



Christ our Sanctification

In 1 Corinthians 1:30 the apostle Paul makes a wonderful statement concerning the believer's union with Christ and the effects of that union: "But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (verse 30). Speaking of these two central themes—righteousness and sanctification—Charles Hodge stated, "These are intimately united as different aspects of the same thing. Righteousness is that which satisfies the demands of the law as a rule of justification; sanctification, or holiness, is that which satisfies the law as a rule of duty. Christ is both to us. He is our righteousness, because by His obedience and death He has fully satisfied the demands of justice. . . . He is also our sanctification. His Spirit dwells in all His people as the Spirit of holiness, so that

they are transformed into His likeness from glory to glory." All that we are before a holy God and all that we have from Him are by virtue of our union with His own dear Son. There are essentially two aspects to this truth that Christ Jesus is made unto His people sanctification.

Our positional sanctification in Christ

The words *sanctify* and *sanctification* in both the Old and New Testaments have reference to the same basic idea—holiness. When the apostle wrote to the Corinthians, he referred to them as "sanctified in Christ Jesus." This means they were set apart unto God in holiness. As is common with all other sinners, they were once without Christ. But, by grace, they were now seen as "in Christ." Later in the same epistle Paul reminds them that

they were "washed, sanctified, and justified" (1 Corinthians 6:11). See also the words of Hebrews 10:10: "We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Believers have been set apart once and for all by virtue of their union with Him. This too is the thought expressed in 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

We see, therefore, that the language of sanctification is often "used with reference to some decisive action that occurs at the inception of the Christian life, and one that characterizes the people of God in their identity as called effectually by God's grace" (John Murray). In this sense it is equivalent to justification and includes effectual calling. This is positional sanctification. It refers to our position before God, in Christ, as justified and accepted as perfectly righteous. By an act of God's free grace, every believer has been granted a

new standing. It is the result of the finished work of atonement that our Lord accomplished by His blood-shedding upon the cross. “Wherefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate” (Hebrews 13:12).

The child of God can rejoice in the knowledge that he has been eternally cleansed from the guilt of his sin by the precious blood of Jesus. He does not need to fear to enter the presence of God. He may come to the throne of grace with boldness, for he has a complete and perfect acceptance. The privilege of prayer is granted to him because Christ is his sanctification. This will be his blessed position for all eternity. But he can rejoice that it is his position here and now as well. In the words of an old hymn he can sing: “Near, so very near to God, nearer I cannot be, for in the person of God’s Son I am as near as He.”

Our personal sanctification by Christ

Normally, when the topic of sanctification is discussed, it is this aspect of personal sanctification which is in view—that which we usually term “progressive sanctification.” This is a work of grace that relates to the Christian’s daily conflict with sin and victory over it. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Answer 35) gives a succinct definition of sanctification: “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” Antinomianism, so-called because of its rejection of the necessity of living a holy life in obedience to God’s law, is a denial of this sanctification by Christ. The Bible teaches that God desires His people to be holy.

Bishop J. C. Ryle wrote: “He who supposes that Jesus Christ only lived and died and rose again in order to provide justification

and forgiveness of sins for His people has yet much to learn. Whether he knows it or not, he is dishonouring our blessed Lord, and making Him only a half Saviour. The Lord Jesus has undertaken everything that His people’s souls require; not only to deliver them from the guilt of their sins by His atoning death, but from the dominion of their sins by placing in their hearts the Holy Spirit; not only to justify them, but to sanctify them. He is, thus, not only their righteousness, but their sanctification” (*Holiness*).

It is true that God commands holiness, but it is also true that He imparts it. Sanctification is both a duty and a grace, therefore. In sanctification believers cooperate with the Spirit of God in using the means He has provided for that purpose (see Philippians 2:12–13). But the Westminster divines were correct in carefully defining sanctification as “the work of God’s free grace.” Holiness is a divine work just as righteousness is. Christ is not only the believer’s righteousness but his holiness as well. The Lord has given to us His Spirit, and by Him communicates His own life to the justified believer. Holiness is divinely wrought within Christians. Christ enables us to walk in holiness.

The commentator Godet remarks, “If, then, our righteousness is Christ for us, our sanctification is Christ in us. Christ is our holiness as well as our righteousness.” This thought then must be included in Paul’s great statement that Christ is made unto us . . . sanctification.” God’s people are set apart in holiness unto God by means of the indwelling Spirit of God and through the virtue of the death of Christ. Holiness of life is the inevitable result of the vital union that the believer has with Christ, and is the outcome and consequence of the new birth.

Dr. Alan Cairns puts it well in his *Dictionary of Theological Terms*: “The moving cause of sanctification is the grace of God (Titus 3:5), the meritorious cause

is the blood and righteousness of Christ (Titus 2:14), and the efficient cause is the Spirit of God (1 Peter 1:2). Thus the source of sanctification is the Lord Himself.” In his *Systematic Theology*, Dr. R. L. Dabney writes of this work of Christ in sanctifying His people: “Now, Christ is our Sanctifier, because He procures the benefit for us by His justifying righteousness; because He is now the God of Providence, and Dispenser of means to His people; and because, by His perpetual intercession, He procures and dispenses the influences of the Holy Ghost to us.” Note the mention of means. Christians grow in holiness only as they make fresh applications to Christ. He is the head of the body from whom all the members are supplied (Ephesians 4:16). We are called to live a life of daily faith in the Son of God.

It is by looking unto Jesus that we become more like Him. This is the teaching of 2 Corinthians 3:18. As we look at Christ we are changed into the image of Christ, by the work of the Spirit of God. The hymnwriter had this in mind, no doubt, when he wrote, “By looking to Jesus like Him thou shalt be; Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see.” We must learn that the secret of holy living and of daily, progressive sanctification is a constant and right view of the Lord Jesus Christ. ■

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