

"Sanctification"

by
B. B. Warfield

Sanctification (from Lat. *sanctificatio* [deriv. of *sanctificare*, sanctify; *sanctus*, holy + *facere*, make], trans. of Gr. *ἀγιάζειν*, hallow, make holy, deriv. of *ἅγιος*, holy) is the work of God's grace by which those who believe in Christ are freed from sin and built up in holiness.

In Protestant theology it is distinguished from justification and regeneration, both of which lie at its root, and from neither of which is it separable in fact; inasmuch as the term justification is confined to the judicial act or sentence of God, by which the sinner is declared to be entitled, in consideration of what Christ has done in his behalf, to the favor of God, and of which sanctification is the efficient execution; and the term regeneration is confined to the initial efficient act by which the new life is imparted, of which sanctification is the progressive development. Both regeneration and justification are momentary acts, and acts of God in which the sinner is passive; sanctification, on the other hand, is a progressive work of God, in which the sinner co-operates.

The nature of sanctification, as well as its method and the relation of the divine and human factors in its prosecution, is differently conceived by the several types of theology.

1. The Pelagian and Rationalistic view excludes the action of the Holy Spirit altogether; and makes sanctification to be nothing more than continued right action, in the native powers of the free moral agent, by which he gradually conquers evil tendencies, and builds up a holy character.

2. The Mediaeval and Roman view refuses to distinguish between justification and sanctification; and makes both justification and sanctification to be the cleansing from sin, and the infusion of gracious habits by the Holy Ghost for Christ's sake by the instrument

of baptism, upon which subjective change the removal of guilt and the divine favor is conditioned.¹ It is therefore held to be progressive, and to be advanced by good works, which possess real merit, and deserve and secure increase of grace;² as well as by penances, prayers, fastings, etc., which satisfy God's justice and purify the soul.³ If the believer dies before the process of deliverance from sin is perfected, he must complete it in purgatory, the pains of which are expiatory and purifying; and there he may be assisted by the prayers and masses and dispensing power of the Church on earth.⁴ But it is possible, even before death, for a believer perfectly to conform to all the demands of God's law as graciously adjusted to this life;⁵ and it is even possible, out of love, to perform supererogatory service by obedience to the councils of Christ, which are advisory but not obligatory until voluntarily undertaken. These are voluntary poverty, celibacy, and obedience to monastic rule; and they merit more than the mere salvation of the person, and contribute to the "treasury of merits" at the disposal of the Church, which is imputable at the discretion of those holding the jurisdiction to believers on earth or in purgatory not yet fully justified.⁶

3. The Mystical view of sanctification, though never embodied in any church creed, has existed as a doctrine and as a tendency in all ages and among all Christian denominations. Christian mysticism more or less depreciates the dependence of the soul for light upon the objective revelation of the word of God, and the necessity of the means of grace and human effort, and emphasizes spiritual intuition, the regulative value of religious feeling, the physical communion of the soul with the substance of God, conditioned on quiet and passivity of mind. Such views gained great currency in the Church through the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, which were published in Greek in the sixth century, and translated into Latin by John Scotus Erigena in the ninth century. They qualified the teaching of many eminent evangelical Schoolmen, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugo and

1 *Council of Trent*, sess. 6, can. 7.

2 *Council of Trent*, sess. 6, can. 32.

3 *Council of Trent*, sess. 14, ch. viii; sess. 6, cans. 29 and 30.

4 Bellarmin, *Purgator.*, ii. 9.

5 *Council of Trent*, sess. 6, ch. xvi, can. 25.

6 Bellarmin, *De Monachiis*, chs. vi and vii.

Richard of St. Victor, and subsequently Thomas à Kempis. They were taught with great influence among the early Protestants by Schwenckfeld (1490-1561), Paracelsus (1493-1541), Weigel (1533-1588), and Jacob Böhme (1575-1620); and among the Roman Catholics by St. Francis of Sales (1567-1622), Molinos (1640-1697), Madame Guyon (1648-1717), and Archbishop Fénelon (1651-1715). The original Quakers held similar views, as is seen in the writings of George Fox (d. 1691), William Penn (d. 1718), and Robert Barclay (1648-1690). A mystical conception is present whenever sanctification is conceived, not as the goal of effort, but as an immediate gift to the waiting soul.

4. The evangelical doctrine of sanctification common to the Lutheran and Reformed Churches includes the following points: (1) The soul after regeneration continues dependent upon the constant gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, but is, through grace, able to co-operate with them. (2) The sanctifying operations of the Spirit are supernatural, and yet effected in connection with and through the instrumentality of means: the means of sanctification being either internal, such as faith and the co-operation of the regenerated will with grace, or external, such as the word of God, sacraments, prayer, Christian fellowship, and the providential discipline of our heavenly Father. (3) In this process the Spirit gradually completes the work of moral purification commenced in regeneration. The work has two sides: (a) the cleansing of the soul from sin and emancipation from its power, and (b) the development of the implanted principle of spiritual life and infused habits of grace, until the subject comes to the stature of perfect manhood in Christ. Its effect is spiritually and morally to transform the whole man, intellect, affections, and will, soul, and body. (4) The work proceeds with various degrees of thoroughness during life, but is never consummated in absolute moral perfection until the subject passes into glory.

In opposition to this doctrine a theory of perfect sanctification in this life has been taught from several distinct points of view, e.g.:

1. According to the principles of Pelagianism, a man is perfect who obeys the laws of God to the measure of his present natural ability, since the moral law is a sliding scale, adjusting its demands to the

varying ability of its subject; and this is possible to every man.

2. According to the Mystical idea, perfection consists in absorption in the divine essence, or, in a less extreme form, in the absorption of human desires and will into the divine will, in a disinterested love; and this may be attained by anyone through persistent detachment from self and meditation on God.

3. According to the Roman or Ritualistic theory, perfection consists in perfect conformity to the law of God, graciously for Christ's sake adjusted to the capacities of the regenerated man in this life; and this perfection is attained by means of meritorious works and penances, prayers, fasts, acts of voluntary self-denial, and ecclesiastical obedience. Not only is this within the reach of men, but so is even the rendering of supererogatory service in the way of extra-legal self-denial from a principle of evangelical love.

4. The Wesleyan theory of perfection conceives that the satisfaction and merit of Christ have made it consistent with divine justice to offer salvation to men on easier terms than the old Adamic law of absolute perfection; and that perfection is attained when these lower terms have been complied with. "Christian character is estimated by the conditions of the gospel; Christian perfection implies the perfect performance of these conditions, and nothing more."⁷

Chapter 21 from *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. II, edited by John E. Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973). Meeter states that this article is taken from Johnson's *Cyclopaedia*, new ed., 1896, which had been written by A. A. Hodge and revised by B. B. Warfield. **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that long paragraphs have been divided.

⁷ Wesley's tract, *Christian Perfection: Methodist Doctrinal Tracts*; Dr. George Peck's *Christian Doctrine of Perfection*.