

The Holy Spirit, Sanctification, And Sinless Perfection

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Introduction

The concept of *sanctification* is found in the Old Testament word *kadhash*, and in the New Testament word, *hagiazō*. In its various cognates (i.e., *holy*, *holiness*, *hallow*, *hallowed*, *consecrate*, *sanctify*, and *saint*) it appears more than 1,000 times. *Saint* (i.e., one who is sanctified) is the common designation for Christians, being so used some 56 times. This certainly qualifies it as a major theme of the Bible. What does the word *sanctify* mean?

The most basic meaning of *sanctify* is separation. In each of the thousand places where this term and its cognates appear in canonical Scriptures, the meaning of separation is either explicit or implicit, and in no instance is this meaning excluded.¹

With the foregoing definition agree *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*² and *The Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*.³ "This significance is to be clearly seen in our word *sacred*—something dedicated to holy purposes."⁴

The denominational world has taken an assumed meaning of *sanctification* and built around it the false doctrine of *sanctification unto sinless perfection*, often referred to as "entire sanctification." This alleged "sanctification" is distinct from anything that occurs at the time of conversion, according to the doctrine. Rather, it is an alleged "second work of grace" or "second blessing" that is accomplished by baptism of the Holy Spirit. Allegedly, it both erases one's "evil nature" and renders him sinlessly perfect and incapable of sin. Below is a statement of the doctrine from the Nazarene Church manual:

We believe that entire sanctification is that act of God, subsequent to regeneration, by which believers are made free from original sin or depravity, and are brought into a state of entire devotement to God, unto the holy obedience of love made perfect. It is wrought by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and comprehends in one experience the cleansing of the heart from sin, the abiding and indwelling experience of the Holy Spirit, empowering the believer to life and service.⁵

Another definitive statement of the doctrine is found in the first proposition of the *Nichols-Weaver Debate*. C.J. Weaver affirmed:

The scriptures teach that baptism with the Holy Ghost is for the sanctification of all Christians, the eradication of evil nature, or inborn sin, and is to continue throughout the gospel dispensation, or Christian age.⁶

History and Background of the Doctrine

Rooted in Calvinism

When John Calvin enunciated his five points of doctrine in the sixteenth century, he spawned a plethora of doctrinal offshoots that continues to affect millions of people. Upon the dual doctrinal cornerstones of Calvin's *total hereditary depravity* and *perseverance of the saints*, John Wesley, the architect of Methodism, constructed his doctrine of sanctification in the early eighteenth century. In Wesley's view,

...in the normal Christian the principle of holiness, beginning with the new birth, gradually expands and strengthens as the believer grows in grace and in the knowledge of the truth, till, by a final, all-surrendering act of faith in Christ, it reaches an instantaneous completion through the act of the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier.⁷

Groups that Follow Wesleyan Doctrine

Wesley's influence has gone far beyond the sphere of Methodism, just as Calvin's has expanded far beyond Presbyterianism. The Church of the Nazarene, which assumed its present form in 1908, is wholly Wesleyan in its theology, even more so than the liberal contemporary United Methodist Church. The Nazarenes especially emphasize Wesley's theories on sanctification and holiness in their mourner's bench approach to conversion and sanctification. For the most part, the Holiness and Pentecostal Church movement has emerged from the seedbed of Wesley's *sanctification* emphasis. This includes Assemblies of God, Pentecostal, and Holiness groups. The very term "Holiness" that is used to describe these groups stems from their preoccupation with Wesley's theories on the subject. The resurgence of Pentecostalism (i.e., Neo-Pentecostalism) in the late 1960s makes it necessary for lovers of Truth to understand their false doctrine of sanctification.

Observations on the Doctrine and its Consequences

Both a Child of God and a Child of Satan Simultaneously

According to the doctrine, one is first regenerated or converted, and later sanctified. This means that between one's conversion and the sanctification "experience" one is at the same time a child of God, but still bears the "image of the devil" in Adam's sin. The doctrine leaves such poor souls occupying the impossible roles of child of God and child of the devil at the same time.

Incapable of Service to Christ

The doctrine holds that when one is sanctified by Holy Spirit baptism, **only then** is he empowered to life and service. Thus between conversion and sanctification the child of God is a helpless, miserable, spiritual half-breed, incapable of spiritual life or of service to Christ.

False Sense of Spiritual Security

The alleged "sinless perfection" that results from "sanctification" is a monstrous doctrine that plays right into the hands of Satan. Believing this doctrine, one man claimed, "Since I have been sanctified, every impulse or desire to sin has been completely erased from my heart!"⁸ This statement indicates a totally false sense of spiritual security and immunity to sin. Such a position makes repentance, confession, and the need of forgiveness of sins logically inapplicable, if not impossible. What dangerous ground such a one occupies!

Wesleyan "Sanctification" Refuted

Refuting Total Hereditary Depravity

As previously indicated, Wesley's theory of sanctification is built principally upon the Augustinian-Calvinistic doctrine of an inherent and universal Adamic sinful nature. To refute this basic fallacy will bring down the whole doctrinal system, as the destruction of a foundation will cause the house thereon to collapse. A fair test of any doctrine is its consequences. If the doctrine of total hereditary depravity is true, then it must follow that:

1. Every little baby that dies in infancy will go to Hell before it ever thinks, speaks, or consciously acts, because no sin can enter Heaven (Rev. 22:15), including Adam's. However, Jesus said of little children, "... to such belongeth the kingdom of heaven" (Mat. 19:14). If babies are born sinners, then the kingdom belongs to sinners as well as to saints.
2. The good thoughts and inclinations of unsaved persons cannot be explained. The doctrine does not say merely that all men are born **devoid** of good, but **opposite** to all good and **wholly** inclined to **all evil**. Yet, even the most wicked and godless persons are capable of some good inclinations and deeds. How much more is this true of unregenerate persons who live by high moral standards? Cornelius was not a Christian when Luke introduced him in his inspired history, but he was engaged in many good things (Acts 10:1-2).
3. Luke traced the lineage of the Christ all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38). Did Jesus come into the world with sin upon Him, therefore under divine condemnation? Jesus was a fleshly man (John 1:14; Phi. 2:7-9; 2 John 7, et al.), yet He "did no sin" (Heb. 4:15; 2 Pet. 2:22). If all are born sinners, He would have been also. Since He was not, the whole contention *Adamic sin* house collapses.
4. The dictum of an inherited moral nature must work for righteousness as well as for sin, or it does not work all. If "Baby A" is born with an evil nature because its father or some more distant ancestor sinned, then it must follow that "Baby B," whose father was a faithful Christian, is born totally disposed to righteousness and incapable of sin. The fact that the total depravity advocates will not apply their theory consistently emphasizes its fallacy.

What does the Bible teach on the subject of inherited sin? "The soul that sinneth, it shall die: the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, ...the wickedness of the wicked shall be

upon him" (Eze. 18:20). One is held accountable only for his own sins, not the sins of Adam or any other ancestor. "Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till unrighteousness was found in thee" (Eze. 28:15). What is here said of the King of Tyre is representative of all mankind. We are born into this world innocent of any sins (our own or any others'). We become sinners when we are old enough to know right from wrong and we choose to transgress the Law of God (1 John 3:4). "So then each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12). No one besides Adam will account for Adam's sins!

The Scriptures unwaveringly teach that sin and its guilt are personal. The **consequence** of Adam's sin (death) is shared by all (1 Cor. 15:22), but not the guilt. If men are not born with a sinful nature, then there is no place remaining for a means of eradicating it. The *entire sanctification* doctrine is false at its foundation.

Refuting Modern Holy Spirit Baptism

What does the Bible teach about Holy Spirit baptism? The *sanctification* doctrine depends upon Holy Spirit baptism to accomplish the work of sanctification and sinless perfection. Only two cases of Holy Spirit baptism are recorded in the New Testament. The first occasion was on Pentecost upon the apostles (Acts 1:5; 2: 1–4). The sanctificationists say that it was for the purpose of sanctifying or cleansing the apostles from Adam's sin. However, before Pentecost, Jesus prayed for the apostles, "Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth." (John 17:17) The apostles were sanctified by the Truth Jesus taught them **before** they were baptized in the Holy Spirit. The purposes of their baptism in the Holy Spirit are clearly stated (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–14), none of which was related to their sanctification.

The other case of Holy Spirit baptism was that of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44–48; 11:15–16). This occurred while they still had their alien sins against them, before they were even told what to do to be saved, which included baptism in water (Acts 11:13–15; 10:47–48). According to sanctificationists, Holy Spirit baptism is the "*second blessing*," to cleanse one of inherited sin **after** he has received the "first blessing" of being cleansed of personal guilt in conversion. But it could not be so in Cornelius' case. If baptism in the Holy Spirit is a "*second blessing*," then the Lord was confused in Cornelius' case, giving it before the "*first blessing*"! This case, like the former, is completely unrelated to forgiveness of any sins of the recipients. It was for the purpose of convincing the racially prejudiced Jewish Christians that Gentiles were equally worthy recipients of salvation through the Gospel as were the Jews (Acts 10:9–20, 28–29, 44–48; 11:15–18; 15:7–9).

Some ten years elapsed between these two cases of Holy Spirit baptism with no others occurring (Acts 11:15–16). Were none of the tens of thousands who were converted between these two cases "sanctified"? By the time Paul wrote to the Ephesian church (cir. A.D. 62–63), he clearly stated, "There is...one baptism" (4:4–5), a reference to baptism in water that eliminates the possibility that Holy Spirit baptism had been or would be generally administered. Obviously, the "entire sanctification" doctrine is false in its means.

Refuting the Wesleyan Definition of Sanctification

What does the Bible teach on the meaning of *sanctification*? In the Introduction above I cited evidence to demonstrate that the word *sanctification* means "to set apart," "...to devote to a special usage or purpose," "...to separate." The sanctificationists (and many others) **assume** that *sanctification* refers to moral and spiritual purity, and their doctrine depends upon this assumed definition. Moral purity is **only the by-product** of one's separation and dedication to God, but not sanctification itself. Numerous Biblical passages employ *sanctify* or *make holy* in such a way that these terms could not possibly refer to any ethical quality. Jerusalem (Mat. 27:53), the smaller room of the temple (Mat. 24:15), the altar (Exo. 29:36), the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:10), and so forth, are all impersonal entities which have no capacity for moral purity or impurity, but which were sanctified – dedicated to God's service. Such is the consistent meaning of the term, whether in reference to our Lord, to mere men, or to things. Since *sanctification* does not mean ethical or moral purity, the *entire sanctification* doctrine is entirely wrong in its definition.

Refutation of the Concept of Sinless Perfection

What does the Bible teach regarding *sinless perfection*? Nothing, except to teach its impossibility. The Bible repeatedly, constantly declares that all men are sinful and in need of a savior (1 Kin. 8:46; Ecc. 7:20; Rom. 3:23; et al.). Moreover, the New Testament repeatedly teaches that after one has been forgiven of his alienating sins by the blood of Christ through Gospel obedience, he will thereafter sin and need forgiveness. Paul called the Corinthians "sanctified" people (1 Cor. 1:2) and then devoted the bulk of the letter to rebuking their sins. To saved people, John wrote: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Again, to saints he wrote: "If any man see his brother sinning..." (5:16).

In the maturity of his faith, Paul declared: "I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected" (1 Cor. 9:27). Every New Testament book and epistle stresses the danger Christians face in being overcome by temptation and sin. It is incredible that so many millions could be led to believe a doctrine so

manifestly heretical as *sinless perfection*, or its first cousin, *perseverance of the saints* (or more popularly characterized, *the impossibility of apostasy*), yet this is the case.

But what of the passages that seem to teach that Christians do not or cannot sin, but should be "perfect"? They simply must be harmonized with the plain passages of the previous paragraph (and scores of parallels). Otherwise, hopeless contradictions are created. Their harmony is easily achieved by fully understanding the *perfection* passages. *Perfection*, when used of men, refers to **maturity**, rather than to sinlessness. When Paul speaks of those who are "perfect" at Philippi (Phi. 3:15), he is speaking of spiritual maturity (the American Standard Version footnote correctly suggests "full-grown"). The term *teleioi*, translated "perfect" in this text, is translated "full-grown" in 1 Corinthians 2:6. The same word is used in Hebrews 6:1 with the same meaning (cf. Heb. 5:13-14).

When John says that the child of God "doeth no sin," "cannot sin," and "sinneth not" (1 John 3:9; 5:18), he is not denying what he had earlier affirmed (1:8-10). The present tense verb forms in these passages are the key to their understanding. They refer to continuing, habitual sinning, by which sin controls and reigns over a person. Such is one's state before obeying the Gospel. In said obedience, Satan is dethroned from the heart in the act of repentance, and Christ is enthroned. When we are then buried with Christ in baptism, we leave behind the old man with both his servitude and guilt of sin, arising to walk in "newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). By these very means one escapes the "bondage of sin," and, serving his new master, he cannot "continue in sin" nor "any longer **live** therein" (Rom. 6:1-2, *emph. DM*). In the same context, Paul exhorted those raised to a new life, "Let not sin therefore **reign** in your mortal body..." (v. 12, *emph. DM*). A careful reading of the Sacred Text reveals that the very claim of sinless perfection is itself a sin (1 John 1:8-10)! It is manifest that the "entire sanctification" doctrine is erroneous in its claimed result. We have now shown that both the foundation and each part of the superstructure of this doctrine are false.

What is Scriptural Sanctification?

"Initial" Sanctification

The New Testament certainly teaches that Christians are sanctified, separated, and set apart from common, profane use to serve God. When is one sanctified? At the same time, he is washed from sin and justified by God (1 Cor. 6:11). By the very nature of conversion, wherein one consciously dethrones Satan and enthrones Christ, leaving both the practice and guilt of

sins in the decision to repent and in the act of baptism, respectively, one sets himself apart to serve Christ exclusively.

“Progressive” Sanctification

In addition to this “initial” sanctification, there must be a “progressive” sanctification in the life of each saint. Those **already sanctified** are further told to “present your members as servants to righteousness unto sanctification” (Rom. 6:19). To people **initially** sanctified Peter wrote: “Be ye yourselves also holy [i.e., sanctified] in all manner of living” (1 Pet. 1:15). The ideal before us is to perpetually and progressively set ourselves apart till there is no part of our lives from which Christ is excluded. Such is the complete dedication toward which the Scriptures point us (1 The. 5:23). Peter described this process as “grow[ing] in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

God is the **author** (1 The. 5:23), Christ is the **enabling ground** (1 Cor. 1:30), and the Holy Spirit is the **agent** of our sanctification (Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 6:11). The Word of God is the means the Holy Spirit uses to sanctify, convict, and convert men (John 17:17; Eph. 5:26; Rom 6:17–18). We must consciously sanctify **ourselves** in our manner of living (1 Pet. 1:15), separate ourselves from corrupting practices of unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14–18), and present ourselves as a holy, living sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1–2).

The Desperate Need for Christians to Grow in Sanctification

Many modern-day saints are failing to be a people distinct from the world in their speech, their dress, the places they go, the way they spend their money, and in their moral convictions. Most churches will not purge out such corrupting leaven. God expects us to be different from the world about us. Even the world expects us to be different. Some worldlings are outliving some of us! It is amazing that some saints see nothing wrong with dancing, social drinking, wearing indecent apparel, gambling, and such like, but people of the world almost always understand such practices to be incompatible with Christian behavior. People in the world cannot be attracted to Christ by people who are not different from themselves. Without sanctification we cannot see the Lord (Heb. 12:14), for only the sanctified are promised the eternal inheritance of Heaven (Acts 26:18).

Conclusion

Instantaneous, entire sanctification resulting in sinless perfection, accomplished by Holy Spirit baptism, is based on the doctrine of total hereditary depravity and is therefore itself totally false. It is an “unfruitful work of darkness” with which the Lord’s saints can have no

fellowship, but which we must rather reprove and expose (Eph. 5:11). A life that is sanctified is one that has been consciously devoted to the service of Christ through a confessed faith in Him, repentance of sins, baptism in water unto remission of sins, and a daily dedication to his service.

Endnotes

1. G. Goldsworthy, "Sanctification," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia Of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1915), V, 265.
2. Harris Franklin Rall, "Sanctification," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), IV, 2682.
3. John McClintock and James Strong, "Sanctification," *Encyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), IX, 331.
4. Guy N. Woods, *Questions and Answers* (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman College, 1976), 332.
5. *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1968), 30–31.
6. Gus Nichols and C. J. Weaver, *Nichols-Weaver Debate* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1944), 7.
7. Daniel Steele, "Sanctification," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans; 1974), IV, 2685.
8. Waymon D. Miller, "The Nazarene Church," *Why I Left* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Co., 1949), 133.
9. Miller, *loc. cit.*

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