



Sanctification: Words for the weary

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For countless Christians today sanctification is a struggle, which many have given up on. The experience of so much sin and evil in the world has led to an attitude of resignation.¹ As Donald Alexander has observed, ‘A life of consistent holiness seems unattainable to many believers.’² For many, sanctification is a burden which has worn them out.

This burnout and resignation can occur when we rely upon our own efforts. Having been justified by faith, it is often supposed that it is now our part to work out our sanctification. Gary Deddo considers,

What I have observed so often in the Christian Church is that whether conservative or liberal, traditional or contemporary, emergent or mega-church, Christians basically live as if saved by grace but sanctified by works. We depend on our own efforts, choices, accomplishments or zeal. Grace is where we start the Christian life but often we somehow end up ‘thrown back upon our own resources’ and feeling under a great burden. Then we become first unimpressed, then perhaps depressed, and finally even coldly cynical about the whole Christian life itself.³

Yet the good news of the gospel is that we do not have to depend upon our own efforts for sanctification. What God demands, He empowers. It is not that God did His part; now we must do our part. Our sanctification is rooted with our justification in the vicarious humanity of Christ. God works this out in our lives as we participate by the Spirit in Christ. This means that instead of growing weary or resigned, we are liberated to grow into the reality that we are already holy in Christ.



Christ is our sanctification

Christ [...] became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor 1:30)

Our sanctification is found definitively with justification in Christ. Sometimes we conceive of sanctification as a separate stage following justification in the *ordo salutis*. When this happens, our attention turns from Christ and focuses upon ourselves and what must happen to us and in us. This then places a burden upon us to work out our own sanctification.

Yet sanctification has been worked out for us in our humanity by Christ. Sanctification is found with justification in the vicarious humanity of Christ. The Torrance brothers had a profound understanding of this. The vicarious humanity of Christ means that ‘Christ takes our place and represents us, so that what is true of him is true of us, and what he did in his (our) humanity is ours.’⁴ Jesus said, ‘For them I sanctify myself that they too may be truly sanctified’ (John 17:19).⁵ Christ *is* our sanctification. In the Incarnation, the very act of the divine assuming human flesh was a transforming, sanctifying event.⁶ Then, throughout the whole course of Jesus’ earthly life, He continued to sanctify our human nature, turning it from its estrangement from God towards right relationship with Him.⁷ His life of perfect obedience to the Father, leading even to death, was the sanctification of our humanity on our behalf.⁸ Christ’s holy life was not merely an example for us to endeavour to replicate; it was lived out in our place so that what is true of Him is true of us. Whether we are aware of it or not, humanity has a new ontological condition: we are sanctified in Christ.⁹ T. F. Torrance wrote,

Justification by grace alone remains the sole ground of the Christian life; we never advance beyond it, as if justification were only the beginning of a new self-righteousness, the beginning of a life of sanctification which is what we do in response to justification. Of course we are summoned to live out day by day what we already are in Christ through his self-

consecration or sanctification, but sanctification is not what we do in addition to what God has done in justification.¹⁰

Therefore, we do not have to rely upon our own efforts because Christ has sanctified Himself for our sakes. The weary and burdened can find rest in the vicarious humanity of Christ.



By the Holy Spirit

You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:11)

Although it may be recognised that sanctification is objectively rooted with justification in Christ, there can nevertheless be a further problem when the subjective outworking of sanctification is conceived of in external, logico-causal categories: God did His part in Christ; now we must do our part with the help of the Holy Spirit. This perspective conceives of the believer, aided by the Spirit, applying the benefits of Christ to his life.

The outworking of sanctification is detached from the vicarious humanity of Christ and becomes an autonomous activity. The reality of our sanctification in Christ is made only a potentiality which demands our efforts for actualisation. This then places a burden upon humanity so that the outworking of sanctification becomes the impossible task of an autonomous believer.

Rather, the outworking of our sanctification should be understood in terms of our participation by the Spirit in what has been decisively accomplished in Christ.¹¹ The work of the Spirit is not to 'help' the believer to be holy. The Spirit does not make us progressively more holy; the Spirit reveals the reality that we are already holy in Christ and enables us to participate in that reality. The believer does not *apply* what Christ has accomplished; he *participates in* what Christ has accomplished.

This means that the outworking of our sanctification is not a wearisome autonomous activity. The outworking of our sanctification comes by freely participating by the Spirit in Christ's definitive sanctification on our behalf.



The Father's calling

Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." (1 Pet 1:15–16)

We are called by God to lead holy lives and this is a high calling. Andrew Murray observed that Christians are often content with receiving God's forgiveness and peace in salvation, but he argued that God desires more than that: He desires conformity to His Son.¹² Murray argued, 'There is not, as so many think, one standard for Christ and another for His people. No, as branches of the vine, as members of the body, as partakers of the same spirit, we may and therefore must bear the image of the Elder Brother.'¹³ As Paul wrote,

How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. [...] We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. [...] So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 6:2–4, 6, 11)

Yet many Christians do not consider themselves dead to sin; their struggle shows it to be very much alive. They consider holiness to be an impossibility, becoming resigned to sin and evil. This happens when the call to be holy is detached from, or made prior to, our holiness in Christ. Sanctification then becomes an immense burden which we must struggle to work out for ourselves.

However, what God demands, He empowers. We can follow the imperative, not by relying upon our own resources, but by relying upon the vicarious humanity of Christ, which we may participate in by the Spirit. Thomas Smail wrote,

[...] if we wish to measure the possibilities of our humanity, whether in the realm of its sanctification or its empowering, we are not to look at ourselves and scale Christ down to us, or worship the goodness and greatness of a divinity that is in principle inaccessible to us, but we are to look at him, to behold the Man that he is, and therefore the men that we shall be in him.¹⁴

J. B. Torrance often asserted, ‘the indicatives of grace are always prior to the obligations of law’.¹⁵ If the imperative to be holy is preached without the indicative truth that we are holy in Christ, sanctification becomes a burden for us. Yet the reality is that the indicative precedes the imperative. We are sanctified in Christ; therefore we must live holy lives. As Paul wrote, we have been set free from sin (Rom 6:7); therefore we must not let sin reign (Rom 6:12). The decisive accomplishment of our sanctification in Christ means that we are liberated to grow into that reality. Rather than struggling to become holy by our own autonomous endeavours, we are set free to participate by the Spirit in the reality that we are already holy in Christ.

Murray continuously stressed the imperative call to live a sanctified life but his exhortations were rooted in the indicative vicarious humanity of Christ. Thus the imperative is not a burden because he showed that God always provides the means of fulfilment. Although Murray presented a high calling, he did not place a burden upon the believer because he taught that it is fulfilled by God working through us. Murray wrote, ‘Look not upon a life of holiness as a strain and an effort, but as the natural outgrowth of the life of Christ within you.’¹⁶ And further,

Christ is not only our Surety who lived and died for us, our Example who showed us how to live and die, but also our Head, with whom we are one, in whose death we have died, with whose life we now live. This gives us the power to follow our Surety as our Example: Christ being our Head is the bond that makes the believing on the Surety and the following of the Example inseparably one.¹⁷



Words for the weary

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matt 11:28)

Having been justified by faith, it is often supposed that it is the responsibility of the believer to work out his own sanctification. When sanctification is separated from justification and its basis in the vicarious humanity of Christ, this detracts from what has been definitively accomplished in Christ and causes the burden to fall upon the believer. However, our sanctification is found definitively with justification in the vicarious humanity of Christ. Christ has sanctified Himself for our sakes, which means that there is nothing we can do to make ourselves any more holy.

It is often believed that we must apply to our lives what has been accomplished in Christ, with the help of the Holy Spirit. This perspective is determined by logico-causal categories and human subjectivity, again placing a burden upon the believer to work out his own sanctification. However, the Spirit's role is not to enable the autonomous believer to apply Christ's sanctification to his own life. It is not that God did His part; now we must do our part. Rather, the Spirit enables the believer to participate in Christ's definitive sanctification.

We are called to lead holy lives yet many Christians today are weary from struggling with sin and others have an attitude of resignation. However, what God demands, He empowers. He has elected us to holiness in Christ. Sanctification is definitive in Christ and God works it out in our lives as we participate in Christ by the Spirit. This means that we do not have to rely upon our own endeavours, becoming weary and even resigned. We can rest in the reality that we are already sanctified in Christ, which liberates us to become who we are and lead holy lives that glorify God.

Notes

- ¹ Andrew Murray, *Like Christ* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1983), 233.
- ² Donald Alexander, “The Riddle of Sanctification”, in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (ed. Donald L. Alexander; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1988), 7.
- ³ Gary Deddo, “The Christian Life and Our Participation in Christ’s Continuing Ministry”, in *An Introduction to Torrance Theology: Discovering the Incarnate Saviour* (ed. Gerrit Scott Dawson; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 138f.; cf. ‘We have been saved in the power of his blood, but have to live the Christian life out of our own resources of our own humanity, by pious dedication and consecration, or by organised religions, evangelistic or social activism – so that instead of the principle of grace covering the whole of our life, we behave as if we had been saved by grace, but have to live by our own works.’ Thomas A. Smail, *Reflected Glory: The Spirit in Christ and Christians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 60f.
- ⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 205.
- ⁵ James B. Torrance, “Christ in Our Place”, in Thomas F. Torrance, James B. Torrance and David W. Torrance, *A Passion for Christ: The Vision That Ignites Ministry* (ed. Gerrit Scott Dawson and Jock Stein; Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), 45; cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 167; cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 141.
- ⁶ Torrance, *Reconciliation*, 53; cf. ‘In his holy assumption of our unholy humanity, his purity wipes away our impurity, his holiness covers our corruption, his nature heals our nature.’ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 155f.

- ⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 81.
- ⁸ Torrance, *Reconstruction*, 155.
- ⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, “The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition”, *Modern Theology* 4 (1988): 321.
- ¹⁰ Torrance, *Reconstruction*, 161f.; cf. John Webster who considers that we cannot think of sanctification as the work of the believer: ‘In effect, the rooting of sanctification in justification prohibits any conversion of sanctification into ethical self-improvement, as if justification were merely an initial infusion of capacities which are then activated through moral or spiritual exertion.’ John Webster, *Holiness* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 81.
- ¹¹ James B. Torrance, “The Priesthood of Jesus: A Study in the Doctrine of Atonement”, in *Essays in Christology for Karl Barth* (ed. T. H. L. Parker; Plymouth: Latimer, Trend and Co., 1956), 165f.; cf. Torrance, *Passion*, 48.
- ¹² Murray, *Like Christ*, 227.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 232f.
- ¹⁴ Smail, *Reflected Glory*, 70f.
- ¹⁵ James B. Torrance, “The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 230.
- ¹⁶ Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2002), 79.
- ¹⁷ Murray, *Like Christ*, 32.