their union with Christ, Christians can gain victory over sin. Unlike the holiness teaching, though, the sin nature is not eradicated, but its power to control us is destroyed by the death of Christ.

The Higher Life Movement emphasizes obtaining victory over sin, provided by Christ, through faith. Christians must totally abandon all hope for achieving holiness by personal effort and trust entirely on the grace provided through the death of the Savior. Keswick asserts that believers need a crisis experience which consists of a step of personal abandon and reliance on Christ. Boyd describes this crisis:

…a total surrender to God, acknowledging that the natural self cannot overcome sin, and a resting-faith in Christ, who conquered sin…. The surrender constitutes an abandonment of self-effort and a reliance by faith on the indwelling Holy Spirit.[[94]](#footnote-94)

After believers abandon their self-reliance, they are ready to embrace the completed work of Christ on their behalf. From that time on, they stand in faith for total victory over sin. In this “atmosphere of faith,” the Holy Spirit finds room to work effectually in their lives and apply the benefits of Christ’s redemptive work for their sanctification.

Sanctification by faith is associated with the concept of Sabbath. Boyd comments on this, “Resting-faith in the provisions of Christ’s death and resurrection is the key to victory over sin and a life of godliness.”[[95]](#footnote-95) McQuilkin adds, “Faith is thus the key to appropriating God’s provision for successful Christian living…. As we continue to trust God the Holy Spirit, the means of grace become operative in our lives.”[[96]](#footnote-96) The Keswick teaching does not hold that people attain perfection in practice during this life. Nonetheless, adherents of this view expect to make great strides in that direction.

The Keswick view recognizes three stages in the sanctification of believers. First, upon conversion to Christ, they are counted “holy” in Him, that is, they acquire positional sanctification before God. Second, they undergo the progressive process of life-transformation leading to victory over sin and development of Christian character. Third, sanctification reaches completion in the future when believers are glorified. Also notable is that sanctification by faith does not lead to passivity in moral living. Believers take active part in the process by submitting to God. Nonetheless, emphasis is placed on gaining victory through faith.

Our assessment of the Keswick teaching is mainly positive, since it coincides with the biblical revelation which we have outlined earlier. Especially valuable is the focus on the believer’s union with Christ, which Scripture reveals to be the means by which God has destroyed the power of death. We also applaud the movement’s expectation to see great progress in sanctification in this life through this union, and the central place it allots to the role of faith in attaining victorious living.

The only real criticism to offer is the supposed need for a “crisis experience” to initiate this process, which we do not observe in Scripture. We apprehend this truth progressively over time (see Eph 1:18-19a) in the same way that we progressively appropriate the grace that sanctifies.

**e. Word of Faith**

In the contemporary Church, an unbiblical view on sanctification, advanced by the Word of Faith movement, is gaining acceptance by many. It derives from the teaching of Kenneth E. Hagin, whose anthropology is expressed in the oft-quoted phrase, “*Man actually is a spirit. He has a soul, and he lives in a body.*”[[97]](#footnote-97) Hagin considered that 2 Corinthians 5:17 describes the rebirth of the human spirit. The passage reads, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, {he is} a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

According to this view, when persons are born again, their spirits become perfect. The human body is the seat of the sinful human nature. Hagin equates the biblical idea of the sinful nature, or the “flesh,” with the human body. He writes, “That nature he has to deal with is the fleshly nature. It is his body which has not yet been redeemed.”[[98]](#footnote-98)

So then, the spirit is on God’s side, while the body sides with sin. The third part of peoples’ tripartite nature, the soul, determines their behavior. Hagin claims, “*If we don’t get our minds renewed with the Word of God, the MIND will side with the BODY against the SPIRIT.*”[[99]](#footnote-99) Sanctification, therefore, involves suppression of the physical.

However, the striking resemblance of this teaching with the basic tenets of Greek dualistic philosophy (mind is good, matter is evil) makes this view suspect. Sanctification is not a battle between spirit and body, but a conflict between the entire person (spirit, soul, and body) and sin.

In addition, the human spirit does not become perfect through the new birth. 2 Corinthians 7:1 makes clear that born-again Christians must still cleanse themselves “from all defilement of flesh and spirit.” Additionally, according to 1 Thessalonians 5:23, our spirit, soul, and body are still undergoing the process of sanctification.

Finally, it is misguided to equate the sinful human nature with the physical body. Galatians 5:19-21 reveals that the “works of the flesh” include vices that do not originate in the body, such as envy, anger, divisions, etc. We also recall Jesus’ word from Mark 7:21-23: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries…. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

**f. Liberals**

We will conclude our investigation of the doctrine of sanctification with a brief glance at the views of some prominent liberal theologians and philosophers.[[100]](#footnote-100) Immanuel Kant, for example, advanced the idea of the “categorical imperative,” which refers to an inner sense people have of how they should behave. Kant claimed that since no one perfectly satisfies this categorical imperative, there must exist life after death so that this drive can be satisfied.

Friedrich Schleiermacher was not so much interested in rules for ethical conduct as he was in developing an attitude of dependence on the Lord. For him, this attitude of dependence constituted the heart of human religious experience. Sanctification, in general, consists in overcoming an attitude of independence from God. Victory over this vice is accomplished in the context of the Church and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who indwells it.

Albrecht Ritschl felt that the essence of sanctification was strict observance of ethical norms and the establishment of God’s kingdom on the earth. Along with Schleiermacher, Ritschl taught that sanctification is realized in the context of the Church, in which the Holy Spirit is present and active.[[101]](#footnote-101)

However, although these three systems address some aspect of sanctification (Kant – conscience, Schleiermacher – feeling, Ritschl – behavior), none of them provide a comprehensive view of the Christian concept. In addition, we affirm with Scripture that the reason no one fulfills the “categorical imperative” is that humans are born with a sinful nature.

Furthermore, although these authors acknowledge the need for the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, they fail to recognize the fundamental role that the redemptive work of Christ plays in putting to death the “old man,” and imparting new life to believers. Moreover, Ritschl undervalues the role of faith in attaining spiritual victory. Schleiermacher does emphasize faith, but he fails to propose and define a substantial ethical system for judging right from wrong.

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2. Ibid., v. 4, p. 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. White R. E. O. Sanctification // Elwell W. A. Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001. – P. 1051-1053. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Muller, v. 4, p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mullen B. A. Sanctification // Elwell W. Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996. – P. 712. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. White, p. 1052. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Muller, v. 4, p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. White, p. 1052. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Muller, v. 4, p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Murray J. Definitive sanctification // Calvin Theological Journal. 2. 1967. P. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Johnson M. P. One with Christ: An Evangelical theology of salvation. – Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013, Kindle ed. – P. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Taken from McGrath A. Christian Theology. – 4th ed. – Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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18. Muller, v. 4, p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. White, p. 1052. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nonetheless, we can qualify this claim by stating that the power of the law to threaten and execute punishment may curb sinful tendencies to a point. Most likely, this is what Paul is intending to say in 1 Timothy 1:8-10 (сf. Rom 13:1-7). See Schreiner T. R. The Commands of God // Hafemann S. J., House P. R. Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007. – P. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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22. Ibid., p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Muller, v. 4, p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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25. Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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36. Ibid. v. 4, p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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39. Ibid., v. 4, p. 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. White, p. 1053. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
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47. Ibid., p. 40. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., p. 60. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Mantzaridis, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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86. Dieter, p. 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Other Scriptures in support: Matt 6:13; 22:37; Jn 17:20-23; Eph 3:14-19; Lk 1:69-75; Tit 2:11-14; 1 Jn 4:17 (Dieter, p. 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. It is thought that the following Scripture passages point to this sanctifying experience: Phil 2:5; Eph 4:22-24; 2 Cor 7:1; 2 Cor 10:5; Heb 12:1; 1 Cor 3:1; Col 1:28; 1 Thes 3:10; 1 Jn 3:8; Jn 8:34-36 (Dieter, p. 32-33). [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Dieter, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. White, p. 1053. Also see Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer, W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 995-996 (abbreviated BDAG). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
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94. Boyd, p. 157-159. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
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